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## Digital witnessing in conflict zones: the politics of remediation

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**TITLE:** Digital witnessing in conflict zones: The politics of remediation

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**ABSTRACT:** Digital witnessing, our engagement with death through local participants' own recordings of the conflict zone, introduces a new kind of death spectacle in the West: mediatized death (Mortensen 2015). Whilst, like past spectacles, this one also invites its publics to witness death as a moral event that requires a response, mediatized death differs from past spectacles in that it injects into the practice of witnessing an accentuated sense of doubt: how do we know this is authentic? And, what should we feel towards it? This is because, given the multiple actors filming in conflict zones, digital witnessing breaks with the professional monopoly of the journalist and becomes a complex site of struggle where competing spectacles of death, each with their own interest, vie for visibility. How the status of the death spectacle and our potential engagement with it change under the weight of this new epistemic instability is the focus of this article.

**KEYWORDS:** war and conflict journalism, amateur reporting, digital witnessing, performativity, death spectacle, ethics

## **Digital witnessing in conflict zones: The politics of remediation**

### **Digital witnessing and the remediation of mediatized death**

Digital witnessing, the visual engagement with distant suffering through mobile media by means of real-time recording and uploading, sharing and tagging, poses new epistemic challenges in the management of the visibility of conflict death in Western media (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010; al-Gazzi 2014; Mortensen 2015). These are challenges about the status of death images (are they authentic?), our relationship to them (what should we feel towards them?) and the power relationships within which they are embedded (who dies and how does this matter?). Central to these new challenges is the rise of 'amateur'<sup>i</sup> recordings of conflict as a testimonial act - an act of representation that publicizes conflict death from the locals' perspective so as to mobilize emotion and invite a response, be this revenge, outrage, contempt, fear or empathy. Whilst such testimonial acts were earlier the privilege of journalistic professionals, the rise of local actors has complicated the remediation of testimonies of death in Western news platforms. This is, at least partly, because digital witnessing is not simply about these actors' use of cameras to record death but, importantly, about their own active participation in the very death scenes they produce as potential victims, benefactors or perpetrators.

Digital witnessing is, in this sense, defined by the new status of the camera not only as a tool for the professional reporting of conflict but, simultaneously, as a weapon in the very conduct of conflict, where those who record are precisely those who may be killed, as civilians, or those who kill, as militants, in the course of recording- what Mortensen calls the 'mediatization' of conflict death (2015). Drawing on Gaddafi's death video, al-Ghazzi hints precisely at this intimate implication of the camera in the very dynamics of conflict, by speculating on a causal relationship between the dictator's death and the participation in it of those who filmed it: 'one cannot help but wonder', he says, 'whether and how al-Quaddafi's or Hussein's fates would have changed if the rebels did not have cell phones with them to tape their capture and execution' (2014: 441). Rather than attempt, like al-Ghazzi, such a causal link between amateur media and the act of killing, however, I approach mediatized death as primarily a symbolic practice of representation, which, by implicating the actors of death in the production of their own spectacle, blurs the very boundary between the two; so that, as Butler puts it, we can no longer 'separate ... the material reality of war (death) from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation' (2009: 29).

It is, I argue, precisely this blurring of boundaries, characteristic of mediatized death in the post-Arab Spring conflict zones, that brings about a new sense of radical doubt in the status of the death spectacle in Western journalism. This is because, unlike embedded war journalism, which boasts unlimited access to the realities of conflict yet regulates its spectacles through institutional norms of taste and decency (Campbell 2004), amateur footage offers intimate views of the battlefield yet provides no guarantee for truth<sup>ii</sup>. Instead, it promotes its unedited footage as the 'real thing', rendering it a crucial news source for Western platforms - keen as these are to reclaim some of their waning institutional legitimacy through the raw authenticity of popular testimony (Kristensen and Mortensen 2013).

How exactly Western news, in the case of UK press, remediates this uncensored imagery of conflict death is the analytical focus of this paper. I explore this problematic, by focusing on three instances of mediatized death in post-Arab Spring conflict reporting, Gaddafi's death portrait (2011), the Jihadist beheadings (2014) and Syrian civilian victims (2013), which, as we shall see, together constitute a comprehensive (though not exhaustive) typology of digital witnessing in the UK press. Following a theoretical overview of the implications of remediating digital witnessing in the West, I introduce my own analytical approach, which defines remediation as performative

practice– a practice of representation that re-constitutes mediatized death as an authentic event worthy of ‘our’ emotion at the moment that it claims to simply re-disseminate it (Chouliaraki 2013). Performativity, I propose, draws attention to two interrelated dimensions of the remediation: ‘recontextualization’, the symbolic process through which death footage is re-situated within particular narrative regimes and ‘humanization’, the process through which these narrative regimes articulate moral meaning by construing (or not) the dead as human beings worthy of our emotion.

My analysis demonstrates that the remediations of mediatized death from Libya and Syria in the West do not simply entail technical controls of verification but actively construe amateur footage as authentic, in the course of reporting it . Authenticity, I therefore claim, becomes here a matter of affective attunement<sup>iii</sup> – a symbolic process that regulates the emotional potential of mediatized death in ways that resonate with Western sensibilities, thereby amplifying, challenging or ignoring the testimonial potential of their source. In the process, affective attunement positions each life lost within a continuum of lives-worth-living: from the de-humanization of the Arab leader, to the suspended humanization of civilian casualties and to the hyper-humanization of the beheaded Westerner as a ‘hero’. The remediation of digital witnessing can, from this perspective, been seen as a key dimension of Western journalism in terms of thanatopolitics (Agamben 1998): the selective memorialization of certain deaths at the expense of others, thereby contributing to existing geo-political hierarchies of human life.

