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# Promoting Newsafety from the Exile: The Emergence of New Journalistic Roles in Diaspora Journalists' Networks

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## ABSTRACT

Diaspora journalists and digital media play an important role as stakeholders for war-ridden homeland media landscapes such as Syria. This study analyzes, from a safety in practice perspective, the physical and digital threats that challenge the work of Syrian citizen journalists examining the role of three online advocacy networks created by Syrian diaspora journalists to promote newsafety. Through a metajournalistic discourse analysis of the networks' published visions and missions, and 12 in-depth interviews with the founders and other selected members of the networks, the paper investigates how journalists working for these networks perceive threats, what counterstrategies they adopt, and how they understand the changing nature of their roles. Findings demonstrate that diaspora journalists perceived physical and digital threats as inescapable, following them across borders. Counterstrategies are implemented through collaborations with civil society actors and human rights organizations, aiming to offer professional safety training programs and emergency rescue for journalists under attack, but also through the release of safety guides or codes of conduct. Grounded on the findings, we propose four novel journalistic roles for promoting newsafety from exile: *sousveillance*, *defender*, *trainer*, and *regulator/policy developer*. While the networks follow some traditional journalistic ideologies, they also show a hybrid conceptualization of journalism.

## KEYWORDS

Online diaspora; newsafety; surveillance; journalism networks; Syria; global journalism; hybridity

## Introduction

Syria remains one of the most dangerous places to report from owing to the continuous fights, airstrikes, and jihadist groups (Johnston 2017). In the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Syria is currently ranked 174th out of 180 countries, and the Index describes the country as an unbearable environment where “the risk of arrest, abduction or death make journalism extremely dangerous and difficult [...]” (Reporters Without Borders 2020). The risk for the safety of journalists is also confirmed by a large number of journalists who fell victim to the different war factions present in the country such as the Syrian military, its

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allies, as well as the different armed opposition groups that include Turkish-backed forces, Kurdish forces as well as radical Islamist groups such as the Islamic State and other groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The Committee to Protect Journalists reports that between 1992 and 2020 there have been 137 confirmed killings in Syria (Committee to Protect Journalists 2020), and the situation is not very likely to change in the near future.

In this hostile environment, the safety of journalists cannot be guaranteed, and journalists do not have many places they can turn to when it comes to their safety (Delgado Culebras 2020). Due to the life-threatening situation for both Syrian and foreign journalists, the flow of news from the country almost dried out, were it not for those local citizen journalists who stepped in to expose violations and war crimes, often facing abuses, threats, intimidations and even abductions or killings (Reporters Without Borders 2013). Such a repressive media environment led to an emergent intervention by diaspora journalists who played an important role as stakeholders for the war-ridden—and often politically influenced—homeland media landscapes (Skjerdal 2011; Ogunyemi 2015; Oyeleye 2017). 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, 24)

Not only do diaspora journalists maintain ties with their country of origin, but diaspora networks often support, mentor and protect local (citizen) journalists to tell their stories (Yousuf and Taylor 2017; Wall and el Zahed 2015). In the “brokerage” (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013) between diaspora journalists (or foreign media) and those gathering and producing information in Syria, safety plays a crucial role (Johnston 2017): raising safety awareness, keeping track of assaults against reporters, and teaching security techniques are vital and can minimize life-threatening risks to both journalists and dissidents.

In this regard, Westlund, Krøvel, and Skare-Orgeret (2019) introduced the concept of newsafety, which “blends news and what is new with safety with the intention to stress how safety and news should be approached in tandem”. This contribution focuses on a particular dimension of this particular concept, that is *safety in practice*: we are looking into the question of how diaspora journalists who are part of a larger network, tackle the question of safety in journalism practice, and how they are using information and communication technologies to protect journalists in Syria not only against physical risks but also against digital threats and surveillance. To this end, the paper *first* examines the physical and digital threats experienced by local Syrian and diaspora journalists. *Second*, it analyzes the counterstrategies adopted by three *online networks* from a safety in practice perspective. The networks—the *Syrian Journalists’ Association*, the *Syrian Female Journalists’ Association*, and the *Professional Safety of Journalists network*—have been created by diaspora journalists who offer help to journalists operating in their home countries. These networks support journalists regarding physical and digital safety and involve cooperation with civil society and human rights associations: *Third*, the paper examines how journalists working for these networks perceive the changing nature of their roles and how they communicate their role perceptions through their

networks' websites and Facebook pages. Expanding the politically oriented journalistic roles proposed by (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018), this contribution further theorizes a novel set of missionary safety-related roles of diaspora journalists: *sousveillance*, *defender*, *trainer*, and *regulator/policy developer* role. By examining these roles, the paper explains how the diaspora journalists' digital networks do not only serve the local journalistic community under threat, but also challenge the authoritarian power by protecting the flow of information and press freedom in a highly restricted media environment.

Drawing from metajournalistic discourse theory (Carlson 2015) and 12 in-depth interviews with the founders, directors, and active members of the three online networks, the study both explores the active role exiled Syrian journalists serve in protecting citizen journalists in their home countries after resettling in safer environments, as well as the nature of their journalistic roles in diaspora networks.

To this end, the study conceptualizes the digital diasporic networks as "ancillary organizations" (Lowrey, Sherrill, and Broussard 2019). Such "ancillary organizations", which can take the form of "professional membership associations, trade groups, professional training centers, labs, foundations, and academic programs" (Lowrey, Sherrill, and Broussard 2019, 2132), are organizations that play a crucial role when it comes to promoting journalism, albeit not taking a center stage with regard to the actual news production. Their contribution is nevertheless central as we will see, given that they "play important roles in the production of meaning about new things and new ideas, both within and outside the social space" (Lowrey, Sherrill, and Broussard 2019, 2136), which means that they are able to reformulate the core of journalism, by infusing norms that might challenge the understanding of news work. Drawing on the concept of "ancillary organizations" is useful to understand the role of diaspora journalism networks and to assesses how these networks adopt or discard traditional journalistic norms in favor of other values—for instance grounded in advocacy—when it comes to promoting newsafety (Westlund, Krøvel, and Skare-Orgeret 2019) for journalists operating in Syria.

