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Examining Diaspora Journalists' Digital Networks and Role Perceptions:
A Case Study of Syrian Post-Conflict Advocacy Journalism

Abstract

Using digital ethnography and in-depth interviews, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of how diaspora journalists maintain connections with their conflict-torn homeland and advocate for transnational human rights and political reforms after fleeing its repressive political sphere. To this end, the paper examines how anti-regime Syrian diaspora journalists engage in transnational advocacy practices through building digital networks that blur boundaries between journalism, activism, human rights advocacy, social movements, and civil society work. The paper further investigates how these advocacy practices shape the diaspora journalists' perceptions of their roles as well as their understanding of the different political, economic, procedural, organizational, and professional factors that influence how they perform them. Findings demonstrate that diaspora advocacy journalism poses various challenges to traditional journalism paradigms as journalists' roles go beyond news gathering and publishing to include petitioning, creating transnational solidarity, collaborating with civil society organizations, and carrying out various institutional work. In so doing, the paper rethinks hybridity in journalistic role perceptions proposing two unique approaches for serving democracy from exile. A novel definition of *diaspora advocacy journalism* and comprehensive discussion of the various sources of influence on news reporting and advocacy networking in the unique transnational conflict context are further proposed.

The increasing violence and turmoil following the insurrections that started in 2011 against Bashar Al-Assad's regime have led to one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent times with various armed factions fighting against each other (Al-Rawi & Fahmy, 2018). The Syrian government's security forces and cyber-army used surveillance tools to monitor and silence dissidents and control the online flow of information (Reporters without Borders, 2011). Due to the increasing number of attacks targeting journalists, Syria has become one of the most dangerous countries for reporters (Yousuf & Taylor, 2017) with almost 138 killed, 71 imprisoned, and 77 missing journalists since 2011 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020). This led to the migration of Syrian journalists and independent media outlets, mainly to neighboring Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon (Omari, 2016).

Diaspora journalism refers to "the collective, organized, sometimes individual, sporadic practices, of diasporic subjects to purposively engage in activities of news and information gathering and dissemination as a tool for self-expression and for engaging in the socio-political and cultural interests of self, and of community, in the contexts of their homeland and host country" (Oyeleye, 2017, p. 24). Empowered by digital technologies, diaspora journalists use their new locations to continue their truth-telling mission, support the human rights initiatives, provide unfiltered independent news to local, diasporic, and international audiences, and de-westernize the representations of their homeland conflicts by diversifying the coverage perspectives (Balasundaram, 2019; Kämpe, 2017; Ogunyemi, 2018). Literature on diaspora journalism has focused primarily on investigating the level of professionalism in exiled journalists' online media, their promotion of advocacy agendas through conflict reporting, as well as the digital and physical threats that influence their daily practice (e.g., Ahmed, 2019; Skjerdal, 2011; Ristow, 2011; Wojcieszak et al., 2013). However, little attention was paid to examining how diaspora journalists use social media to create and engage with transnational digital networks that amplify their advocacy goals and opposition voices and how they perceive their changing roles and view the multiple influencing factors that shape practicing these advocacy roles in exile.

To this end, the study first employs digital ethnography to explore the advocacy content, practices, and dynamics of interaction within the Facebook pages of two digital diasporic networks, *Syrian Journalists' Association (SJA)* and *Syrian Female Journalists' Network (SFJN),* created by exiled journalists. This allows investigating how these networks facilitate developing online collaborations between diaspora journalists, activists, civil society actors, and human rights associations to advocate for homeland-related causes and mobilize a

transnational change, expanding the concept of networked journalism beyond the newsgathering and reporting purposes. In a second step, the paper draws on 12 in-depth interviews with Syrian diaspora editors and journalists working for opposition news websites and digital networks to examine how they perceive the changing nature of their roles, as well as the political, economic, procedural, organizational, and professional influences shaping their advocacy journalism efforts. In so doing, the study moves the scholarly discussion forward by advancing a novel definition of diaspora advocacy journalism as well as a comprehensive understanding of the influencing factors on practicing advocacy in the unique transnational conflict context.

Diaspora Advocacy, Networked Journalism, and Conflict

The repressive measures taken by autocratic governments and the increasing violence rates against journalists have pushed many media practitioners, including reporters and editors, into exile (Skjerdal, 2010). Scholars used the notion of "diaspora journalist" to describe journalists working outside their origin countries, whether professionals or amateurs, in international mainstream media outlets or online news portals established by exiled and independent journalists (e.g., Ogunyemi, 2015; Skjerdal, 2011; Wojcieszak et al., 2013). Diaspora journalists keep close connections with multiple actors in the home countries and use diverse technologies from printing presses to Facebook pages to disseminate ideas, values, and ideologies that influence the "theater of conflicts" in their homelands (Oyeleye, 2017; Ristow, 2011).

The networked communication environments have facilitated the combination of advocacy and journalism in the diaspora where news websites tend to adopt a journalism practice characterized by activism and favoritism posing a critical attitude to the homeland governments (Skjerdal, 2011). Advocacy journalism refers to "a genre of journalism that is fact-based but supports a specific viewpoint on an issue" (Berney & Robie, 2008, p.1). This genre of journalism "identifies social issues, takes a stand on the identified issues and promotes these issues with the objective of shaping public perception" (Asemah et al., 2013, p. 179). While advocacy journalism might adopt a biased viewpoint to raise public awareness about certain causes or issues, it is still not the same as being an activist (Careless, 2000). Activism involves taking direct action or intervention to achieve a political change through political campaigning, organizing protests, strikes, or boycotts, consulting politicians and bureaucrats, or conducting cyberattacks or hacktivism (Ginosar & Reich, 2020, Hall, 2018).