### **The ambivalent implications of remediation: between doubt and authenticity**

At the heart of the epistemic doubt around mediatized death lies the synergy between the proliferation of digital cameras and the implication of civilians in conflict zones (Mortensen 2015; see also Sumiala & Hakola 2013). Digital witnessing participates here in a ‘diffused’ visual ecology of conflict (Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010) that brings together non-professional and professional actors in a radical democratization of our ‘right to look’ (Mizroeff 2011). Even though, as we shall see, this democratization is usually associated with civilian and NGO testimonies only, insofar as digital witnessing is also practiced by military actors (as both allies and enemies of the West), the democratization of the ‘right to look’ should be seen as inextricably linked to a parallel democratization of ‘the right to kill’ - a right that is ‘no longer the sole monopoly of states’ or ‘regular armies’ (Mbembe 2003: 16-7), but has today become the practice of fragmented and conflicting armed groups across battlefields.

Consequently, digital witnessing is about more than just amateur actors using technologies to disseminate spectacles of war atrocities. Rather, as Potzsch would put it, digital witnessing ‘unites new technologies of ...vision and cognition with new ways of executing violence on behalf of implicitly universalized sets of norms and values’ (2015: 91). Digital witnessing, it follows, is also communicating these actors’ diverse ‘universalized norms and values’ around whose death is ‘grievable’ and whose is not (Butler 2004). In this diffused context, the concept of gatekeeping used to capture the elimination of doubt in earlier contexts, where ‘an one way information flow (was) shaped by varying patterns of press-government relations’ (Bennett 2004: 311), proves to be inadequate. In contrast, I argue, the concept of remediation can more productively describe the complex process of managing doubt today, in that it takes into account not only the validation of an increasing quantity of testimonials available but, importantly, also the domestication of the competing values and affects that inform these testimonials. It is precisely in this dual sense that doubt over the authenticity of mediatized death should be approached not only as epistemic uncertainty begging fact verification but as, at once, a profound skepticism towards the moral invitation of the footage for us to feel for the dead *and* a technology of power that, in defining who is worthy or unworthy of emotion, classifies conflict death along the lines of a hierarchy of grievability.

Whilst, however, the role of digital witnessing as the West's primary mode of engagement with conflict death is well-established (Allan 2013; Sumiala 2013; Mortensen 2015), the question of the management of doubt remains relatively untheorized (though see Ali and Fahmy 2013). It is either taken for granted as a corrosive dimension of digital witnessing or ignored in favour of an unjustified optimism that celebrates the authenticity of the amateur. In sidestepping this question, however, both perspectives leave the role of the remediation of digital witnessing outside the remit of our critical attention.

On the one hand, the positive argument treats digital witnessing as the manifestation of an authentic popular perspective on conflict - what I earlier referred to as the emergence of 'the right to look', in that people's cameras enable those who were once 'the objects of surveillance' to now 'turn their eyes, ears and voice on the powerful' (Fuchs 2011: 13). This emphasis on amateur footage as an instrument of public transparency heavily informs the optimistic argument about the democratization of conflict reporting, where digital witnessing is seen to break with the professional monopoly of the news and introduce, what Hoskins and o'Loughlin term, '*a new fragility*' in Western reporting - a fragility 'fed by the potential of images (...to) shutter attempts to develop or sustain a version of warfare around which public and political opinion can cohere' (2010: 22). Digital witnessing, however, does not only come to democratize the journalism. Its testimonies further humanize those who speak from conflict zones, by inviting us to stand by them in solidarity. Doubt here is ignored in favour of the moral act of 'bearing witness' as in itself the guarantee not only of a new authenticity but also of the new 'humanity' of conflict: '*the camera-phone*', as Anden-Papadopoulos argues, 'permits entirely new performative rituals of bearing witness, ... effectively mobilizing {this} footage as graphic testimony in a bid to produce feelings of political solidarity' (2014: 753).

On the other hand, there is the negative argument, which, instead of celebrating the authenticity of amateur footage, introduces doubt as a constitutive element of digital witnessing both in terms of technology, giving rise to concerns of surveillance, and content, giving rise to concerns of de-politicization. Turning the celebration of technology argument on its head, this approach is skeptical of mobile cameras as being less about the 'right to look' and more about the 'obligation to be seen'. Given that digital reporting inevitably entails an element of peer-to-peer monitoring, this argument shows suspicion towards the mediatization of death as, potentially, a new site of state surveillance, where 'important security-related practices are privatized and outsourced ... beyond the grasp of government agencies' yet operate to their advantage (Potsch 2015: 87). This suspicion around the potential of digital technology to de-humanize those it reports about through the scrutinizing visibility of the camera bifurcates into further doubt about digital content as concealing more than it reveals. Speaking of Saddam Hussein's death footage, for instance, Zelizer (2010) suggests that Western journalism used this amateur recording to focus on the scene immediately preceding his hanging, what she calls 'about to die' imagery, and so to orient the debate towards the circumstances of dying rather than the legitimacy of the death verdict. A different inflection of the inauthentic content argument is Kampf and Liebes' critique of digital reporting as de-politicizing conflict, in that it tends to marginalize politics in favour of 'experiences and feelings': 'the focus on experiences and feelings of individual players in the tales of war and terror', they say, 'is only one aspect of a larger trend of inability to discuss social and political issues' (2013: 15).

In summary, the controversy around digital witnessing revolves around the capacity of mediatized death to either overcome doubt and act as a moralizing force that democratizes Western journalism and humanizes conflict victims, or to accentuate skepticism and act as a regulative force that de-humanizes people and de-politicizes conflict news. Whilst the optimism of the former perspective refers primarily to amateur testimonials as they are recorded on the ground and, thereby, emphasizes their

potential for authentic voice-giving but downplays the remediating effects of Western journalism in the process of dissemination, the pessimism of the latter is culpable of the reverse: it overemphasizes journalism's remediating impact on Western publics at the expense of the potential connectivities that may be enabled by the authentic testimonials of conflict zones. Instead of a priori privileging one over the other position, I argue, drawing on Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantti, that, the success of digital witnessing 'relies on translating the meanings of its actions to local and distant audiences alike and on bridging "old" and "new" media platforms' (2013: 2186). In this spirit, I choose to provisionally suspend judgment and turn to my empirical cases. The task is to explore, rather than assert, how such 'translations' manage doubt, as they remediate mediatized death across audiences, from Syria to the UK, and between platforms, from the mobile phone to news outlets.

