



editorial

CyberOrient is a peer-reviewed online journal of the virtual Middle East.

[more](#)

editorial board

Editor-in-Chief:
Daniel Martin Varisco

Managing Editor:
Vit Sisler

[more](#)

submissions

Submissions are welcome from scholars in any discipline.

Deadline for Vol. 12, Iss. 1 is April 20, 2018.

[more](#)

authors

Houda Abadi
Mona Abdel-Fadil
Rasha Abdulla
Ghayda Aljuwaiser
Ilhem Allagui
Kira C. Allmann
Ahmed Al-Rawi
Gülengül Altıntaş
Nada Alwadi
Abdulrahman Alzaagy
Anders Ackfeldt
Jon W. Anderson
Miriya Aouragh
Mohammad Ayish
Kalle Berggren
Jenny Berglund
Hélène Bourdelle
Billie Jeanne Brownlee
Gary R. Bunt
Samson A. Bezabeh
Ines Braune
Heidi A. Campbell
Johan Cato
Marek Cejka
Burçe Çelik
Khalid Chraibi
Andrea Dankic
Donatella Della Ratta
Stine Eckert
Daniel Enstedt
Emily Fekete
Angel M. Foster
Vika Gardner
Jacob Groshek
Arturo Guerrero E.
Christoph Günther
Salman Hameed
Diana Hawk
Ali Honari
Dina Hosni
Seyedehbehnaz Hosseini
Sara Houmair
Lisa Siobhan Irving
Fatima El Issawi
Sahar Khamis
Hakim Khatib
Sean Kolhoff
Attila Kovacs
Zuzana Krihova
Luboš Kropáček
Petr Kučera
Johanne Kuebler
Anup Kumar
Jens Kutscher
Göran Larsson
Letizia Lombezzi

Echoes of Populism and Terrorism in Libya's Online News Reporting

Letizia Lombezzi
University of Florence

CyberOrient, Vol. 12, Iss. 1, 2018

Abstract

This article focuses on news reporting in Libya, assessing both official and citizen journalism. Special attention is paid to online resources, primarily spontaneous posts written in Arabic. Social media shows the emergence of citizen journalism together with so-called User-generated Content. Both have proved capable of creating legitimacy. Political inclinations, including Islamic ideology and its religious claims, are presented, supported, or criticized by ordinary citizens who post their comments and opinions on the web. Official press and news agencies have their social media profiles as well, sharing the same online space with nonprofessionals. Monitoring and analysis of reporting show that there is no relevant difference in journalistic models; nor do concerns between professionals and nonprofessionals vary. Libya appears today to be a mosaic of different interests: one that is interconnected and in conflict at the same time. These interests are vying to establish new supremacies in the country. Journalism in its various typologies faces pressure from the abovementioned interests, so it is negatively affected by rhetoric in both reporting and commentary. These preliminary arguments lead us to the core topics of populism – for which a definition is suggested – and reporting about terrorism in Libya. Against this background, we analyze news flows, sources, and other issues. I conclude with a brief review of the main issues, the characteristics of the Arabic narrative discourse, and the emerging Arabic lexicon.

Keywords: [Islam](#), [Libya](#), [social media](#), [journalism](#), [populism](#), [citizen journalism](#)

Introduction

This article aims to analyze news reporting in Arabic about current events in Libya. The difficult, unstable situation in Libya has encouraged the spread of citizen journalism carried out by nonprofessionals who have a level of media literacy comparable to that of professional journalists.

Libya emerges as an interesting setting for so-called *User-generated Content*, diffused by social media. The term *User-generated Content* (OECD 2007) refers to Internet content (pictures, audio, video, and texts) created and directly uploaded by amateur users. This has given birth to a new "citizen media" sector.

Such a development offers both opportunities and challenges. It encourages media pluralism and participation, but it also involves risks and important problems. The first concern is with regard to accountability, because user-generated content can be misleading for online readers. Then, there is the fact that content can be manipulated before publishing. The high number of users involving complicates the monitoring of outlets and sources and impedes verification of reliability and truthfulness (Comninos 2011). Given these first considerations about the pros and cons of citizen journalism in *User-generated Content*, it is clear that, in a country like Libya, spontaneous reporting can be negatively affected by populism (see below) and terrorism-related claims. Bearing this in mind, after reviewing the framework of recent events, we then study news flow, sources, and other issues.

A Look at Recent Events

Libya has never been a country that is easy to access. Obtaining a visa often takes a couple of years for most applicants, even with the support of their home embassies and diplomatic missions based in Tobruq or Benghazi. Today, after the closing or dismissal of many consular sections, it is even harder to conduct research inside the country. For this reason, analysis and studies concerning Libya tend to be based on open source information, citizen-reported news or comments on older online posts.

