



**Seeing and not seeing the Syrian crisis:  
New visibility and the visual framing  
of the Syrian conflict in seven newspapers  
and their online editions**

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**Keywords**

Visual construction of conflict  
Visual coverage  
Non-professional images  
News sources  
Visual framing  
Graphic imagery of death  
Syrian conflict

## Abstract

This cross-national study analyzes the visual construction of the Syrian crisis in the quality press of seven countries. The crisis has held the world's attention for over two and a half years and provides a compelling case study due to the difficulties professional journalists have in covering its events as well as the Syrian opposition's innovative social media strategies, which focus on the dissemination of eyewitness images. Moreover, there are stark divisions in the political discussion about how to respond to the mounting crisis – a discussion fueled by footage uploaded to social media sites by opposition activists. There is however little empirical evidence of how the conflict has been made visible in the international media, or how Syrian activists' images figure in this mediated visibility. The study compares the use of visual imagery in *The Guardian* (UK), *Helsingin Sanomat* (Finland), *La Repubblica* (Italy), *Romania Libera* (Romania), *El País* (Spain), *Kommersant* (Russia), and *Hürriyet* (Turkey). It asks how mainstream newspapers visually construct a conflict when the access of professional media to the conflict zone is restricted, but an abundance of non-traditional visual source material is being made available by activists.

## Contributor Note

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## Introduction

*What would it mean for everyday knowledge if images of horrible crimes ceased to circulate, or were never seen in the first place?*

John Taylor (2000: 130)

Syria's civil war has proved the longest and most violent of the conflicts that arose out of the 'Arab Spring' uprisings over the past two years. The movement of refugees and the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government have highlighted the fact that the crisis is a 'world problem'. In the aftermath of video clips – posted online by Syrian anti-government activists – that showed numerous victims killed by chemical weapons, both the EU and the US called for a 'strong response'. President Barack Obama has been widely quoted as saying 'We cannot turn a blind eye to images like the ones we've seen out of Syria' (*The Guardian*, 7 September 2013). The outrage generated by the video clips illustrates the significance of non-professional visual images in forming what John Thompson (2005) calls 'new visibility' and the inseparability of the traditional media and activist media in constituting contemporary conflicts and protests, thus affecting how events are 'seen' by politicians and wider audiences (Cottle 2008; 2009; 2011a).

New communication technologies – and the incorporation of the 'new' media within the 'old' – have brought the hope that those who have previously been invisible in the media will be 'made visible for all to see' (Thompson 2005: 31). This new visibility, which is 'more intensive, more extensive and less controllable' (48), has become a key site and strategy in today's political conflicts.

Alongside the battle on the ground in Syria, there has been a battle fought on new media platforms for visibility and legitimacy. Since the early protests in March 2011, Syrian anti-government activists within the country and in exile have been determinedly and in a highly organized manner seeking visibility in the media by producing, aggregating and disseminating eyewitness videos and photos through the webpages and social media sites of different opposition groups, UGC platforms hosted by major news organizations, and opposition news networks (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013). In the narrative of the opposition, the Syrian people rose up against an authoritarian regime and became victims of escalating regime terror. In the opposition's counter-narrative, the protests and violence have been blamed on 'terrorists' and the uprising has been framed as a conspiracy by imperialistic foreign countries against Syria (Athamneh and Marji Sayej 2013; Lundgren-Jörum 2012). Activists' cameras have taken eyewitness images and furnished empirical evidence of the Assad regime's violence, and thus arguably ensured the conflict's continued visibility in the mainstream media. The media campaign by the opposition has been credited with successfully creating sympathy for their cause in the Western media (e.g. Hersh 2012; Khamis et al. 2012; Sadiki 2012; Varghese 2013), to the extent that the traditional media have been accused of viewing the Syrian conflict 'in terms of black and white when the situation is in fact quite grey' (York 2012).

While sweeping claims about the representation of the Syrian conflict in the international media and the dominance of activist content as sources for the coverage are made, empirical evidence is scarce. Only a few studies

have addressed the mainstream media's coverage of the Syrian crisis and their use of visual images. Harkin et al. (2012) write that due to professional journalists' limited access to the conflict's sites, 'news organizations had to rely almost exclusively on this UGC [photos and videos provided by activists on the ground and in exile] via social media and their own UGC intake platforms'. Their study examined three days of coverage (between March and August 2011) on BBC Arabic and Al Jazeera Arabic. Van Leuven et al. (2013) examined the reporting of street protests in Syria from 15 March to 18 July 2011 in their larger quantitative content analysis of the Arab Spring coverage in Belgian newspapers and broadcasters. They found that, in the coverage of the Syrian uprising, the use of social media and amateur videos played a bigger role than they did in Egypt and Tunisia. This article contributes to existing research by providing an analysis of the visual construction of the conflict in quality print newspapers and their online editions as presented in five EU countries (Finland, Italy, Spain, Romania and the UK) and two key international players in the conflict (Russia and Turkey).

Answers to three research questions are sought here. The first is whether mainstream media are dependent on the visual content of 'citizen journalists', as is claimed in public discourse and the literature. This is done by asking what role Syrian opposition activists' footage – as a visual source – played in making the Syrian conflict visible. The second and third questions are what and how they allowed audiences to see, i.e., which frames are applied to the imagery and, more specifically, how different newspapers visualized death and suffering in the coverage. The research

covers the period from the beginning of the conflict in March 2011 to February 2013 when the civil war was already being fought with heavy weapons, and suspicions about the use of chemical weapons were first raised.