## Literature Review

### *Professional Safety and Conflict Reporting*

As Høiby and Ottosen (2019, 69) argue, the "traditional reporter is a threatened species" that experiences violent offense ranging from digital security risks to verbal and physical attacks. Threats by the government and by military forces, political and ethnic conflicts, the socio-political situation, religious extremism and social conservatism are among the contextual factors that impact the professional safety of journalists and their ability to produce accurate news coverage (Jamil 2018). Professional safety here is understood as the ability of journalists to carry out their "professional role without fear or intimidation" (Onoja Harara, Sanda, and Msugther 2018, 43) based on the safety-awareness, perception, and practices by journalists. By threatening the physical, emotional, psychological and financial well-being of reporters, safety dangers lead to less presence in conflict zones, more self-censorship, and more dependence on second-hand observations, posing limitations to journalism quality and professionalism standards of newsgathering (Høiby and Ottosen 2017; Jamil 2018). Even multinational organizations such as the United Nations (2016) and UNESCO (2013) recognized the problem and developed plans on the safety and impunity of journalists:

while the problem of impunity is not restricted to the failure to investigate the murders of journalists and media workers, the curtailment of their expression deprives society as a whole of their journalistic contribution and results in a wider impact on press freedom where a climate of intimidation and violence leads to self-censorship. (UN 2016, 1)

Following the high rates of inflation and unemployment since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, many Syrians turned into (citizen) journalists as a means of survival (D'Ignoti 2018). By selling stories, photos and videos of shelling, rocket attacks and civilians' evacuations to international media organizations and news agencies (D'Ignoti 2018), local (citizen) journalists have become the main information providers in dangerous conflict zones where foreign correspondents cannot operate (cfr. Chawaf 2019). This form of networked journalism (Beckett and Mansell 2008) contributed to bridging the gap left by professional reporters suppressed by the Syrian regime (Gopalakrishnan 2017), leading to what Wall and el Zahed describe (2015) as a "pop-up news ecology, an entirely new, oppositional news system fueled by citizen activists' use of social media to report on the conflict" (720). However, relying on inexperienced citizens without any support, equipment or professional security training unlike professional media workers raises many ethical questions about this collaboration (Johnston 2017). In this sense, diaspora journalism networks become crucial as they represent one of the few possibilities for citizen (and often also professional) journalists on the ground to obtain support for their work in terms of safety recommendations in dangerous countries such as Syria. These networks can offer specific help to journalists who are not only confronted with threats on the ground, but also with cyber-attacks.

### ***Promoting Professional Safety from Diaspora***

The critical situation of news production and professional safety in regime-controlled regions left journalists with very few options: they can either work in Syria and promote state propaganda, or they escape the repressive political environment in the country (Gopalakrishnan 2017; Omari 2016). This led to the migration of Syrian journalists and independent media outlets, mainly to neighboring Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon (Omari 2016). While enjoying an increased freedom of expression in exile, diaspora journalists can still encounter threats through cyber-attacks from inside and outside their host country, threatening both their safety and the safety of their families back home (Ristow 2011; Wojcieszak, Brouillette, and Smith 2013). These cyber-security risks range from digital surveillance, location tracking, and software and hardware exploits that include phishing, fake domain and denial of service attacks (Henrichsen, Betz, and Lisosky 2015, 8). As a consequence, Syrian journalists in Turkey impose self-censorship because of their cross-border fear of ISIS (Omari 2016).

Despite their resettlement in relatively safe environments, exiled journalists maintain transnational ties with citizen journalists and activists in their origin countries and combine forms of activism, advocacy, and professionalism to inform the outside world about the crimes and violations of the homeland's regime (Ristow 2011; Skjerdal 2011; Wojcieszak, Brouillette, and Smith 2013). This "brokerage" role enables connecting voices inside and outside the origin country (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013) by providing local citizens and activists with training courses on newsgathering, reporting skills, and security tools offering "one-on-one mentoring in every step of the news

creation process” (Yousuf and Taylor 2017, 10). In this sense, the migration of Syrian journalists to (neighboring) countries led to the creation of specialized networks that do not serve primarily as content producers, but as “ancillary organizations” offering services related to safety, protection, and cybersecurity (see also Porlezza and Di Salvo 2020) for instance teaching citizen journalists about operating in conflict areas. These “ancillary organizations”, while acting in a peripheral journalistic culture, might well reformulate the core of journalism as they convey, through their various collaborations and interactions with “traditional” news organizations and journalists, new routines, behaviors, values, and norms into the journalistic practice. Lowrey, Sherrill, and Broussard (2019, 2142) also argued in their findings, that ancillary organizations “help legitimate innovation and aid adaptation of innovations with the wider ecosystem by fostering interaction”. Particularly when it comes to diaspora journalism networks, this aspect becomes evident, given that the networks’ primary goal is to facilitate communication with journalists on the ground, but at the same time they ensure that communications about safety reach journalists in need of such information.

Building on this, it is relevant to look at the way journalists understand their own role, given that it influences specific safety practices. Journalistic roles and their perception is a question that has been looked into for decades, from the earliest studies in the 1960s (Cohen 1963) to Janowitz (1975), who introduced the “advocate” alongside the gatekeeper, to the more recent and less Western-oriented work of Hanitzsch et al. (2011) that looked into the role perceptions, epistemological orientations, and ethical views of journalists from 18 countries in their World of Journalism study. What is relevant for this particular contribution is that most work on journalistic role perception rarely connected its findings to normative works. Christians et al. (2009) were among the first authors to come up with specific journalistic tasks in society such as observation, information, and participation in public life through commentary, advice, and advocacy—in which case the media roles can be described as monitorial, facilitative, collaborative, and radical.

However, even in this case, the roles were strongly attached to a Western understanding of journalism’s democratic role (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 150). Both Hanitzsch and Vos argue, therefore, that journalism’s role needs to be understood as a discursive construction of journalism’s identity and place in society, which results in a much broader understanding of journalism’s place in society than a Western perspective usually offers. Journalists are the agents that articulate their roles (Zelizer 1993) through which they legitimize and delegitimize certain norms, ideas, and practices (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 151).

Hanitzsch and Vos’s (2018) framework of politically oriented roles of journalists can thus be helpful in analyzing some of the ideal-typical roles of journalists in the specific case of diaspora journalism networks, particularly as the two authors have come up with six elementary functions: the informational-instructive, the analytical-deliberative, the critical-monitorial, the advocative-radical, the developmental-educative, and the collaborative-facilitative (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018, 152).

While most literature focused on citizen journalism practices in the Syrian conflict zones and the connective role of diaspora journalists, only scant attention was paid to examining exiled journalists’ digital networks that involve collaborations with various human rights organizations, civil society actors, and social movements on the local,

transnational, and international levels. This study thus investigates how diaspora journalists build online networks to promote physical and digital safety techniques to monitor violations and assaults committed by the regime and opposition factions against local journalists by publishing reports about kidnapping, assassinations, and enforced disappearance cases to mobilize the international community. When it comes to the roles of online Syrian journalism networks, the paper specifically looks at how they are expressed in the self-description of the networks as well as in the interviews with the journalists:

RQ1: How do exiled Syrian journalists perceive surveillance and digital threats encountered by local and exiled journalists?