The capture and killing of Colonel Gaddafi, on October 20, 2011, marked the beginning of a new era in Libya. Sadly, however, the transition to a different political system is taking too long and has led to the formation of two centers of formal authority: Tripoli and Tobruq. Apart from these two capital cities, Derna, Sirt, Benghazi and the southern areas of the country have emerged as territories of strategic importance. This is both due to their geographical collocation and the relevance of the social groups living there.

Between 2014 and 2015, Derna and Benghazi fell under the control of the Islamic State; the latter consisting of local actors and foreign jihadists from Iraq and Syria. These different militias initially moved to the south, and then back north toward Sirt and Misrata. Sirt is considered the last stronghold of Gaddafi's loyalists. The latter group is prevented from holding public office based on a law issued in 2013. The "regular" Libyan Army, in which key positions are reserved for actors living in Tobruq, bombed Sirt with several air strikes targeting the TV and radio stations, the local power plant, the hospital, and the university.

The South of Libya is under the control of Tuareg and Tebu tribes. The Tuareg were former allies of Gaddafi, while the Tebu are favored by Libya's current *ad interim* government. The Islamic State recruits its members among the opponents of the new political initiatives. It is considered politically close to the groups in Sirt and the Tuareg in the South. Research institutes like the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (Binetti 2015) report that the Islamic State is deeply involved in human trafficking operations: especially of women. Many researchers investigate the issue of human trafficking by pursuing two separate tracks: the control exercised by criminals over the coastal strip of Libya (Amnesty

about us

CyberOrient is published by the [American Anthropological Association](#) and the [Faculty of Arts of Charles University](#).

[more](#)

search

[ok](#)

James Marchant
 Jade Metzger-Riftkin
 Mohammed El-Nawawy
 Jon Nordenson
 Mark LeVine
 Zeynep Oguz
 Sydney O'Shay Wallace
 Kristin Peterson
 Anna Piela
 Thomas Poell
 Chelsea Polis
 Raymond Pun
 Babak Rahimi
 Bernhard Rieder
 Kristine Ringsager
 Anne Sofie Roald
 Bronwen Robertson
 Anton Root
 Inka Rantakallio
 Aida Rouhana
 Caterina Gentiloni Silveri
 Vit Sisler
 Hadi Sohrabi
 Derya Gurses Tarbuck
 Helga Tawil-Souri
 Sarah A. Tobin
 Ahmed Tohamy
 James Trussell
 Philip Tschirhart
 Ruth Tsuria
 Mervat Youssef
 Augusto Valeriani
 Daniel M. Varisco
 Olesya Venger
 Robbert Woltering
 Lisa Wynn
 Liesbeth Zack

International 2012) between Sirt and the Tunisian border, and the criminal organizations that manage the departures of migrants from those coastal areas to Europe.

Several press agencies have made reports based on interviews with people who reached the southern European coast. They speak of the brutal treatment and imprisonment practices to which these migrants have been exposed. UN reports like the one issued in June 2017 (UN Security Council 2017) attest to the presence of the Islamic State along the coastal strip between Sirt and the Tunisian border. Due to this strategic positioning, the Islamic State naturally plays a crucial role in illegal trafficking operations: although it does not manage them directly. In fact, migrants are controlled by different criminal militias. Their arrival and placement in the coastal area controlled by the Islamic State are tolerated based on a give-and-take principle: traffickers plan the arrival of migrants to the coast, which is accepted thanks to the fact that these migrants are used as human carriers for delivering weapons to the region. The same UN report (2017:186) writes about "two migrants being used as 'mules' to transport weapons." The picture is very fragmented; however, it is clear, that many militias and criminal groups have control over the Libyan coastline.

In any case, the mapping of Islamic militias in Libya is not easy at all. Likewise, it is difficult to interpret. In fact, Libya is a Sunni country without the traditional trifold partition of Sunnis-Shiites-Kurds typically found in Syria and Iraq. This explains the extreme fragmentation in many more than three macro-groups, which affects both the civil society and the jihadists groups we speak about; plus, it complicates the analysis of the political scene. To provide a few examples: the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, considered a branch of Al-Qaeda, operated in favor of the Tripoli Government, but only due to its rivalry with the Islamic State. The coastal strip from Sirt to the Tunisian border is home to militias like Ansar As-Sharia and Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam. Other brigades - Islamic or not - back the Tobruq political elite, in exchange for access to interests in the fields of the oil crescent area. Every Islamic group aims to establish its own control over the major projects in the country: the Great Man-Made River water project, the oil fields, and power plant sites.

Apart from their existing differences, Islamists, as well as formal groups, seem to lack centralized, stable leadership. Given that there is no single pole (axis) of formal power, the authorities have severe difficulties identifying informal enemies (militias of fighters or Islamic brigades of terrorists) in these various local settings. Politics in general is complicated due to the difficulty of finding one actor, representative of the whole country, who is able to engage in dialogue, cooperative efforts and civic initiatives on the local and international levels. This explains the uncontrolled growth of groups that trust only themselves and who attempt to defend their own particular interests, legal or illegal, in oil fields and oil exports, human trafficking, and agreements with Western powers.