Diaspora journalists serve as human rights advocates with the power to influence the

international media agendas and policy decision-makers and mobilize transnational processes of justice and accountability (Balasundaram, 2019). Their transnational engagement in conflict mediation and resolution incorporates documenting arrests and violations and communicating the evidence of oppression and election irregularities to the international foreign media and broadcasting stations (Pidduck, 2012) as well as promoting the "inside-out" and "outside-in" channeling of voices for democracy" (Zaw, 2006, p.237).Such a proactive role contradicts objectivity as a basic norm of conventional journalism which originally "seeks journalists to keep a political, personal and emotional distance between themselves and their work" without following an agenda to overthrow regimes or to promote peace and human rights (Balasundaram, 2019, p.270). Based on the exile journalists' motives and perceptions of truth, O'Loughlin and Schafraad (2016) identified four types including *idealist* journalists who see democracy as an end goal in itself, *pragmatist* journalists who perceive truth as an instrumental value to fight for democracy, *dialogist* journalists who try to improve their people's lives practically by getting involved in peace-building or advocacy, and *activist* journalists who act as active agents to enact apolitical change (p. 60). The latter type reflects blurred boundaries between journalism and activism enabling cooperation between diaspora activists and professional journalists who connect the mainstream and social media (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013).

As Syria remains one of the most dangerous places to report from owing to the continuous fights, airstrikes, and jihadists group activists (Johnston, 2017), networked journalism emerged as a digitally-empowered collaboration between diaspora journalists and those citizen journalists and activists who report locally from the Syrian war zones (Beckett & Mansell, 2008). Many international broadcasters and diaspora journalists who cannot report on the ground depend mainly on the citizen journalists and activists in Syria to cover domestic news including Al Jazeera whose 46.3% of broadcast footage about Syria came from opposition citizen journalists (Khasib & Ersoy, 2017), and New York Times which started the Collaborative News Clip as a journalistic tool (Wall & Zahed, 2015).

Prior research has focused on the engagement of diaspora journalists in their homeland conflicts, their adoption of activism stances in news reporting, and their networked collaborations with local citizen journalists for news production purposes. However, little attention was paid to investigating how these transnational digital networks might serve as virtual associations to advocate for human rights and political reforms in the war-torn homelands. This necessitates examining an expansion of the networked journalism concept to

4

include many diasporic and non-diasporic political, social movement, and civil society actors who engage in the Syrian diaspora journalists' online networks to mobilize collective action. Hence:

> **RQ1:** *How do Syrian diaspora journalists use their online networks to promote social/political homeland-related causes and advocacy goals?*

Journalistic Roles and Sources of Influence on News Work

Previous research has argued that the way journalists understand and perceive their roles shapes the news content they produce and the journalistic decisions they make (Mellado, 2019). Thus, instead of merely examining the content of diaspora journalists' digital networks to understand their actual practice of advocacy, it is also important to investigate their own perceptions of their advocacy roles and reporting constraints in the diaspora. Hanitzsch and Vos's framework (2018) proposed 18 politically oriented journalistic roles arranged under six journalism functions. These roles do not focus on the western framework oriented towards the model of democracy but rather offer discursive constructions of journalism's identity in society enabling a wider understanding of the non-western and non-democratic contexts (p.14).

In particular, three functions seem most relevant for examining the roles of opposition Syrian journalists in the diaspora. The first is the *critical-monitorial* function which entails voicing criticism to the authorities and holding powers accountable and includes the *monitor* role, the *detective* role, and the *watchdog* role. The latter involves a more active stance and independent criticism of society and its institutions (Waisbord, 2000). The second function is *advocative-radical* where journalists perceive themselves as 'participants' in the political discourse (Cohen, 1963 p. 20) and introduce bias to the discussion by playing an *adversary role*, *advocate role*, and/or a *missionary role* where a journalist "engages in campaigns out of a personal motivation" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 155). The third *developmental-educative* approach encourages journalists to participate, intervene, and drive a real-world change by serving as *change agents* who promote political and social reformations, *educators* who raise awareness about specific problems, or/and *mediators* in the heterogeneous societies to promote social integration and engage in conflict resolution. This study uses Hanitzsch & Vos's framework as a starting point for examining if and how the Syrian diaspora journalists' perceptions of their advocacy-oriented roles in exile match or contradict the conventional journalistic roles reported in literature. This allows for understanding how the diasporic conflict context proposes new hybrid role perceptions for serving democracy challenging the traditional journalism paradigms. Hence:

RQ2: How do Syrian diaspora journalists perceive the changing nature of their journalistic roles and advocacy practices in exile?

However, literature highlighted various practical constraints that shape how journalists perform these roles leading to "a wide gap between professional ideals and professional practices at different levels" (Mellado, 2019, p. 3). Communication scholars developed various typologies to describe the multiple sources of influence on journalists' work differentiating between the "objective influences" connected to the real world and "perceived influences" as understood by the individual journalists (Hanitzsch & Hoxha, 2014). An early five-level hierarchy of influences was proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996): individual level (journalists' attitudes, training, and backgrounds), routine level (work practices), organizational level (goals, policies, structures, and control), extra-media level (outside media organizations such as government, advertisers, news sources, public relations, economic environment), and ideological level (system-level influences) (Cited in Reese, 2001).

By surveying journalists from 17 countries, Hanitzsch et al. (2010) further developed six domains of perceived influences on journalism: *a) political influences* including government officials, censorship, and the business people who represent the business interests negotiated in the realm of the political, *b) economic influences* including the needs of advertisers, profit expectations, and market and audience research, *c) organizational influences* from within the newsroom and/or within the media organization, *d) procedural influences* involving operational constraints in the daily practice such as limited resources and routinized news production processes, e) *professional influences* related to the policies, conventions, and customs of the profession and the influence of the media laws, and finally *f) reference groups* incorporating other influencing institutions and groups such as audiences, colleagues from other media, competing media outlets,…etc.

However, the Syrian diaspora journalists operate in a unique transnational media system that exists physically in one country while operating virtually in another, facing various influences on their news reporting and barriers to their advocacy-oriented networking efforts in both countries of origin and settlement. These barriers and challenges require a reexamination of the sources of influence developed for non-diasporic media and the way Syrian diaspora journalists correspond to the contextual factors that shape their media advocacy practices. By re-examining and expanding the two traditional hierarchies of influences proposed by Shoemaker & Reese (1996) and Hanitzsch et al. (2010) in the Syrian context, the paper suggests some unique influences on diaspora advocacy journalism and connects them together. Hence:

RQ3: What are the local and transnational sources of influence and news reporting constraints that shape advocacy journalism work in the diaspora?

