"Citizen journalism" in the Syrian uprising:
Problematizing Western narratives in a local context"
Omar Al-Ghazzi

Introduction

For the past decade, citizen journalism has been a popular discursive frame in describing different kinds of digital media practices. In relation to news, the concept refers to the use of digital media by "ordinary individuals (who) temporarily adopt the role of a journalist in order to participate in newsmaking, often spontaneously during a time of crisis, accident, tragedy or disaster when they happen to be present on the scene" (Allan, 2013, p. 9). The term has been propagated by Western news organizations, academics, and NGOs. In this article, through a focus on amateur videos, I distinguish between narratives about digital media and actual digital media practices. I focus on the case of the Arab uprisings, particularly in Syria, to show the multiplicity of actors and possible motivations involved in digital media practices— and contrast that with the frame of citizen journalism. I approach the study of journalism from the discursive perspective (See: Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013, Deuze, 2005; Zelizer, 1992, 1993) by examining the political narratives that dominated the framing of digital communication in the Arab uprisings.

The Arab uprisings are the latest world event that has generated a lot of discourse about citizen journalism. In the uprisings, political activists, ordinary people, armed rebels, state agents, soldiers, and torturers have all used digital media for different purposes— making it difficult to assess whether digital media are used to witness or to stage an event, to lobby for a cause or report on a story. They were instrumental in efforts to mobilize political action against brutal dictatorships, but they were also used as a weapon of war and tool of torture. This

complexity is concealed by the narrative of citizen journalism that foregrounds citizenship and journalism as prisms to understand digital media practices. As Allen (2013) argues, when linked to democratization, citizen journalism becomes "in danger of conceptual collapse under the sheer weight of the burden it is being asked to sustain" (p. 201). Within the context of Syria and more broadly, the meanings that determine the congruence—or the lack thereof— between the citizen journalism narrative and digital media practices, are shaped by the interaction between activist networks and news media. Each deliberates and frames these practices around notions of amateurism, witnessing and authenticity (See Markham, 2011).

In response to the renewed call put forth in this special issue to engage with the notion of "de-Westernizing" communication studies, I explore how the concept of citizen journalism takes shape in interaction and reaction to developments in the rest of the world. The citizen journalism frame projects the liberal democratic values implied in both journalism and citizenship on myriad and vastly different situations and contexts. The citizen journalism narrative inadvertently also centers the nation-state as the political space through which to conceive the use of new technologies. In Western tradition, citizenship describes the relation between an individual and the state-bound national polity, while journalism is currently seen as one of the pillars of deliberative democracy in a nation-state. The framing of digital media as citizen journalism invokes the values implied in both concepts. In analyzing the use of the term in Iran, Khiabany and Sreberny (2009) contend:

"When such a neologism is applied to a very different setting, some interesting questions are triggered. These include a critique of the export of such notions to different contexts; that is to say, do conceptualizations developed in particular locations necessarily travel and travel well? But the opposite kind of critique is also important: what kind of questions does

this new concept raise about the assumptions underlying both journalism and citizenship elsewhere?" (p. 121)

In response, this paper asks, what tropes, emanating from the West, are used to describe digital media practices in the Arab world? And how do they relate to the local context of digital media use? In addition, what nuances and historic debates are ignored when journalism and citizenship are used as universal concepts?

Against the backdrop of empirical examples of digital videos from the Arab uprisings, particularly the situation in Syria, I follow a dual approach that takes into account both the changing Western narratives about new technologies and the local contexts in which digital media are used. Context is defined by the particular intellectual history, political milieu in question, and people's locally-situated agency (Chung, 2013). Disentangling different forms of digital media practices is then necessary in order to contribute to addressing the question, posed by Chouliaraki (2012a), "under what conditions may convergent journalism facilitate the articulation of ordinary voice by non-Western others?" (p. 270)

The first part of the article distances digital media practices from the changing Western narratives about new technologies, such as the popular frame of citizen journalism, or the post 9/11 discourse about terrorism and new media. The second part highlights the genealogy and history of the concepts of citizenship and journalism in an Arab context. The larger point is that citizenship and journalism are not universal categories and that the agency of digital media users should not be assumed as citizen or journalist, when the meanings of both concepts are contextual.

Through the monitoring of videos emanating from the Syrian conflict and shared on social media, from March 2011 to August 2014, I engage with examples that have instigated

extensive discussions in news media reports and press editorials, in addition to social media sites. I analyze these video by paying particular attention to the following criteria: the subject matter, the intentionality and identity of the producer, the timing of the video's production within the Syrian conflict, and the amateur or professional quality of the video.