RQ2: What counterstrategies do the journalists employ to guarantee physical and digital safety of local journalists in conflict zones?

RQ3: What role do online Syrian journalism networks, created by exiled journalists, play in implementing these counterstrategies and promoting professional safety in conflict zones?

RQ4: How do Syrian journalists working for these networks perceive their changing roles in diaspora and how these role perceptions are communicated through the missions and visions published on their websites and Facebook pages?

## Methods

The study adopts two methods: in-depth interviews and metajournalistic discourse analysis. We carried out in-depth interviews with 12 Syrian diaspora journalists, who serve as executive directors, co-founders, or active members of the three networks under study over a seven-month period (from December 2019 to June 2020; see [Table 1](#)) to garner the participants' experiences of physical and digital threats, the counterstrategies they develop through their networks, and their perceptions of their changing roles in the diaspora. Many of the participants worked as editors-in-chief and managing editors of well-known Syrian opposition diaspora news websites. The sampling followed a snowball technique (Becker 1963). In snowball sampling, scholars select specific participants to start with, and then ask them to nominate other potential participants that are relevant to the study and in line with the actors that are sought. The participants the study starts with are usually central and well-connected actors in a specific field. This kind of sampling method is particularly useful for analyzing networked communities such as journalists

**Table 1.** Participants of the different networks.

No. of journalist	Affiliation
J1	Executive board member of the <i>Syrian Journalists' Association</i> (SJA)
J2	Executive board member of the SJA
J3	Active member of the SJA and chief editor of a Syrian diasporic media outlet
J4	Active member of the SJA and managing editor of a Syrian diasporic media outlet
J5	Active member of the SJA and managing editor of a Syrian diasporic media outlet
J6	Diaspora journalist and active member of the SJA
J7	Diaspora journalist and active member of the SJA
J8	Diaspora journalist and active member of the SJA
J9	Active member of the <i>Syrian Female Journalists Network</i> (SFJN) and the CEO of a diasporic media outlet
J10	Executive board member of the (SFJN)
J11	Founder of <i>The Professional Safety Network of Journalists</i>
J12	Occupational safety trainer



working for diaspora networks. Other studies that looked into similar highly networked communities such as data journalists (Porlezza and Splendore 2019) applied the same method. Since snowball sampling delegates some of the agency in selecting interview partners to the interviewees, the authors made sure that the people mentioned were in line with our expectations of central actors in the networks. Hence, we first interviewed the directors and founders of the three networks and then asked them to refer us to the most active members and trainers in the field of professional safety, particularly those affiliated with their networks. The sample consisted of five female and eight male exiled Syrian journalists. Some of them were originally political activists who learnt journalism by practice after fleeing the homeland while others hold official degrees in journalism from reputable Syrian universities. Interviews lasted for 45 min in average and were conducted via Skype and WhatsApp calls because journalists are located in different cities in Turkey, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the UK. Because of the vulnerability of the research sample, the participants are only referred to with numbers and affiliation to the studied diaspora networks. Most of the interviews were conducted in Arabic based on the journalists' request. With the help of Nvivo 10 software, the thematic analysis was conducted to draw out insights and build connections between the theoretical concepts and the data.

Participants were asked four main groups of questions: (a) background information about their journalistic career and the foundation of their anti-regime digital advocacy networks, (b) the main physical and digital risks/threats that local and diaspora Syrian journalists encounter in their daily practice, (c) the types of services their online networks offer to eliminate risks and promote professional safety among local journalists in conflict zones, especially their networks' roles in monitoring and documenting attacks and violations against journalists, and (d) their perceptions of the changing nature of their work in exile and the type of connections they maintain with the human rights organizations and political/social movements to defend journalists' rights. Following Webb's thematic analysis guidelines (2017), open coding was first employed to identify the commonly occurring ideas and list the themes that emerge from the data rather than using priori categories. I then re-read the transcripts data again using a "constant comparison process" until no new themes were located to assure reaching the theoretical saturation (Webb 2017, 1344). Next, codes were grouped into categories derived from the data and theoretical frameworks. New connections were then created among categories using the process of axial coding to develop theoretical extensions and build novel models and typologies (Corbin and Strauss 2015).

Furthermore, we carried out a metajournalistic discourse analysis (Carlson 2015) in order to analyze and understand how the journalists working for the networks under scrutiny describe their own activities by looking at how they "react to, and make sense of, this perpetual state of flux" that journalism is currently confronted with (Carlson and Usher 2016, 566). A discourse analysis looks specifically at the way language is used to express specific meanings, for instance through the use of certain words, sentences, and rhetorical strategies (van Dijk 1988), and it can be particularly useful to analyze journalistic legitimization strategies expressed through discourse (Vos and Thomas 2019). More specifically, by a metajournalistic discourse analysis, Carlson defines a specific process by which "various actors inside and outside of journalism compete to construct, reiterate, and even challenge the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practices and the limits of

what can or cannot be done” (Vos and Thomas 2019, 349). By analyzing the way journalists describe their own activities we are actually able to understand the implicit and explicit arguments they use to define and legitimize journalism (Vos and Thomas 2019, 566), how journalists apply community building (Zelizer 1993) in order to differentiate themselves from other actors and communities, and how they establish legitimacy (Dahlgren 1992).

Eventually, the way journalists describe their own activities not only limits their scope of actions, but it also impacts how they legitimize their practices and the way they interact with the public. Particularly with ancillary news organizations such as diaspora journalists’ networks it is useful to look at the rationales they come up with in order to understand how they describe their place in the journalism field: “Such statements present individualized claims about their specific sites, but do so through assessments about the state of journalism and assertions about correct journalistic forms for the future” (Carlson and Usher 2016, 566). We specifically opted for a metajournalistic discourse analysis because we wanted to discover how the diaspora networks were describing their own activities, not just as a legitimization strategy, but also to understand whether issues of professional safety are included in the reflections presented in the rationales.

In order to explore the discursive construction of the networks, we identified and downloaded all the relevant self-describing texts on the websites of the three networks. Specifically, we looked at so called “visions” and “missions” often published in the “about us” sections of the three diaspora networks. These texts vary in their headings, lengths, and locations on the websites or social media pages. Therefore, we needed to look at different texts, but as Carlson and Usher (2016) showed earlier on, such self-descriptions or “visions” can take many different forms and raise different topics and issues. The texts were analyzed through a qualitative discourse analysis, in which we focused on three of Carlson’s (2015) main aspects: definitions, boundaries, and legitimacy. While definitions concentrate on how journalism is understood and what it means to the different actors, boundaries focus on differentiations between the networks and other actors or communities. Finally, legitimacy “involves establishing the basis for authoritative journalism” (Carlson and Usher 2016, 568).