Methods

The study investigated two online diaspora journalists' networks that were founded following the outbreak of the Syrian crisis to advocate for press freedom and democratic reforms claiming independence from any partisan, Islamist, or governmental funding or influence:

a) *The Syrian Journalists' Association* (500 members and 12,743 Facebook followers) [1]: The *SJA* is a diaspora network with virtual offices in Gaziantep, Paris, and Berlin. Its founders describe themselves on the Facebook page as "a professional independent democratic institution founded on 20 February 2012, and member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)."

b) *The Syrian Female Journalists' Network* (150 members and 7,331 Facebook followers)[2]: Registered in the Netherlands since 2013, the *SFJN* is a nonprofit opposition feminist association working on media development from a gender perspective. It seeks to "build bridges between media and the Syrian women's movement by enhancing and empowering both females and males working in the field of media." (What we do, 2020).

To examine these two networks, the study adopted two qualitative research methods. While using digital ethnography enabled answering the first research question, in-depth interviews were conducted to answer the second and third questions as follows:

First, Digital Ethnography: social media ethnography as "a variant of (online) participant observation enables researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in their natural (and 'constructed') settings through observing and participating in those activities" (Mare, 2017, p. 10). It enables investigating special interest groups and virtual communities where like-minded people with specific political identifications gather and discuss issues (Brennen, 2017). Guided by the literature and research questions, the online participant observation focused primarily on examining and mapping out the online advocacy practices conducted by the diaspora journalists' digital networks to mobilize for homeland-related causes. The digital ethnography allowed for investigating the advocacy content, practices, relations, interests, and posting agenda on the Facebook pages of the two networks, as well as exploring

the diaspora journalists' cooperation with and correspondence to the local and international social and human rights movements.

Digital field notes were collected over a period of four and a half months (from the 1st of November 2019 to the 21st of March 2020) to record ethnographic observations about the textual and audio-visual content, links, and interactions within the online networks. Every post published by the Facebook pages of the *Syrian Female Journalists' Network (SFJN)* and the *Syrian Journalists Association (SJA)* during this selected time was analyzed resulting in a total of 56 posts on the *SFJN* and 146 posts on the *SJA* along with about 300 comments under them. This time frame was selected to coincide with some international advocacy causes to which the two networks paid great attention including the international day to end impunity for crimes against journalists, the international day for the elimination of violence against women, and 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. The co-founders of the two networks were contacted and informed about the study purposes.

Ethnographic data collection followed Mare's (2017) seven routines of conducting social media ethnography including background listening, friending/ liking, observing, catching-up, exploring, interacting, and archiving. I first dedicated a week for pilot observation to familiarize myself with the online advocacy activities practiced by the two networks. Liking the networks' Facebook pages allowed me to access the digital field and become a part of the discussion threads where I spent one hour daily taking notes about the networks' advocacy-related posts and exploring the external web links, videos, and audio clips shared by them to identify their patterns of posting and communication. I also kept a track of the audience's conversations, commenting behaviors, and interactions on the posts. Following the "observer as participant" ethnographic approach, I contacted and interviewed the co-founders and some of the members of the online journalistic networks using Skype, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp without participating in or influencing the natural environment of online discussions and activities on the networks' pages (Brennen, 2017). Using Nvivo capture, I archived the audio-visual data gathered from the two online networks for later usage.

Consequently, the collected ethnographic field notes were thematically analyzed following Corwin and Clemens's (2020) practical guide. Using a data-driven approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the initial data analysis involved a line by line hand-coding of field notes and led to inductively developing a code list of seven major recurrent themes to which more focus was given during the subsequent data collection stages: advocacy-driven activities, media development, political/human rights collaborations, regime opposition, counter narratives, transnational activism, and audience participation. These themes describe the main observed

recurrent topics/issues in the networks' posts. Practices like lobbying, running public forums, conducting research to interpret problems, hashtag activism, and media campaigning were considered advocacy-driven activities as they chime with the conventional advocacy practices reported in literature (Steinberg, 2017; Reid, 2000). After the data collection was complete, I entered the field notes into Nvivo 12 pro software for a more detailed coding. This allowed for organizing all of the text excerpts connected to particular themes in one place and facilitated grouping relevant themes together, categorizing them, and mapping out new connections on a more abstract level. For example, I observed that petitioning, launching media campaigns, collaborating with associations that support journalism freedom, and releasing solidarity statements are four connected activities practiced by diaspora journalists' networks in different occasions to promote solidarity with journalists and activists across border. Thus, those practices were grouped together under a more abstract thematic category that I called "*Creating transnational solidarity*" representing one of the advocacy-related functions/aims the journalists' networks serve. By observing the networks' posting agenda during different human rights movements, other related activities were detected and grouped under seven main functions, as it will be explained later in detail.

Second, In-depth interviewing: Over seven months (from December 2019 to June 2020), 12 semi-structured interviews with the Syrian co-founders, executive directors, and members of the two online journalistic networks (5 females, and 7 males) were conducted via Skype and WhatsApp calls as they are located in different cities in Turkey, France, the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 56 years old and worked as reporters, editors, or chief editors of well-known Syrian opposition diasporic news websites such as *Rozana*, *Enab Baladi*, *Sada El Sham*, and *The Levant* with an average of 10 years of journalistic experience. The latter four diasporic outlets were established after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis to advocate for the freedom of expression and offer counter-narratives to the state-backed media's coverage. They collaborate on writing joint investigations and releasing ethical charters to regulate the Syrian media environment. While the first three outlets are based in Turkey with a similar editorial policy that focuses on covering the local Syrian affairs through a network of local correspondents posing criticism to various regime and opposition forces, the London-based *Levant* has a broader focus on covering the Middle Eastern news and the violations of political Islamist movements in the region. Some participants held academic degrees in journalism; however, many were originally political activists who learned about journalism later after fleeing their homelands following the outbreak of the Syrian crisis. The sampling followed a purposive snowball technique where I first interviewed the directors and founders