Digital media practices in the Syrian uprising

The success of Tunisian and Egyptian activists in using social media to organize mass protests that forced their countries' presidents to step down lent credence to the belief that the use of digital technologies by citizens strengthens democracy or allows it to take shape. In fact, as a result of the attention to the role of new media in the uprisings, the translation of the term citizen journalism in Arabic (sahafat al-muwatana) has been propagated by international NGOs and news media. An online search for the term "citizen journalism" and "Arab Spring" reveals the diversity of acts referred to as citizen journalism in major US and British news sources. The term mainly centers around two acts: witnessing— when ordinary people document and distribute reports and images of events they encounter— and activism, the strategic media output and contribution of political activists and dissidents whether videos, images or social media participation. The two modes of digital media practice are not mutually exclusive. Witnessing can be strategic (Ristovska, 2013) and activism can take the form of witnessing and reporting, especially in contexts like post-2011 Syria where the ruling regime banned journalists from reporting. In other words, the citizen journalist can be a neutral witness or an activist for a civic cause.

In the United States, the term citizen journalism began to be used in news discourse in 2001 to describe footage and reports taken or made by amateur witnesses during the 9/11 attacks (Allan, 2013). With the fast diffusion of digital technologies across the world, legacy media and

the public increasingly expected and relied on the media contributions of ordinary people in breaking and making news during exceptional events such as wars, bombings, and natural disasters. As Zelizer (2007) contends, news media started outsourcing the role of the eye-witness to claim that they ""have been there" as witnesses of events they have not witnessed" (p. 425). Through the frame of citizen journalism, witness accounts have been used to report events like the tsunami in 2004, the London bombings and hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Mumbai attacks in 2008, and most recently the Arab uprisings of 2011 (Allan, 2013).

Rodriguez (2001), who was one of the first academics to propagate the term "citizen media," saw it as a way to counter the framing of media activism as "alternative media." She contends that a focus on the citizen enables a "break away from the traditional, static and essentialist definitions of democracy, citizenship, and democratic communicative action" (p. 4). However, currently, the descriptor of citizen journalism has become ubiquitous— leaving little conceptual space for a nuanced discussion of digital media. For instance, are we to assume that an act of citizen journalism by a European tourist witnessing the tsunami is of the same genre as a Syrian activist advocating for political freedom in his country? And why do we use the notions of citizenship and journalism in contexts, like the Arab world, that have different conceptions and practices of the two notions? I will return to the second question later in the article.

Dahlgren (2009) suggests that what binds citizen journalist witnessing and activism is the assumed intention of the use of digital media, which is the "civic agency" of the user/ producer. He defines "civic" as carrying "the implication of engagement in public life –a cornerstone of democracy" (p. 58); and "'civic agency' as a fundamental notion to conceptually anchor people's enactment of citizenship" (p. 59). He cautions that civic qualities should not be attributed to "groups that espouse, for example, neofascism, racism, terrorism, or hate. Here the 'civic' takes

the high road and parts company from that which is merely 'public'" (59). But how can one distinguish between these contentious concepts? Who determines which digital media practices espouse "hate" and which are civic, which are journalistic acts and which are not?

Compared to other Arab uprisings, the Syrian revolt has arguably featured the widest range of examples of digital and social media content produced and distributed by a host of political activists, witnesses, rebels, state agents, soldiers, and torturers. This complex digital media output was simplified by the frame of citizen journalism. Journalists initially celebrated social media as central for mobilization and democratization, yet social media were ignored when their use did not adhere to this simplistic narrative. For example, the use of social media to mobilize for and document controversial political activities at the outset of the uprisings, such as the storming of embassies, was largely ignored by legacy media commentary. At the beginning of the uprising, digital media featured strongly in the stories of how protestors used their cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, and Skype to connect, mobilize, document, and witness. On the other hand, when regime thugs, known in Syria as shabiha, simultaneously used the same technologies to intimidate and terrorize the rebelling population— no claims were made about digital technologies.

Indeed, there are many examples of digital media use that blur the lines between witnessing an event and staging it, between professional and amateur productions, and between civic and violent intentions. This complexity is ignored by Western news media, which project authenticity on the selected output of Syrian activists— based "on the fallacious conditions of amateurism and localism, their perceived exoticism or, more likely… their viability as empty signifiers into which Western foreign editors, reporters and audiences can project their democratizing credentials" (Markham, 2011, p. 148). In the beginning of the Syrian uprising in

March 2011, both the protests and the amateur digitally-shot and distributed videos about them were of an experimental nature. Protest chants seemed spontaneous— improvised and cried out at the spur of the moment. One of the early videos in the city of Dara'a shows Syrians simply chanting "no more fear" ("Halabiyofi," 2011) — which contrasts with the elaborate songs, chants, and slogans of later protests. In another early amateur video from Damascus, we hear the person shooting the video switching back and forth between classical Arabic and the Syrian dialect, seemingly unsure of the formality of a digital activist video ("bave alan," 2013). As the Syrian uprising progressed, activists became aware of some tropes of production to help them get their message across to viewers. Amidst the media blackout imposed by the regime, and its accusations that videos of the uprising were inauthentic, activists began to mention the day's date or show the day's newspaper at the beginning of their video for authentication purposes. By April 2011, some witnesses featured in videos began showing their national identification cards to prove their identities ("SHAMSNN," 2011).