A Chronology of Political Initiatives

The Government of National Accord

On December 17, 2015, a UN initiative led to the establishment of a Libyan unified government, supported by the UN as the sole valid interlocutor. The Government of National Accord was installed in 2016, guided by Fayez Al-Serraj. It was an attempt to put an end to the rivalry between the House of Representatives and the General National Congress. The former was based in Tobruq and established in August 2014, while the latter was elected in July 2012 and based in Tripoli. It was later dissolved in August 2014.

The Skhirat Agreements

This initiative took place in Morocco on December 17, 2015, under the patronage of the UN delegate to Libya, Martin Kobler. The aim was to legitimize a sort of executive Presidency Council in Tripoli while keeping the Tobruq actors as a parliament in support of the Tripoli executive. This plan failed due to internal and external competition. Many militias then tried to take control of the oil fields and power plants in the oil crescent. They saw this as an obstacle to the political and economic policies of the new-born presidency and hoped to carve some space for themselves in the Libyan political scene.

The Ceasefire Agreement in Paris

On July 25, 2017, the leader of the Government of National Accord, Serraj, and the Field Marshall Haftar, leader of the Libyan National Army, met to set up a ceasefire under the patronage of the French president. They also discussed the date for the next elections: tentatively planned for spring 2018. The ceasefire could not be agreed due to the fact, that Serraj does not control any military forces, while Haftar is supported by several nongovernmental, armed groups. This put him in an ambiguous role and undermined his credibility as a leader. In particular, Haftar seemed to be seeking political office in return for his ability to maintain control of certain militias.

The Role of the UN: from Kobler to Salame

The former UN delegate Kobler, who promoted the Skhirat initiative, was replaced by Ghassan Salame last June. Salame remarked on the importance of creating a centralized government and a unified army to represent the country's various interests. Salame centered his diplomatic efforts around the topics of illegal immigration and the people's suffering. He gave top priority to caring for the people and creating a unified government. These were key factors for sorting out any other issues in Libyan politics.

The Media in Libya: from Gaddafi to the Present

Government control over the Libyan media was very heavy-handed during the Gaddafi era. At that time, reporting was exclusively a propaganda tool. Media outlets were subject to the authority of the People's Committees, consisting of the dictator's loyalists. In 1971, media were placed under the control of the Ministry of Information; a year later a press code was instated. Attempts "to tarnish the country's reputation" were punishable by life imprisonment and offering "theories or principles" aiming to change the social system's basic structure or to overthrow the State's political, social, or economic structures was punishable by death (El Issawi 2013).

In 1975, the Ministry of Information became the Secretariat for Information, and later in 1988, it became the Ministry for Information and Culture. One last change took place in 2011, with the birth of the *Jamahiriya* General Information Corporation. The latter was given control over the media. Regardless of these name changes, the Libyan media was still

limited to publishing news approved by the regime. The *Jamahiriya* National News Agency had monopoly control of the news.

The fall of the regime in 2011 was not sufficient to give birth to professional journalism. This is because the lack of professionals was due not only to repression but also to a deficit of proper journalism skills. In December 2011, the *ad interim* government promoted the creation of a single, national TV station and radio station and one newspaper. Private outlets were not forbidden, but they received very limited funding (both in total amount and the period for which money was supplied). Additionally, a Committee for Supporting and Encouraging the Press (CESP) was organized with the principal aim of destroying what was left of the media associated with the former regime's media. A High Media Council was established in May 2012. It had the task of regulating the media; a process that ran the risk of recreating conditions for new State control over the information sector. The private sector also saw a proliferation of initiatives. Funding came mainly from liberal actors (for the Libya Awalan channel), the Muslim Brotherhood (for Libya Al-Hurra) and Qatar (for Libya Al-Ahrar).

Citizen Journalism. Competence in Reporting, Information Gathering and Media Literacy in Libya

In principle, citizen journalism helps shape the concept of citizenship as associated with participation in civil society and politics. In fact, participation contributes to the democratization of a community and its system of communication. There are factors that promote participatory journalism: availability of communication tools, easy access to platforms and the emergence of the private sector and commercial companies in the field of reporting. Mobile devices seem to provide the easiest-to-use tool for taking part in the communication process: they help users produce and consume news. In many African countries, mobiles also represent the only communication and information tool available to most people.

Citizen journalism contrasts with institutional journalism in the sense that it is not subject to any formal governance. Citizen journalists are distinct from other reporters because they take the initiative to report on something that is happening within their community. Their reporting is totally people-centered. Consequently, official journalism is depicted as elitist, often profit-seeking and difficult to access from outside, rendering it undemocratic. On the other hand, the values of citizen journalism usually focus on human rights, justice, peace, and respect for diversity. Ordinary citizens attempt, and often succeed, in de-professionalizing and de-institutionalizing journalism. Meanwhile, they encourage participation. Sadly, they face the huge problem of funding: this is why some forms of *institutional citizen journalism* exist within a structure that provides support for, and protection to, its nonprofessional reporters. This happens when famous, well-established media encourage citizens to leave contributions on their websites; for example, by posting comments. In fact, traditional media acknowledge the importance of ordinary citizens' involvement and appreciate this new form of journalism. The current risk is that the new platforms have become a marketplace for advertising content from traditional media, without the power to affect the opinion of others and to transform their lives.