of the two networks and then asked them to refer us to the most active members particularly those affiliated with their networks. Participants were asked four main groups of questions about; a) background information regarding their journalistic career and the foundation of their online networks and news websites, b) the main homeland-related advocacy tasks and functions they practice in diaspora and the type of connections they maintain with the homeland audiences, activists, as well as political/social movements, c) their definitions of their own advocacy philosophy and the nature of their roles and journalistic cultures in exile, and d) their perceptions of the various contextual and professional factors that influence their advocacy journalism in diaspora. Conceptualizing the first two groups of questions was mainly guided by the findings of ethnographic observations as spending time on the networks' Facebook pages facilitated asking relevant questions about their particular advocacy practices. Conceptualizing the two latter groups of questions was informed by literature on journalistic roles and sources of influences that helped design some follow-up questions about their perceptions of the watchdog and change agent roles and the various influencing factors on their advocacy practices. Participants were anonymized for safety purposes and will be referred to with numbers and general affiliations (See Table 1).

Following Webb's thematic analysis guidelines (2017), I conducted a thematic analysis of interview transcripts. Initial codes and patterns were first identified through open coding to identify the recurring ideas and the emerging themes from the data rather than using prior categories. Themes were identified based on three criteria: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Next, I grouped codes into categories derived from the data, and created new connections among them through axial coding. Then, groups of new categories were developed into a chart (See Figure 1) to advance theoretical extensions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Research Findings

First: Diaspora Journalists' Digital Advocacy Networks

To answer *RQ1*, this section explains three main advocacy-related roles of diaspora journalists' digital networks in promoting advocacy goals and homeland political change, developing the Syrian independent media sector, and creating transnational solidarity. As the executive board member of *The Syrian Journalists' Association* (journalist 4) explained, the SJA was originally established as a Facebook network to provide an "alternative for the regime-controlled Syrian Journalists' Union and gather Syrian journalists outside the state media's umbrella with clear advocacy goals for supporting press freedom and protecting journalists' rights". Similarly, the

co-founder of the *Syrian Female Journalists' Network* (journalist 6) explained the network's crucial role in advocating for developing the Syrian media's content from a gender perspective to "reach free and professional media that transcends the exclusionary male discourse, believes in equality, freedom, and justice, and rejects discrimination and sexual, ethnic, sectarian and class oppression".

Findings of digital ethnography showed that the digital networks created by exile journalists do not publish any news coverage targeting the general audience. As the thematic analysis of ethnographic observations demonstrated, diaspora journalists rather use their Facebook pages as a platform to serve seven main functions: a) promoting homeland-related advocacy and developing the independent Syrian media sector, b) connecting the Syrian cause to international human rights movements, c) creating transnational solidarity, d) documenting violations and threats against journalists, e) cooperating with local news websites to produce visual stories, f) updating followers about the networks' regional and international meetings/conferences, and g) informing journalists about training programs, job vacancies, and grant competitions either organized by them or by third parties. The first three advocacy-related roles/aims are explained in detail as follows:

Promoting advocacy goals and developing Syrian independent media

Ethnographic observations demonstrated that the two digital networks used their Facebook pages to promote clear opposition advocacy agenda, express their aims to develop the independent Syrian media sector, and highlight their collaborations with social movements and civil society to support democratic goals. To this end, they publish reports, organize online/offline media forums, conferences, and workshops, and launch online visual media campaigns to get their voices heard. For example, the *Syrian Journalists' Association (SJA)* organized a media forum in Istanbul to develop a code of conduct for regulating the role of the Syrian independent media in monitoring elections to enhance integrity and transparency, raise the awareness of the Syrian electorate, and challenge the misuse of women by candidates. In collaboration with the Syrian Kurdish Journalists' Union, the network further hosted a forum to tackle and release recommendations on how to reinforce the role of Syrian women in media and civil society organizations (*Digital Field notes, Feb 2020*). These forums target both diaspora journalists and local citizen journalists working in the Syrian opposition-controlled regions. To guarantee that local Syrian journalists can access the forums, live streaming of the sessions was available subject to prior online registration on the network's Facebook page (*Digital Field notes, Dec 2019*).

However, the *Syrian Female Journalists' Network (SFJN)* expanded its advocacy agenda on a wider geographical scale, involving non-Syrian actors. Using the motto "Feminist Media for Social Change" as a cover photo for their Facebook page, the network organizes online and offline regional meetings to gather female journalists from Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia to network and exchange experiences on developing the feminist Syrian media sector. In their meetings, they developed a practical plan to support feminist media initiatives (*Digital Field notes*, *Nov 2019*).

In the two networks' posts, a clear challenge of the Syrian regime and state media is presented, showing them as "the opponent". Also, a strong emphasis on the important role of civil society organizations in supporting their advocacy media agenda is promoted:

> "Forum participants affirm that independent media can prevail over state media if they adhere to the required professional standards" (*Translated post, SJA, 15 Dec 2019*).

> "We pledge to continue our work and the work of those who left us and those who were intimidated, arrested, and kidnapped, whether by the security services of the oppressive regimes in our countries, or all of the other armed parties" (*Translated post, SFJN, 18 Nov 2019*).

> "The role of the media and civil society organizations cannot be separated regarding the concept of equality and raising awareness about gender" (*Translated post, SJA, 26 Feb 2019)*.

Although Turkey is home to most of the diasporic Syrian media outlets, the *SFJN* expressed an opposition stance against the Turkish intervention in Syria. The following example presents the *SFJN*'s reply to a follower who asked "against whom do the civil resistance actors fight in Idlib?". This was one of the few times when the networks criticized the Turkish intervention online:

> "Resistance against the destruction caused by the Russian bombing by air and the Syrian regime forces on land, as well as resistance to the Turkish intervention alike" (*Translated comment, SFJN, 15 Feb 2020*).