Digital media became an intrinsic part of protests in the sense that the very organization of protests seemed centered around how they were going to be recorded and how the footage was to be distributed. Amateur videos became slicker, with activists taping the protests from multiple angles, such as rooftops to present an aerial view. Activists developed expertise in directing amateur videos— many times with the intention of making protests appear more crowded on camera. More importantly, the network of Syrian activists and news media grew stronger. Influential Arab Gulf news channels, mainly Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, gave extensive airtime to Syrian activists who would relay their reports on primetime news broadcasts— blurring the lines between witnessing, reporting, and lobbying. One also cannot ignore the role of Syrian

diaspora activists whose "brokerage" media work has been essential in packaging and promoting footage by local videographers to news media (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013).

This slippage in defining citizen journalism has grave ramifications— not least on the lives of amateur reporters. According to the Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ), the Syrian conflict has claimed the lives of 73 journalists so far. The CPJ website defines journalists as "staff journalists, freelancers, stringers, bloggers, and citizen journalists -- people who cover news on public affairs through any media." The war's violence, in addition to the great restriction imposed on news media by the Syrian regime, expanded the outsourcing of the journalistic role to amateurs and activists on the ground. Almost since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, amateur media networks, such as the Shaam News Network (SNN), mushroomed to coordinate amateur media output. While in May 2011, the SNN described itself as a "group of patriotic Syrian youth activists... supporting the Syrian people's efforts for democratic and peaceful change" (Yazbeck, 2011), in 2014 its Facebook page states that it is "unaffiliated to any group or party" and that its output has been has been "verified and checked for credibility." Its development indicates the professionalization of Syrian amateur video production and distribution.

Debates around the consequences of this professionalization, particularly in relation to the responsibility of news organizations, were reignited following the death in late 2013 of 18-year-old Syrian, Molhem Barakat, who worked as a freelance photojournalist for Reuters news agency. His case highlights how "citizen journalists" and "stringers" are still a form of unpaid or low-paid labor, who are "voluntarily co-opted in projects of power that may have a therapeutic value in 'giving voice' to the ordinary, yet ultimately reproduce local asymmetries and global inequalities" (Chouliarki, 2012b, p. 12). Molhem was an enthusiast and activist in support of the

Syrian revolution. He first worked with the pro-revolution Aleppo Media Centre and then for

Reuters (Kenner, 2014). As Kenner (2014) notes, Barakat "took the sort of risks that would

horrify most veteran journalists" and one video posted on YouTube shows him trying to aid a

wounded rebel fighter in the midst of battle (See "Tube True," 2013). He died while covering a

battle between the Syrian army and rebels. His tragic story captures how the Syrian war forced

news media to reassess how to balance their need and responsibility for covering a story versus

the constraints and ethical obligations in using the work of amateurs.

On the other hand, Syrian regime thugs were also keen on using digital media. Regime

fighters used digital media to record and disseminate their violence and torture of civilians.

Sometimes their techniques were a direct response to protest demands. When chanting the word

"freedom" became a rallying cry in Syrian protests, dozens of videos taken by regime fighters

would show them shouting at a civilian, "You want freedom?" and proceeding to beat and torture

the defenseless civilian in horrific ways. As a report on Syrian opposition Orient TV

("televisionOrient,", 2011) said:

"There are many explanations for these videos. Some say they have been deliberately

leaked to terrorize protestors and those thinking of joining them. Others suggested they are

part of a business, where soldiers sell them to activists who submit them to the media.

Others purport that the shabiha take the videos just to boast about them."

Sometimes the use of digital media is so striking and unusual that commentators can only

speculate about why videos were produced. One example is a video that shows Syrian soldiers

herding about a dozen donkeys to line them within the frame of a phone's camera. After the

donkeys got lined up, the soldiers begin to shower the donkeys with bullets until they are all

lying dead on the ground ("nasser mahmoud," 2013). The video shows several soldiers

shooting the scene with their phones. Again bloggers and commentators were at a loss about how to explain the intentionality of the video (Hounshell, 2011), speculating that the livelihood of villagers was the target.

As the Syrian uprising became more of an ongoing civil war, its changing nature paralleled the changes in the kinds of digital media practices involved. Digital media output became a battleground and a weapon of war. Different warring sides and their supporters on social media began to shoot and distribute horrific videos of killings and torture. One extreme example is a video that shows adults encouraging a child, who appears no older than ten years, to use a sword to behead a captured officer from the Syrian ruling Alawite minority sect ("Syrian rebels," 2012). Another video, shot in the desert between Syria and Iraq, shows militants of the Islamic State (known by its former acronym ISIS— the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham) stopping three truck drivers and asking them questions about Islamic prayer, as if they were contestants in a game show. The purpose was to determine whether the drivers were practicing Sunni Muslims. When the drivers did not know the answer to a question about how to perform morning prayers, they were shot by the militants, who were taping their interaction with the drivers all along ("SyrianPerspective," 2013). Another widely circulated Syrian amateur video shows a grotesque theatrical performance of an anti-regime rebel holding what he said was the heart of a dead regime soldier and threatening to eat it—while taunting other regime fighters that this would be their fate if they do not surrender (Wood, 2013).