In the following, I will first discuss the role that visual images play in the formation of the 'new visibility' (Thompson 2005) in the context of contemporary political conflicts. The second section introduces the methodology behind the cross-country content analysis. The third section presents the major findings of the analysis by identifying the sources, visual frames and the presentation of images of death in the reporting. The article concludes with a consideration of the effects of the visual representation on the political responses.

### **Digital visibility and the visual constitution of conflict**

Digital camera and video-enabled mobile phones have become essential in making political struggles visible in the media (see Askanius in this issue). Visibility is, as Andrea Brighenti (2007) writes, 'a metaphor of knowledge', but it is also a political 'strategy' for and a 'space' of disclosure and recognition (Butler 2004; Thompson 1995, 2005). Developments in communication technologies have become deeply implicated in what Thompson (2005) terms 'the new visibility'. This means that digital communication technologies have become an inseparable part of a conflict – as extended spaces of appearance and political struggle (Cammaerts 2007: 131; Cottle 2011a). Accordingly, Judith Butler (2011) writes that media form a space where 'the bodies on the street' can appear to distant audiences: 'The street



scenes become politically potent only when and if we have a visual and audible version of the scene communicated in live time, so that the media does not merely report the scene, but is part of the scene and the action; indeed, the media is the scene or the space in its extended and replicable visual and audible dimensions'.

Control over information and image flows is a crucial aspect of power, constituting an area that today's political movements focus their efforts on. When interviewed by the author about their media strategies (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013), the Syrian anti-government activists repeatedly contrasted the invisibility of the 'Hama massacre' of 1982 with the visibility and global audiences new technologies bring to the current conflict. As the Syrian activists' discourse and their active media tactics also illustrate, the new mediated visibility is invested with great hope grounded in the long-standing idea that visibility bestows recognition and symbolic power (e.g. Brighenti 2007: 338; Thompson 2005: 49).<sup>1</sup> In particular, this is a hope linked to visual images. For Syrian activists, the 'invisibility' of the Hama massacre specifically meant a lack of photographic evidence. What David Campbell (2009: 7) calls a 'shared logic about the relationship between vision, ethics and politics' among journalists and social movement actors is based on the belief that visual images offer a quicker, more direct and more emotionally engaging route to reality and truth. Above all, visual images have been

deemed important due to their ability to communicate and create emotional reactions effectively and therefore shape the understanding and evaluation of issues (e.g. Perlmutter 1998).

It is safe to say that visibility is a precondition for social recognition, for inducing feelings of responsibility in others, or for compelling distant others to care for a cause they would have previously remained unaware of – even if it has no guaranteed outcome. Digital imaging technologies have contributed to the increasing focus on and reporting of abuses by oppressive regimes, occasionally managing to create responses of global outrage that have resulted in political pressure, including economic sanctions, the severing of diplomatic relations and military intervention. It is a premise of this study that images establish visibilities that provide the ability to know and engender (or inhibit) emotional responses from a distance. The political meaning of such enhanced visibility is clear: visual images of violence become the basis of discussion and can have material effects (Campbell 2007; Sontag 2003: 74-75; Taylor 1998: 50).

However, if we are to understand the 'impact' of visual images of conflict and their capacity to summon wider attention, compassion, outrage and pressure, we must not think that visuals have an 'intrinsic shock value' (O'Loughlin 2011: 89). Images are ambiguous until identified, explained and authorized by the accompanying text, and the wider context of their circulation and consumption (Campbell 2007; Sontag 2003: 10). The meaning of images in the news media depends on how they are defined by journalists, captions and news narratives. Examples of the ambiguous meanings that images can contain are

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1 The power of visibility has been critically addressed in recent media research, focusing on the power of what can not been seen. See, for instance, Lester and Hutchins (2012) on the strategic use of invisibility in environmental politics.

found in the amateur video reports documenting the chemical weapons attack on the outskirts of Damascus on 22 August 2013. These images, telling us that hundreds or perhaps thousands had been horribly killed in Syria, captured the attention of the global public. However, the international political response was pending until the imagery was interpreted in the West as representing an atrocity that was carried out by the Syrian government (the Russian counter-interpretation being that rebels sought to provoke international military intervention and that the videos were produced for that purpose). In other words, from merely 'recording' the attack and its consequences, these images depicting rows of corpses wrapped in burial shrouds came to 'define' or symbolize the brutality of the regime (cf. Sontag 2003).

Activist and citizen images play a special role in this new visibility as they have become an important means through which conflicts travel from local scenes and move into the space of the global media and are made meaningful there (cf. Cottle 2009: 122; 2011a: 655). Moreover, 'citizen witnessing' allows new voices to enter the mainstream-media-dominated information sphere, which carries the potential to democratize the mediated space of appearance and strengthen journalism's social responsibilities (see Allan 2013; Chouliaraki 2008). It is widely documented that the digital accessibility of sources, and amateur sources in particular, has provided crisis and war reporting with immediate access to previously unreachable conflict zones, while simultaneously presenting challenges concerning the verification and reliability of images (e.g. Allan 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2011; Hänska-Ahy and Shapour 2012).