Similarly to previous works on metajournalistic discourse analysis such as Vos and Craft (2017), the specific unit of analysis was the discourse in itself, and the way the different networks articulated definitions, boundaries, and the legitimacy. Our investigation looked therefore at the way the networks defined their own activities, and how they legitimized their activity. Regarding the definitional part, we searched for depictions of particular activities and values of the networks—and the journalists working for them—in order to understand their journalistic role. For instance, an expression like “activating the media to realize positive change in society” denotes the role perception of a change agent rather than of a journalists referring to concepts such as objectivity and impartiality. When it comes to legitimizing strategies, preparing “female journalists to take over leading positions” offers an explanation why diaspora journalism networks are acting more as advocacy groups rather than the aspect of legitimization was dealt with through a focus on how they characterized their role. The boundary aspect, instead, was operationalized through discourses directed at distinguishing the networks’ own activities and values from those of other journalistic actors. This particular procedure builds on previous work by Carlson and Usher (2016) as well as Vos and Craft (2017) in

terms of the methodological procedure, which is one of the appropriate checks for ensuring validity and reliability (Gill 2000, 187).

### **Sample of Selected Networks**

Empirically, this study looks at the following three networks that offer journalists operating inside Syria help regarding matters of safety:

- *The Syrian Journalists' Association (SJA)*: a diasporic network with virtual offices in Gaziantep, Paris and Berlin that aims to "achieve the best working conditions for a free, professional and independent press in Syria and enhance the possibilities for better living for Syrian journalists without discrimination between race, sex or religion" (Syrian Journalists' Association 2019).
- *The Syrian Female Journalists' Network (SFJN)*: a Dutch-based network that 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, [...] and to realize a positive social change in thinking and behavior with respect to matters surrounding gender justice and equality. (Syrian Female Journalists' Network n.d.)
- *The Professional Safety of Journalists network*: this network is a Turkey-based Facebook network that focuses on safety in practice of journalists operating in Syria.

The three networks were chosen based on four criteria: (a) they were founded by opposition Syrian diaspora journalists following the outbreak of the Syrian crisis to advocate for the press freedom and defend rights of journalists in Syria, (b) they raise awareness about the occupational safety of local and diaspora journalists, (c) the networks' founders and board members were involved in producing safety manuals and ethics guides to regulate and protect the Syrian media work environment, and (d) they have active Facebook pages and websites where they regularly publish physical and digital safety tips and surveys and allow local journalists contact them if they need emergency help.

## **Research Findings**

### **Digital and Physical Threats**

To answer RQ1, this section identifies how diaspora journalists perceive the digital and physical threats experienced by local and exiled Syrian journalists. The data analysis demonstrated that local and diaspora Syrian journalists encounter a wide range of physical and digital threats based on their location and spatial proximity to the ongoing conflicts in Syria. As many participants reported, the political unrest inside Syria poses high restrictions on the press freedom either in the regime-controlled and opposition-controlled areas or even the politically autonomous Kurdish-inhabited regions. According to the SJA member (Journalist 5), local journalists are subject to "arrest, kidnapping, and murder either intentionally or through shelling, bombing, and crossfire between the Syrian regime forces and the opposition groups, or by being targeted by the Iranian and Russian militia in the region". He was imprisoned by the Syrian regime in Damascus from 2013 to 2015 for working as a secret correspondent for Sky News Arabia TV channel

and then moved to France after being released. A survey conducted by the Syrian Female Journalists' Network (SFJN) on 40 female Syrian media workers revealed how the situation is even worse for local female journalists who experience other forms of exploitation including sexual harassment, gender discrimination, underestimation of their work effort, and preference of hiring male journalists.

However, fleeing the country does not guarantee enjoying higher levels of press freedom or safer working environments (Ristow 2011; Wojcieszak, Brouillette, and Smith 2013). The SJA member (Journalist 4) explained that Syrian diaspora journalists face similar dangers in the neighboring countries, especially in Lebanon, where they encounter "arbitrary detention", or in Turkey, where there are many restrictions on news reporting since Turkey is a part of the ongoing war in Syria which "makes it hard to criticize anyone in the government". Another SJA member (Journalist 5) further commented:

Our colleague Naji Al Jerf was murdered in Gaziantep (a Turkish city) 4 years ago, and many others were kidnapped and deported by the Turkish forces who handed them to Al Nusra front in Syria. Journalists can only talk about the Syrian issue in the interest of Turkey. Sometimes, we become cautious when we release reports for the SJA association because we have an office there that will be immediately shut down if we pose any criticism.

Although the media work environment is expected to be safer and more free in Europe, the SJA executive board member (Journalist 1) asserted that Syrian diaspora media workers also "receive threats from factions, parties and sometimes institutions, especially journalists who reveal corruption in the institutions of the Syrian regime and opposition groups such as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces and the Syrian provisional government". There are also concerns for the lives of journalists who write about ISIS or shoot videos in ISIS-controlled regions. Apart from the physical threats, the local and diaspora activists experience online surveillance, hacking, and digital bullying among other digital dangers. The SFJN executive board member (Journalism 10) identified different forms of cyber-security threats her network encountered:

Our website was hacked twice but we upgraded the digital safety standards so we no longer experience that. I think my personal computer was also attacked. There are online counter-campaigns against journalists who defend human rights. As we work remotely from many countries, we use encrypted emails and follow a digital security policy about what information to share, how long to keep them and how to communicate with each other.

## Developing Counterstrategies in Diasporic Digital Networks

To answer *RQ2* and *RQ3*, this section explains the role of the Syrian diaspora journalists' digital networks in enacting and executing counterstrategies to ensure the professional safety of local journalists in danger zones.

As the executive board member of the Syrian Journalists' Association (Journalist 1) explained, the SJA network was founded in 2012 and registered 2013 after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution with an aim of gathering Syrian journalists and getting out of the state media's umbrella and its regime-controlled media union. The network's main advocacy goal is supporting human rights and press freedom in Syria. Similarly, the executive

board member (Journalist 10) of the Syrian Female Journalists' Network explained that the association was registered in 2013 with the aim of improving the media content from a gender perspective. This involves developing a safer media environment for female journalists, and advocating for the rights of female journalists in Syria and the Middle East. Unlike the two previous networks whose focus on professional safety is one of their various advocacy goals, the founder of the Professional Safety of Journalists (journalist 11) created the network's Facebook page out of a personal motivation after receiving a two-year-training program for professional safety by the International Media Support (IMS) program. His main objective was supporting local and diaspora Syrian journalists, and raising awareness about professional safety.