As the war escalated, armed groups began to document their military advances in slick edited videos that are not only meant to recruit more supporters and militants or to intimidate enemies, but also as a showcase for Arab funders, mainly in the Gulf region, to show them

that their money is not going to waste and to ask for more funds (Harb, 2013). In this context, English-language media began calling the Syrian conflict "the first YouTube war" ("Channel 4," 2013). In some videos, even people in extreme physical pain and under torture glance at the camera of their torturers' cell phone—as if in a moment of consciousness that their pain and suffering is not private and will soon be available for all to see.

Though the Syrian context perhaps provides the most dramatic examples of the myriad uses of digital media, the discussion applies elsewhere. In Libya, videos of Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi's killing are one remarkable example. There are several videos showing the moment that Libyan rebels found the dictator of 42 years hiding in a ditch near the town of Misrata, and proceeded to kill him. The video shows moments of chaos as rebels were seemingly coming to terms with the shock of finding a bloodied and pleading al-Qaddafi. We hear some rebels shouting Allahu Akbar (God is great). Others call out "Misrata," the city they hail from. Also, several times in the video, we see rebels pushing others out of the way saying, "Picture!" and "Let me capture his image!" The short video is loaded with human emotion, a jumble of the rebels' elated disbelief and al-Qaddafi's terrified shock. An earlier similar example is the amateur video showing the hanging of the late Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein by Iraqi militants in 2006. These examples raise the question of the performativity of these technologies; one cannot help but wonder whether and how al-Qaddafi's or Hussein's fates would have changed if the rebels did not have cell phones with them to tape their capture or execution. It is important to ask then; does the use of digital media exacerbate acts of violence? How does the constant presence of digital media affect the behaviour of activists, torturers, and victims? These questions are beyond the scope of this article but the answer, I expect, lies in the analysis of the local context, rather than through the narratives and

discourses about digital media, such as that of "citizen journalism" with its universalist assumptions about participation, democratization, and inclusion.

On Western narratives & the local dimension

Papacharissi (2010) suggests that discourses about how new technologies affect contemporary politics are often "framed within utopian and dystopian polarities that represent hopes and fears projected onto these newer technologies" (p. 3). As mentioned above, Western news discourses about technology are often generated vis-à-vis the ways it is thought to be utilized by the West's others – in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The contrast between the framing of digital technologies vis-à-vis the Arab context in the 2000s and recently during the "Arab Spring" exemplifies the discursive oscillation between utopian and dystopian visions. These narratives, from the celebratory tone of most discussions of citizen journalism to the fear of digital media-enabled terrorists, tell us more about Western political discourse than digital media practices as such.

As for academic analysis, much of the communications literature on the Arab uprisings discusses the role of new media in building networks and inciting collective action. The bulk of the literature (Elseewi, 2011, Howard & Hussein, 2011, Khamis et al., 2012, Faris, 2012, Castells, 2012) examines the short term effects of digital media in the mobilization for protest. Moreover, a general trope in the literature on the uprisings is "the idea that radical political imaginaries can emerge out of" particular media practices "in isolation from the myriad other generators of subjectivity embedded in phenomenal experience" (Markham, 2014, p. 97). In contrast, following the 9/11 attacks and the US George W. Bush administration's "War on Terror," much of Western journalistic and academic discourse on the internet and new technologies highlights its dangerous potential

when used by terrorists. These discursive shifts suggest that there are no intrinsic social and political values within new technologies; rather, the values projected onto their use are dependent on larger questions related to world politics and the global circulation of hegemonic discourses.

For example, Schudson (2006) has stated, "[I]f there is any kind of politics that the new information technologies have disproportionately enabled, it may be international terrorism" (p. 13). Weimann (2006) asserts that the Internet is "ideal for terrorists-as-communicators" (p. 25):

"[The Internet] appeared to offer unparalleled opportunities for a creation of a forum in which the "global village" could meet and exchange ideas, stimulating and sustaining democracy throughout the world. However… utopian visions of the promise of the Internet were challenged by the proliferation of pornographic and violent content on the Web and by the use of the Internet by extremist organizations of various kinds. Groups with very different political goals but with the same readiness to employ terrorist tactics started using the network to distribute their propaganda… and even execute operations." (pp. 19-20)

With the rise of radical jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, mainly ISIS, journalistic narratives about digital media shifted back to highly pessimistic scenarios. The ISIS invasion of the second largest Iraqi city, Mosul, and large swathes of the country with little resistance by the army was attributed to their skillful use of digital media. "In wars gone by, advancing armies smoothed their path with missiles. Isis did it with tweets and a movie" (Kingsly, 2014) stated a journalist in the British paper, the Guardian. In fact, reports about ISIS "social media genius" (Barlett, 2014) through tweets, "selfies" on Instagram, smart phone applications, and branding techniques were ubiquitous on Anglo-American news media (See Berger, 2014, Irshaid, 2014, Kwong, 2014,

Speri, 2014). The frenzy was also expressed on US news comedy shows— for example, commentator Stephen Colbert (2014) announced that ISIS has invaded "Hashtagistan."