To this end, I ask: How does the remediation of mediatized death establish the authenticity of amateur testimonials? Under which conditions may the remediation of digital witnessing act as a humanizing force on the conflict deaths it reports? and which are the political implications of the remediation of digital witnessing for Western journalism?

### **The performativity of remediation**

Taking my starting point on the shared premise of both perspectives, namely that digital witnessing is a key symbolic terrain for the performance of conflict death, I treat this terrain as inherently unstable and explore how exactly each of my case studies remediates conflict death as authentic and which proposals for emotion towards conflict victims each invites us to endorse. To this end, I conceptualize the remediation of mediatized death in UK news in terms of 'regimes of witnessing': relatively stable formations of meaning that perform the dual task of establishing the 'facts' of conflict death and simultaneously inviting us to engage with normative ways of feeling for the dead. Neither the authenticity of a death scene nor the humanity of a life lost, it follows, can be seen as taken-for-granted attributes of amateur footage. They should instead be approached as emerging through specific regimes of witnessing, which, in turn, need to be analyzed via a case-based, multi-modal methodology – one that focuses on how the symbolic resources of Western journalism (image and language) locate mediatized death in distinct narrative logics and how, in so doing, distribute the quality of humanity across each case. Analysis, it follows, is organized around the concepts of 'recontextualization' and 'humanization', which together capture how remediation routinely authenticates and re-moralizes mediatized death in Western news.

Recontextualization draws attention to the symbolic dimension of remediation as a process of narrative appropriation, where amateur footage is embedded within a broader news story, turning disturbing images into credible news item (Chouliaraki 2000). Regimes of witnessing, in this respect, far from communicating 'raw' visual content, tactically manage our encounter with mediatized death as a journalistic event that tells the truth 'out there'. If recontextualization is about narrativizing mediatized death as an authentic event, humanization is about attaching value to this narrative, by tactically assigning the attribute of humanity to its actors, victims, perpetrators and benefactors, thereby separating those worthy of mourning from those who are not (Butler 2009). Even though humanization, in the case of living actors, is about giving voice and representing the sufferer as an agent (Chouliaraki 2006), in death, humanization is about historicizing and memorializing the lives lost as well as animating the emotional responses of those close to them (Morse 2015). Regimes of witnessing, in this respect, do not address our 'spontaneous' sense of humanity but rather regulate our emotional response towards death, by proposing specific configurations of affect as legitimate ways of feeling towards them.

It is this duality between the authenticity of death, established through the recontextualization of 'facts' and the affective claims 'facts' make about the victim's

humanity, that enables the remediation of mediatized death to do two things at once: to overcome doubt about mediatized death and to regulate our moral encounter with it.

### **Remediations of digital witnessing**

My empirical material consists of the front pages of six major UK newspapers<sup>iv</sup>, in their print and online versions. The assumption is that, despite their differences, online and print share key features across their main stories, such as front-page pictures and headlines (Boczkowski 2010) - as indeed was the case in my data.

The three instances of mediatized death, the beheading of a Western citizen (2014), the death of Gaddafi (2011) and the mass killing of Syrian civilians (2013) fulfill five selection criteria. First, they all share a similar geo-political context, the post-Arab Spring conflicts (2011-2015), thereby making it possible to establish continuities and discontinuities between them against a common historical background; second, they all have maximum newsworthiness, in that most appeared as front page news and had various kinds of impact in the course of their respective conflicts (from the investigation of Gaddafi's death as a case of war crime in The Hague, to the international military coalition against ISIS in Syria to the UN decision to destroy Syria's chemical weapons reservoir); third, they encompass a range of amateur sources, including non-governmental organizations and militant media users - both allies and enemies; and, finally, they have, what Flyvbjerg (2006) calls, 'paradigmatic' status, that is they stand as exemplars of broader clusters of imagery with similar generic properties, thereby typifying three significant variations of mediatized death in Western news: Arab leader killing (Gaddafi, but see also Hussein and bin Laden), hostage killing (a number of jihadist beheadings, 2004 and 2014-5) and mass civilian killing (Syria, but also across the post-Arab Spring zones and Palestine). It is these variations that, in turn, illustrate how mediatized death contributes to perpetuating a hierarchical continuum of remediations in Western news, across a spectrum of de-humanization (Gaddafi), hyper-humanization (beheaded hostage) and suspended humanization (Syrian civilians).

### ***Witnessing as vindication/De-humanization***

Gaddafi's death, on October 20<sup>th</sup> 2011, is not fully captured by the mobile phone cameras of Libyan militia that went viral shortly after his death. What is documented is his weak and bloodied body, already injured by a grenade, as it is violently pushed around. Even though the footage became an extraordinary sensation in social media, the absence of a visual record of death gave rise to controversy. Official versions claimed that Gaddafi was accidentally shot as a result of being caught on crossfire during his transfer to a vehicle, but witnesses insisted that he was killed by those surrounding him: 'By the time Muammar Gaddafi was loaded into an ambulance and transported to Misrata,' the Human Rights Watch report says, 'his body appeared lifeless: it remains unclear whether he died from this violence, the shrapnel wounds, or from being shot later, as some have claimed.'<sup>v</sup>.

Central to the ongoing political controversy about Gaddafi's death is the issue of the authenticity of the footage. Filmed by those who participated in Gaddafi's killing, this instance of mediatized death enacts, what Mortensen (2015) calls, a 'first-person documentary style' that resonates with the aesthetic norms of amateur authenticity; random shots, shaky camera, unstable frames, erratic sound claim indeed to represent conflict 'as it is'. Unable to offer credible evidence of the act of killing itself, however, the newsworthiness of this footage ultimately operates less as testimony to a historical event as such and more as a marker of emotional proximity to the death scene. What this chaotic scene of violence against Gaddafi communicates with evidential certainty, in other words, is not how exactly Gaddafi died but the emotional dynamics via which Libyan soldiers acted upon him: an affect of intense aggression and hateful revenge. Understood not only as a sensory but also a semiotic mechanism that 'amplifies the intensities' through which 'we experience emotions .... and, more important, the urgency

to act upon those feelings' (Papacharissi 2015: 22), affect defines the emotional potentialities that orient us towards legitimate ways of feeling for mediatized death. Affect then is here articulated through images of pushing, pummeling and shouting soldiers, thereby giving rise to a regime of witnessing as vindication - a regime waiting to be translated into a new story in UK news and to invite Western publics to engage with it in ways that endorse, ignore or denounce it.

