Too Crowded for Crowdsourced Journalism: Reddit, Portability, and Citizen Participation in the Syrian Crisis

Scott S.D. Mitchell & Merlyna Lim
Carleton University

ABSTRACT

Background *This article explores the complexity of citizen participation in social media and crowdsourced journalism by utilizing the case of r/SyrianCivilWar, the sub-community of Reddit where users discuss the Syrian crisis.*

Analysis *In examining the limitations and affordances of the platform, the article identifies features that characterize the r/SyrianCivilWar community, namely: algorithmic driven public discourse, deliberative communication, reflexivity and transparency, and database journalism. These features shape the functioning of the community and have broader implications for citizen crowdsourced journalism projects.*

Conclusion and implications *The article demonstrates that alternative media practices, such as crowdsourced journalism, are limited in their capacity to reach mainstream consciousness. In the commodified landscape of media, portability—a capacity for complex issues to be distilled into a simple or simplified concept—is made important.*

Keywords *Reddit; Syria; Crowdsourcing; Citizen journalism; Portability; Social media*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Cet article explore la complexité de la participation citoyenne dans les médias sociaux et dans le journalisme financé collectivement en recourant au cas de r/SyrianCivilWar, communauté sur Reddit où l'on discute de la crise syrienne.*

Analyse *En examinant les limites et avantages de la plateforme, cet article identifie certaines caractéristiques de la communauté r/SyrianCivilWar, à savoir : un discours public basé sur des algorithmes, une communication délibérative, la réflexivité et la transparence, et un journalisme de données. Ces caractéristiques influencent le fonctionnement de la communauté et ont des implications plus larges pour les projets journalistiques financés collectivement par les citoyens.*

Conclusion et implications *Cet article démontre que les pratiques médiatiques alternatives, telles que le journalisme financé collectivement, sont limitées dans leur*

Scott S.D. Mitchell is a PhD candidate and ALiGN Media Lab researcher in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University. Email: Scott.dobson.mitchell@gmail.com . **Merlyna Lim** is Canada Research Chair in Digital Media & Global Network Society, ALiGN Media Lab Director, and Associate Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University. Email: Merlyna.Lim@carleton.ca .

capacité à rejoindre le grand public. Le caractère commercialisé des médias traditionnels rend importante la portabilité, c'est-à-dire la possibilité de transformer des questions complexes en concepts simples ou simplifiés.

Mots clés *Reddit; Syrie; Financement collectif; Journalisme citoyen; Portabilité; Médias sociaux*

Introduction

On January 7, 2017, *The Week in Review* magazine published a special issue about the Battle of Allepo in the Syrian civil war (Syrian Civil War, 2017). Showing a close-up photograph of two Syrian rebel soldiers, one appearing to help the other clip an assault rifle onto his uniform, this special edition focuses on the Battle of Aleppo from a rebel perspective. The issue provides in-depth coverage of the battle, complete with detailed maps, an illustrated analysis, a report from the field, profiles of the rebel's leadership and group, and a story about civilians. Accompanied by a bibliography recounting all the sources used, the edition has a depth and comprehensiveness rarely found in legacy media analysis of a similar event. Beyond the Battle of Aleppo, *The Week in Review* periodically publishes comprehensive reportages of various events from the Syrian crisis. In addition to its informative coverage, the magazine is also visually attractive. Following textbook magazine design, every single issue of *The Week in Review* looks professional and adopts a minimalist aesthetic.

Judging from both its cover and content, the magazine might lead readers to assume that it is produced by a well-established publisher. Interestingly, it is an online crowdsourced production from an internet sub-community on Reddit, an online site predominately known as a source of internet memes, cat pictures, and often strange communities (Ovadia, 2015). A popular social networking site that aggregates online content through user submissions, Reddit is made up of countless "subreddits," which operate as individual Web forums organized around a common interest or purpose (e.g., sharing news around a certain issue, bringing attention to lesser-known bands). *The Week in Review* is produced by users of the subreddit r/SyrianCivilWar, which relies on crowdsourced news, user-created content, and links to social media to generate alternative information about the Syrian crisis. According to some observers, the subreddit has often provided better and more immediate coverage of issues than legacy news media (Ingram, 2013; Strochlic, 2013).