Rather than an academic focus that parallels this alarmed media narrative, I am suggesting an approach that conceives digital media use in specific contexts from the ground up– at the local level. As Appadurai (1996) argues, locality is a "fragile social achievement" that requires "deliberate practices of performance, representations and actions" (pp. 179-180). Accordingly, the production of locality is shaped by several factors mainly "the nation-state, diasporic flows, and electronic and virtual communities" (p. 198) and the interactions and tensions between them. Kraidy and Murphy (2008) have called for using the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in global communication studies. Geertz (1983) states that "the shapes of knowledge are always ineluctably local, indivisible from their instruments and encasements" (as cited in Kraidy & Murphy, 2008, p. 335). The authors contend that the local is "inherently dynamic and dialogical, but nevertheless an empirically accessible 'place' where the elaboration of meaning can be witnessed as it is enacted and negotiated by contextually situated agents" (339). While Kraidy & Murphy (2008) apply this trans-local approach to global television formats, it can also orient how we theorize digital media practices in a globalized world. The agency and intentionality behind the use of digital media can only be understood in a locally-contextualized situatedness. While the frame of citizen journalism portrays the digital media user as an amateur journalist and a civic agent, digital media themselves tell us little about the intention of the user.

Citizen journalism also focuses on the rationalist assumptions of journalism and citizenship. In the Syrian example, particularly the video that shows a Syrian rebel threatening to ingest the body parts of his enemies, how is one to understand the agency of the perpetrator and

the grotesqueness of the performance enacted in the midst of a battle and a war— without

understanding what the local means in that battlefield? The man behind the video, Abu Sakkar, a

laborer turned armed rebel, was interviewed by the BBC. Abu Sakkar tells the reporter (Wood,

2013):

> "Put yourself in my shoes… They took your father and mother and insulted them. They
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> slaughtered your brothers, they murdered your uncle and aunt. All this happened to me.
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> They slaughtered my neighbors… This guy [whose flesh he previously held in his hands]
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> had videos on his mobile. It showed him raping a mother and her two daughters. He
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> stripped them while they begged him to stop in the name of God. Finally he slaughtered
>
> them with a knife... What would you have done?" (para. 14)

Regardless of the truth behind these claims, this example indicates that the intentionality behind

the use of digital media in warring Syria reflects the lived experiences of a violent and gruesome

war— and it cannot be fully comprehended by those not affected by it. This example also

highlights another aspect of digital media, which is its role as portable personal record. In this

case, it allegedly indicts its user with his past crimes.

This complexity of the situation in Syria and the use of digital media in its conflict is

exemplified by the controversy generated by the video of British street artist and film director,

Banksy. The Banksy episode is another example of the dissonance between narratives and

grounded digital media practices. In a short film, Banksy spoofs a video by Syrian rebels

shooting down a military helicopter. In Banksy's version, rebels, purportedly from the Aleppo

Province, are shown shouting "Allahu Akbar" (God is great) as they look up to the sky to spot

their fallen target. It turns out they have actually shot down the Disney flying elephant cartoon

character, Dumbo! Syria-watchers have criticized the video for its "crude politics" (Fisher, 2013). Syrian blogger, Nader Atassi (2013), writes:

"[T]he imagery Banksy uses is offensive, no matter the intent. The imagery is, on the one hand, Orientalist: the buffoon-ish Arabs, savagely celebrating killing a poor animal… So what exactly is the message? That the Syrian regime warplanes are analogous to poor flying elephants? That the rebels in Syria are a bunch of ragtag buffoons going around trying to kill even the poorest creatures?" (para. 2)

Regardless of Banksy's intent then, the film and the resulting controversy showed that, to outsiders, the videos coming out of Syria might as well be showing the killing of Dumbo. With the lack of understanding of the local, and the situated agency of people on the ground, most viewers see examples of digital media use in Syria through general frames that can barely make sense of its actors, their political intentions, and their media output.[1]

On citizenship

The invocation of citizenship and journalism in descriptions of digital media practices is the main narrative I focus on in this article. As I mentioned, another way to criticize this narrative is through a consideration of the intellectual genealogy. When applied to the Arab context, a new set of questions about the history of the concepts of citizenship and journalism must be considered. In communication, the frame of citizen journalism has roots in the theoretical tradition of the Habermasian public sphere with its emphasis on rational deliberation—framed within the nation-state. As Fraser (2012) has written "public-sphere theory has been implicitly informed by a Westphalian political imaginary: it has tacitly assumed the frame of a bounded political community with its own territorial state" (p. 77). As with Fraser's criticism of public sphere theory, I argue that the concept of citizen journalism is implicated in

this Westphalian imaginary and the modernist and rationalist bias of Western traditions of

citizenship and journalism, which have different genealogies when situated in an Arab context.

While citizenship is contested in Western scholarship, the meanings projected on

citizenship in the Arab world capture the contentious and ongoing debate about the political

legacy of Islam within the nation-state, which is the predicament that Muslims have faced for

decades (Asad, 2003, Hallaq, 2013). This history is important in thinking of the assumptions that

are made about the agency and political intentionality of digital media users and activists when

their actions are conceptualized as citizen journalism. What kind of citizenship is enacted when,

for example, an Arab activist reports and comments on current events during the Arab uprisings?