Connecting the Syrian cause to international human rights movements

As ethnographic observations further revealed, the advocacy agenda of the two networks corresponds with the international human rights movements (*Digital Field notes, Nov 2019*). For example, on the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, the *SJA*

published a report of 454 media personnel who were murdered in Syria since 2011 without their killers being punished while the *SFJN* posted the results of a survey they conducted about the security risks the Syrian female journalists and human rights defenders encounter. Supporting the International Women's Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the two networks produced videos and posted reports about the crucial role of Syrian female journalists and media activists in reporting the truth on domestic conflicts and shared information about the violations against them. The *SFJN* further released a statement committing to cooperate with civil society actors to establish a professional and ethical charter aiming to lobby the home government to enact laws to guarantee a safe public space for female journalists and human rights defenders (*Digital Field notes, Nov 2019)*.

To increase the visibility of their posts and enhance the chance of their content being read by individuals who are not following their pages, the online networks also engaged in Hashtag activism linking their advocacy goals to the bigger international causes. Using hashtags also helped categorize posts and facilitate searches within their Facebook pages. Among the frequently used Arabic and English hashtags by the *SJA* and *SFJN* comes #تضامن_مع_الثائرات #16daysofactivism #GenerationEquality, #orangetheworld, #EndGBV, #ILOEndGBV, #اليوم_العالمي_لمناهضة_العنف_ضد_المرأة/# (*Digital Field notes, 25 Nov 2019*).

Adopting the internationally-oriented advocacy agenda is consistent with the networks' offline efforts to have a wider presence and global visibility to mobilize the international community to take an action. For example, the secretary-general of the *SJA* explained that the network's board members joined the United Nation's peace talks in Geneva to voice their opinions and concerns about the future of independent media in Syria. In 2017, the network also joined the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). Similarly, specialists from the *SFJN* participated in the talks organized about the media reporting on rape in cooperation with the UN Women, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Australian embassy (*Digital Field notes, Nov 2019*).

Creating transnational solidarity

By posting videos and quotes of female journalists and human rights defenders from Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen and presenting their struggles and success stories, the advocacy work of the diasporic *SFJN* network exceeds promoting the Syrian cause and presents a transnational perspective. On the 25th of November, the *SFJN* released a solidarity statement with the struggle of the female revolutionaries in the Middle East and North Africa and asked their

followers to sign a petition to create a professional and ethical charter to support the demands of feminist movements in different Arab countries. This encouraged the cooperation of various media organizations from Iraq, Syria, and Libya. As a part of their media campaign, "she is a defender", the network also cooperated with online news platforms such as Al gumhoreya.Net and SY+ to produce textual and visual content including video reports about the struggle and success stories of female human rights defenders inside the Arab world. They also shared investigations produced in collaboration with international associations such as the International Media Support, the Guardian Foundation, and the Syrian Women Journalists' Network to condemn the verbal bullying against women and discuss the post-revolution work conditions of female journalists in Syria and asylum countries (*Digital Field notes, Dec 2019 & Feb 2020*). Similarly, the *SJA* practiced transnational solidarity by issuing solidarity statements with female journalists who experienced an organized campaign of defamation on social media launched by pro-regime supporters (*Digital Field notes, 5 March 2019).*

Second: Advocacy Philosophy and Changing Role Perceptions

To answer *RQ2*, this section discusses the diaspora journalists' perceptions of the changing nature of their roles and news production culture in exile highlighting their advocacy philosophy, legitimizing narratives, and collaborations with civil society actors. Interestingly, all of the participants refused to describe their media work as "activism" because it is a politically loaded concept with a bad reputation in Syria since many armed fighters who belong to terrorist Jihadist groups tend to call themselves "activists". Most of them rather perceived it as a form of "advocacy" that comes within the frame of constructive journalism to provide solutions, benefit, and teach people without promoting any mobilizing messages or urging a certain immediate response. However, it is important to differentiate between how journalists working for diaspora journalists' media outlets (e.g., *Enab Baladi*, *Sada El Sham*, and *Rozana*) and those who work for the digital networks (e.g., *SJA* and *SFJN*) tend to distinctively legitimize their advocacy work and their different logics for serving democracy.

In the interviews, the first group used four legitimizing narratives to rationalize their professional roles and advocacy aims: a) challenging the regime's authoritative voice, b) telling the truth and avoiding the state-like propaganda (Wright et al., 2020), c) promoting opposition without being identified with any oppositional party/group, and d) practicing public-service advocacy while avoiding political activism and mobilization journalism. Journalists of this group perceived their anti-regime media outlets as an outcome of the "Syrian revolution" and a

formof "independent/alternative media" that provides a voice for the voiceless civilians and challenges the authoritative voice of the Syrian legacy media controlled by the regime. For example, *Journalist 3* reported that the Syrian diaspora journalists believe their mission to be "telling the truth, letting people know about the crimes, torture, and massacres committed by the Syrian regime or any military faction, and conveying what happens inside Syria to the outside world". She clearly defined their "advocate" role as "supporting and promoting the freedom of expression and the rights of women and children through raising awareness, opening debates about these topics, and bringing all the different points of view without judging any party". To this end, *Journalist 7* argued that the alternative media presented by Syrian diaspora websites offer a public service because there is no freedom of expression inside the country. In his opinion, there is nothing called objectivity. He described the editorial policy of his diasporic media outlet *Sada El Sham* as "not biased towards any of the regime or opposition factions, but biased towards democracy and people" as they purposively monitor the regime's violations and mistakes and tell the truth about them.

These legitimizing narratives align with the advocacy journalism functions reported in literature where journalists engaged in politicizing issues, building a consensus to advocate for public policies, and influencing audiences and leadership by reinforcing democratic dialogues (Kamboh & Yousaf, 2019). However, diaspora editors further claimed that their conflict news reporting does not involve promoting propaganda, supporting political campaigns, or siding with any certain opposition factions. As *Journalist 1* explained:

> We are classified as opposition but we do not work on behalf of the opposition.
> We work for the audience. We try not to use framing for influencing audiences
> in a certain way. We do not support certain campaigns or certain causes except
> for those promoting freedom of expression. We have a good balance and cover
> violations of the Syrian regime and violations of opposition alike. We have more
> enemies because we criticize the regime, the Kurdish forces, the Turkish army,
> the Syrian opposition, and Islamist groups.