How is this regime remediated in the UK press? Which narratives regulate our affective encounter with the death and how, if at all, do they attempt to humanize the figure of the victim? All six online versions include links to the video, stills of which are used in the print front pages, on October 21<sup>st</sup> 2011<sup>vi</sup>. Five of them privilege the 'about to die' trope, whilst the sixth depicts Gaddafi dead. Three front pages (The Daily Telegraph, The Sun and The Guardian) use the same still of the man injured and bloodied, leaning against a sitting soldier; one (The Daily Mail) uses a similar shot of him barely standing up among his captors, while the final one (Daily Mirror) depicts him lying dead purportedly at a meat store in Misrata, where his body was briefly put on display.

This consistent presence of Gaddafi's face across front-pages confirms the tactical use of the about-to-die trope as an authenticating device ('yes, he is dead'), which allows Western journalism to reclaim authority over a controversial 'moment' by focusing on the just-before moment - along the lines of our familiar Saddam Hussein example (Zelizer 2010). This universal presence of death or near-death across front-pages, however, suggests that, for the UK press, it was more important to prove that Gaddafi is dead than respect the privacy of his last moments. This management of visibility, relying as it is on the exposure of his mortally injured body, deprives his body of its human dignity. In being shown as 'bare life' stripped of its legal and moral rights, Gaddafi becomes a mere object of consumption to our own 'right to look'. It is this rare public exposure of mortal vulnerability that constitutes here a misrecognition of this victim's humanity, thus confirming and reproducing historical asymmetries between the dignified dead of the West and the indignity of its 'others': 'Images of dead foreigners', as Campbell argues, 'are little more than a vehicle for the inscription of domestic spaces as superior, thereby furthering the "cultural anaesthesia" produced through media representations of the other' (2004:64).

In light of this visual consensus, how do the UK newspapers differ in their recontextualization of Gaddafi's death? Their differences, I argue, can be classified along three distinct categories - each investing the image with a different claim to authenticity: the indexical, the iconic and the symbolic (Chouliaraki 2006). In the first category, the imagery of Gaddafi is recontextualized by the sentence, 'Don't shoot' (The Daily Mail) and 'Don't shoot, don't shoot' (The Daily Mirror), which, in echoing Gaddafi's last words, establishes a relationship of correspondence between language and image: what you read is what was uttered on the spot: 'Battered and bloodied, the tyrant of Libya pleads for his life. Moments later he was dead', writes The Daily Mirror. Indexical meaning works here to animate Gaddafi's death scene: we see evidence of the death but we also get to know the victim's last reaction. Mediatized death is consequently authenticated within a narrative of merciless violence that 'sticks to the facts'. Caught in this indexical milieu, Gaddafi is consequently also construed as an ambivalent figure, suspended between a reluctant humanization that demystifies the tyrant as a powerless individual pleading for his life and explicit humiliation that exposes the dictator as weak and cowardly in the face of death.

In the second category, multiple stills and single about-to-die still shots are accompanied by the sentences 'End of a Tyrant' (The Independent), 'Death of a Dictator' (The Guardian) and 'No mercy for a merciless tyrant' (the Daily Telegraph). All three function indexically in that 'end', 'death' and 'no mercy' are directly anchored onto what we see. However, they also depart from it, as they simultaneously offer a broader narrative within which to contemplate Gaddafi's death. The evaluative vocabularies of '(merciless) tyrant' and 'dictator' open up these images to, what Peirce calls, iconic



meaning - meaning that abstracts from immediate context to foreground generality: Gaddafi is no longer just a dying man; he stands for any despotic regime. His death is thus recontextualized as a generalized truth about the fate of an oppressor – a moral tale that invites us to reflect on the destiny of others like him: ‘The bloody end of the bloody regime’, The Guardian adds just above its letterhead, ‘stands as a warning to the region’s other brutal leaders’. Gaddafi’s own humanity, I claim, is here annulled by its subsumption under the generic category of ‘dictator’, which, in turn, invites us to contemplate the destiny of others like him but without pity or empathy towards this victim’s gruesome death.

The final category, consisting solely of ‘The Sun’, accompanies an about-to-die Gaddafi with the sentence ‘That’s for Lockerbie...’. Rather than indexicality, corresponding to external reality, or iconicity, subsumed under a prototypical category, this choice enacts symbolic meaning, in that its truth is primarily ideological: Gaddafi is construed within a ‘tit for tat’ narrative as a trophy of revenge in a conflict between ‘us’ and ‘them’. ‘That’s for Lockerbie...’ presupposes this narrative, by drawing upon the nation’s collective memory of the Libya-executed 1988 PanAm plane bombing over Scotland and thus inviting ‘us’ to recognize this death as a long-awaited act of national vindication. Gaddafi’s humanity is consequently here fully annihilated, as, far from recognized as human, he operates as the symbol of ‘our’ evil foe.

Their differences granted, these various recontextualizations converge upon a relatively homogenous regime of witnessing that, instead of challenging the emotional potentialities of aggression and revenge characteristic of the militants’ own footage, reproduces and, at times, legitimizes this potential. By foregrounding violence, tyranny and criminality as the truth claims through which Western publics are invited to engage with Gaddafi’s death, this regime not only establishes an affective affinity with its source but also a similar moral orientation to the victim’s humanity. Indeed, the testimonial narratives of his death in terms of ‘bare life’ in the hands of his captors, nemesis for an oppressor and retribution for an international criminal undermine any performative possibility for this victim to emerge as worthy of empathetic emotion in the face of death - as a figure endowed with humanity. The Gaddafi of UK press is subjected instead to, what Butler (2004) calls, a process of symbolic defacement: he is an unequivocally dehumanized figure, a radical ‘other’.