Here, I will give the examples of two Libyan citizen journalists, and I invite the reader to evaluate the fragility of their position compared to their high level of activism. Mohammed Nabbous founded and worked for Libya al-Hurra, a TV channel that broadcast via an illegal satellite connection to avoid censorship. He was killed on March 19, 2011, while reporting from Benghazi. Eman Al-Obeidi was a law student who entered the Rixos Hotel, where Gaddafi detained international reporters. She said that she had been raped by Gaddafi's forces during an anti-regime demonstration. She was immediately placed in a vehicle and taken away by the dictator's loyalists. Then, the government spokesman accused her of drunkenness and likely prostitution.

Prior to analyzing Libyan media, it is important to recall the meaning of information literacy and media literacy. Joint and Wallis (2005) defines the term *information literacy* as a set of skills required to make use of and navigate in the electronic environment. In addition to these basic abilities, a media literate person possesses a deeper level of perception and critical thinking; they check and examine information's authenticity and accuracy. In fact, the term *media literacy*, according to Nijboer and Hammelburg (2010:36-45), is used to incorporate various forms of literacy: information literacy, visual literacy, textual literacy, new media literacies, news literacy, and mass media literacy. In practice, this means that a media literate person not only reads news but also creates news.

It is true that new media allows the same person to produce and consume information. They are simultaneously an active and passive part of the processes of message selection, design, and transmission.

The crucial role of spontaneous journalism is that it can create legitimacy and build consensus: intentionally or not. The Internet has many devices for testing and improving the strength of someone's reporting: counting the "likes" or the number of followers is a way of receiving feedback. If negative, authors can modify their content, the style of their news, or the channel they use for sending it. Information that results from the spontaneous initiative is called User-generated Content. It is characterized by extreme flexibility and is subject to repeated and "live" changes. Many audio or visual materials are uploaded to the Internet by nonprofessional users. All these users are motivated by the desire to share information they consider relevant or true. This practice goes beyond any restrictions traditionally used in the field of news reporting; this in the sense that content is published before it has been evaluated.

Official journalism, on the contrary, prefers to disseminate news only after verification. Professional reporters must filter their news and disseminate that which is reliable. Indeed, verifying news or content posted by private citizens challenges media analysts for two main reasons: (1) the huge quantity of data (in relation to a limited period of time) and (2) the speed of collection. A high number of videos and pictures can be posted in a very short time. These, in turn, cannot be adequately evaluated for truthfulness or reliability. Authorities - a part when they decide to exert a severe censorship - are generally not able to filter such a continuous flow and can only monitor it. The result is a vast amount of unchecked information available on social media, competing with official sources and channels used for reporting. The issues of complexity and ambiguity emerge here: reflecting the complexity faced during analysis of self-produced materials and the ambiguity linked to their nonprofessional and unverified nature.

Different media convey different interests; they need to address similar topics because they compete in gaining consensus on current events. Then, they operate a sort of reciprocal accommodation concerning news content. In doing so, each medium focuses on the same topics and follows recurring patterns in news design. Websites, official governmental departments, citizens' posts, and the Islamic State news agency focus their attention on a specific selection of events that do not offer a broad or complete overview of the country. Observation of news reporting in Libya shows that, from week to week, different actors and geographic areas attract attention; yet, they do this without keeping track of events reported just a few days earlier. The reader works hard to keep abreast of daily narrations and has to make a very personal effort to link and relate different happenings and protagonists. Correlation and analysis are not facilitated by Libyan media. This happens because the official media are not up to the task of freeing themselves from the censorship operated by the new elites: so they simply avoid taking a position. Content produced by nonprofessionals has its weaknesses, too. In fact, such content can be posted on an emotional whim, without the key ability to translate it into relevant political or economic context, in spite of the great opportunity that social media provide citizens, the lack of criticism - lack of a high level of ability to interpret facts and formulate opinions - impedes the development of effective investigative journalism. This has caused, in part, the failure of revolutions: in Libya as elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. It also explains why social change is taking so long to take root.

Methodology and Approach

Taking into account the above-mentioned media literacy and the significant spread of User-generated Content in North African countries, as a side effect of the diverse Arab Spring, I investigated the situation in Libya where less research has been done. I collected data by reading and translating news written in Arabic and publicly available online: via blogs, social platforms, discussion groups, user posts and articles. I did not use any software or additional tools apart from my laptop and an Internet connection. This basic equipment, integrated by my competence in Arabic language, allowed me to gather a large amount of data in a short period of time, that is over a few months in autumn 2017.