What kind of citizenship, if any, is sought and imagined?

Faulks (2000) defines citizenship as "a membership status, which contains a package of

rights, duties and obligations" (p. 13). It "is an ethic of participation, which only democratic

systems of governance encourage" (p. 107). Citizenship thus is associated with democracy and

is largely conceived as a membership category within the nation-state (Faulks, 2000). However,

given the accelerating rates of immigration and the advent of globalization, theorists have been

debating how to distance citizenship from the nation and the state (See Hoffman, 1995; Oommen

1997; Faulks, 2000).

Within the context of digital media, the discussion aims to criticize assumptions that

citizenship is a universal concept; while, in fact, it invokes varied values and its meanings are

mired in contentious historical debates. In modern standard Arabic, the translation of the word

citizen is muwatin, which is derived from the word w-t-n, whose modern meaning is nation or

nation-state. However, the term does not necessarily and exclusively reflect the relationship

between an individual and a nation-state based on sets of rights and obligations. It can merely be

an expression of cultural affiliation. For example, it is as common to say 'the Syrian *muwatin'* as to say 'the Arab *muwatin.'* In fact, with the rise of Arab nationalism since the late Ottoman period onwards, the concept of watan as nation became popular and commonly used but it continued to take multiple meanings. For example, one person could express a sense of belonging and loyalty to more than one watan whether a village, country, or region (See Dawn, 1993).[2] Thus, since the meaning of nation was introduced into Arabic it took simultaneous meanings that designate different spatial and political imaginings.[3]

Similarly, the concept of umma is vague but offers an imagination of a sense of belonging, where religious doctrine— and not place— is the compass of identity. Al Faruqi (2005) defines umma as "the Quranic concept of identity." According to her, the umma is:

"A religious community bound by faith and transcending all other markers of belonging…
(it) refers to that which, transcending the group is materialized in the tradition, laws, or
religion that the group has sought or voluntarily followed… only the group that follows a
certain law is an umma." (p. 2)

During the height of Arab nationalism, umma acquired nationalist and secular overtones when the term al-umma al-arabiyya or Arab umma became part of political parlance. However, as Asad (2003) contends, ideologically the Islamic umma is "neither limited nor sovereign, for unlike Arab nationalism's notion of al-umma al-arabiyya, it can and eventually should embrace all of humanity" (p. 198). However, umma – in the way it is employed politically – can be an 'imagined community' based on the adherence to Islamic law and on commitment to an Islamic political project, deemed more important than allegiances based on territory, language or ethnicity (see Asad, 2003).

Islamic thinkers have had different approaches to the concepts of watan and umma. Hardline

Islamists completely reject the new notion of watan as a "concept from overseas" that seeks to

change "the Islamic intellectual system" based on the political configuration of the umma (Al-

Sharif, N.D). The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, famously argued that "a

person's nationality is his doctrine" rather than his country (Al-Ghannushi, 2010). Other

contemporary Islamic scholars have sought to bridge the gap between watan and umma. The

Qatar-based Egyptian cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, has suggested the conceptualization of watan as

the community of Islamic lands (Arabic: Ahl Dar al-Islam), which can include non-Muslims (Al-

Qaradawi, 2013). Similarly, the Islamic scholar and founder of the Tunisian Ennahda Party,

Rashed al-Ghannoushi (2010), contends that the umma is a viable alternative conceptualization

of political space by questioning whether the relation between the person and the socio-political

collectivity has to be constructed within the confines of the nation-state, secularism, and

democracy. These examples of Islamic scholars who call for the construction of a polity around

Islamic doctrine are by no means exhaustive. They show a snapshot of the theoretical debate on

governance and offer a glimpse into the particular tensions to be considered when theorizing

civic agency in Arab and Muslim contexts. A parallel analysis is applied next in order to

question and interrogate assumptions about the universality of journalism.

On journalism

The history of Arab news reflects a diversity of competing approaches and

conceptualizations of what journalism communicates, and how, despite the absence of

functioning democracies, news outlets are used by governments and audiences to construct,

negotiate, and contest collective ideas about religion, the nation-state, citizenship, and modernity.

The ways different political actors in the Arab region conceptualized journalism throughout its

modern history shows the instability and the dramatic changes it has undergone and reflects unsettled deeply-rooted anxieties regarding identity. Of course these changing conceptions and uses of journalism are not unique to Arab contexts. In fact, many scholars have argued that there is a significant gap between how the academy discusses journalism, citizenship, and democracy and the way they are practiced on the ground. Mouffe (1999) argues that the Habermasian vision of deliberative citizenship, based on the ideals of rationality, does not reflect the antagonistic nature of democracy. In journalism studies, Zelizer (2012) critiques the worldview rooted in the Enlightenment that privileges rational discourse, links journalism and democracy, and presents an unnecessarily narrow understanding of journalism practices. Similarly, critical scholarship on citizenship points to diverse histories of different conceptualizations and performances of citizenship (Schudson, 1999) and to its varied contextual understandings (Longova, 2000, Turner, 2000, Dahlgern, 2009). My use of the Arab context simply highlights that journalism serves various functions and plays multiple roles mostly in authoritarian states. This historic approach to Arab journalism also shows that, like citizenship, it cannot be understood as a universal category and it is a limited descriptor of media practice.