To support journalists on the physical, psychological, and digital levels, the three diaspora journalist's online networks chosen for analysis developed four counterstrategies to raise awareness about occupational safety guidelines and provide emergency services for local journalists in danger zones. These counterstrategies are significant for protecting the news production in Syria since local citizen journalists are "the only newsgatherers bearing witness to Syria's war, since international reporters have been barred or restricted, or pulled out by their networks" (Bdiwe 2015):

(a) *Training local and diaspora journalists and media activists about professional safety*

The professional safety of local journalists in war zones comes as a top priority on the diaries of the three studied diaspora journalists' digital networks. While mainstream media organizations have offered various safety trainings and manuals to prepare their journalists to cover conflict and survive in hostile environments (Slaughter et al. 2018), organizing transnational professional safety trainings for citizen journalists and media workers under attack in Syrian war zones is a challenging mission. According to the participants, the online diaspora journalists' networks develop various programs for training local journalists and upgrading their digital security skills to fulfill what the secretary general of the SJA calls "a moral, professional, and humanitarian duty towards the homeland media workers". In addition to sharing safety guidelines and tips on their websites and social media pages, the SFJN executive board member (Journalist 10) pointed out that the network started its *Protection and Safety for Female Journalists* project in cooperation with many international institutions when they noticed that "talking about safety was very theoretical". According to the official website of SFJN, the objectives of this program include:

Capacity building in the field of safety and digital and data security through a series of training courses in collaboration with organizations specializing in the subject, in addition to providing practical exercises on "self-defense techniques for female journalists and human rights defenders" to build their capacity for self-protection from harassment or physical risk while performing their work. (Syrian Female Journalists' Network 2020)

As the SFJN executive board member (Journalist 10) further noted, the program offers online and offline training in Gaziantep, Turkey, and Qamishly, Syria, because "it's been easier to organize trainings in the Kurdish part of Syria and in Turkey although acquiring the licenses has recently become harder". These workshops focus on teaching the concepts of occupational safety, harassment, and cyber-bullying aiming to develop the

female media workers' self-defense skills to confront violence and harassment and build a knowledge base related to information security and protection. To maintain the sustainability of these security programs, the network organized training programs for trainers in 2016 to allow journalists to train others inside Syria.

Similarly, the professional safety training is a priority for the Syrian Journalists' Association's work (*SJA*). Because the military shelling operations and the physical dangers have recently decreased, the *SJA* agenda for 2020 focuses mainly on offering training courses on digital safety and cyber-security. According to the *SJA* member (Journalist 5), diaspora journalists train local media workers on how to use encrypted passwords, secure social media accounts and connect them with phone numbers, save data in different domains and keep fake copies of it, and delete data correctly and permanently after sending emails or WhatsApp messages—overall they train in matters of datafication (Porlezza 2018). They also teach journalists how to hide any physical or digital traces especially in places where they are subject to detention or assault and advise them to wear helmets and protective jackets while covering attacks. Accordingly, he believes that the network's security training programs meet the intentional criteria and surpass the regime's tactics:

We are not an official (governmental) association, however we have international connections that the regime-affiliated Syrian Media Union do not have. We have a specialized team who gives digital and physical professional safety training. We trained local citizen journalists up to international levels which enabled them to pursue successful careers in Europe. Zakareya Abdel Kafy, a citizen photo journalist who works now as a correspondent of the AFP news agency, is an example.

The SFJN member (Journalist 9) argued that following the professional safety guidelines was a lifeline for many journalists who were "arrested and released because they used encrypted emails and the regime could not have a proof against them". Regarding the physical safety, a diaspora journalist who started giving occupational safety training since 2015 (Journalist 12) emphasized the importance of teaching local journalists covering conflict zones how to plan the field coverage, evaluate dangers, and maintain personal safety before starting their work. He designs his online and offline training courses to include guidelines for journalists on how to be independent on the battleground, what to do if they lose communication with their fixers and colleagues, and what to take in their backpacks:

I teach journalists how to secure their residence places and how to deal with security guards either affiliated with the regime or with opposition factions. I teach them the mechanisms of movement and travel inside the conflict areas, when they should cover or reveal their identity and press cards, and the best safety applications they can use to protect their digital fingerprint.

Although the *SJA* used to bring in journalists from northern Syrian to attend training workshops, conferences about women, and forums about the election coverage in Turkey in the past, the board decided to move many of the training sessions online when Turkey increased the border-crossing restrictions. As a consequence, many diaspora journalists customize their training programs to suit the digital resources available to local journalists which warrants a thoughtful study of their logistical resources. To prepare for the online training courses, an executive board member of the *SJA* (Journalist 1) reported posting a Google document survey and asking people to leave logistical information

about their internet access and the strength of the internet connection signals they might have to adjust to the needs and capabilities of local journalists who would attend the workshops online. With the current pandemic, this has become even more important. It reflects the diaspora journalists' ability to assess the needs and priorities of the local journalistic community (Brinkerhoff 2008; Riddle 2008).

(b) *Emergency rescue of journalists under attack*

In addition to raising awareness about the digital safety and cyber security tools, diaspora journalists' digital networks provide various emergency services for local citizen journalists and media activists in danger zones. With the help of international human rights organizations and non-profit associations that safeguard press freedom and journalists' rights, diaspora journalists mediate the Syrian conflict by serving as transnational relief workers and humanitarian aid assistants (Boichack 2019). They evacuated many local reporters to safer places and provided them with essential financial aid and health support. As the SJA executive board member (Journalist 2) explained:

Many local journalists needed protection because of the recent unrest and attacks on journalists in northern Syria, especially Idlib. We created a group to gather their names and survey their needs to figure out how we can offer help. We also started a humanitarian aid project for helping the activists and media workers in Ghouta when it was under siege before they forcibly migrated to the north.

Since the SJA network has a limited financial budget, the network collaborates with international organizations such as Amnesty International, the United Nations, Reporters without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists. This allows to provide the required health and financial care. As participants further explained, the network e.g., evacuated Syrian journalists from regions with strong opposition, helped journalists in Daraa to move to safer places in northern Syria and provided them with money to rent a house. Thanks to the networks' Facebook pages, website, emails, and emergency hotlines, local journalists can easily contact the association if they need help. This immediacy allows the network to keep close ties with journalists in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Similarly, the safety program of the SFJN offers emergency financial support to evacuate female journalists and their families from Idlib and the Kurdish region after their homes were bombed or attacked by Turkish forces. Thus, SFJN executive board member (Journalist 10) argued for the importance of securing an emergency support fund for journalists in danger:

We are the first association to work on the safety of female journalists this way and one of the few who provide this fast reaction. When their (journalists) lives are in danger, we do not have time to review papers and follow bureaucratic procedures; we want them to receive the money on the same day.