The content of these open sources challenges the investigators' abilities, should the investigator wish to switch their role from monitoring to assessing. Indeed, when evaluating information available online, many factors need to be considered. First of all, does the information merely signal an isolated fact or does it allow for broader generalization? Does the gathered news indicate and signal an event, or does it provide warnings as well? My research suggests that the analysis of open source information requires a high degree of specialization in communication sciences and strategies for assessing spontaneous citizen reporting.

In fact, several indicators deserve utmost attention: the structure of the text format, its credibility and reliability, and its confirmation and corroboration. Every factor mentioned constitutes a problematic aspect. For example, online texts are usually unstructured, or they can be highly structured: in the sense that they include audio and video components integrated into written content. This added complexity demands deeper analysis; specifically, review of content as concerns production time and location for the final piece as well as of its separate parts.

Credibility and reliability relate to news content: the topic. It is crucial to group together documents or sources that report on the same subject in order to triangulate or confirm the information they provide. Nevertheless, if various channels, platforms, or outlets report a similar fact, it could be that they all relied only on the same source which may be groundless or erroneous. Without verification, the same alleged fact may be repeated many times, may be validated and the source considered credible enough. The same is true if a source anticipates an event, reported later by an official or national channel; in such cases, credibility increases. Credibility and reliability are also assessed on a scale that assigns scores for authenticity and trustworthiness. The more outlets that provide the same information, the more likely the information is to be true. Such a process takes place through a so-called corroboration step. The critical point is that we cannot assess credibility and reliability once and for all, as both are subject to changes and instability.

Corroboration is very problematic because the repetition of the same interpretation of the same fact tends to lead to an agreement. Considering all the above factors, whoever makes use of open sources for investigations must adopt a mixed methodology and multi-level approach. This means taking into account private and public outlets, assessing products produced by professionals and nonprofessionals, and considering different political preferences or interests. This is the only way to offer a valid analysis. This was precisely my intention and the result of my presentation here.

A Selection of Concrete Examples

The selection presented here is chosen from a wider collection of articles and posts analyzed on a weekly basis in autumn 2017. The choice of Libya is due to the country's particular status. Libya offered a wide array of social media and personal devices used in reporting, as in many North African countries; however, Libya suffered more, and for a longer time, the side effects of the (failed) regime change. Any Libyan citizen reporting is heavily affected by populism and terrorism claims. In fact, many militias or brigades as well as government offices have opened their own sites or have created specific social media profiles. The online space is overwhelmed by these kinds of users; they are effectively majoritarian compared to the authentic, spontaneous reporting done by ordinary citizens. It is not possible to provide an exhaustive survey of all the parts and actors involved, but I attempt to focus on the more active ones; or the ones whose messages were more accurately constructed. This is the part their content that was in most cases groundless, biased, offensive, or violent.

This section then offers a selection of news from Libyan media and pays attention to the choice of topics and message design; including the Arabic lexicon and the channel used for publishing.

We observe that reporting takes place through a narrative discourse without comments. News takes the form of a "short story with a happy ending." The happy reporter conveys bad news, too; for example, when we read a post by Amaq. From the Islamic State producers' point of view, the destruction of an enemy target, as well as the seizure of a city, is considered a happy ending.

Reporting is also generally reduced to "short and simple good stories-bad stories" due to a sort of time-space constraint: it depends on the style required by social platforms and online communication.

Adopting a similar style and stimulated by the same motivation: populism, both professional and amateur journalists present each news story as a "success on their part", carefully omitting elements detrimental to their mission.

But what is populism? In a recent publication, Müller (2016) defines it as three kinds of denial: populism is antiliberal, antidemocratic, and antipluralist. Populists depict themselves as the only true and honest representatives of the people; both from a moralistic and practical point of view. Whatever the need of the people may be, populists state that they, and only they, deserve the exclusive trust of the people.

Regarding populism, the Council of Europe (2017) published an interview on YouTube given in 2017 by Professor Pierre Rosanvallon. He defines populism as divisive and always "against": against elites, oligarchies or foreigners. Populism tends to privatize key concepts (rights, justice, and authority) and the possible ways in which these concepts can be implemented.

For these reasons, populism may endanger democracy when it changes from a movement to a regime.

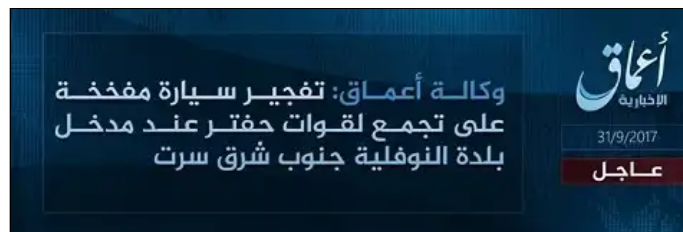
Given the above definition of populism, terrorist calls and journalistic reporting both seem to accommodate populism, presenting their "truth" as the only possible reading of current events. Both meet similar requirements: messages are designed and disseminated in a way that reaches a great number of citizens, especially through social media, with the specific aim of increasing their supporter base.