As Mellor (2007) argues, the story of Arab journalism experiences is hybrid as journalists balance their desire for change with difficult structural political and economic constraints. Following the independence of Arab countries in the early to mid-20th century, Arab journalism was subjected to the control of authoritarian regimes in the majority of Arab countries. Most Arab governments became the main actors in using journalism as the vehicle for their control over society and for attempts to shape national identities, articulate policies, and mobilize and control their populations. Governments used news media as a site for the negotiation of the relation between pan-Arab nationalism, nation-state allegiance, and Islamic religion. One of the

most important examples of this process in modern Arab history is the use of another

revolutionary communication technology— radio— by the late Egyptian President Gamal

Abdelnasser to promote Arab nationalism. He addressed Egyptians and Arabs as "the Arab

people" through the Egyptian radio station "Sawt al-Arab" (The Voice of the Arabs), which

began service in 1953. The defeat of Arab countries, led by Abdelnasser, in the 1967 war with

Israel weakened the ideological power of Arab nationalism. Furthermore, the poor performance

of Arab government media during and in the aftermath of the war led to the decline of radios like

"Sawt al-Arab" and paved the way for foreign radio broadcasters (Kraidy & Khalil, 2010), which

addressed Arab listeners as an audience rather than a political community.

In the realm of television news, evening news bulletins on state-owned television

channels were the only audio-visual source of information in most Arab countries up until the

1990s (Kraidy & Khalil, 2010). Governments used television media and news to directly

communicate to their populations their hegemonic political identity projects in crude ways. The

Libyan regime, for example, used news media to communicate a sudden shift in government

rhetoric during the 1990s from one that had focused on Arab nationalism to one calling for

African unity and promoting a pan-African identity. Libyan television news broadcasts reflected

this shift, not only through the different ways news scripts were written, but also through

changing the background studio map from that of the Arab world to the map of Africa.

In the late 1990s, the Arab world entered the era of satellite television with the launch of

the infamous Qatari-owned satellite news channel Al-Jazeera, which revolutionized journalistic

discourse in the region and had a significant impact on the Arab media and political landscape.

Al-Jazeera's original editorial slant reflected and influenced perceptions of Arab political

identities through combining tropes of Arab nationalism, Islamism and Third Worldism (Kraidy

& Khalil, 2010). Since the launch of Al-Jazeera, the number of pan-Arab news channels mushroomed and many regional and Western countries funded their own twenty-four hour news stations in their pursuit of projecting political power onto the region, reflecting different news cultures.

In the realm of print media, with the exception of a few mostly London-based pan-Arab dailies, most papers are published and distributed within individual Arab countries and used, to different degrees, to promote government ideology and discourse. For example, in authoritarian and Ba'thist Syria, until recently, the media is completely supervised by the government and reflects government ideology. In the occupied Palestinian territories, as Thawabtah (2010) argues, journalists balance their definitions of objectivity with defending the Palestinian cause because journalism is seen as "a message rather than a mere profession" (p. 87). In Saudi Arabia, the Saudi academic Al-Ghathami (2004) focuses on the journalistic column as having played a crucial role in instigating debates around modernity and the relation between the individual and society, the rural and the urban, and men and women.

A recent growing trend in the Arab world is the conceptulaization and practice what is labeled as Islamic journalism. The popular Islamic website "Islamweb" describes Islamic journalism as "(news) publications that are issued and edited by Muslims who care deeply about Islamic ideology with its values, ethics, and principles… and who believe that Islam is the eternal word of God that encompasses all worldly affairs" (Al-Ghiashi, 2002). Some argue that the same guidelines that Muslim scholars use to verify the authenticity of the Prophet Mohammad's statements, the hadith, should be used for journalism, including citing multiple sources and making sure a claim does not "harm the innocent or falsify reality" (Pintak, 2011, p. 96).

"De-Westernizing" digital media discourse?

In this above brief survey of histories of citizenship and journalism in the Arab world, I argued that both concepts have particular intellectual genealogies—mainly that they have been conceived and practiced in largely non-democratic systems. Intellectual debates about citizenship in Arab countries have long attempted to reconcile the political legacy of Islam with the nation-state as the space of governance (Asad, 2003, Hallaq, 2013). The rationale of my argument relates to wider questions about de-Westernizing the academy. When criticizing that a certain construct, such as citizen journalism, is "Western" and not applicable to other cultural and political contexts, it is difficult to negotiate the politics of sameness and difference. The purpose of de-Westernization is to counter the claim that Western theory is universally applicable and to encourage the contribution of non-Western scholars, but at the same time it is misleading to assume that non-Western contexts are necessarily and essentially different. The de-Westernization approach also simplistically maintains the imagined geographies of 'the West' and the 'non-West.' In discussing the state of Arab cultural studies, Sabry (2010) contends that the preoccupation with de-Westernization often leads Arab scholars to lose sight of the cultural practices in the present tense and at the level of the everyday. As Khiabany and Sreberny (2013) argue, "the challenge for social analysis is to find a conceptual footing between imperialist intervention on the one hand and non-Western exceptionalism on the other" (p. 489).