Through his Facebook page, the founder of *The Professional Safety of Journalists* (Journalist 11) also reported using his personal connections to offer emergency help whenever possible. He reported providing Skype consultation for local media workers on the safest routes in the different Syrian regions. When a journalist contacted him after being arrested in Turkey, he managed to interfere to release him. When a photojournalist



was arrested in Idlib by an armed group seven months ago, they sent him money to buy a GPS for his car to be able to track him down.

(c) *Documenting violations against journalists and human rights defenders*

To monitor violations against professional and citizen media workers and activists in Syria, the Syrian Journalist' Association (SJA) established the *Syrian Center for Journalism Freedom* (SCJF) in 2014 with the support of *Free Press Unlimited*. The center releases monthly, biannual and annual reports of the number of murdered, kidnapped and tortured Syrian journalists and media workers and the geographical distribution of these violations accusing various state and non-state actors including the Syrian regime, the armed Syrian opposition factions, the Russian or Turkish forces, and some jihadist militant groups. As the SJA's executive board member (journalist 1) explained, these reports have become "a trusted reference" for many international associations that report on violence and intimidation against journalists in Syria including the Committee to Protect Journalists and Journalists without Borders. According to another executive board member of the SJA (journalist 2), the network uses its Facebook page to publish daily news stories about the Syrian correspondents or media activists who were attacked or arrested while covering events, reveal their names and the names of the media organizations they work for, and provide information about the circumstances of their murder or disappearance. When possible, they contact journalists to get first-hand information and post updates when they are released. Similarly, the *Syrian Female Journalists Network* (SFJN) uses its website and Facebook page to post infographics about the physical and electronic forms of abuse that female journalists encounter, but they also provide practical advice on how to improve cyber security.

Documenting the violation cases and contacting international organizations allow diaspora journalists to present a lobby or a pressure group on the armed factions and regime authorities to release journalists. This qualifies diaspora journalists to be labeled as human rights defenders as the United Nations clarified that "journalists and media workers can be considered as human rights defenders when, through their activities, they promote human rights in general and strive to protect the rights of others" without restricting their activities to news reporting (United Nations 2011, para. 32). Although the Syrian regime authorities, militia, and opposition groups do not always yield to the association's lobbying pressure to release certain journalists or give them rights, publishing these reports reflects "an ethical and professional obligation whether a response is taken or not" as the SJA's executive board member further described it:

We (the network) could release some journalists who were arrested and tortured by some armed factions inside Syria. In the meeting of the International Federation of Journalists, we even called for releasing a Syrian journalist who forcibly disappeared although he was a member of the regime-controlled Syrian media union and participated in disseminating hate speech. We embarrassed the union in front of the international community and the journalist was released a few months later (journalist 1).

However, the diaspora journalists' networks do not only protect journalists against detention and physical attacks imposed by armed forces, they also serve as mediators to defend journalists' rights when they experience any form of moral assassination by their



employers. According to one of the *SJA* active members (Journalist 6), the network released denunciation statements to support a group of journalists who were defamed and attacked by a Turkey-based Syrian media institution to protect their reputation and source of living. As a response to a strike in one diaspora Syrian media organization whose members are affiliated with the *SJA*, the network formed a committee, sent two of its members to Turkey to listen to the journalists' demands and negotiate with the administration, and suggested some professional solutions to end the conflict.

(d) *Developing transnational policies and establishing ethical codes of conduct*

However, the role of online journalists' networks goes beyond defending journalists. They provide training and services, release safety guides to establish collaborative codes of conduct, and develop new policies to regulate the work environment in the Syrian diasporic media organizations. For example, the *SFJN* has developed the *Safety Manual for Media Workers in Syria* in which they develop policies for protecting against harassment and exploitation, extortion and virtual violence, and gender discrimination in the workplace. Based on a two-stage professional safety training program organized by the international media support association (IMS), members of the online journalists' networks and diaspora media organizations collaborated in producing the *Safety guide for media work in Syria for individuals and institutions* in 2018. According to the founder of *The Professional Safety of Journalists* (Journalist 11), 4000 copies of the guide were distributed to journalists working for media institutions in Turkey and the opposition regions in Syria.

In cooperation with 30 Syrian media organizations, the *SJA* also established the *Ethical Charter for Syrian Media* as a moral code that states the professional rules the Syrian journalists should commit to aiming to comply with the international professionalism standards. The *SJA* member (Journalist 5)

As an important rule of our charter, the 500 journalist members of the *SJA* cannot practice any hate speech against anyone inside or outside the network, or even against the supporters of the Syrian regime. We monitor the media associations to make sure they work professionally and do not violate the code. This rule expands to some of the *SJA*-affiliated opposition media associations inside Syria.

According to the *SJA* executive board member (Journalist 2), the association's ethical charter also embraces equality principles with no differentiation on the basis of religion, race or color and promotes the freedom of expression within the network with respect to one other's opinions. Trying to create a healthy environment inside the network, the administration managed to control political talks and discussions in the associations' closed groups to avoid clashes among the network's members who have different backgrounds and political affiliations.

In this context, participants described working from diaspora as a "privilege" rather than a limitation or barrier for pursuing their media, gender and human rights advocacy work. As one of the *SJA* members (Journalist 6) commented:

Within the ongoing military and political wars in Syria, being outside the country is better in order not to lose our compass and to shed lights on the Syrian issues in a professional way that would have never been possible if we were still inside the country under threats of kidnapping and murder. Our residence in scattered places in Europe allows for posing a pressure

on the countries in which we are living, and creating international connections with various human rights and journalistic associations that exist inside these countries. This diaspora and geographical diversity helped a lot in having different pressure sources.

This privilege of distance places diaspora media in “a unique position which enables them to circumvent regime censorship and spread their content through cross-border networks and collaborations with citizen journalists, on-the-ground correspondents and media platforms” (Kämpe 2017, 49).