Terrorist claims and news reporting are built around a narrative discourse, which presents facts and results, but quite carefully *avoids explaining the reasons* that led to the current situation. This kind of reporting creates "momentum" by taking advantage of readers' impulses. These impulses enable readers to be controlled and exploited very easily by the ruling elites. Populations suffering from food shortages, car bombings, and the killing of civilians, or damage to a power plant as part of crossfire in fighting are all recurring subjects in Libyan articles. However, no in-depth explanation is provided for the endless state of war in the country.

The lexicon used and the level of the language are simple and repetitive. Words are used which belong to military, political, and diplomatic spheres. The same verbs are repeated many times with no synonyms. Sentence construction is done in a particular Arabic style: meaning long clauses, interrupted by several phrases inserted to provide details. Posts by Amaq differ in style because of their brevity; they go straight to the news, presented abruptly without interjections. The Islamic State posts tell us in a few lines about the place, the event, the part targeted, and casualties incurred.

Below is a selection of news with a suggested analysis of lexicon:

Posts by the Islamic State News Agency, Wikalat al-Amaq



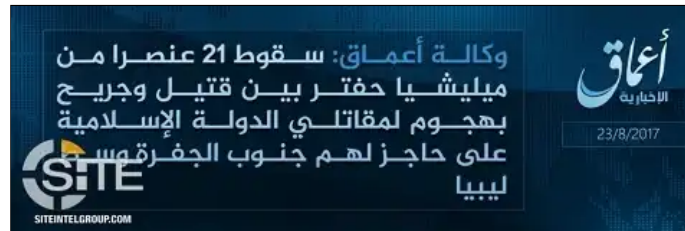
"The explosion of a car bomb during a gathering of Haftar forces at Nofaliya Gate, southeast of Sirt." (Wikalat al-Amaq)



"Damaging and targeting 12 elements of the forces of the despot Haftar, southeast of Sirt. With the support of only God himself, Islamic State soldiers placed a car bomb at the Gate of Nofaliya and exploded it during a gathering of elements belonging to the despot Haftar's forces. This led to damages and the death of 12 persons among them. Glory to Allah and mercy." (Wikalat al-Amaq)



"Martyrdom operation with a car bomb that has targeted a gathering of Haftar armed elements close to the Customs Squad, western area of Benghazi." (Wikalat al-Amaq)



"Fall of 21 elements in Haftar's militias, dead and injured, during an attack carried out by Islamic State fighters at a checkpoint they crossed south of Jufra in central Libya." (Wikalat al-Amaq)

Analysis

The four previous posts show a common pattern; they start with the fact, give details about the place and the device used for the attack, tell the exact number of casualties, and name the group of people attacked. At times, we find an expression of gratitude to Allah.

Nouns

The lexicon used is very repetitive, both inside the same post and when compared to other posts.

We find a list of nouns repeated many times:

<i>tafjīr</i>	تفجير	explosion
<i>sayyāra mufaxxaxa (adj.)</i>	سيارة مفخخة	car-bomb
<i>tajammuʿ</i>	تجمع	gathering
<i>quwāt</i>	قوات	forces
<i>hujūm</i>	هجوم	attack
<i>ʿunsur</i>	عنصر	element

Prepositions

Prepositions are present even where their usage could be avoided. Prepositions work as markers for relevant pieces of information: the device used for the attack (by), the party that carried out and suffered the action (from-to), the place where (at which) it took place. Prepositions are employed every time this is allowed by acceptable grammar rules.

<i>min</i>	من	from
<i>ʿinda</i>	عند	at
<i>ʿala</i>	على	against, over
<i>bi-</i>	ب	with, by
<i>li-</i>	ل	to

Verbs

If possible, use of verbs is avoided. The infinitive form is preferred, and the infinitive works as a noun in Arabic grammar. The only verbs found here are *qāma bi-* (قام ب-, operate) and *ʿadda ʿila* (أدى إلى, lead to). I have verified that posts concerning different countries still abide by the same communication rules, that is minimizing the use of verbs and repeating a basic lexicon many times, as shown above.

As mentioned earlier, this kind of reporting builds momentum through the use of nouns and adjectives helpful in describing a fact. Verbs, typically found in commentaries and use for giving opinions, are avoided in this style of writing.