On the contrary, the second group of journalists running the digital networks focused mainly on two legitimizing narratives: a) mobilizing for a social change, and b) lobbying the regime and opposition authorities to defend journalists. In so doing, *Journalist 11* reported that diaspora networks' main role is to form a pressure lobby on the Syrian regime, militia, and opposition groups who arrest and threaten local journalists. To this end, both executive board members of the S*yrian Journalists' Association* and the *Syrian Female Journalists' Network* (Journalists 4

and 6) perceived their advocacy mission to involve mobilizing a real-world change by empowering democracy and press freedom, defending the rights of journalists and human rights defenders, promoting gender equality, and building connections between the Syrian independent media sector and the social movements. Thus, it was hard "to separate advocacy frames from their everyday media work" as the co-founder of *SFJN* (Journalist 6) argued.

To achieve their democracy-oriented advocacy missions, the two groups of journalists emphasized the necessity of collaborating with civil society actors and human rights organizations for acquiring information, analysis, and consultations. To this end, *Journalist 3* argued:

> When you work on advocacy, you cannot work alone. Your work is based on connections with civil society associations. When they ask us are you media or civil society? We say we are both as we are closely networking with these civil society associations to create our work.

Similarly, *Journalist 1* described Syrian diaspora journalism as a part of "the civil society movement". His media outlet organized many training workshops in collaboration with human rights organizations to benefit from their expertise in tackling the legal topics and using jargon in news coverage. Moreover, *Journalist 4* reported that when Ghouta wasbombed in February 2018 by the Russian-Syrian forces, their SJA network's administration contacted various intentional organizations including the United Nations, Reporters Without Borders, and Committee to Protect Journalists to create safe passages to evacuate journalists from the afflicted areas.

Third: Sources of Influence on Diaspora Advocacy Journalism

Answering *RQ3*, participants reported encountering multiple local and transnational challenges and sources of influence that limit their advocacy news reporting and networking efforts in diaspora:

Economic influences

Autonomy and funding pressure: The economic influences are one of the major sources of influence that contribute to shaping the diaspora journalists' advocacy agendas and threaten the sustainability of their networks' activities and advocacy goals. Achieving financial autonomy is impossible for diaspora journalists whose opposition media outlets and digital networks cannot depend on advertising or crowd-funding as a sustainable business model

because of the complex circumstances of their war-torn home country. *Journalist 4* explained that they received many "seductive funding offers from countries, political parties, and institutions that claim their opposition to the Syrian regime but they refused such attempts of political polarization". To this end, both editors of news websites and directors of networks reported not accepting funding from governments, military or political associations. Alternatively, they reported depending solely on the yearly donations and grant funding offered by the European organizations that support democracy and press freedom such as the International Media Support, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), and Free Press Unlimited. However, this vulnerability to experiencing 'donor fatigue' (Pidduck, 2012) might threaten the sustainability of their donor-funded journalistic business model and endangertheir advocacy goals and the impartiality of news they provide. Similar financial challenges were reported by exiled journalists in other contexts (Nordahl, 2009; Ogunyemi, 2018; Ristow, 2011).

Aware of media ownership as a mechanism for controlling the discourse and the influence of donor's political and economic interests (Yaghi, 2017), *Journalist 1* reported adopting two strategies to limit the intervention of grant providers in the advocacy agenda:

> The first is having multiple donors with smaller budgets and less authority so they cannot threaten to cut the fund or force the website to comply with their rules. The second is putting clear conditions before signing contracts that donors will not have the right to approach the editorial policy or make any changes to it. As a result, we claim to be administratively, editorially, and organizationally independent with no journalists hired by an intervention from any external party.

Organizational Influences

Diaspora reporters' biases and political leanings: the political affiliations of diaspora journalists and editors, who experienced persecution by authoritarian regimes in home countries, have an undeniable influence on shaping their editorial decision making and advocacy agendas (Donsbach & Patterson, 1996). This presents a form of influence that emerges from within the diasporic newsroom itself. While *Enab Baladi*, for example, started as a peaceful political movement by a group of activists with no professional journalism experience to support the Syrian revolution and document the regime's violations, it embraced the international professional standards of balance, fairness, and objectivity in a later stage to

ensure their sustainability and competitive position (Ayoub, 2019). Although its editorial board members claimed that they stopped engaging in politics or in producing activism or mobilization journalism, the news outlet still has a clear political color because of its editors and founders' political background. As *Journalist 1* argued:

> We aim to produce ethical professional opposition journalism that tries to separate opinions from the news. However, we cannot deny that the team members who work for the news website are opponents of the Syrian regime and their selection and way of tackling the topics are influenced by this political stand. I claim this political position does not reflect on coverage except in opinion pieces but not in news and reports. Although you can see on our website that we are monitoring the failure of the Syrian regime government through the topic selection, we claim to have a good balance.

The influence of the journalists' political backgrounds might even become more dangerous if all the diasporic editorial team adheres to the same cause with less diverse opinions inside the newsrooms (Ruigrok, 2010). In doing so, diaspora media might cause similar problems to those in Syrian mainstream media and fall into the same trap of focusing on one part of the story, promoting biased reporting, and ignoring the bigger picture (Ncube, 2017).

Procedural Influences and Transnational Reporting Constraints

a) Information verification and limited access to sources: participants agreed that reaching sources with diverse political affiliations is a big problem particularly in Syria whereany media outlet other than the state-controlled media, fed by the Syrian intelligence agents,is considered "fabrication" and "against the State" (Omari, 2016). This limits the diaspora journalists' ability to provide impartial and balanced coverage which shapes their advocacy news reporting agenda. As *Journalist 2* explained:

> It is hard for diaspora journalists to interview pro-regime analysts as they refuse to talk to a platform that they believe to be anti-regime and fear facing security risks. The nature and availability of sources impose a certain type of coverage and analysis on us. The editorial management tries to balance this orientation (source selection) which might look biased by including documents, numbers, and evidence.