## Networks’ Visions and Role Perceptions

While the interview data identified the various threats journalists experience and the counterstrategies they develop to promote newsafety across borders, the metajournalistic discourse analysis reflected diaspora journalists’ wider understanding of journalism and their role perceptions. The metajournalistic discourse analysis showed that all three diaspora journalist networks abide to a combination of traditional norms and values, but integrate them with additional aspects that are more in line with the role conceptions of advocacy groups. When it comes to the definition of journalism, the networks stress that they want to enable a professional and ethical journalism, understood as a fourth estate. The Syrian Journalists’ Association (SJA), for instance, publishes in its Media Charter of Honor, that journalists are obliged “to investigate the truth and seek it and to convey the facts truthfully and honestly without disregarding or truncating information”.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, they also state that their work has to be in the interest of the public, that they need to respect privacy, assure accuracy, distinguish between editorial content and advertising, publicity, and sponsored material, and do no harm to individuals. However, in addition to these traditional principles, the networks also include norms that, unlike legacy news media, go beyond traditional definitions of journalistic work: the Syrian Female Journalists’ Network (SFJN) for instance declares that one of the network’s main duties is 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”.<sup>2</sup> The network clarifies this activist stance as a change agent even further in its Code of Conduct by pointing out that it actively supports change movements, participates in “civil campaigns aimed to change the laws that hinder women’s equal access to their rights and their rights as citizens and human beings” (Kämpe 2017). Nevertheless, there are differences in the degree to which the networks abide to an activist stance. The SJA adopts a more traditional approach by using concepts such as accuracy, truthfulness, credibility of information, objectivity, integrity, truth and freedom of expression when it comes to newswork. On the other hand, the SFJN often refers to building bridges, empowerment and realizing a positive social change. The analyzed networks refer to the concept of safety in terms of protection: the protection of persons with special needs, the protection of sources, witnesses, women, private property and, eventually, of journalists.

The studied networks are keen to draw boundaries between them and the (propagandist) news media in Syria. This can be observed by the various references to the concept of *independence*. The SJA for instance wants to create an “independent environment for the Syrian media sector”, because the traditional news media in Syria, for decades, have lacked “conveying the truth to the public professionally and objectively”.<sup>3</sup> The SFJN,

instead, points out the *distortion* in the coverage, specifically in the representation of women. Similarly, the networks frequently refer to the concept of *transparency*, both with regard to the methods of obtaining information as well as the publication of all relevant materials—no matter what consequences.<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to the legitimacy of the journalistic activities, the networks strongly focus on training to improve safety, developing social dialog, and enhancing the risk-awareness of the press when it comes to the coverage of Syria. Particularly with regard to training, the aspect of safety is often invoked: the Professional Safety Network of Journalists has launched numerous campaigns for journalists' safety, caring in particular for local and independent journalists who have minimal protection. The training does not only involve suggestions on how to survive and to stay safe while reporting from a high-risk country, but it is also about creating a culture of awareness with regard to the dangers in war zones. The services are not only focused on foreign journalists active to Syria, but also on (citizen) journalists active in the country: by helping these journalists in getting crucial information out of the country, the networks also hope, in the long run, to establish a process of both change and dialog. Additionally, the training is not limited—as shown in the interviews above—to traditional suggestions on how to act in the field, but also on how to improve electronic safety. However, the different texts do not refer in any way to surveillance and on how to avoid it.

What emerges even more clearly from the metajournalistic discourse analysis is a plurality of approaches—and thus in line with previous findings from Carlson and Usher (2016)—that in fact move away from traditional journalistic values, norms and routines. Even if to some degree the networks still refer to classic journalistic values such as objectivity, accuracy and truth—a phenomenon that can also be observed in some journalism startups (Wagemans, Witschge, and Deuze 2016)—their visions encompass a broader and more activist understanding of journalism. Hence, the analyzed networks do not see their roles as limited to “longstanding notions of journalism and journalistic authority, often reinforcing existing journalistic modes and normative commitments” (Carlson and Usher 2016, 568), but they do understand journalism also as a means for active social change. From an institutional logics perspective, this means that we can actually observe a change in the sense-making frameworks of their daily activities (Lowrey 2016, 136) as traditional and digital—or activist—logics become more important in the work of journalists, particularly when it comes to newsafety, fighting undemocratic regimes, and implementing social change.

### Promoting Newsafety from Exile: Theoretical Implications

The findings demonstrated the engagement of Syrian diaspora journalists in various self-described digital practices to serve the citizen journalists' community and local reporters in war zones such as providing emergency rescue of journalists under attack, documenting violations and lobbying governments, training local journalists, and developing transnational policies and safety guides. In this sense, the analyzed networks' goals, visions, and activities are in line with Lowrey, Sherrill, and Broussard (2019) understanding of “ancillary organizations”—not the least because they play a crucial support role for journalists on the ground. Evidence shows therefore that the diaspora networks' self-defined rational transcends a narrow conceptualization of the journalist's role as a neutral

observer. The discourse also shows that strong efforts from the networks to expand the legitimacy of journalistic activities, particularly through the lens of newsafety: by focusing on vital aspects of journalists' everyday work, particularly those working in war-ridden zones such as Syria, diaspora networks try to introduce a new norm into political journalism, positing therefore a journalism of advocacy, active resistance, and change.

By revisiting Hanitzsch and Vos's (2016) critical-monitorial, advocative-radical, and developmental-educative functions of journalism in the political life, this study advances four digitally-empowered new roles of Syrian diaspora journalists in promoting newsafety from exile. Table 2 defines and explains these roles in detail comparing them to the traditional roles that journalists perform through their news reporting to show how they entail different meanings and tasks particularly for the transnational conflict context.

However, practicing these roles warrants continuous collaboration between diaspora journalists and other actors on the local, diasporic and international levels including human rights organizations, political activists, civil society actors, and European funders using different digital media platforms and online channels. The collaborations beyond the traditional boundaries of the journalistic field, together with the combination of traditional and digital or advocacy values not only point toward the complexities of "change and stasis" (Lowrey 2012, 277) in the field, but they also demonstrate that the field's institutionalized cultural threads, as Ryfe (2019, 845) states, are coming undone.