The focus in this article is on how different newspapers have visually constructed the Syrian conflict. The news media have a key role in managing visibility, and because of this symbolic power, political struggles and social movements continue to depend on their ability to connect to the space of appearance provided by the mainstream media (Cammaerts 2007: 270; Lester and Cottle 2011: 290). In the context of journalism, the concept of framing has been useful in understanding the media's role in structuring visibility. Framing, referring to the selection and accentuation of some aspects of the perceived reality (Entman 1993), implies that the media establish how much we can see and in what way. Butler (2011) describes the travelling of protest scenes, 'Although [...] those who are elsewhere have the sense that they are getting some direct access through the images and sounds they receive. [...] they do not know how the editing takes place, which scene conveys and travels, and which scenes remain obdurately outside the frame'. Thus, how and what images are presented in the news media help to build news frames inviting specific emotional responses, moral evaluations and action recommendations (Entman 1993: 52; see also Parry 2010; Schwalbe et al. 2008).

### **A cross-national visual content analysis of the Syrian conflict**

By comparing several countries' visual coverage of the Syrian conflict, this study aims to provide detailed empirical evidence of the choices newspapers and journalists make in different cultural contexts when producing their visual coverage. As mentioned above, this study is guided by three research questions: how much priority newspapers gave to

certain visual sources, in particular, to the Syrian activists. As far as visual content is concerned, previous studies show that national news outlets rely heavily on the supply from international news agencies such as AFP, AP and Reuters (Fahmy 2010; Paterson 2005). Since advance in communication have opened up new possibilities for 'visual voices', it is important to ask whether national news outlets still draw their visuals from the same pool of resources. The second and the third question look at the ways in which news outlets configured visibility – what could their audiences see and not see? Specifically, the second question asks how different national newsrooms visually framed the conflict. The third question asks how different outlets visualized death and suffering.

In order to answer these questions, the visual coverage of the Syrian conflict in the print and online editions of national quality newspapers in seven countries was analyzed: *El País* (EP) in Spain, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) in Finland, *La Repubblica* (LR) in Italy, *Romania Libera* (RL) in Romania, *The Guardian* (GU) in the UK, *Kommersant* (KO) in Russia, and *Hürriyet* (HU) in Turkey. The newspapers were selected based on their 'quality' reputation and the availability of news articles in their digital archives. These countries were selected to ensure a large variation in data by including countries which represent different media systems and levels of media freedom. Based on the three media systems developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), Italy and Spain represent the Polarized Pluralist model, Finland the Democratic Corporatist model, and the UK the Liberal model. While Romania, Russia and Turkey were not originally included as part of the model, they can be seen as belonging to the Polarized

Pluralist model (Dobek-Ostrowska *et al.* 2010). In terms of media freedom, all the selected EU countries rank as 'free' except for Romania, which is 'partly free'. Russia and Turkey are considered 'not free' (Freedom of the Press 2013). Furthermore, the countries were selected so as to represent different political stances on the conflict. While all EU countries have more or less strictly condemned the Syrian government's use of violence, Russia has played a key role in resisting international action against its long-term ally in the Middle East. Turkey's AKP government has sought the ousting of Assad's government by supporting the Syrian opposition, for instance, by allowing the opposition to organize and convene in Turkey (Yilmaz 2013).

Seven months of coverage were examined. The periods chosen included key events and issues in the conflict both in terms of human rights violations and international pressure. All but the first period are full calendar months and are briefly described in the following.

- 1) *The first four weeks of the uprising from 15 March to 15 April, 2011*: protests in Dara'a and Damascus triggered unrest around the country. On 18 March, a 'Day of Anger' protest was held in Dara'a, where security forces killed a number of protesters.
- 2) *August 2011*: following the military crackdown in Hama in July, where hundreds were reported killed, countries worldwide took a clearer stand on the Syrian conflict. The UN Security Council released a statement condemning the widespread violation of human rights in Syria.
- 3) *November 2011*: the Syrian government accepted an Arab League peace plan to halt its crackdown on

protesters but the ceasefire quickly broke down. As a result, Arab nations joined the West in supporting tough sanctions to force the regime to stop its violence.

4) *February 2012*: Russia and China blocked the UN resolution condemning the Syrian government's actions as violations of human rights. The European Union increased its economic sanctions. Syrian government forces launched a month-long offensive in the city of Homs during which Western war journalists were also killed.

5) *May 2012*: more than one hundred civilians were massacred in Houla, half of them children. Syrian ambassadors to the UN and 12 countries, including the UK, Italy, Spain and the US, were expelled.

6) *November 2012*: Assad reinforced his position in the country and an increasing number of Syrians fled the country.

7) *February 2013*: A car bomb near Baath party headquarters in Damascus killed dozens and wounded more than 200. Aleppo and Damascus were

reported to be under heavy attack by the government. The UN estimated that up to 70,000 people had died in the Syrian conflict.

The articles were gathered from the newspapers' archives by using the search word 'Syria', producing a total of 3,202 items on the Syrian conflict (Table 1). The final sample was limited to 2,203 news articles and editorials which had accompanying images and focused specifically on the conflict; reports covering 'the Arab Spring' in general were omitted. Print and online articles published during the research period are included, because the online environment allows for enhanced visual content such as photo galleries and videos, and the enhanced practices of 'network journalism', which, Charlie Beckett (2010) states, 'combines a diverse range of sources to make a wider, deeper and more engaging narrative'. The Internet offers a venue where newspapers can compete with broadcast news by providing opportunities for audio-visual storytelling (Dimitrova et al. 2005: 37).