Reaching credible information sources and verifying news in the regime-controlled regions is another major transnational reporting constraint reported by many interviewees. As *Journalist*

2 further explained, it is much easier to "verify information provided by Idlib's citizenjournalists where diaspora editors can reach other sources than in a regime-controlled city likeDamascus". This delays producing the stories and makes it harder to publish breaking news about events taking place in these regions which results in coverage that might appear partial or biased towards some areas over others. According to her, keeping the anonymity and privacy of correspondents doubles the hardship of reaching information and leads to losing the ability to "ideally" cover news from a big part of Syrian governorates where contacting sources might endanger their lives.

b) *Sensational conflict coverage*: Syrian diaspora journalists depend mainly on the live and immediate coverage of events by local citizen journalists and activists in war zones whose personal connection with the shelling, murder, persecution, and war circumstances influence their news reporting that turns out to be emotional in many cases. As *Journalist 3*

commented:

> When the chemical attack was carried out by the regime on Ghouta and 1600 persons were killed in one day, it was so hard to ask citizen journalists to tell what is happening because they were in great shock. They witnessed the death around them and experienced the murder of their families, friends, and children. Even when they started to speak out, they were talking emotionally and anxiously. In such situations, we try to be credible but it is hard to be objective.

This can be further understood with regard to the concept of "journalism of attachment" (Bell, 1997) where local citizen journalists take the side of the war victims, to whom they belong, drawing clear distinctions between what they believe is "Right and Wrong", or "Us and Them". Adapting to the war circumstances, two strategies were employed by diaspora journalists to verify the information and increase the credibility of their transnational reporting. According to *Journalist 3*, the first strategy is "cross-sourcing" by acquiring information from sources living in distant and less affected places, and the second is to avoid reporting on certain topics if they feel the coverage will be very emotional or might pose dangers and threats to sources.

Political influences

Home and Host State Intervention: In the diasporic sphere, threats and challenges imposed by the home and host countries as well as the political interests and interstate relations between the two can restrict the diaspora journalists' freedom of expression and influence their news production routines and advocacy practices. Digital state surveillance, transnational

repression (Moss, 2018), and the resulting digital security threats imposed by thehome country, as well as the digital infrastructure, and licenses provided by the host country present new aspects of state intervention that influence the diaspora advocacy work. While participants fled Syria to avoid political parallelism and practice press freedom in exile, they reported encountering censorship imposed by their host states, especially Turkey as an active player in the ongoing homeland conflict. *Journalist 7* explained that Syrian journalists cannot express their opinions freely about Turkish interference in northern Syria. Therefore, they become cautious while reporting on the Turkish side because they do not want their headquarters in Gaziantep to be shut down. Similarly, *Journalist 2* asserted that it is hard to criticize anyone in the Turkish government. She further reported that Syrian journalists encounter various legal restrictions in Turkey because it has become harder to get licenses to report as a journalist or establish media organizations there.

Across our interviews, participants also agreed that diaspora journalists encounter a wide range of homeland-related digital and physical threats from the Syrian state authorities, opposition groups, and Jihadist militia who aim to silence them. The threats range from the confiscation of work permits, blackmailing, and digital hacking to kidnapping, enforced disappearance, and murder. *Journalist 6* reported that their network's website was hacked and her personal computer was attacked. Similarly, *Journalist 3* reported knowing of some diaspora journalists who were killed in the middle of the street such as Naji Al Jerf and many others who were kidnapped and deported by the Turkish forces that handed them to Al Nusra Front in Syria.

Reference Groups

Audience's Pressure: the participants reported the audience's interests and expectations as another source of pressure on their reporting practices which significantly shape their advocacy stances. For example, *Enab Baladi's* editors reported being fiercely criticized by the audience when they wrote stories sympathizing with Syrians living in the state-controlled areas and the economic problems regime-supporters in Damascus and Aleppo encounter. As *Journalist 2* explained "We started as a revolutionary newspaper then moved to professionalism but the audiences still perceive us as a revolutionary newspaper although we try to stay away from this and take further steps towards professional standards".

The transnational conflict context requires connecting and re-organizing the previous influences in relation to the home country, host country, and diasporic levels. Drawing on the six domains of perceived influences suggested by Hanitzsch et al. (2010), I propose Figure 1 that maps out the different sources of influence on diaspora advocacy journalism. It classifies the

sources of influence into 3 types/categories (homeland-related influences, diasporic insulences, and host-country related influenced) showing how every group of them impact diaspora journalism in a certain way (e.g., urges journalists to adopt self-censorship, shapes the transnational advocacy agenda,..etc):
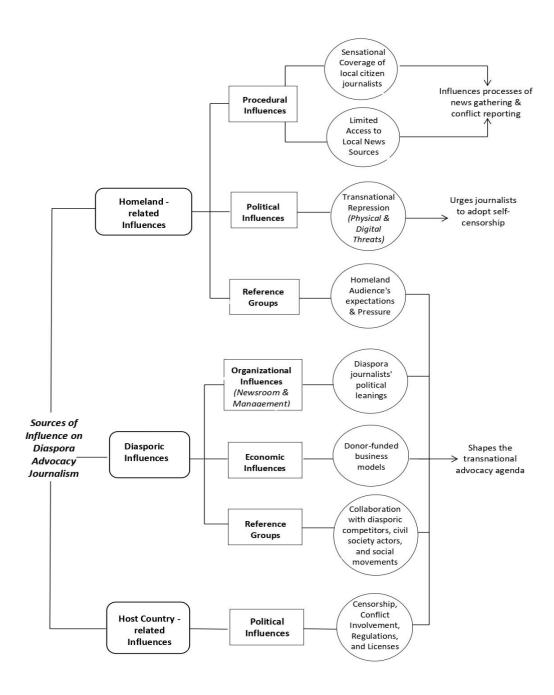

Figure 1: Sources of Influence on Diaspora Advocacy Journalism.