### ***Witnessing as commemoration/Hyper-humanization***

If Gaddafi’s mediatized death accomplishes the symbolic defacement of a tyrant, Alan Henning’s beheading is about the actual defacement of a Western citizen – a British taxi driver who volunteered as a humanitarian worker in the Syrian war zone. Filmed on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014 by perpetrators, ISIS jihadists in Syria, the video differs from the previous one. Rather than chaotic and improvised, it was carefully staged following the tripartite structure of the decapitation genre: justification, execution, anticipation. Whilst the first part introduces the grounds for the killing, the middle part includes denunciatory statements against the UK government by victim and perpetrator before the latter places a knife in the victim’s throat; the filming stops short of showing the act, suggesting that ISIS’s media tactics entails a high degree of professional reflexivity that moderated content in pursuit of maximum remediations in Western news (Al-Ghazzi 2014)<sup>vii</sup>. The video concludes with a frame of the next victim (Peter Kassig) warning the West of his impending execution.

The authenticity of this video is, similarly to Gaddafi’s, established through the forensic examination of the recording by UK intelligence (the FBI and Foreign Office) as well as media networks themselves. Even though verification was strictly concerned with the credibility of the source, the management of the footage by UK media addressed a broader skepticism towards the footage as part of an intimidation tactic of jihadist propaganda (Conway 2012). The management of doubt in the UK press focused, therefore, on suppressing the emotional potentialities of disgust and terror, inspired by

the anticipation of Henning's slow, painful and brutal killing in the theatrical staging of the execution scene: the hooded and black-clad executioner holding a knife against Henning's neck, the kneeling prisoner's orange uniforms, the desolate desert landscape. It is precisely these affective intensities, set in motion through the imagination rather than actual imagery of decapitation, that situates this footage within a regime of, what we may call, traumatic witnessing.

How is traumatic witnessing remediated in UK newspapers? Let us look into the front pages of the same six ones published on October 4<sup>th</sup> 2014<sup>viii</sup> – in fact five, as The Daily Mirror's print version ran a different story to its online live update of the execution ('Carkson flees hate mob' about Top Gear presenter's negative reception in Argentina), provoking protest in social media<sup>ix</sup>. The online versions of the rest of the newspapers may have prioritized the story and used video stills of the execution but, for the first time since the beheadings began, they refused to include the footage link – an act of defiance against ISIS propaganda.

Print versions followed a similar tactic<sup>x</sup>. Unlike the Gaddafi news, which authenticated his death by combining explicit imagery with various narratives of contempt, contemplation or revenge, the lack of such imagery here recontextualized Henning's death in a unanimous narrative of commemoration that turned the victim into an iconic figure: someone with a specific identity yet simultaneously emblematic of 'universal' values. Iconicity is the outcome of managing particularity and generality as simultaneous attributes of the victim, though synergies between the imagery and language of headlines. It is, to begin with, the capacity of visualization for indexical meaning, for referring to the victim in his corporeal specificity, that, in combination with certain linguistic choices, for instance the occupational attribute 'Salford driver' (The Independent), particularizes Alan Henning as a 'real', historical figure. Other configurations of language and image, however, such as Henning holding a Syrian baby (The Guardian, The Sun, The Daily Mail) or smiling from the driver's seat of his convoy support vehicle (The Independent), simultaneously situate Henning within a broader humanitarian narrative that foregrounds his moral agency as a compassionate volunteer, a 'hero' (The Sun). The only two execution-related stills of Henning in yellow uniform are recontextualized within the humanitarian narrative through their juxtaposition between these 'about to die' images and a photo of him with a baby (The Daily Mail) or through a sub-heading that reiterates his virtues, 'Alan went to help people of all faiths...' (Telegraph). The remediation of this death thus entails minimal visualization and a descriptive use of language: 'beheading' is everywhere ('murdered' in The Guardian) accompanied by national identification markers such as 'Brit nr2' (The Sun), 'Second Briton' (Daily Mail), 'British hostage' (Daily Telegraph) - all of which construe Henning's death as part of an unfolding tragedy of national loss (second, Brit nr 2).

Unlike Gaddafi's annihilated humanity that, in different degrees, activated a vindictive regime of witnessing in UK news, relatively resonant with that of its source footage, Henning's heroic humanity stands in full dissonance to the amateur footage of his decapitation. The recontextualization of the footage, in other words, sought to refract the affective potential of trauma, inherent in the jihadist video, into a different, hybrid affect of sober national pride. This configuration of affects, as we saw, activates a regime of witnessing as memorialization, which hyper-humanizes Henning: whilst he is presented as a human being like 'us', a Salford driver who 'just wanted to help', he is also an ideal version of 'us', a humanitarian 'hero' of the nation worthy of national commemoration.

### ***Witnessing as outrage/Suspended humanization***

The footage of the Syrian gas attack at Ghuta outside Damascus, which killed around 1700 people, in August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013, was recorded by the Violence Documentation Centre (VDC), a body of Syrian opposition activists committed to documenting violence against

civilians during the conflict. These amateur witnesses followed the NGO practice of bearing witness to war crimes (Givoni 2014) but they were not outsiders to the death scenes; they were, at once, benefactors and fellow sufferers to those they filmed. The videos recorded the suffering of Syrian civilians, including large numbers of children, in hospital areas where they sought help after the attack. Some were crying distressed and short of breath, others lying with 'their eyes lifeless and staring', as *The Independent* describes, '...in convulsion, mouths foaming, as medics frantically tried to save them...'. Focusing not on single individuals, as the previous examples, but on groups of people, these visual records included, but did not exclusively consist of, about-to-die images, as some people would eventually recover yet others were already dead.