Table 1. *Amount and form of images*

	Spain EP	Finland HS	Italy LA	Romania RL	UK GU	Russia KO	Turkey HU	Total
News items	277	486	318	210	314	64	1539	3203
Items with images	210	183	143	197	270	56	1144	2203
Videos	16	27	27	5	34	8	44	161
Photo galleries	5	19	23	2	6	25	150	230

The unit of analysis was a news image together with its surrounding textual elements of caption, heading and news

texts – all of which play a part in forming the meaning of the image (cf. Parry 2010). Only the primary image of a story



was coded and when a news item contained a photo gallery only the first image displayed on the news report was coded. A video content analysis, comprising 161 videos, was conducted separately. Videos were excluded from the analysis if the video was a repeat (published before on the news site), or if the video file could not be opened.

Native-speaking research assistants coded the articles based on a coding manual that encompasses 29 categories. For the purpose of this study, all images were coded on the following three variables: source, frame and graphicness. To test intercoder reliability the coders independently recoded 48 news items published in May 2012 in *The Guardian* (15 percent of its total amount of news stories). The coding revealed a consistency of over 85 percent for these variables, which is an acceptable level of reliability (Lombard, Snyder-Duch and Bracken 2002). First, each image was coded for source or photo-credit, for instance, professional photojournalist affiliated with newspaper; international wire agency; amateur image distributed through international wire agency; Syrian state-run media. Second, all images were coded for their fit with the eight frames that were either used in previous studies (Dimitrova et al. 2005; Dimitrova and Strömbäck 2005) or defined inductively during the analysis: 1) an armed conflict frame with an emphasis on military action; 2) a violence of war frame depicting human injury and death and/or material destruction; 3) a protest frame depicting the act of dissent; 4) a citizen frame depicting civilian life amidst the crisis, for instance, refugees and Syrian exiles; 5) an Assad frame depicting Assad, his family or government; 6) an international politics frame focusing on international response and typically depicting foreign leaders; 7)

a domestic politics frame focusing on the domestic impact of the conflict; and 8) a media self-referential frame depicting journalists covering the conflict. Third, all images were coded for the degree of visibility of death. Borrowing from Hanusch's (2012) wider typology of the visibility of death the following variables were used to indicate an image that shows the human cost of the conflict: 1) injury; 2) metaphorical death – no actual bodies are visible but death is indicated by showing, for example, bloodstains on a street; 3) veiled death – images showing covered bodies, body bags or coffins and funerals; 4) explicit death – images showing dead bodies; and 5) dead children – veiled or unveiled bodies of children.

### **Sources of the visual images depicting the Syrian conflict**

There is something both old and new in the use of sources in the visual coverage of the Syrian conflict. What is *old* is that the majority of the visual material was provided by Western news agencies. Excluding images without a photo source, 89% (820) of the images came from the Western news agencies of AP, AFP and Reuters. This reliance on the pre-selected stories and visuals is said to set the framework for the international reporting of national media (Paterson 2005). Fahmy (2005: 396), however, argues that Western news agencies provide a wide range of visual images 'to be framed differently by different media' according to their own interpretations of the events and their political interest in them.

What is *new* is the variety of images in the news agencies' visual pools. Today, news agencies do not only provide 'a

diverse range of visuals shot by their staff photographers and freelance stringers' (Fahmy and Neumann 2012: 9), but also images originating from social media and other alternative sources. However, the findings show that news agencies have retained their role as 'image brokers' who move images, or restrict their movement, re-circulating images circulated on the Internet (see Gürsel 2012). The pool of images made available by wire agencies includes images from pan-Arab news media, from the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), from various Syrian opposition news networks (e.g. The Shaam News Network, Ugarit, all4syria.com), and other amateur images originating from Syrian opposition groups.



Image 1. A photo published in the *Guardian* 16 February 2012 which shows new forms of interplay between amateur and traditional sources and increasingly multi-layered referencing (see Kristensen and Mortensen 2013). The caption says 'A photo provided by Syrian opposition Local Co-ordination Committees shows destruction in Homs. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images'. Local Coordination Committee is an activist network with media offices in most cities across Syria that organizes and distributes the work of 'citizen journalists'. The photo is distributed by the news agency with a disclaimer: 'AFP is using pictures from alternative sources as it was not authorised to cover this event, therefore it is not responsible for any digital alterations to the picture's editorial content, date and location which cannot be independently verified'. Credit: AFP/Lehtikuva.

The findings indicate that national newspapers, including *The Guardian*, which is considered a pioneer in the use of social media, rarely tracked down amateur images from social media sites themselves, but used those they received from news agencies. A total of 40 images distributed by news agencies were identified as non-professional – with labels such as 'amateur,' 'opposition,' and 'activist'. A total of 12 stills distributed by the agencies were credited to Syrian opposition news networks. The amount of amateur visuals that were *not* credited to news agencies is remarkably low (21 in total). Twelve stills (six of them in *The Guardian*) were credited to social media platforms (mainly to YouTube), seven to opposition news networks (of which 5 were published in *Helsingin Sanomat*) and only two were loosely identified as an 'amateur' photo. National news outlets seldom have the resources to independently collect and verify foreign amateur images, and even if non-professional visuals obtained from news agencies are unverified, national news media can avoid questions of reliability by treating the intermediary as a source of credibility (Pantti and Andén-Papadopoulos 2011).

Table 2 shows the amount of professional and non-professional sources in the coverage, showing that in Spain and the UK approximately half of the images are credited to individual professional/freelance photographers affiliated to either an international news agency or occasionally to respective newspapers. In Finland and in Russia, the number of images credited to individual professional photographers is even higher. Overall, the results show a perhaps surprising availability of professional footage considering that media access to the conflict has been limited. These photojournalists were

usually embedded within opposition groups, among them several prolific war photographers whose photographs were amply used in all newspapers but *Hürriyet*. However, the amount of non-professional eyewitness footage coming from inside Syria is also relatively high.

These images extend the space of visibility, what or who we can see, although this idea of augmented visibility is not without problems due to the journalistic practices of identifying visuals.

*Table 2: Main sources of the visuals in national newspapers, excluding Turkey*

Images credited to:	EP	HS	LR	RL	GU	KO	Total
Professional photographer (newspaper or news agency)	52.6%	61.7%	0	0	49.3%	85.7%	38,2%
News agency (no further identification)	25.8%	4.9%	53.1%	58.7%	33.3%	0	32,5%
Amateur source (identified)	13.9%	15.8%	3.5%	0	9.6%	7.1%	9.4%
Other	6,8%	8,9%	2,8%	4,6%	7,1%	7,2%	5,7%
Not identified	0,9%	8,7%	40,6%	36,7%	0,7%	0	14,2%

Previous research has observed that amateur imagery is often poorly credited in news (Kristensen and Mortensen 2013; Pantti and Andén-Papadopoulos 2011). This study shows that not only the sourcing and labeling of amateur imagery but of all images varies greatly between newspapers. All the still images in *Kommersant* and almost all of them in *The Guardian* and *El País* had a photo source. As for the five European newspapers, *La Repubblica* (40.6%) and *Romania Libera* (36.7%) were the least likely to identify the source of an image. *Hürriyet* is excluded from the above table because over 99% of the still images it published lacked a credit line and caption. It is important to note that in events such as the Syrian conflict where access has been difficult and dangerous for professional journalists, a

large amount of images credited only to news agencies are likely to come from non-professional origins. News agencies are credited as sources without further information as to the original photographer or original distributive platform in over 50% of the images published in *La Repubblica*, in 33% of the images published in *The Guardian* and in roughly 25% of those published in *El País*. In this respect, *Romania Libera* stands out (images 2 and 5): if images are not credited solely to news agencies, they are not identified.

While professional visuals dominated the reporting, the visual coverage also points to what Sasseen (2012) calls the ‘crowd-sourced video revolution’, the prominence of clips shot by citizen and activist videographers in the global news coverage of crises and disasters (see

also Andén-Papadopoulos 2013). In particular, mobile phone videos, shot in the midst of conflict in areas less accessible to professional photographers, have been used abundantly for screen grabs. In contrast with photos, videos are dominated by non-professional footage, except in *Kommersant* and *Hürriyet*. A total of 161 news stories (7%) contained either embedded or hyperlinked videos and over 60% consisted of or included amateur footage (table 3). Most of the videos published by European news outlets are credited to Western wire agencies (60) or social media (13), or are not identified (39). In *Kommersant* all video clips come from the newscasts of various Russian broadcasters, while in *Hürriyet* the videos are attributed either to staff journalists (16) or to the Dogan News Agency (26), which belongs to the same media group, Dogan Media Holding, as the newspaper, and, like Western news agencies, distributes footage from the pan-Arabic, Syrian and

opposition news networks, albeit with the logo of the original source often blurred.



Image 2. A screen grab used several times in *Romania Libera* in November 2012 without a source or caption. The image is originally from amateur video of the shelling in Houla. The blurry video was published in the *Guardian* on 29 May 2012 (credited to Reuters), with the title 'Syria massacre: children flee shelling in Houla' and a caption labeling it as an 'unverified video uploaded to a social media website'. It also explained what it shows: 'People are seen fleeing as explosions and gunshots are heard, and several people appear to help an injured person on the ground'.

Table 3. Prominence and origin of videos

	EP	HS	LR	RL	GU	KO	HU	Total
Videos	16	27	27	5	34	8	44	161
With amateur footage	11	21	18	3	20	4	21	98
Identified amateur	4	13	9	3	15	2	4	50

### Visual frames of the Syrian conflict

The Syrian conflict has been framed in a similar way by *El País*, *Helsingin Sanomat* and *The Guardian*. The dominant visual frame in these newspapers was the violence of war, in which the emphasis is on material destruction, death and

injuries, protest being the next most common frame. Frames are not static and, as the uprising became an increasingly violent civil war, the dominant visual frame of these news outlets changed from protest to the violence of war, that frame peaking in February 2012 during the study period.



Among the European countries only *Romania Libera* was an exception, framing the conflict more consistently as a protest and, more frequently than

others, choosing images related to international politics and Assad himself (table 4).

Table 4. The presence of main visual frames

Frames	EP	HS	LR	RL	GU	KO	HU
Violence of war	29.7%	22.9%	28%	13.7%	26.3%	7.1%	7.3%
Protest	19.1%	21.3%	29.4%	21.8%	24.8%	48.4%	5.9%
Assad	6.7%	4.4%	8.4%	15.2%	9.3%	14.3%	10.8%
International politics	18.2%	19.1%	11.2%	20.3%	9.6%	16.1%	33.6%
Armed conflict	14.3%	6.6%	8.4%	12.7%	12.6%	10.7%	9%
Home politics	1.4%	4.9%	1.4%	3%	0.4%	0.0%	16.2%

The violence of war frame was not among the dominant frames in *Kommersant* and *Hürriyet*, accounting for only about 7% in both newspapers. In *Hürriyet*, the international politics frame and the home politics frame were the most prominent. The pictures they used to cover the Syrian war were of international and national politicians, especially the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan.

The dominant visual frames of *Kommersant* were similar to those of *Romania Libera* in that the dominant overarching frame was protest, followed by the international politics frame (Image 3). In *Kommersant*, the visual representation was highly symbolic as flags, banners, artistic images of street protests and portraits of Assad marked the news event and functioned as visual attractions, rather than describing details of the conflict (cf. Griffin 2010). The first function is strengthened by the absence

of captions that could give meaning to the images.



Image 3. In *Kommersant* the Syrian conflict is a parade of flags. A photo published on 14 February, 2012 amidst the Homs offensive and credited to Paul Hanna/Reuters. The photo was taken in Madrid on 12 February during a protest against the attacks by the Syrian government forces on the city of Homs. Credit: Reuters/Lehtikuvu.



Image 4. An unidentified image from *La Repubblica* published 28 May, 2012. The story was titled, 'Syria, more blood after Houla. Bombs hit Hama: 33 civilians killed'.

Although videos can, by their nature, be framed in multiple ways per clip, the predominant framing patterns discussed above carried over to them, too. The important difference, however, was the prominence of the armed conflict frame instead of the protest frame, due to the high level of non-professional footage showing the civil war in action. In *Helsingin Sanomat* (20), *La Repubblica* (11) and the *Guardian* (15) armed conflict was the most prominent frame (videos showing scenes of fighting between government and opposition forces, shelling and bomb explosions), followed by the violence of war, which focused on the aftermath of the violent actions. In *El País* the violence of war remained the most prominent frame (9), followed by armed conflict (7). *Kommersant* was the only newspaper in which the protest frame was the most dominant (9), followed by international politics (6). In *Hürriyet*, the focus was once more on home politics (14), followed by armed conflict (10). However, the armed conflict was also domesticated as the videos *Hürriyet* incorporated into the reporting were typically shot from the Turkish side of the border and showed military action in the towns along the Turkey-Syria border (for instance, a video titled 'Syrian

war planes bombed the border again' from 13 November 2012 ).

### The visibility of death and injury

Images of death are particularly important in considering the interpretation of news events and ethical responses to the suffering of others; images must 'haunt' us if they are to invoke a moral response (Sontag 2003). Regarding the visibility and the nature of the images of the human cost of the conflict, the comparison of the newspapers' coverage reveals pronounced differences (Table 5), although it formed only a minor part of the visual coverage – only 7% of all images depicted death and bodily harm. This finding confirms previous research: the press is cautious when depicting horrific events (e.g. Campbell 2004; Taylor 1998). The largest visual representation of violence occurred with the coverage of the Homs shelling in February 2012 and the Houla massacre in May 2012.

Death and injury, including dead children, were most visible in *El País*'s coverage with 52 images, followed by the *Guardian* with 40 images. *Romania Libera*, *Hürriyet* and *Kommersant* showed fewer images of death and suffering than other news outlets. Images of the violence and suffering of Syrian citizens are largely absent from the primary images in *Kommersant*, although the photo galleries contain some very graphic images. This can be compared to the insignificant role the human cost of war plays in *Kommersant*'s textual discourse: some reports mentioned casualties, like demonstrators killed by the police, but they are never the main topic. While *La Repubblica* and *Romania Libera* concealed death in their images,

it is present in the often scandalous headlines and news stories that report casualties (see images 4 and 5). In *Romania Libera* the visual representation was particularly at odds with the written

reports of casualties, which are typically accompanied by images of celebrating government soldiers or anti/pro-Assad protests

*Table 5. Images depicting death and suffering (n=155)*

	EP	HS	LR	RL	GU	KO	HU
Injury	7.6%	2.7%	2.8%	0	8.1%	1.8%	1%
Explicit death (face shown)	3.3%	0	0.7%	0.5%	0.4%	0	0.2%
Explicit death (face not shown)	0.5%	2.2%	0.7%	0	1.8%	1.8%	0.3%
Dead children	2.4%	0	0	0	0	0	0.1%
Death – metaphorical	1.4%	2.7%	0	0.5%	0	0	0.1%
Veiled death	9.5%	0.5%	4.2%	1.5%	4.4%	0	0.9%
Total images depicting death and suffering	24.6% (52)	8.1% (15)	8.4% (12)	2.5% (5)	14.8% (40)	3.6% (2)	2.5% (29)



Image 5. An uncredited photo published several times in *Romania Libera* to illustrate stories on civilian casualties. On 8 April 2011 it was used in a report titled 'At least 19 protestors were killed in Syria'. On 29 May 2012 the same image was used in the story of an 11-year-old boy who smeared himself with the blood of his dead brother and played dead as gunmen burst into his home and killed members of his family in Houla. The story was titled 'The NIGHTMARE story of an 11 year old child from Syria: He covered his face with THE BLOOD OF HIS BROTHER and pretended he was dead'.



The newspapers generally exercised great restraint in the depiction of the human cost, preferring to show injured people rather than explicit or even veiled death, depicting covered bodies and funeral rituals. In addition to selecting images of injured people, *Helsingin Sanomat* tended to metaphorically represent the human cost by using images displaying bloodstains or shreds of torn clothing lying in the middle of a street.



Image 6. *The professional photograph, its careful composition reminiscent of a painting, was taken by renowned war photographer Goran Tomasevic (Reuters) in Al Qusayr, in the province of Hama, 28 February 2012, when it was under siege by government troops. The caption says: 'A woman holds a baby before his father's corpse in Al Qusayr' (published in El País 28 February 2012). Credit: Reuters/Lehtikuva.*

A crucial question is whether the infiltration of non-professional images into traditional media constitutes a change in the kinds of images of violence we can see in the mainstream media (Zelizer 2010). Non-professional images have emerged onto the public stage carrying an aura of heightened authenticity and emotional proximity obtained via the photographers' position as non-detached, involved observers and the non-formal, non-artistic qualities of their images (Pantti 2013). Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the incorporation of the Syrian activists'

eyewitness footage did not have a strong impact on the depictions of violence and death in the newspapers selected. Most of the credited images (77) depicting the human cost of the conflict came from professional photojournalists affiliated with the national newspapers (4) or international wire agencies (37), and 41 images were credited to international news agencies without further identification. Fifteen graphic images that were distributed by international wire agencies were credited to anonymous 'activists'. Moreover, five of the non-professional images of death and injury were credited to social media sites and seven to Syrian opposition news networks. While extremely graphic non-professional material is available through the news agencies, it is rarely used. The same is true of pictures taken by professional photographers. For instance, the work of AP photographers Rodrigo Abd, Manu Brabo, Narciso Contreras, Khalil Hamra and Muhammed Muheisen took photos showing scenes of violence that were more harrowing than those embedded into news coverage of the Syrian civil war – the photos were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for breaking news photography (AP 2013).

Almost 37% of the videos used by the newspapers included graphic imagery. The use of videos is most prominent in February and May 2012, when Homs was being shelled and the Houla massacre took place, making up over 60% of all videos. The amateur videos used by the news outlets typically take viewers into the middle of violent action in a way that professional footage rarely does. However, while the selected amateur clips typically show violent events and show extremely anguished scenes, such as people under bombardment and explosions, only a few videos display dead or hurt people.





Image 7. A non-professional image published in *Helsingin Sanomat* on 27 May 2012 (taken on 26 May) with the caption, 'Syrian opposition news agency Shaam News Network published this picture of people killed in the Houla massacre on Saturday'. The picture is credited to 'AP-REUTERS-HS-STT-AFP' and Shaam News, and distributed with a disclaimer 'The Associated Press is unable to independently verify the authenticity, content, location or date of this citizen journalism image'. Credit: Lehtikuva.

As with still photos, a video is more likely to show injury than death, and death is usually presented at a distance – metaphorically or veiled. Both *Helsingin Sanomat* and *El País* published a video depicting a mass burial on 26 May 2012, for victims of the Houla massacre, and stills from the video were seen in all newspapers (in *Hürriyet* as an extreme long shot). These images show rows of bodies wrapped in white shrouds and very much resemble the amateur visuals of the victims of the chemical attack on 21 August 2013 (image 7).

Amateur videos provide vivid and disturbing accounts of terror as they show the violence in process, rather than the aftermath of the fighting. However, videos too are often 'tamed' either by the editing of the wire agencies and newspapers to create a beginning, middle and end narrative, or by the qualities of the footage itself, particularly their anonymity and extremely poor technical quality. A particularly effective video, compared to the predominantly 'faceless' amateur videos, was a plea made by a British-Syrian activist reporting from Homs' worst-affected neighbourhood, Baba Amr, against a backdrop of falling rockets in February 2012 (published in EP, HS, LR and GU). While showing the dead, injured and destroyed homes, he makes frantic pleas for help: 'Where is the UN? Where is the humanity? Where is America? Isn't America supposed to defend humanity? Isn't the UN supposed to defend humanity? Are we animals dying here?'

*Table 6 Videos depicting death and injury (n=161)*

	EP	HS	LR	RL	GU	KO	HU	Total
Injured	4	3	8	2	4	2	1	24
Death (face shown)	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	6
Death (face not shown)	0	1	2	0	2	1	3	9
Dead children	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Death – metaphorical	1	3	4	0	1	0	1	10
Veiled death	0	2	2	0	2	0	0	6
Total graphic videos	6	10	17	3	14	4	5	59
Not applicable	10	17	10	2	20	4	39	102

## Conclusion

Thompson theorized that transnational communication systems had aided a 'democratization of responsibility', in which 'a concern for distant others becomes an increasing part of the daily lives of more and more individuals' (1995: 263). Digital media technologies have changed the infrastructures of visual production and circulation – and the moral possibilities of this transformation are evident in transnational flows of images exposing repressive action by authoritarian states as it happens. This study aimed to examine the ways in which national newspapers, which continue to play a significant role in public political discourse, constructed the visibility of the Syrian conflict.

While a large group of professional photojournalists have been working clandestinely in Syria, non-professional eyewitness footage has played an undeniably important role in the visual constitution of the conflict (cf. Van Leuven et al 2013). However, this does not signal a new era of co-operation between national news media and alternative image providers, but the adaptation of the international news agencies to the new 'visual world order' characterized by amateur image makers'

unforeseen access to the means of production and circulation of visual images (see Gürsel 2012). Newspapers hardly ever used non-professional images from social media sources (cf. Robertson 2013).

Gaining access to the mainstream media by providing eye-witness images has been a key strategy of the Syrian opposition groups in their effort to mobilize the support of distant audiences. We can conceptualize these images – leaving aside the undeniably important discussion about their reliability and bias – as 'voices' demanding to be seen and heard (cf. Couldry 2010: 130). These voices potentially enhance reporting by providing a wider variety of perspectives, by revealing new information and by effectively inviting us to feel responsible for the victims of the conflict through the raw aesthetics and involved perspective of the images presented.

This potential was best exploited by *El País*, *The Guardian* and *Helsingin Sanomat*, which were not only the most likely to use non-professional images but also shared similar standards for publishing them. More often than not, these news outlets identified the original sources of the images and provided contextual information to give meaning

to them and add to the substance of the reports. *La Repubblica* was similar to *Romania Libera* in that it did not explicate who took the image, or when and where, but, unlike RL, it occasionally used captions to describe the images and aimed to illustrate the themes of news report. Among the European newspapers *Romania Libera* stood out as its visual coverage can be best characterized as random due to images not being identified or contextualized and because they rarely related to the news story. Neither *Kommersant* or *Hürriyet* used photo captions to give meaning to the photos. While *Hürriyet* used some non-professional images they were never acknowledged as such. It is safe to say that unidentified or disconnected images cannot meaningfully contribute to the mediated perception and knowledge of an event.

The enduring importance of the protest frame in the coverage warrants further examination. Its persistent use across Western newspapers tells us that newspapers continued to make sense of the conflict in terms of a popular uprising, even after the protests had turned into civil war. Simon Cottle (2011b) writes that Western news media were inclined to define the Arab uprisings as legitimate struggles for democracy and liberation from oppressive, authoritarian Arab states. The images of the mass protests functioned as relatively non-specific visual symbols tied to the pre-established theme of Arab uprisings.

While the importance of the protest frame diminished in all European newspapers as the civilian casualties increased, it still remained one of the main frames through which newspapers made sense of the conflict. At the same time the depiction of death and suffering

was following the widely documented path of sanitized war reporting. From the point of view of the mounting humanitarian crisis in Syria, the newspapers persistence in the protest frame is problematic as it offers only limited opportunity to empathize with Syrian civilians. However, some images of street protests were explicitly staged to induce feelings of guilt in the distant audiences (Image 8).



Image 8. An amateur photo published in the Guardian on 30 November 2012 in a story about the total blackout of Syrian telecommunication networks with the caption 'Demonstrators gather during a protest against Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in Homs'. In the story, the possible outcomes of the blackout are speculated in relation to Syrian government's attack on the city of Hama in 1982, which was also preceded by an information blackout. The photo was taken 10 February, 2012. It is credited to 'Handout/Reuters' and distributed by the news agency with a disclaimer 'This image has been supplied by a third party. It is distributed, exactly as received by Reuters, as a service to clients'. Credit: Reuters/Lehtikuva.

This study shows that national media exhibit a range of differences in framing the Syrian conflict and how they present it as an issue of moral concern. The visual coverage of *Kommersant* and *Hürriyet* does not communicate any need to act on the crisis. In *Kommersant*, it seems reasonable to connect this to Russia's support for Assad's regime and



government pressure on the media. However, the political spin is mixed with economic motives as the paper aims to catch the eye of the reader with aesthetically attractive extreme close-ups of protests. While also featuring a very narrow approach to the conflict, there is nothing eye-catching in *Hürriyet's* dull visual coverage dominated by close-ups of local and foreign political leaders. If we take into consideration Turkey's involvement in the effort to overthrow Assad, it is surprising that its coverage of the conflict did not make visible either the revolt or the suffering of the Syrian civilians. The focus on national and international politics in the coverage is partly due to the inner tensions caused by the government's policy on Syria. The Syrian conflict has become a growing source of political discord within the country, as the main opposition party and other political and religious groups have criticized the government's policy (Yilmaz 2013). Consequently, the tensions between the Syrian and Turkish governments and those within Turkey have occupied more space in the public discussions than actual events on the ground in Syria.

Images can open up important spaces for inviting reflection, outrage and empathy for those caught up in conflict situations. This study, while limited by its material and its use of quantitative content analysis that relies on manifest content, shows that what can be seen and what cannot be seen – in this age

of new visibility – is shaped by a national media's level of professionalism, its ethics, the conventions of war photography, and the wider political and cultural context in which the national media operates. National media are not inherently bound to look at distant crises through 'glasses colored by national interests' (Cottle 2009: 509), but can also, as this article shows, act as agents of the new visibility. It is for further research to investigate in more depth when and under which conditions images that would 'haunt' us and stretch the limits of transnational responsibility can be seen in national media.

### Acknowledgments

This study would not have been possible without the valuable contributions of Itir Akdogan, Chris Denholm, Tuomas Jalamo, Yannick Llunga, Daria Krivonos, José Rojo Martin and Adela Stefan, who collected and coded the data. I would also like to thank Laura Ahva, Marko Ampuja, Isabel Awad, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Paul Hayes for their very helpful comments during the development of this article.

### Funding

Research for this article was funded by the Helsingin Sanomain Säätiö as part of the author's research project 'Amateur images: a comparative study on how user-generated content is shaping journalism' (2011-2013).

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ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

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