Different Posts by Private Citizens or Groups Available on Twitter



"Al-Mismari states: orders have been issued to the Operation Room regarding the freedom to open fire anytime." (Twitter) ¹



"Return of some elements of Daesh with civilian dresses to Sirt and the Department for Security of the militias Al-Bunīān Al-Marsūs has not arrested anyone in these elements until now." (Twitter)



"Based on an arrest order from the Office of the General Attorney, Fahmi Salim has been arrested. He is accused of the crimes of oil smuggling and illegal human trafficking, and he has been delivered to the Special Deterrence Forces." (Twitter)

Analysis

Nouns

The descriptive style justifies the use of nouns more than verbs. Here too, the lexicon used is very repetitive and concerns the political and military spheres. All posts share these lexemes:

<i>ʿamr</i>	أمر	order
<i>qabd</i>	قبض	arrest

(the same root is also used as verb, <i>qabada</i>)		
^ʔ <i>amn</i>	أمن	security
^ʕ <i>unsur</i>	عنصر	element

Prepositions

The same prepositions used by Amaq are also found here, and sentences follow a similar pattern to emphasize some specific pieces of information.

<i>min</i>	من	from
<i>fi</i>	في	in
^ʕ <i>ala</i>	على	against, over
<i>li-</i>	لـ	to

Verbs

Here again, verbs are replaced by infinitives or nominal sentences. Recurring verbs include *aṣḍara* (أصدر, to issue) and *qabada* (قبض, to arrest). They are strictly related to the political-military context.

Between Populism and Institutional Etiquette. News Reporting of the LANA News Online Agency and the Official Communications of the Government

The examples provided here are not part of citizen journalism production. I want to offer a comparison between an institutional news agency like LANA (see above) and the previous posts from social media. This is to show that the style of official journalism is not very different from that adopted by nonprofessionals. In particular, I refer to the narrative and descriptive style, the absence of criticism and commentaries. I offer below the full translations from Arabic.

UN Delegation and Zintan Municipality Discuss the Return of 20,000 Displaced Persons to Their Homes in Tripoli



"A UN delegation and the Zintan Municipality discussed the return of 20,000 displaced persons to their homes in Tripoli. The two sides spoke about providing basic services, such as water, water purification plants, medical assistance, shelters for internally-displaced refugees, and a guarantee for the return of 3,000 families, equivalent to 20,000 displaced persons, to their homes in Tripoli. The mayor of Zintan, during a reception for the head of the UN Delegation, Mr. Salame, said: "We appreciate the efforts of the UN to gather all Libyans around one table." This is according to what has been posted on Salame's Twitter page. It has been reported that Mr. Salame arrived this morning to Zintan, accompanied by his deputy and coordinator for humanitarian issues in Libya. Politicians and civil society activists of the area will take part in the meeting." (Lana News 2017b)

EU Ambassador Bettina Muscheidt after Her Meeting with Siyala: "I came to Tripoli to prepare the return of the mission to Libya."



"The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Government for the Agreement, Siyala, met today in Tripoli with the EU ambassador. According to the Libyan News Agency, the EU ambassador said after the meeting: "I came to Tripoli to prepare the return of the mission to Libya". She also clarified that the mission will work with the Libyan authorities on all matters related to bilateral cooperation; in particular, reconstruction projects for the country's growth." (Lana News 2017a)

An Official Communication of the Municipality of Derna

I conclude with the addition of this formal document. It is not a piece of news reporting, but it is a typical example of the Arab style of institutional communications. It attests well to the ceremonial and redundant style of Arab protocol, sometimes resulting in dramatization. It is interesting to observe the Islamic formulations; traditionally used to give extra weight and validity to statements. This is a common practice among officers in the public sector; this applies across the different Arab-Islamic countries and not just in Libya.



"The Ministry of the Local Government

Local Council of Derna

The Local Council of Derna announces to everyone that the humanitarian situation is disastrous, and it directly threatens life. There is no medicine, food, oxygen, and fuel. All the structures of the State have been damaged as a result of this intense siege. Waste has amassed in the city due to the interruption of the activities of the public utility company and the water company. This has caused an environmental disaster and has transformed the city into a collective cemetery. We call on all parties involved to bear their responsibilities and stick to their role of protecting isolated civilians, alleviating the suffering by breaking this unfair siege and by bringing the city "life" that is food, medicine, and other goods through

the seaport of Derna, which is ready to receive ships. The port is the fastest and the safest route; after all, the gate has been closed.

In the name of Allah, we have communicated. In the name of Allah, we are witnesses.

May Allah protect Derna. May Allah protect Libya.

The Local Council of Derna

Stamp: Ministry of the Local Government / Local Council of Derna

Issued in Derna

Wednesday 9, August 2017" (Twitter) ²

Conclusions

Libya is typical of North African countries for the role played inside the country by online, spontaneous reporting; even though the country was invaded by a number of factional protagonists. In practice, it seems that Libya did not experience the promotion of social change by social media, as occurred (albeit with limitations) in other countries; in Egypt among others. The online soft war (Jamali 2015:6-9), intended as the voice of protest spread across the web, did not play the expected role in promoting social and political change in Libya. Instead, the news war on social media outlets reflected the real daily war afflicting civilians.