**Table 2.** Diaspora journalists' roles in promoting professional safety.

Journalism functions	Traditional journalistic roles in political life (practiced through news reporting) (Hanitzsch and Vos (2016))	Diaspora journalists' roles in promoting professional safety (practiced through digital networks)
Critical-monitorial function	<i>Watchdog role:</i> journalists serve as a fourth estate (Waisbord 2000) and provide independent criticism of society and its institutions	<i>Sousveillance role:</i> diaspora journalists monitor and document violations by the regime forces, armed opposition factions, and foreign military troops against journalists and human rights defenders in conflict zones and hold powers to account
Advocative-radical function	<i>Advocate role:</i> journalists identify themselves with specific disadvantaged groups of people and act as lobbyists, or supporters of a cause	<i>Defender role:</i> this role involves three aspects: – <i>acting as lobbyists:</i> putting pressure on armed factions and regime authorities to release detained journalists. – <i>acting as relief workers:</i> providing emergency rescue, shelters, and health services for journalists under attack. – <i>acting as fundraisers:</i> writing funding proposals to raise donations from European associations to fund their networks and support local journalists
Developmental-educative	<i>Educator role:</i> journalists teach the public and raise awareness about specific problems	<i>Trainer role:</i> diaspora journalists engage in capacity building developing online and offline training programs to upgrade the local citizen journalists' self-defense and digital security skills
Developmental-educative	<i>Change agent role:</i> journalists promote a real-world change by advocating for social change and mobilizing political and social reforms	<i>Regulator/policy developer role:</i> diaspora journalists develop transnational policies, codes of conduct, and safety guides to regulate the media work in diaspora and opposition regions in Syria and protect anti-regime journalists whose reporting support the democratic reforms and challenge the repressive restrictions on the flow of information in Syria

## Conclusions

Previous scholars argued that networked media environment, empowered by social media and digital technologies, offer new opportunities for diaspora journalists to engage in conflict mediation and resolution in the homelands by serving as advocates for democratic reforms, supporting human rights initiatives, and documenting war crimes against civilians in their transnational news reporting (Balasundaram 2019; Kämpe 2017; Ogunyemi 2018). However, this study moves the discussion forward by explaining how diaspora journalists use their new locations to develop digital advocacy networks that serve as a “defense mechanism” through which they enact and activate counterstrategies and propose new practices that go beyond the traditional news gathering and reporting tasks. Journalists working for these networks perceive defending, training, and protecting the local “truth tellers” as important tools for serving democracy and challenging the restrictions on the flow of information and press freedom inside Syria. Thus, we argue that the four proposed *sousveillance*, *defender*, *regulator*, and *trainer* roles entail an indirect intervention in the ongoing homeland conflict enabling Syrian diaspora journalists to engage in the public discourse and become active players of the ongoing conflict in their war-torn homeland in several ways. This involves tasks that are not practiced by journalists working in legacy media such as raising funds and doing relief work.

To this end, we argue that distance is seen as a “privilege” in promoting newsafety opening doors to new digital practices and counterstrategies. The digital networks created by diaspora journalists provide novel “brokerage” roles (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013) with various non-journalistic civil society actors such as human rights organizations and NGOs to provide emergency rescue, health care, and financial support for local journalists and activists in danger zones. This allows the diaspora journalists of the analyzed networks to play the role of transnational relief workers and humanitarian aid assistants mobilizing an emergent collective behavior in spite of their limited resources (Boichack 2019). To improve the performance of their media outlets and meet the international professionalism standards, the diaspora networks in the study also provide channels for developing policies and ethical charters, and enforcing self-regulations to organize the work environment in the independent media organizations working from outside Syria.

This new role, however, comes at a new understanding of one’s own journalistic role: In their visions and missions, the three diaspora journalists’ networks under study follow previously observed patterns when it comes to the definition of their own activities. Similarly to what has been seen in relation to journalism startups, these journalism networks resemble in their understanding “ancillary organizations” (Lowrey, Sherrill, and Broussard 2019) given that they adopt a hybrid conceptualization of journalism that goes beyond that of a legacy news media (Di Salvo and Porlezza 2020). Although the degree of hybridity varies between the different networks analyzed—the SFJN for instance adopts a clearer stance of social change compared to the SJA or the Professional Safety Network of Journalists—the three agree to some extent that their activities should foster change in order to enhance the possibilities for better living both for Syrian journalists and citizens. In other words: the investigated networks clearly act as “ancillary organizations” and change agents in the journalistic field, given that they act as digital advocacy

networks, both through non-traditional practices and active counterstrategies that go beyond traditional newswork, but also because they foster the adaptation of innovative strategies through an increased interaction involving not only journalists but actors from all sorts of backgrounds such as activists, NGOs, citizen journalists or training centers.

What also becomes apparent in the analysis, but is less clearly referred to due to diverging perspectives in the networks' self-description and the interviews, is that journalistic actors were less clear in the interviews with regard to their role as change agents compared to what they wrote in the self-description of the networks' goals. That is to say: while the metajournalistic discourse analysis underpinned the networks' advocacy role, the journalists' perception emerging from the interviews was more nuanced. And the journalists' struggle to sort out their social role is therefore also reflected in the different roles in promoting professional safety they abide to.

Taken all this together it becomes clear why a focus on professional safety might not be enough: the new concept of newsafety introduced by the guest editors of the special issue, with its wider focus on infrastructures, journalism practice, as well as psychological, social and political consequences, might be better suited to describe the current news ecosystem's characteristics and requirements in terms of safety and news, specifically when it comes to digital threats where many interrelated actors and infrastructures can contribute to journalists' safety.

This study is obviously not free from limitations. The three diaspora journalism networks we have analyzed in this study do not allow to make any conclusions about diaspora journalism networks in general. Rather, our study allows to better understand what the three specific networks do in order to protect journalists working in Syria, by offering a previously unavailable insight into their operations in different countries, even if the people working for the networks are almost always Syrians. Methodologically, snowball sampling does have certain issues, particularly because the selection process of interviewees is largely delegated to the interview partners. However, the risk of interviewing people with limited knowledge can be mitigated by checking whether the mentioned actors are central figures in the networks we were analyzing. Carrying out in-depth interviews with members of these networks, besides the common limitations of qualitative interviews, also carry additional limitations due to the sensitive topic as well as the delicate position in which some of the interviewed journalists are, as they openly challenge an undemocratic government. This is also the main reason why we opted to anonymize all the interviews rather than just some of them.

Grounded on this paper's findings, future research should focus even more on the specific counter-strategies of diaspora journalists' networks: what kind of (digital) tools, software or applications are journalists using to combat surveillance and censorship effectively? How can both professional and citizen journalists be trained to apply all the necessary means to ensure full online security, particularly as the business of surveillance is becoming a lucrative branch of industry (cfr. Reporters Without Borders 2017). Last but not least, it would also be relevant to see, from a comparative perspective, whether diaspora journalism networks related to countries other than Syria act in a similar way, or whether there are differences with regard to the definition of their role(s), their boundary-work, as well as their legitimization strategies.

## Notes

1. See here: <https://www.syja.org/en/home/about-us/31/advance-contents/30284/media-charter-of-honor>.
2. See here: <http://www.sfn.org/en/who-we-are/what-we-do/>.
3. See here: <https://www.syja.org/en/home/about-us/31/advance-contents/30507/association-goals>.
4. See here: [https://www.facebook.com/pg/bit72/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/bit72/about/?ref=page_internal).

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