Questions of verification were raised regarding the suffering of the depicted: were they really suffering or was their suffering staged by the rebels to their own benefit? As in the previous cases of remediation, Western expertise was recruited to authenticate the footage, with senior researchers at the EU Institute for Security Studies in Paris, for instance, declaring that these symptoms could not be staged: 'It is clear that something terrible has happened.', they said, 'The scenes could not have been stage-managed...The footage seems to offer convincing evidence of poisoning through asphyxiation.'<sup>xi</sup> Doubt around the veracity of the footage settled, the amateur aesthetic of unedited shots and jerky camera movements also worked to convey a compelling authenticity of affect - that of outrage. By inviting the world to 'be there' next to the horrific suffering of children, the footage situated its claims to truth within a regime of humanitarian witnessing as denunciation, inviting us to feel indignation towards the perpetrators.

How is this regime remediated in UK press? All six newspapers of August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013<sup>xii</sup> recontextualized the video and/or included video stills or a photograph gallery of the aftermath of the attack in their online versions, some explicitly addressing the 'taste and decency' challenge posed by such gruesome imagery - for instance, 'The Daily Mirror' included an extended commentary entitled 'Why the world must see the shocking reality'<sup>xiii</sup>. Only three of them, however, moved the online story onto the front-page of their print versions. The rest opted for a variety of local interest stories<sup>xiv</sup>.

Of the three print front-pages that foregrounded the civilian killings story, *The Daily Mirror* used close-up imagery of dead faces, all eight of them small children lined up next to each other as-if sleeping. Its headline, 'Now they are gassing children', in bold capitals just under the children's faces, established an indexical relationship of verification between the two, in that what we read, the killing of children, is reflected in the evidence of the picture. In so doing, it points to Assad as the killer: the unspecified 'they', as the subject of the accusation, is visually associated with an adjacent picture of Assad and contrasted with the sub-title's use of 'rebels' as a reliable witness, in 'Chemical weapons kill 1.300, say rebels'. Even though both *The Independent* and *The Guardian* also hosted shots of lined-up dead, they did so from mid-range distance within more complex visual compositions that included living figures among the dead. *The Independent* hosts 'an image released by rebels' that, in randomly cropped frame, foregrounds a number of men walking or standing around rows of dead people covered in blankets, faces exposed, whilst its headline, 'Syria conflict: its darkest day yet?' establishes authenticity through symbolic meaning: the truth of those depicted is about an evil and devastating loss - Syria's 'darkest day'. *The Guardian's* front-page, entitled 'Hundreds killed in apparent gas attack by Syrian regime', shows imagery of an elderly figure holding a baby wrapped in white linen among rows of dead ready for burial, thereby recontextualizing the image in terms of iconic meaning: through its explicit accusation, 'gas attack', the deaths are subsumed under the broader category of 'war crime' - a category established through the association of the attack with the historical precedent of a similar crime, Saddam Hussein's 1988 gas attack in Halabja, Kurdistan ('chemical attack worst since Saddam Hussein').

If the Ghouta gas attack claims authenticity by mobilizing various types of

meaning at the service of emotional (they are gassing children), moral (darkest day) and legal (apparent gas attack...worst since Hussain) narratives of denunciation against the perpetrators, the visualization of the dead tells a more complicated story about their humanity. To begin with, even though all online sites hosted footage of the victims, half of the print platforms failed to report the news in their front pages, effecting thereby, what Butler calls, a 'radical defacement' of the dead – a denial to even recognize the loss of these lives as headline news (2009). Meanwhile, the key pictorial feature of the remaining three front pages is the en masse visibility of the dead. The very visibility of the dead as the object of indignant testimony undoubtedly grants some recognition to those victims. This act of recognition, however, is simultaneously undermined by the presence of faces of the dead across the front pages. Even though, as *The Mirror* argues, the motivation for this visibility is, unlike Gaddafi, to stir anger for the brutal death of innocent children, it does nonetheless break the 'taste and decency' code reserved for the protection of Western victims. Insofar as it signals a differential distribution of the rights to privacy between 'their' and 'our' dead, it cannot but also function as a marker of 'otherness'. Moreover, this collective imagery of death does stir emotion on the basis of its sheer numbers but it does not personalize those dead: we know nothing about them, their lives and histories<sup>xv</sup>. As a consequence, we may be appalled by these mass killings but we are not invited to relate to the victims as human beings. This, at once, discontinuous and intrusive recontextualization of Syria's mass deaths works to situate them within an unstable regime of witnessing that mobilizes some sense of outrage towards the persecutor but not necessarily empathy towards the victims.

At the same time, the association of the persecutor with Syrian president Assad proves to be itself problematic, as, this rushed vilification of the government ultimately failed to take into account the radical ambivalence around the identity of the persecutor in the Syrian conflict: Assad or the rebels<sup>xvi</sup>. Much of the ensuing international debate around the option of a UN intervention in Syria gravitated, consequently, on assigning blame to the two actors and debating UN's Responsibility to Protect mandate rather than engaging with the predicament of the victims. Following the generalized reluctance of the international community to intervene militarily in Syria, unlike Libya, the UN settled for the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons in 2013-14 – despite which, however, April 2015 saw more gas attacks against civilians within the country.

In summary, unlike the previous cases, the recontextualization of affect in the Syrian civilians story was ambiguous – neither universally resonant, as in Gaddafi's vindictive witnessing, nor categorically dissonant, as in Henning's commemorative one. The affect of outrage, so compellingly registered in the source footage, is here selectively taken up, with only half of the press remediating it in resonance to the humanitarian outrage story, with this very half being, simultaneously, hesitation to protect the dignity of the dead as human beings. It is this double reluctance that we may refer to as suspended humanization – a form of humanization that reflects a partial resonance in the remediation of affects between source footage and its Western remediation, thereby legitimizing a less assertive and more uneven moral engagement with the Syrian victims – an engagement that cannot take the value of human life for granted nor fully recognize the humanity of the victims.