The high number of initiatives in the field of news production shows that, in the post-regime era, many "new Gaddafis" have emerged in the media sector. The private sector plays the role of the rebel fighting against the state's control over information. However, it too occasionally behaves like a controller. Professional and nonprofessional reporting are heavily affected by populism in Libya: each spontaneous journalist states that they are the only true, honest representative of people. They see this as justifying their actions: including the more violent ones. This is particularly risky considering the results of the survey reported by Jamali (2015:26). The survey found out that, in Libya, trust in social media is double the level of trust in official media. This stands in contrast to the US, for example, where the trust in the former is slightly lower. In Libya, more than in any other country, online reporting produces a reverse effect: it does not serve as a means for providing people with a channel for expressing free speech (i.e. as a tool for independent journalism). Rather, it was an additional instrument for conditioning their audience's reasoning. Citizen reporting was in fact reporting by individuals belonging to specific factions: both those included in, or excluded from, the management of official power.

Another critical point is not only media proliferation in Libya, but also the journalist status and skills. Journalists who served during the Gaddafi regime were totally rejected by new entities, and this led to the loss of work experience. *Citizen journalists* are nonprofessionals, people that work in other fields, but who offered their biased reports during the revolution and the transition period. This large group of writers and supporters of various causes were unprepared for the task of reporting. However, they were willing to bear witness to contemporary events in Libya with videos, pictures, and film footage.

Libya is still far from achieving press or reporter freedom, since neither the private sector nor private citizens are free to choose what to write and share. The establishment of many centers for news production has given rise to clientelism. This seriously hinders investigative journalism, as noted by a member of the LANA steering committee (the former JANA agency), Bashir Zooghbiya. He stated: "It is extremely difficult for journalists to improve upon the practices they learned and applied for years in news reporting. On the first anniversary of the revolution, they wrote stories using the same glorification style that used to be applied in covering the regime's revolution anniversaries. They just replace the phrase 'September Al Fateh revolution' [of Qaddafi] to 'the February revolution'." (El Issawi 2013:21). In addition to this, but regarding the rehabilitation of Libyan journalism, Abdel Basset Abou Daya, the head of LANA's news department, affirmed that "the first challenge was to kill the fear factor inside journalists." (El Issawi 2013:23). Indeed, after having experienced many episodes of brutal censorship, it would be hard for a journalist to adopt a reporting style focused on the truth.

References

- Amnesty International. 2012. Libya: Rule of law or rule of militias? Amnesty International Publications.
https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2016/12/libya_rule_of_law_or_rule_of_militias_.pdf?x43196%20 accessed July 20, 2018.
- Binetti, Ashley, ed. 2015. A New Frontier: Human Trafficking and ISIS's Recruitment of Women from the West. Washington D.C.: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.
- Comninos, Alex. 2011. E-revolutions and Cyber Crackdowns: User-generated Content and Social Networking in protests in MENA and Beyond. In *Global Information Society Watch 2011: Internet Rights and Democratisation: focus on freedom of expression and association* online. Global Information Society Watch. Pp. 31-37. Association for Progressive Communication, Thematic Reports.
- Council of Europe. 2017. "What is Populism and is it a Threat to Democracy". Youtube video, 01:45, October 11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSNymajDRLw> accessed October 25, 2018.
- El Issawi Fatima. 2013. Transitional Libyan Media. Free at Last?. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for international Peace.
- Jamali, Reza. 2015. Online Arab Spring. Social Media and Fundamental Change. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Joint Nicholas, and Jake Wallis. 2005. Information Literacy and the Role of the National Library and Information Association. *Library Review* 54(4):213-217.
- Lana News. 2017a. "Ana mutawājjida fi-l-ʿāšimat ʾarāblus li-l- taḥdīr li- ʿawda al-buʿṯa ʾilā Libya" ["I came to Tripoli to prepare the return of the mission to Libya.]. Lana News Online,

August 24. <https://lana-news.ly/art.php?id=120807> accessed October 23, 2018.

Lana News. 2017b. Al-wafd al-ʿumūmiyy wa baladiyy li-Zintan yunāqīṣāni ʿawda 2000 nāziḥin ʿila manāzilihim fī Ṭarāblus [UN Delegation and Zintan Municipality Discuss the Return of 20,000 Displaced Persons to their Homes in Tripoli]. Lana News Online, August 17. <https://www.lananews.com/ar/?p=78434> accessed October 23, 2018.

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. What Is Populism?. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nijboer, Jelke, and Esther Hammelburg. 2010. Extending Media Literacy: A New Direction for Libraries. *New Library World* 111(1/2):36-45.

OECD. 2007. Participative Web and User-Created Content: Web 2.0, Wikis and Social Networking. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Twitter. <https://twitter.com> accessed August 30, 2017.

UN Security Council. 2017. Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant Resolution 1973 (2011) (S/2017/466).

Wikalat al-Amaq [Wikālat al-ʿAṣ māq]. Site intelligence group. <https://siteintelgroup.com> accessed September 1, 2017.

Notes

¹ These tweets were retrieved by #Almarsad, #Libya, #Sirt.

² This document was retrieved from twitter by #Derna.