Discussion and Conclusion: Theoretical Implications

The study's main contribution lies in advancing our understanding of diaspora media and advocacy journalism on three connected levels. First, it proposes new advocacy-driven functions of the journalists' online networks beyond their traditional roles in building journalists' social capital, disseminating and verifying information (Millen & Dray, 2000; Vergeer, 2015). Like Ethiopian, Iranian, Sri Lankan, and Burmese exiled journalists (Balasundaram, 2019; Skjerdal, 2011; Wojcieszak et al., 2013), Syrian diaspora journalists practice advocacy reporting by creating news websites to cover oppression and violations, maintain ties with local actors, and influence international media agendas. However, they took a further innovative step by developing online advocacy networks to serve as a virtual diasporic union for gathering exiled journalists and activists to perform collective action and promote a real-world change challenging the traditional journalistic roles reported in literature (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). What is new here is how these digital networks enabled Syrian exiled journalists to engage in activities that were previously attributed to political advocates/activists such as creating ethical charters, petitioning, releasing solidarity statements, opening spaces for argumentation, engaging in Hashtag activism, and lobbying the homelands to enact laws. In so doing, diaspora journalists do not only focus on promoting advocacy goals and producing good journalism themselves, but they rather take a collective approach using their networks to support and teach other journalists working in the Syrian independent media sector by organizing training workshops and media forums and developing recommendations for covering important issues such as Syrian elections.

To this end, the Syrian diaspora journalists' digital networks expand our current understanding of the "networked journalism" concept by serving as digital transnational communities linking local and diaspora reporters, citizen journalists, and activists with audiences, social movements, and human rights defenders not only for the newsgathering and reporting purposes but also for advocacy for transnational causes and developing the Syrian media sector. This collaboration with political and civil society actors expands journalism beyond the professional centers of news production proposing a novel form of journalism advocacy that combines both "journalist" and "civic" advocacy (Russell, 2016; Waisbord, 2009). Drawing on the previous discussion of Syrian exiled journalists' new advocacy practices and collaborations with journalistic and non-journalistic actors, I propose the following definition of *diaspora advocacy journalism*:

> The purposive involvement of exiled subjects in transnational news gathering

and production where new forms of collaboration/networking with people, civil society actors, and human rights defenders from the homeland and host country are introduced to promote underrepresented voices and mobilize a democratic political reformation and or social change.

Second, the paper rethinks hybridity in journalistic role perceptions proposing two unique approaches for serving democracy in the diasporic conflict context. Similar to non-diasporic journalists advocating for environmental movements, children rights, and freedom of information (Camaj, 2016; Wade, 2011), the Syrian opposition diaspora journalists do not see a contradiction between being advocates and independent professional journalists at the same time and do not believe they risk the quality of their media work. They rather believe the two roles go hand in hand to promote democracy, serve the public interest, and facilitate the transnational information flow in a repressive military sphere where political expression is highly restricted (Pidduck, 2012). By identifying themselves with some of the traditional journalistic norms and values including the public service, editorial autonomy, and truth-telling (Deuze, 2005), problematizing some of the normative professionalism standards especially objectivity and impartiality, and introducing novel practices and collaborations with new actors, Syrian diaspora journalists promote a hybrid journalistic culture that serves the diasporic context offering "new forms of journalistic truth-telling" (Baym, 2016, p.1).

However, diaspora media outlets and digital networks showed two distinctive advocacy perceptions to serve democracy despite serving interactive and complementary roles in exile. Journalists working for the diaspora news websites perceive that engaging in the political discourse by informing the public, telling the truth, and challenging restrictions on press freedom is a form of advocacy in itself. Thus, their perceived role can be placed in a middle range between the dialogist and pragmatist classifications proposed by O'Loughlin and Schafraad (2016). By presenting themselves as a "voice for the voiceless" civilians and countervailing power to political authority (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986), those journalists take part in the ongoing political discourse of their home country serving the advocative-radical journalistic function (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). By also monitoring violations and voicing criticism not only against the regime forces, but also opposition and armed factions in Syria, they further embrace the "watchdog" role activating the critical-monitorial function of journalism (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). On the contrary, journalists working for the diaspora digital networks collaborate closely with local and international organizations and social movements to mobilize for a real-world change serving primarily as "lobbyists" (Pintak& Nazir, 2013) and "change agents" by engaging

in petitioning and Hashtag activism and other practices that match and expand the developmental-educative approach proposed by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018).

The paper's third contribution lies in expanding the traditional hierarchies of influences (Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) by proposing and connecting a new set of local and transnational sources of influence that shape the diasporic journalistic practice (see figure 1). While the time, budget, location, staffing, and deadline constraints connected to ordinary journalists' daily practices (Fisher, 2016) fail to fully explain influences on diasporic newsrooms, this study demonstrates other factors that pose restrictions to performing advocacy practices and storytelling routines in exile. The physical distance, limited accessibility to pro- regime sources, emotional attachment and hardship of information verification, and target audience's pressures, as well as journalists' pre-migration persecution experiences restrict the diversity of voices presented and delay the processes of diasporic news production. In particular, the Syrian diaspora journalists' financial dependence on the yearly European grants and vulnerability to experiencing 'donor's fatigue' tend to shape their advocacy agenda and threaten the sustainability of their networks' activities.

While developing digital advocacy networks to mobilize political change stood out as unique practice by Syrian diaspora journalists, future researchers should hold cross-country comparisons between different groups of exiled journalists to investigate their distinctive advocacy practices and examine how they are influenced by the political and social contexts of their origin countries on one side and the political opportunities offered by the host countries on the other. Special attention should be paid to investigating other types of transnational diasporic media organizations such as pan-Arab media owned and funded by Arabic states to see how their business models might influence their advocacy agenda differently.

Endnotes

[1] The Syrian Journalists' Association website: https://www.syja.org/en/home

[2] The Syrian Female Journalists Network's website: https://media.sfjn.org/en/

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