This debate is implicated in the theorization of modernity, not least since both journalism and citizenship are often theorized as pillars of Western modernity. Mitchell (2000) refutes the conception of modernity as a Western experience that has been universalized. This belief, Mitchell suggests, posits non-Western countries as if in a continuous exercise of 'catching up' to the levels of modernity experienced in the West. The discursive force of modernity, however, is

not in its universality, but in the way it necessitates an unmodern 'other,' against which it is defined (See Watenpaugh, 2006). Mitchell (2000) contends instead that there is no single modernity but different stagings of it, as no representation can ever match the promise of the imagined original (Mitchell, 2000, p. xiv). For his part, Bhaba (2012) has discussed how, since the 19th century, Western grand narratives about universalism have eroded when they encountered cultural difference. He writes:

"Reading from the transferential perspective, where the Western ratio returns to itself from the time-lag of the colonial relation, then we see how modernity and postmodernity are themselves constituted from the marginal perspective of cultural difference. They encounter themselves contingently at the point at which the internal difference of their own society is reiterated in terms of the difference of the other, the alterity of the postcolonial site." (p. 281)

Applying this postcolonial framework to contemporary digital media, I have criticized how the conceptualization of digital media practices through a modernist and universalizing discourse about citizenship and journalism implodes when encountering the cultural and political difference exemplified by the uprisings in Syria and the Arab world.

Conclusion

Given the difficulty of conceptualizing acts of journalism and values of citizenship, the current use of the term of citizen journalism seems to adhere to the arbitrary definition of "I know it when I see it." The Arab uprisings, particularly in Syria, demonstrate how digital media use on the ground complicates our assumptions about their relation with political and social agency. The citizen journalism frame circumscribes the critical imagination. It prescribes rather than describes what these digital practices signify. As such, it inadvertently imposes the

reference points of its own historical formation. This is not then simply a call to coin another neologism instead of citizen journalism. Rather, it is a criticism of the need to capture the myriad kinds of digital media practices in an all-encompassing concept. Without context, a comprehensive frame for digital media, such as citizen journalism, is bound to bracket off digital communicative practices deemed lacking in their cosmopolitan or democratizing effects. Accordingly, the article sought to de-link digital media practices from the nation-bound and deliberative communication frame of citizen journalism by highlighting the local level and the multiple antagonistic, affective, and sometimes violent, aspects implicated in digital media.

     As suggested earlier, it is insufficient to state that Western theory is inapplicable to other contexts. It is also crucial to re-think how research and theorization at large can benefit from thinking through varied intellectual histories. For instance, the multiple ways that describe, and the various imagined geographies invoked, in Arabic conceptualizations of the relation between an individual and a political community, such as watan and umma, can contribute to the theorization of citizenship. Similarly, it is important to learn from the experiences of journalism in different political settings. Furthermore, the uses and practices of digital media in the post-uprisings Arab world have acquired an exceptionally important role in the political and social environment. The context of the uprisings then can reframe Western approaches and assumptions about digital media. Finally, despite the short history of digital media, it is apparent that—in relation to the Arab world— Western narratives about them oscillated between terrorism and democracy without sufficient intellectual engagement with the social action of digital media practice. The historicization of media practices and discourses is crucial in order to distinguish between media narratives and media practices.

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[1] Here it bears mentioning that my focus on the Syrian and Arab context has broader applicability. The pictures of American soldiers torturing Iraqis in the Abu-Ghraib prison come to my mind, particularly the contrast between the digitally-captured images and the discursive celebration of these technologies as shaping democratic sensibilities and agents, be it in the Middle East or in the United States itself.

[2] This dual use of the word muwatin has its roots in the original meaning of the word. In the Arabic dictionary, Lisan al-'Arab, watan simply means "the place that one resides in, the place of a human and his locality." From the same root, the verb awtana signifies the act of choosing a location as one's place of residence and thus becoming a muwatin of that place. The initial association of watan with the term nation or nation-state occurred at the beginning of the encounter between Arab scholars and the Western world in the 19th century. Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, one of the first Egyptian and Arab imams and students to study in France and the West in the mid-19th century translated the French national anthem, La Marseillaise (Tibi, 1990, 1997). He translated "*l'amour de la patrie*" as the love of the watan and, in his writing, was an

Arab pioneer in stressing that the love of a country is one of the prime virtues of civilization. However, he also described his Egyptian home village, Tahta, as his watan in an expression of reminiscence and belonging (Tibi, 1997, p. 87).

[3] A similar notion that has multiple meanings is bilad, which means territories but can stand for 'place of belonging' or 'nation.' For example, the Egyptian national anthem starts with "Biladi *biladi biladi, laki hubbi wa fua'di*" (Biladi, to thee I devote my love and my heart). Palestinians commonly refer to their hometown or homeland as al-bilad, a term that is strategically vague and able to encompass Palestinians living within Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza.