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Reporting on Syrian Conflict from Exile: Examining Advocacy Strategies in Diaspora Journalists' Online News

Abstract

Using qualitative textual analysis, this chapter investigates how Syrian diaspora journalists mediate the ongoing conflict in their homeland by creating news websites to advocate for human rights, challenge censorship, and promote counter-narratives to the state-owned media. In so doing, the chapter examines how diaspora journalists operationalize their advocacy goals into content-related practices or selective editorial decisions that shape their choice of information sources, adjectives, advocate frames, and persuasive arguments in news production. Findings demonstrated nine content-related advocacy strategies in the Syrian diaspora news outlets. By employing them, diasporic news reporting promotes active mission-driven involvement in debates about the Syrian conflict encouraging the engagement of underrepresented groups and alienated voices in the public discourse. Critical perspectives on the potential of diaspora advocacy journalism to empower or endanger democracy are further discussed.

Introduction

Living in exile from repressive homelands, diaspora media plays crucial roles in mobilizing change in undemocratic societies and creating new platforms for scrutinizing and lobbying home governments (Ekwo, 2011). Diaspora media, created by and for diasporic groups (Bozdog et al., 2012), provides platforms for “self-expression, the representation of cultural artefacts and the contestation of negative stereotypes by migrant people in the public sphere” (Ogunyemi, 2015, p.1). Diaspora journalists serve as “stakeholders” in the transnational media landscapes demonstrating higher journalistic quality compared to local media by offering a diversity of sources, opinions, and criticism to governmental decisions (Ahmed, 2019; Skjerdal, 2011; Nordahl, 2009). They might also act like activists by politicizing issues, building a consensus to advocate for public policies, and influencing audiences and leadership by reinforcing democratic dialogues (Kamboh & Yousaf, 2019; Wade, 2011).

After the Syrian uprisings have turned into an armed struggle owing to airstrikes and jihadist group activists (Johnston, 2017; Omari, 2016), Syria has become one of the most dangerous places for reporters with almost 134 killed and 75 imprisoned journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020; Doyle, 2014). As Chawaf (2019) describes the complex situation: “the unprecedented violence meted out by the Syrian regime, the support and direct intervention of Russia, and the inaction of the international community have made Syria the most dangerous

country in the world for any human to live in” (p. 51). The situation was not better in the opposition-controlled areas as ISIS and other military groups posed restrictions on media freedom leading many media workers to flee to other countries, “mainly to neighboring Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon” (Omari, 2016, p. 3). This raises questions about the potential role of the professional journalists and amateur writers, who fled Syria and continued reporting from the diaspora, in challenging the restrictions on the flow of information inside the country providing an accurate picture of what's going on in the Syrian and international audiences, and advocating for human rights and political reforms. While conflicts pose various challenges to the journalists' professional values, news agendas and newsgathering tools (Ogunyemi, 2017) investigated diaspora journalism advocacy as a concept, and understood the changing nature of transnational news reporting in the context of civil war which has only received scant scholarly attention.

Using qualitative textual analysis, this chapter aims to investigate the various advocacy strategies channeled through the political content of two Syrian anti-regime diasporic news websites, *Enab Baladi* and *Rozana*, in their coverage of the Syrian conflict. To this end, an advocacy strategy refers to the way diaspora journalists operationalize their advocacy goals (e.g., promoting underrepresented voices or posing accusations against the ruling regime) into a content-related practice or a selective editorial decision that shapes the choice of information sources, adjectives, storytelling angles, as well as the use of advocate frames and persuasive arguments in news production. Based on these analyses, the understanding of diaspora journalists as active players in the ongoing conflicts of their homeland is further discussed. The chapter aims to answer one main research question:

***RQ:** What advocacy strategies do the Syrian diaspora websites Enab Baladi and Rozana employ in their political news coverage of the homeland conflict? And how?*

Diaspora Journalism, Conflict, and Political Change

Literature has elucidated the engagement of diasporic populations in the politics and conflicts of their origin countries surpassing the territorial and political boundaries of states (e.g., Itzigsohn, 2000; Hanlin, 2010; Koinova, 2013). The diaspora concept connotes “a very strong orientation vis-à-vis the homeland, often based on an experience or shared memory of displacement, subsequent settlement in two or more locations outside the country of origin, and the collective idea or myth of the homeland” (Bostrom et al., 2016, p.2). By offering new political opportunities, smartphones and digital media have transformed diasporic populations from

“passive victims” to “active agents” facilitating their engagement in everyday transnational political experiences (Borkert et al., 2018). Such a networked communication environment has facilitated the diaspora journalists' adoption of activism by providing opportunities for transnational engagement in conflict mediation and resolution and advocacy for social movements and political causes in the war-torn homelands (Sözeri, 2016).

As Arafat (2021) argues, diaspora advocacy journalism refers specifically to “the purposive involvement of exiled subjects in transnational news gathering and production where new forms of collaboration/networking with people, civil society actors, and human rights defenders from the homeland and host country are introduced to promote underrepresented voices and mobilize a democratic political reformation and/or social change.” (p. 2191). Diaspora journalists use their new locations to promote counter-narratives to challenge the domestic mainstream media dominated by repressive regimes and inform the outside world about the regime's violations and misdeeds (Cook, 2016; Ristow, 2011; Wojcieszak et al., 2013).

This places diaspora media in “a unique position which enables them to circumvent regime censorship and spread their content through cross-border networks and collaborations with citizen journalists on-the-ground correspondents, and media platforms” (Kämpe, 2017, p. 49). It also empowers them to serve a dual role as a “window on the world” that channels updated information and a “mirror” that reflects back the conflict details and its consequences to their audiences (Ogunyemi, 2017, p.1). For example, Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) used their exile to access the political spaces they were previously denied and document violations and mass atrocities during the war (Balasundaram, 2019).

However, scholars warned of completely abandoning the traditional journalism standards while covering transnational conflicts from the diaspora (Ncube, 2017; Nordahl, 2009). By proclaiming political bias, lacking a clear distinction between facts and opinion in organizing articles, and identifying itself with certain opposition groups, diaspora journalism might pose challenges to traditional journalism paradigms by “bringing new actors into the journalistic arena negotiating the value of journalistic independence, traversing media cultures, and so forth” (Skjerdal, 2011, p.740). Exile journalists might also contribute to inflaming the homeland conflicts and recreating them (Osman, 2017). Taking the Zimbabwean diasporic online community radio as an example, the blurred boundaries between constructive journalism and activism have led to producing one-sided dramatized news coverage that fueled the conflict and failed to provide solutions (Ncube, 2017).

Advocacy Journalism: A Theoretical Framework

In contrast to the so-called “objective journalism”, Berney and Robie (2008) define advocacy journalism as “a genre of journalism that is fact-based but supports a specific viewpoint on an issue” (p.1). Tension has recently escalated between traditional and new-style activist/advocate journalists with more critics accusing the latter group of violating journalistic norms, especially objectivity (Russell, 2017). Some journalism scholars and practitioners argued that adopting advocacy journalism might damage the professionalism and credibility of the journalistic practice when it involves ideological bias and activist intentions (Janowitz, 1975; Steele, 2010). Others argued that advocacy is not the opposite of objectivity as advocating a position is part of the job explaining that the reporting work done by NGOs and advocacy groups, especially if they apply fact-checking and transparency, can fill in gaps in the traditional media coverage when it is hard for media outlets to invest in the on-the-ground reporting (Ingram, 2018; Niles, 2011).

In diaspora, the combination of advocacy and journalism seems possible, and sometimes desirable, as some diaspora news websites adopt a journalism practice characterized by activism and favoritism posing a critical attitude to the homeland government across borders (Skjerdal, 2011). Advocacy journalism serves various functions such as “raising awareness, generating public debate, influencing public opinion and key decision-makers, and promoting policy and programmatic changes around specific issues” (Waisbord, 2009, p.371). To this end, journalists might get personally involved and become active participants in the debate to advocate for certain causes in conflict situations (Mollerup, 2016).

Although the literature has focused on the engagement of diaspora journalists in their homeland conflicts and their adoption of activism stances in news reporting, too little attention was paid to identifying what types of advocacy strategies their news content involves and how they shape the way news is produced and communicated. Accordingly, this chapter investigates how the Syrian diaspora journalism websites engage in the ongoing homeland conflicts by promoting advocacy stances toward the Syrian regime and opposition groups. It draws upon the sourcing and journalistic production determinants of advocacy in the journalistic work identified by Fisher's framework (2016) including the selection of stories, adjectives, sources, advocate frames, story formats, and coverage angles.

Fisher (2016) argues that “each work of journalism falls along a continuum of advocacy”; the degree of advocacy in the journalistic work is influenced by a range of macro, organizational, journalistic production, source, and personal factors (p.711). Sources influence advocacy in the

journalistic content by setting the news agenda and shaping media coverage frames (Seo, 2020) because “who gets to speak in the news is a question of empowerment, as not only can actors with regular access to the news media shape the interpretation of events, but also ongoing meanings in a society” (Beckers & Van Aelst, 2018, p.1). Similarly, the advocate frames including the comments, explanations, and arguments used by the reporter to persuade can lead to one perspective or actor of the story being advocated more strongly than another (Fisher, 2016). By using certain verbs and adjectives to describe a person or an issue, the language of news stories can also “colour” the way the topic is presented impacting with whom the audience would sympathize (Boudana, 2016; Fisher, 2016). The story formats and angles also shape the advocacy in the news content reflecting a process of decision-making by the journalist of what to focus on and how to package stories (Burns, 2013). Further information about how these advocacy determinants were used to build an initial coding sheet for examining news articles published by the diaspora websites about three timely political topics is explained later in the methods section.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative textual analysis as a research method. Following the textual analysis guidelines provided by Altheide and Schneider (2013) for examining news content produced by media outlets, I first familiarized myself with the context of the two diasporic websites under study by taking notes on the format, type, and the number of the news stories published about the ongoing conflict and foreign intervention in Syria, their political economy that shapes the way news is produced and communicated to the local audiences (Smith, 2017), as well as their collaborations and joint investigations with other Syrian diaspora outlets.

Following the content and understanding the context allowed the researcher to select the relevant topics and time period for analysis. Consequently, every news article and investigative report published by *Enab Baladi* and *Rozana* Arabic websites between the 15th of December 2019 and the 17th of February 2020 on one of three conflict-related topics were chosen for analysis: a) the large waves of Syrian civilians' displacement in Idlib following the military campaigns launched by the Syrian regime forces and its Russian ally, b) the demonstrations against the difficult living conditions in the regime-controlled Suwaida governorate, and c) the consequences of the Turkish-Russian military intervention in Syria after breaching the Sochi agreement. This resulted in a total data set of 100 articles collected from the news outlets' digital archives (46 *Enab Baladi*, 52 *Rozana*, and 2 written in collaboration between both). Various

criteria were considered in the selection of these topics. First, the three political issues are timely and have news salience and a significant impact on the Syrian population. Second, the topics cover different key aspects of the ongoing Syrian civil war: the first topic focuses on the war crimes and humanitarian crises caused by the military attacks of the regime and its ally and their direct economic, educational, and psychological consequences on the civilians, the second tackles the anti-regime protests caused by the deteriorating living conditions and high prices, especially in the regime-controlled regions, and the third reflects the foreign intervention of Turkey and Russia as main players in the ongoing Syrian conflict. To this end, analyzing the news content of the two diasporic news websites on the three selected topics enables examining how diaspora journalism advocacy generates a parallel and alternative flow of information that challenges the vertical voice which circulates the regime's propaganda. The topic selection further allows investigating the advocacy strategies employed by the diaspora news websites to cover the various local and foreign actors of the Syrian conflict serving the main goal of the study.

In order to examine how Syrian diaspora journalists operationalize their advocacy goals into news production practices and editorial selections, I developed an initial open-ended coding sheet based on theory following Mayring's inductive category development approach (2000). In this early stage of analysis, "pre-established codes, built from engagement with past literature, are guiding lights at earlier coding phases of a study and are adjusted as the researcher engages in with the texts being studied" (Smith, 2017, pp.1859-1860). Guided by Fisher's framework (2016), six general advocacy determinants in news content including adjectives, information sources, advocate frames, story selection, and formats, as well as angles of coverage were first selected as guiding coding criteria under which new categories and subcategories emerged in the analysis. Through a close reading of the text, new patterns were inductively identified and grouped into more abstract categories resulting in nine content-related strategies particularly used by Syrian diaspora journalists to channel advocacy in news reporting (e.g., promoting citizen sources, promoting voices of civil society actors, promoting adjectives siding with Syrian civilians, ...etc.). I clustered relevant strategies into groups that best describe their content. For example, the textual analysis revealed how the victimization of civilians, humanitarian focus of coverage, and conflict personalization are three connected strategies used by diaspora journalists in their news content to promote sympathy for war victims inside Syria. Thus, those practices were grouped together under a more abstract thematic category that I called "Promoting Sympathy and Humanitarian Aspects" representing one of the advocacy strategies used in

diasporic news reporting. To check inter-coder reliability and point out any potential flaws existing in defining categories in the initial coding scheme, 10% of the selected news sample (10 articles) was coded by a second external coder who speaks Arabic. Some differences were detected in coding, especially about who should be categorized as “information sources” in the stories. Some modifications to the definition of actors and information sources were made accordingly.

Selected Media Outlets

The study examined two online diasporic opposition news websites that were selected based on four main criteria: a) *foundation and objectives*: both websites were founded following the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011 and moved later into diaspora to advocate for press freedom and human rights with around-the-clock news coverage that depends on local correspondents, b) *popularity and wide reach*: both websites have more than one million followers on their Facebook pages with *Enab Baladi* distributing thousands of copies of their weekly print issue in northern Syria and Turkish cities, c) *relative funding autonomy*: both websites claim political independence from any partisan or governmental funding or influence as they depend solely on the yearly grants offered by various European organizations that support independent media and democratic goals including the International Media Support (IMS), Free Press Unlimited, and Global Fund for Women, and finally d) *several editions and additional projects*: both websites have Arabic and English versions targeting both Syrian and international audiences. Apart from news coverage, they are active in other media development projects including establishing ethical charters for Syrian media as well as organizing journalism training programs for students and citizen journalists. The two websites are:

- a) *Enab Baladi* news website (1,143,339 Facebook followers) ¹:

The Turkey-based *Enab Baladi* news association was originally founded in Daraya (Damascus suburbs) in 2011. It releases a weekly print newspaper and Arabic news website that cover Syrian news on the ground. Its English website, launched in 2016, publishes translated news articles targeting foreign audiences to challenge an almost complete absence of foreign media inside Syria. *Enab Baladi*'s family started as “a group of amateur writers with no prior experience in journalism, but who wanted to do their best to present another side of this multi-sided and blessed revolution nonetheless” (Ayoub, 2019). Among the 58 staff members the website mentions, *Enab Baladi* has nine local correspondents covering news inside Syria. The news outlet states its mission clearly as follows: “Enab Baladi helps advance a democratic society in Syria by

producing independent and credible journalism that informs the Syrian public about important issues and gives voice to the voiceless Syrians inside and outside Syria.” (Enab Baladi, 2022).

b) *Radio Rozana* news website (1,020,151 Facebook followers) ²:

Founded in June 2013 with headquarters in Paris and Gaziantep, *Rozana.fm* is an online radio station with Arabic and English news websites targeting Syrian audiences with a focus on the age group between 16-40. Its mission is to be “an independent media that respect human rights including gender, interactive and freedom of expression” (Rozana Radio, 2022). In addition to offering access to its radio live transmission, *Rozana*'s online websites provide a wide range of opinion articles, reports, and visual content lying on the editorial staff of 20 broadcast journalists and a big network of reporters inside Syria (ibid, 2022). *Rozana* also pays special attention to advocating for Syrian women and children's rights by tackling issues of unspoken violence and raising awareness campaigns about women's role in political and social life.

The two media outlets adopt a similar editorial policy and opposition political leaning that facilitated their cooperation in publishing joint investigative reports and news articles. Thus, the paper does not aim to employ a comparative approach but rather analyzes the content of the two websites to acquire a better understanding of the various advocacy strategies adopted by Syrian diaspora opposition media in reporting on the ongoing conflict.

Research Findings

Content-related Diaspora Advocacy

Investigating news content comes first toward understanding what diaspora journalism is and how it promotes certain advocacy stances through its news reporting targeting both the domestic homeland and diaspora audiences. Textual analysis identified several advocacy strategies in the diasporic websites' news coverage that can be grouped into four categories: promoting underrepresented voices, promoting criticism/accusations, promoting opposition stances, and promoting sympathy and humanitarian aspects. Putting these advocacy strategies into practice involves a series of editorial selections of adjectives, information sources, story formats, advocate frames, presentation of actors, and angles of coverage in the news articles. The following table summarizes the content-related advocacy strategies in diaspora journalism:

Table 1: Diaspora Journalism's Content-related Advocacy Strategies

Promoting Underrepresented Voices	Promoting Opposition Stances	Promoting sympathy & Humanitarian Aspects	Promoting Criticism/Accusations
(Selection of information sources)	(Selection of adjectives)	(Selection of story format & angles)	(Selection of advocate frames)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Promoting unofficial/citizen sources •Empowering voices of human rights activists and civil society actors •Presenting various oppositional voices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Use of adjectives delegitimizing the Syrian regime •Use of adjectives siding with local civilians •Use of adjectives opposing foreign intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on humanitarian angles of coverage &personalizing the conflict • Victimizing civilian actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employing persuasive arguments and evidence

Category1: Content promoting underrepresented voices: challenging traditional sourcing norms and routines

Findings demonstrated that empowering citizens, opposition activists, human rights defenders, and civil society workers, by giving them more space and weight in the news articles and presenting them as the main actors in each story, come as one of the main advocacy strategies employed by the Syrian diaspora news websites. This contradicts the sourcing norms in the mainstream press where journalists reinforce the state structure of power by quoting official actors of authority more than unofficial actors and governing officials more than non-governing officials (Bora, 2015; Korthagen, 2013). To challenge the traditional hierarchy of sources, the diaspora news articles promoted three types of non-government and non-elite voices:

a) Promoting unofficial/citizen sources: reporting voices of local correspondents, eyewitnesses, activists, and diaspora experts. Almost every news story or investigative report in the analysis gives attribution to one or two anonymous local correspondents with whom *Enab Baladi* and *Rozana* collaborate to interview local Syrian citizens and activists and collect firsthand information about the ongoing conflicts and demonstrations. Activists, protesters, students, and displaced families were quoted explaining their problems and describing their “harsh” living conditions. Most of the quoted local citizens and eyewitnesses are also allowed to speak on the condition of anonymity or use a nickname to avoid persecution and arrest. Although Carlson (2011) argues that anonymity “creates stress between journalists and audiences by masking unseen alliances and hidden source motives,” anonymity of sources was necessary for reporting about Syria to protect local correspondents and sources from getting murdered or persecuted. Unlike reporters in the legacy media, those anonymous sources can move freely

without governments tracking them, and cover important stories beyond official events and press conferences (Seo, 2020). The followings are demonstrative examples:

Enab Baladi's correspondent said that a group of citizens, including men, women, and children, went out today, Friday, January 17, with a demonstration in the main square of the city of Shahba (*Enab Baladi*, Syria, 17 Jan 2020).

Abu Fayyad, one of the demonstrators, said to *Rozana*: “We continue with our demonstrations until they hear our voice, and give us our most basic rights to live.” (*Rozana*, News, 16 Jan 2020).

The source, speaking on the condition of anonymity for security reasons, added that As-Suwayda is subject to a set of affiliations that are responsible for maintaining the security situation there, without direct intervention by the regime in this regard (*Enab Baladi*, In-Depth, Jan 2020).

To overcome the limited access to local news sources, online sourcing platforms including social search engines and media platforms allowed diaspora media outlets to keep a close track of local citizens' complaints and politicians' online statements to get breaking news, local contacts, and story leads, even in regions with a high-security grip. This use of “digital and distanced techniques” was also reported by the foreign correspondents reporting on countries with dictatorial or semi-democratic regimes including Iran and North Korea (Seo, 2020, p. 284). For instance, *Enab Baladi* monitors local Facebook news pages and people's comments on them to acquire up-to-date information about current events. To report on Suwayda's demonstrations, for example, *Enab Baladi* relied on videos and photos published by *Suwayda 24's* Facebook page run by opposition activists, as well as many local economic websites including the *SalaryExplorer* and the *Syrian Pound Today* to analyze the reasons for the high prices and deteriorating living standards. Some of these online sources are kept anonymized where you can find sentences like: “According to some information monitored by *Enab Baladi* via its social media networks” or “as monitored by *Enab Baladi* from local sources”. Observing people's comments on the social media pages helps *Enab Baladi* to further provide analysis and conclusions about regular people's opinions:

Enab Baladi monitored through local Facebook pages the solidarity of the locals in Tartus with Suwayda demonstrations, through comments on pictures of the

demonstrations published by the page, unlike other Syrians who considered, via the comments, that these movements are “politicized” or “part of a conspiracy against the Syrian people (*Enab Baladi*, In-Depth, 26/01/2020).

The textual analysis also revealed another tactic used by diaspora journalists to encounter the logistical difficulty and high costs of transnational reporting by depending on various easy-to-access diasporic sources. Unlike short news stories, investigations and analytical reports included more quotes from non-local sources such as Syrian diaspora researchers, legal and economic experts, and political analysts to give analytical viewpoints, especially in articles about the Turkish-Russian military intervention in Idlib. Many of these diasporic sources are located in Turkey where the two websites have headquarters.

b) *Empowering voices of human rights activists and civil society actors:* Used as proof of the failure and brutality of the Syrian regime and its supporters, the coverage of *Enab Baladi* and *Rozana* depends widely on statistics and reports published by local and international human rights organizations to monitor the violations and destructive consequences of the local policies and military campaigns led by the Syrian regime, its Russian ally, and some opposition groups. Including statements of officials from these associations allows for an understanding of the conflict context, its backgrounds, and consequences and empower the human rights defenders by getting their voices heard and giving visibility to their data on the war crime evidence. This focus on human rights reporting, especially disseminating information about violations, demonstrates the “newspapers’ critical independence from the state and providing in-demand, democracy-enhancing information” (McPherson, 2012, p.119) has the potential to raise local and international public awareness, put pressure on politicians, and call for accountability and justice (Balasundaram, 2019).

Among the frequently mentioned local organizations in the analyzed news stories of the two outlets come *The Syrian Response Coordination Group*, the *Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets)*, and the *Syrian Network for Human Rights* which documented the numbers of victims and displaced people during the five military campaigns that violated the Russian-Turkish ceasefire agreement. Regarding international organizations, reports of the *Human Rights Watch (HRW)* on the number of murder cases in the Syrian prisons and statistics published by the *United Nations* about the killed and displaced Syrian civilians are among the frequently used sources in many articles. In particular, stories covering the displacement of citizens and the Turkish-Russian military operations in Syria, *Enab Baladi* and *Rozana* paid special focus to interviewing

the local civil society actors including the founders and volunteers of the rescue initiatives that offer services and shelters for displaced civilians:

The team of the *Syria Response Coordination Group* revealed that the number of displaced families in the southern and eastern countryside of Idlib between last November and the beginning of the new year 2019 reached more than 55,664 families (328,418 people) (*Rozana*, News, 4 Jan 2020).

According to HRW, thousands died in the Syrian regime's prisons in 2019 after being brutally tortured and forced to live in terrible detention conditions (*Enab Baladi*, In-Depth, 26 Jan 2020).

c) *Presenting various oppositional voices:* Stories in *Enab Baladi* and *Rozana* included direct and indirect quotes from many opposition leaders in various factions such as the spokesperson of the opposition Syrian High Negotiations Committee (HNC), the Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs in the Syrian Salvation government, as well as leaders of Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army and the National Liberation Front who announced their responsibility of killing pro-Assad forces fighters in many articles. The opposition social media networks, including *Ebaa* Telegram news network affiliated with Tahrir El-Sham Jihadist militant group, come as another online sourcing platform for acquiring information. Although their news coverage gives space for opposition actors to voice their opinions, no clear support for any of these factions by the diaspora journalists was identified in the content analysis:

A member of the *Men of Dignity Movement* who refused to mention his name because of security reasons told *Rozana*: "The demonstrations the Suwaida governorate has witnessed against corruption and corrupt people under the slogan (We want to live) are a true popular demand, and we stand with it." (*Rozana*, News, 27 Jan 2020).

The official Spokesperson of the opposition Syrian High Negotiations Committee (HNC), who is from the province of Suwaida, Yahia al-Aridi, thinks that the root cause of the protests is that the people of Suwaida took to the streets to reclaim their legitimate rights. (*Enab Baladi*, Syria, 9 Jan 2020).

In addition to presenting local oppositional voices, the news articles in *Enab Baladi* and *Rozana* also cited various Syrian, Turkish, Russian, and American state-affiliated sources by including

excerpts of the policy makers' statements, especially in articles tackling the foreign intervention in the ongoing Syrian conflict. Quotes from the key foreign players in the Syrian conflict including the Turkish and Russian presidents, the Turkish, Russian, and Syrian foreign ministers, the US Secretary of State, as well as Trump's tweets were used in news stories. Unsurprisingly, quotes from official state actors were either collected from their social media pages or other international media outlets with a very limited number of pro-regime Syrian officials or politicians interviewed in the two outlets.

Category2. Content promoting opposition stances: the selection of adjectives

Selecting adjectives in the two online diasporic media outlets promotes three main advocacy strategies:

a) Adjectives delegitimizing the Syrian regime: In *Enab Baladi* and *Rozana*, Al-Assad's government is always referred to as the “Syrian Regime” and never as the Syrian government, state, or republic as many local pro-state media outlets tend to describe it. Consistently, Bashar Al-Assad is referred to as the “president of the Syrian Regime”. According to Oxford dictionaries, a regime is defined as “a method or system of government, especially one that has not been elected in a fair way” or “a government, especially an authoritarian one”. Repeating such classification in the news coverage implies a way of depriving this ruling structure of its authority and undermining its legality and right to govern.

Consistently, the regime is associated repetitively with many negative adjectives in the two outlets' reporting such as “massive oppression”, “troubled”, with “failed” attempts by the government to control prices, “flawed” legislative decrees, “rampant corruption” in state institutions, while describing the measures taken by the regime as “hysterical” and “a new nail in the coffin of the Syrian economy”. While some of these adjectives/descriptions are written directly by the reporters, many are attributed to the interviewed oppositional sources especially citizens, analysts, and experts. On the other hand, anti-regime rebels such as Suwaida's protesters were recurrently described in *Enab Baladi* using positive adjectives including “peaceful protesters”, “peaceful movement”, and “spontaneous campaign”. This reflects what D'Alessio and Allen (2000) call as “statement bias” where the coverage is favorable for certain actors/parties and unfavorable for others.

b) Adjectives siding with civilians: The coverage of *Enab Baladi* and *Rozana* pays great attention to tackling the current living conditions of Syrian civilians and the related humanitarian, health, and economic circumstances they encounter. For example, the living situation in Syria,

especially in the Suwaida governorate, was associated with negative descriptions such as “harsh”, “severe”, “deteriorating living situation”, and people's deep sense of “defeat”. Similarly, the displacement of civilians in Idlib was referred to as “Idlib's disaster”, “humanitarian catastrophe”, “hysterical”, “escalated human suffering”, “a curse amid a floating geography in conflicts” and “the most violent escalation campaign against the last Syrian opposition stronghold” within “difficult living and security conditions”. The afflicted families are described as “victims”. Notably, investigative reports have more usage of biased (negative/positive) adjectives than shorter news stories. Using similar adjectives by the two diasporic media outlets reflects how they share similar oppositional agendas which open the door for the regular production of collaborative investigative reports between them. In so doing, it is clear that the Syrian journalists working for the two websites do not detach themselves from the homeland's conflict. This reflects on their depiction of the conflict in terms of ‘victim’ vs ‘oppressor’, and ‘good’ vs ‘evil’ (Ruigrok, 2010) by overtly blaming the regime and siding with the civilians and anti-regime protesters in many stories.

c) Adjectives opposing foreign (Russian) intervention: Regarding the foreign actors, the Russian intervention is always connected to various negative adjectives in the reporting by repetitively quoting sources that call the military campaigns of the Syrian-Russian alliance forces “massacres”, “crimes against humanity”, and “breaches” of the cease-fire agreements with turkey and its counterterrorism strategies as an excuse to justify its attack on Idlib. A few adjectives are associated with the Turkish response to ceasefire violations. These adjectives are mentioned in quotes by military analysts who described Turkey as the “weakest party” in the Sochi agreement, with a “limited” role and “insignificant influence” where it is standing aside “passively”.

Category3. Content promoting sympathy and humanitarian aspects: story formats and angles of coverage

a) Focusing on the humanitarian angle and personalizing the conflict. News articles on the two websites tackled the three political topics under study with a great focus on humanitarian perspectives and less concentration on political and military angles. Similar prioritization of the ‘conflict’, ‘human interest’, and ‘responsibility’ angles was identified in the African diasporic press (Ogunyemi, 2015). For example, *Enab Baladi* provided daily updates about the numbers of murdered and displaced civilians in Idlib focusing on the economic, educational, and psychological consequences of displacement including the suspension of school attendance, deterioration of the education sector, the increasing prices of house rents, and the roles of civil

society and humanitarian aid organizations in rescuing displaced civilians and providing emergency shelters. By publishing more human-interest stories and focusing on individual cases of families that took refuge in a chicken coop, a couple's love story separated by displacement and war, and the inhuman circumstances displaced families encounter in refugee camps on the Syrian-Turkish borders, *Rozana* personalized the crisis aiming to capture the audience's attention and increase their engagement in the news stories (Beyer & Figenschou, 2014).

b) Victimizing civilian actors

With a focus on the number of murdered, kidnapped, and displaced civilians, the two diaspora websites presented civilians, whose lives are significantly impacted by the military shelling of the regime and the exploitations of some opposition groups, within the “victim frame”. By showing the impact of shelling, bombing, and destruction on the lives of civilians, the two websites sided with the Syrian citizens and indirectly promoted their oppositional advocacy agenda against the “oppressive” regimes in the homeland presenting a form of bottom-up surveillance (Cammaerts, 2015):

“Between the exploitation of the Salvation Government and the bombing of the regime, the suffering of the displaced in Idlib continues” (*Rozana*, headline, News, 06/01/2020).

Category4. Content promoting criticism/accusations: advocate frames

Using persuasive arguments and evidence (Advocate frames). In *Enab Baladi's* article sample, journalists employed various advocate frames using persuasive explanations that involved particular ways of interpreting topics and conflicts and promoting certain viewpoints rather than straightforward information formats (Tewksbury et al., 2000). For instance, the Syrian regime was directly accused of various crimes and violations including carrying out military campaigns in collaboration with its Russian ally that resulted in the displacement of millions of civilians and the death of thousands, arresting activists and opposition leaders, and cooperating with the local militia that carries out kidnapping and assassinations. Many of these accusations are accompanied by statistics, statements, and reports published by international human rights associations and local civil society organizations that document violations inside Syria. Promoting this fact-based information meets one of the main criteria of advocacy journalism (Berney & Robie, 2008).

However, the websites' criticism against the regime comes in two forms: explicit (direct criticism by journalists) and implicit (reported criticism by sources) with the second type more prominent in most of the news content. The following excerpts are demonstrative examples of the two types:

The Syrian regime dyed the end of 2019 with blood and gunpowder in the southern countryside of Idlib causing the displacement of hundreds of thousands to the north (*Enab Baladi-Rozana*, In-Depth, 19/1/2020, Explicit).

Regime forces violate the armistice and bomb the separate areas in Idlib (*Rozana, News*, 11/01/2020, Explicit).

In 2019, the Syrian regime arrested hundreds of former activists and opposition leaders as well as members of their families according to a year's events report issued by Human Rights Watch (HRW). (*Enab Baladi*, In-Depth, 01/02/2020, Implicit).

Other accusations are based on the outlets' own investigations referring to themselves as a source of information. By doing so, the diaspora media outlet gives legitimacy to the story by presenting themselves as a source while simultaneously legitimizing their media credibility through the story:

As-Suwayda was of the governorates that witnessed anti-regime demonstrations at the beginning of the Syrian revolution. However, the regime, which did not directly intervene in their suppression, cooperated with local militias from the people of the governorate to carry out the mission. This was found by *Enab Baladi* in a previous investigation entitled "As-Suwayda... An isolated island was awaiting its fate. (*Enab Baladi*, In-Depth, 01/02/2020).

However, it is important to argue that the nine advocacy strategies proposed in this chapter are closely connected and interchanging. As findings demonstrated, diasporic news websites usually employ multiple content-related strategies to promote a certain advocacy role in their news reporting. To advocate for the Syrian civilian's rights, for instance, diaspora journalists choose to victimize civilians using certain news frames, empower their voices that are usually underrepresented in mainstream media, and use adjectives and persuasive arguments to side with them while focusing on the humanitarian angles of storytelling to show their deteriorating living conditions and provoke sympathy. It can be further argued that connecting certain determinants of advocacy (e.g., adjectives, information sources, angles of coverage, etc.) to certain advocacy

strategies in the analysis (see table 1) does not necessarily mean that they cannot predict other strategies while the selection of adjectives, for example, was more decisive and relevant for the strategy of “promoting opposition stances” as the findings have shown that adjectives might also be employed by diaspora journalists to promote accusations, criticism, sympathy, or humanitarian angles of coverage.

Discussion: Theoretical and Critical Implications

Theorizing in this chapter goes beyond the current knowledge on diaspora journalists' role in challenging power authorities and documenting violations and war crimes (Balasundaram, 2019; Cook, 2016; Kämpe, 2017). It moves the discussion forward by identifying how their opposition advocacy goals are operationalized into various content-related strategies that are reflected in every step of the news production process including story narration, framing, and presentation (Hanitzsch & Hoxha, 2014). This involves a series of selective editorial decisions through which diaspora journalists chose humanitarian angles of storytelling to focus on destruction, promoted the out-of-authority voices, and gave a space for various oppositional groups to speak for themselves without supporting any of their viewpoints. Story framing involves utilizing persuasive arguments instead of straightforward information and using adjectives that intentionally delegitimize the Syrian regime while victimizing civilians.

Although diaspora journalism fosters democratic dialogues through pluralizing voices and presenting non-elite actors marginalized in Syrian legacy media coverage (Kamboh & Yousaf, 2019), it challenges the traditional journalistic norms of objectivity and impartiality. However, their journalistic practice can still be differentiated from propaganda as most of their stories incorporate fact-based evidence collected from diverse online and offline sources with a focus on using statistics and reports published by international and national human rights organizations. Similar cases of journalists abandoning the objectivity norm in diasporic and non-diasporic war contexts were reported in the literature such as Burmese exile media (Nordahl, 2009), Ethiopian diasporic websites (Skjerdal, 2011), and advocate journalists reporting on the Bosnian war (Ruigrok, 2010).

Therefore, it would be naïve to simply claim that advocacy journalism, in the unique diasporic conflict context, would either empower or endanger journalism and democracy. It offers a wide range of advantages and drawbacks that should be carefully taken into consideration. Based on the findings, I argue that the online Syrian diaspora journalism reporting on the ongoing homeland civil war presents a unique case where achieving objectivity and

adhering to the conventional professionalism norms might be an unrealistic luxury. Diaspora journalists cannot escape taking sides when the only news stream coming out of the country represents the government's view promoted by the state-backed media outlets that act as the government's mouthpiece. They serve the public good by engaging in cyberwar to generate a parallel and alternative flow of information that challenges the vertical voice that circulates the regime's propaganda and misinformation. Therefore, acting “beyond the notion of objectivity and play(ing) a proactive role to contribute towards the protection of human rights” might be inevitable to serve the information needs of their audiences (Balasundaram, 2019, p. 267).

Drawing away from glorifying diaspora advocacy journalism, it is important to understand how the political affiliations of diaspora journalists and their pre-migration persecution experiences in authoritarian rule significantly shape their news production and editorial advocacy agendas (Donsbach & Patterson, 1996). This might make them more vulnerable to tunnel vision where “the issue is perceived in such a way that it overrules the journalistic practice of balance and neutrality” (Ruigrok, 2010, p.89). While in the Syrian case, the aim of defending the rights of civilians under threat might be a heroic advocacy goal and a worthy cause, diasporic advocacy journalism still raises various undeniable concerns. *First*, promoting one-sided coverage might fuel the conflict; the Zimbabwean diasporic online community radio is an example where diaspora journalists served as the extreme opposite of the mainstream media and failed to provide solutions (Ncube, 2017). Therefore, audiences should be aware of the type of information they are fed, and diaspora journalists should make it clear when they cannot produce balanced stories letting readers know they should be cautious when consuming such news (Ruigrok, 2010). *Second*, it is important also to consider the influence of the government of the diaspora journalists' host country on their news reporting, especially if it is involved in the homeland's conflict such as Turkey. *Third*, the sustainability of the donor-funded-business model of diaspora media might also risk the impartiality of the news they provide. We need to think of the future of these diasporic media outlets if the yearly funding is not granted, or if they are compelled to take money from certain political movements or Islamist groups.

Concluding Remarks

Driven by the “reformist impulse” (Waisbord, 2009) and benefiting from the value of distance (Seo, 2020), diaspora journalists used nine content-related advocacy strategies to promote clear opposition stances in their news coverage exceeding the information dissemination and analysis

functions. Employing these advocacy strategies reinforces diaspora journalists' power as “gatekeepers” of information whose selective portrayal of events contributes to socially constructing the reality of conflict in their homelands (Fisher, 2018), and facilitates the transnational information flow in a repressive military sphere where political expression is highly restricted (Pidduck, 2012).

The findings of the chapter give empirical-based insights into how political communication works in diaspora connecting to the focus of this book on two levels. First, they demonstrate how exiled journalists, as opposition diasporic communities, serve a crucial role in transnational mobilization calling for democratic reforms in their war-torn homeland by engaging in forms of political advocacy from a distance. Second, the findings show how using digital media as tools for news gathering, sourcing, and dissemination continues to empower the rise of new voices documenting war crimes and supporting democracy in Middle East diasporas.

While previous scholars debated how digital connectivity empowered the diasporic exiles' engagement in transnational homeland politics (e.g., Borkert et al., 2018; Sözeri, 2016), not only do Syrian diaspora journalists use the internet as a medium to reach their local audiences, but also they use it as a sourcing channel through which they created a decentralized participatory news ecosystem (Heinrich, 2011; Seo, 2020) where various actors including citizen journalists, human rights defenders, activists, diaspora experts, political opposition actors, as well as the public audience serve as news providers. Their shift to online sourcing platforms allowed them to challenge the traditional sourcing hierarchy, overcome the challenges reported by journalists collecting information in hard-to-reach countries (Seo, 2020), and monitor the local people's complaints on a daily basis to collect first-hand testimonies while saving time and cost.

Endnotes

¹ Enab Baladi's website: <https://www.enabbaladi.net/>

² Radio Rozana's website: <https://www.rozana.fm/en/home>

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