### **The politics of remediation**

Digital witnessing, our engagement with conflict death through the participants' own recordings of the death scene, introduces a new kind of death spectacle in the West: mediatized death. Whilst, like past spectacles, this one also invites its publics to witness death as a moral event that requires a response, mediatized death differs from past spectacles in that it injects into the practice of witnessing an accentuated sense of doubt: how would we know it's authentic? and what should we feel towards it? This is because, given the multiple actors filming in conflict zones, digital witnessing breaks with the professional monopoly of the journalist and becomes a complex site of struggle where

competing spectacles of death, each with their own interest, vie for visibility. How the status of death and our potential engagement with it change under the weight of this new epistemic instability has been the focus of my analysis.

Looking into the remediations of three paradigmatic cases of amateur death footage in the UK press, I examined the process by which doubt around status and engagement are addressed through the recontextualization of regimes of witnessing online and in print. Two insights emerged. First, the remediation of mediatized death relies upon affect as a key marker of the truth of amateur footage; this, in turn, points to an emerging conception of authenticity that complements factual accuracy through source verification so as to thematize emotional resonance through 'affective attunement', the regulation of the emotional potential of each death event in line with Western sensibilities, as a key mechanism for establishing the truth of conflict reporting. Second, processes of 'affective attunement' entail uneven allocations of the symbolic attributes of humanity among the dead; it is, in turn, such differential processes of humanization that render digital witnessing central to the classification of conflict deaths in a continuum of memorability/oblivion, in Western news platforms. These two insights point to the need to re-theorize digital witnessing in ways that neither over-emphasize nor ignore the specificities of remediation, as existing literature does.

Let me then, in conclusion, build on these insights to reflect upon the remediation of digital witnessing as a crucial dimension of Western journalism, which combines the domestication of doubt with the exercise of thanato-political power. Despite the promise of the shaky camera to re-invigorate the credibility of professional journalism, digital witnessing, as we saw, mobilizes instead old anxieties around the truth claims of mediatized death (al-Gazzi 2015): how did Gaddafi really die? is this decapitation real or fake? are the gas victims truly suffering? In response to these questions, all our three visuals were subject to rigorous procedures of verification through the techno-institutional agencies of governments and news networks. Technical proof, however, is not enough to authenticate them. This is because the raw images of about-to-die bodies in the digital footage of conflict do not simply provoke epistemic doubt, uncertainty about their truth claims. They also provoke moral scepticism, uncertainty about where we stand towards them: what our responsibility towards dying others is and how we should relate to them.

It is in the context of this moral scepticism that the remediation of mediatized death in Western news should not be seen simply as the re-dissemination of verified content. It should be seen as an increasingly complex process that recontextualizes the narratives and affective orientations of such content in ways that render it morally relevant to Western publics. Affective attunement refers precisely to this normative process of adjusting the emotional potentialities of mediatized death in ways that a relative resonance of affects is established between source and host. The Gaddafi footage, for instance, was recontextualized around images of his about-to-die or dead body, establishing particular narratives of his death as true to us (national foe, coward, merciless tyrant) and thereby depriving this victim of the dignity granted to human beings, in their last moments. In contrast, the unanimous refusal to broadcast footage of Allan Henning's decapitation recontextualized this death within a narrative of national commemoration, rather than intimidation, and construed the victim as 'our' hero, a 'hyper-human' figure worthy of our emotion and action.

It is precisely this selective humanization that lies at the heart of remediation as thanatopolitical practice, a symbolic practice of power that implicates mediatized death in the production of hierarchies of place and human life, by instituting 'a break', in what Foucault calls, 'the biological continuum' between 'what must live and what must die' (2004: 255). Even though, according to Agamben (1998), the term was employed to juxtapose Foucault's 'benign' biopolitics of modernity, operating through the micromanagement of large populations at the service of sustaining life, with the savage politics of race and death in colonial and neo-colonial contexts that persist today,

thanato-politics, I argue, can also be used productively to describe the participation of Western journalism in the reproduction of hierarchies of grievability. Journalism as thanato-politics relies, then, on the tactical remediation of affect so that some mediatized deaths are viewed with indifference if not satisfaction, others fully mourned and commemorated and others mentioned but ultimately forgotten.

At the heart of the thanato-political practice of Western journalism lies the 'taste and decency' norm, which, let us recall, consists in 'the tactful elision of horror that stems from the media's reticence to offend' and aims at 'shielding' publics from the trauma of witnessing death (Campbell 2004:64). Even though 'taste and decency' has always been part of war reporting, the 'diffused' visual (and military) economy of recent conflict zones complicates the taking of sides and throws into relief the politics of affect, which now replace straightforward 'our victors'/'their dead' propaganda with the complex and fragile mechanism of affective attunement. For, in the absence of old certainties about 'us' and 'them', 'our' shielding becomes a matter not of simply sanitizing facts to boost morale but of fine-tuning the raw emotional proximities of mediatized death, wherever they come from, with our own pre-existing sensibilities.

Even though affective attunement confirms Kampf and Liebes' 'emotionalization of conflict' argument (2013), whereby the digital narratives of conflict shift emphasis onto the sentimental visualities of testimony rather than expert arguments on strategy, this same concept simultaneously points to an unchanging dimension of conflict reporting – one that is central to the exercise of thanato-politics: the importance of sovereign power and geo-political interest in the taking of journalistic sides. The norm of 'resonance', the harmonization of the affective intensities of digital witnessing with the expectations of Western publicity, best captures this unchanging dimension of conflict reporting. Theorized also as a process of 'normalization', whereby old platforms adopt new technologies to their habitual practices (Singer 2005), resonance nonetheless goes beyond normalization both in referring to the narrative rather than technological fine-tuning of digital news and, crucially, in thematizing the complicity of this norm in the geo-politics of remediation.

The clearest example of this complicity is the uneven recontextualization of the Syrian victims, whose humanity was suspended between reluctant recognition and complete defacement. At the heart of this discontinuous resonance of affectivities lies the geo-political controversy around Syria both in terms of the stakes of the conflict (whose side to take?) and the status of amateur actors (are they witnesses or potential perpetrators?) – a controversy that, in the aftermath of the attack, led Khaled Erksoussi, Head of Operations for the Syrian Red Crescent, to wonder: 'You see all those pictures and you see all the suffering in those areas, then you hear people talking about decisions in the Security Council and investigation committees, and you scratch your head: did they see the same picture I saw? Because what I saw in those pictures is people need help.'<sup>xvii</sup>

It is, I argue, the thanatopolitical practice of remediation that, by both informing and reflecting the geo-political uncertainty in the region, fails to consistently humanize the Syrian victims and ultimately works to separate, in Foucault's words, '*those who must live from those who must die*'. Whilst the UK's decision for non-intervention in Syria in September 2013 was obviously based on the political rationale of a parliamentary majority that opposed military measures on the grounds of past failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, the selective remediation of the gas attack's amateur footage in UK news, I argue, played a key role in naturalizing and legitimizing the moral proposal of inaction in the collective consciousness of the British public. Why support intervention, in other words, if the Syrian suffering is only partly a newsworthy event and the humanity of the dead only a half-granted humanity? For ultimately, those whose lives who are not considered to be, in Butler's terms, 'grievable', inevitably also fail to be treated as worthy of 'our' memory, emotion and protest, protection or defense.

In conclusion, thanato-politics is one of the most consequential operations of

digital witnessing in Western journalism. In drawing attention to remediation as a crucial mechanism of managing doubt and, in the process, reproducing global power relations, thanatopolitics challenges dilemmatic debates on digital witnessing as a de-politicizing or a democratizing force. Against de-politicization, it shows that the experiential testimonies of death are themselves deeply politicizing insofar as affect, rather than factual validity, has today become the primary site through which Western journalism regulates the digital spectacles of conflict death. Against democratization, it stands sceptical against the celebration of amateur testimonies as a pluralization of journalism, insofar as the new visibility of mediatized death does not necessarily imply new norms of recognition but, instead, sets in motion remediating procedures that reproduce global hierarchies of place and human life.

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<sup>i</sup> The term 'amateur' is here broadly used to refer to media content production and dissemination by various actors (civilian, military, local NGOs) who are not trained in the professional practices of institutional journalism - even though, as we will see, some of them, such as ISIS, are developing professionalised practices in their social media use - what Shane and Hubbart (2014) call online jihad 3.0.

<sup>ii</sup> As a general point, professional war journalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, beyond the embedded reporting of the Iraq wars (1991, 2003), differed from today's in that such earlier journalism fully subordinated amateur voice to the voice of the journalist, employing it exclusively to express the personal experience or opinion of the eyewitness rather than convey newsworthy information; as such, amateur voice was not really central to the journalist's claims to truth, aiming primarily at mobilizing emotion and unifying audiences around the imagined community of the nation (for a discussion see Chouliaraki 2015; Kampf & Liebes, 2013; see also Chouliaraki 2013 for a comparison of professional war photojournalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries). As we shall see, however, contemporary journalism performs a parallel function, as the remediation of amateur recordings in Western platforms similarly attempts to recontextualize the emotional potential of these recordings as particular claims to authenticity that, rather than convey any form of truth, primarily resonate with Western structures of feeling.



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iii I here draw on and re-contextualize Papacharissi's use of 'affective attunement' as citizens' use of hybrid digital spaces in ways that foreground the affective character of participation – 'what Coleman (2013) has termed *the feeling of being counted*' (Papacharissi 2015: 25).

iv These are The Independent, The Guardian, The Daily Mirror, The Sun, The Daily Telegraph, The Daily Mail. The selection criteria for these press platforms are: high readership and influential coverage; inclusive of high- and low-brow readership; comprehensive spectrum of political positions.

v <http://world.time.com/2012/10/18/how-did-gaddafi-die-a-year-later-unanswered-questions-and-bad-blood/>

vi All front-pages of October 4<sup>th</sup> 2014 can be found here:  
<http://www.thepaperboy.com/uk/2011/10/21/front-pages-archive.cfm>

vii Such professionalized reflexivity is further reflected in, what we may call, 'the semiotics of decapitation' with the detainee wearing an orange jumpsuit and the executioner speaking with a British accent – both tactically staged visual signs that reverse Western norms of visibility (Guantanamo prisoners, native-spoken English as the official language of Western foreign policy) and challenge Western assumptions about the roles and power relationships of conflict reporting (for a discussion of the appeal of such ISIS' propaganda strategies on Western audiences see Farwell 2014).

viii All front-pages of October 4<sup>th</sup> 2014 can be found here:  
<http://www.thepaperboy.com/uk/2014/10/04/front-pages-archive.cfm>

ix <https://www.facebook.com/dailymirror/photos/a.394365354161.172272.6149699161/10152754616794162/>

x For instance, The Independent October 5<sup>th</sup> 2014; as discussed by The Huffington Post:  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/10/05/islamic-state-independent\\_n\\_5934086.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/10/05/islamic-state-independent_n_5934086.html)

xi [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria\\_cw0913\\_web\\_1.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria_cw0913_web_1.pdf)

xii All front-pages of August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013 can be found here:  
<http://www.thepaperboy.com/uk/2013/08/22/front-pages-archive.cfm>

**The Sun:** Boris bonking nus boss bedded broke brass (sex scandal exposed). Image:  
(No online headlines available - Showing BBC Headlines Instead for 22/08/2013)

xiii The Daily Mirror, Thursday, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/syria-chemical-weapons-attack-children-2203679>

The Daily Telegraph and The Sun's online versions are no longer available.

xiv The BBC license fee (The Daily Telegraph), a health supplements fraud (The Daily Mail) and a municipality of London sex scandal (The Sun).

xv In contrast, for instance, to the Peshawar victims in December 2014, which UK press personalized through individual portraits of each schoolchild:  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/peshawar-attack-the-faces-of-the-innocent-children-killed-by-taliban-gunmen-9931606.html>

xvi <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/did-syria-gas-its-own-people-the-evidence-is-mounting-8783590.html>

xvii [www.independent.co.uk/voices/archive/?year=2013&month=8...](http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/archive/?year=2013&month=8...)