For legacy media platforms, which in most cases are driven by the market, ideology, or a combination of both, covering the Syrian crisis fairly and accurately may not be the highest priority, as pressures from advertisers, profit-making concerns, or power structures from the surrounding nation state may influence media coverage (Graber & Dunaway, 2017; McChesney, 2008). Within Syria, government control and censorship extends over newspapers, magazines, periodicals, books, and other print media (Human Rights Watch, 2010), and the news media is controlled by the state and dominated by propaganda (Al-Ghazzi, 2014). Meanwhile, foreign press covering the crisis, including Canadian news outlets, often frame the crisis in ways that are overly simplistic or misleading (Cozma & Kozman, 2015). By relying on crowdsourced journalism, r/SyrianCivilWar attempts to provide broader, less-biased perspectives on the events and underlying political issues.

This article explores the complexity and dynamics of citizen participation in social media and crowdsourced journalism about the Syrian crisis, focusing on the subreddit r/SyrianCivilWar. The aim is to explore how a complex social issue is represented on a social media platform through a process that unfolds dynamically and is impacted by the structure and affordances of the platform and features of the community, and, ultimately, possibly shapes mainstream perceptions of the issue.

The Syrian crisis, social media, and citizen journalism

In mid-March of 2011, thousands of Syrians took to the streets of Dara'a, Banias, Homs, as well as Damascus, the capital, calling for greater freedom. The mass protest forced the government to recognize that the wave of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, famously labelled "the Arab Spring," had reached Syria. The protest was followed by a series of nationwide protests demanding President Bashar al-Assad's resignation. By July 2011, hundreds of thousands had taken to the streets all across Syria.

Under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad (1970–2000), who seized power in 1970 after a bloodless military coup, the government dealt harshly with domestic opposition, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, a fundamentalist Sunni group that continued to criticize the government until its suppression in 1982. In response to the Muslim Brotherhood's uprising in February 1982 in Hama, the government attacked the city with artillery fire, causing tens of thousands of deaths. Since then, public displays of anti-government sentiment have been very limited. Following the death of al-Assad in 2000, which marked the beginning of the presidency of his son Bashar al-Assad, there was a short-lived period of relative peacefulness that resulted in the release of hundreds of political prisoners. However, there was no meaningful long-term progress made with regard to political freedoms, the protections of human rights, or reformations of the state-controlled economy (Khashanah, 2014).

In 2011, security forces made violent attempts to quell anti-government protests. Yet, rather than dispersing, the protests quickly became more organized, transforming into a more formalized resistance against the government that, in turn, escalated into a civil war (Khashanah, 2014). Over the years, the Syrian crisis has turned into a multisided armed conflict fought by multiple factions: the Syrian government and its allies, a loose alliance of Sunni Arab rebel groups including the Syrian opposition coalition (the Free Syrian Army), the Syrian Democratic Forces (Kurdish majority), Salafy jihadist groups including Al-Nusra Front, and the Islamic States of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS) (Khashanah, 2014). Approximately 4.8 million Syrians (out of the total population of 23 million) have fled the country, with many refugees ending up crossing the border into Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan; an additional 6.6 million have been internally displaced within Syria (Di Giovanni, 2016). By March 2017, almost half a million Syrians had lost their lives or gone missing as a result of the armed conflict in the country (Moore, 2017).

Syrian media have handled the conflict in an autocratic manner. The prevailing media ecology in Syria is characterized by absolute authoritarianism, where the government maintains total control of information and communication (Ghadbian, 2001). In Syria, "media workers are considered government employees, and those in higher positions are required to be loyal party members" (Ghadbian, 2001, p. 76). Its

monopoly over the press allows the state to mobilize the government's agendas through news media, ensuring no place is left for any critical voices or dissents. Further, the state also maintains the right to control books, radio, advertising, and other forms of media, and to confiscate or destroy any works that supposedly threaten state security, through the so-called Ministry of Information (Ghadbian, 2001).

As a key site for the production and dissemination of information, the legacy media, in Syria and elsewhere in the world, often represents a manifestation of political and corporate power. By monopolizing and manipulating discourses, and legitimizing certain narratives while undermining others, the news media in particular can affect public perceptions on the issues and events it covers (Chomsky & Herman, 2002; Hackett & Zhao, 1998). Western media coverage of the Syrian crisis illustrates how geopolitical interests have arguably impacted the way these outlets framed discourses on this conflict by incorporating moral judgements, misinformation, and biases that serve to strengthen certain narratives and discredit others. Research on American news coverage of the Syrian crisis has found that its framing is often "cold" and "distant," possibly a result of "journalists not being able to identify with the Syrians … people from a faraway land that has neither a historical nor a contemporary relation with the United States" (Cozma & Kozman, 2015, p. 680). Further, U.S. official sources have notably dominated the coverage, supporting the frames presented within the stories by drawing on official viewpoints (Cozma & Kozman, 2015).

This article explores r/SyrianCivilWar through the lens of citizen journalism and crowdsourcing. Here, citizen journalism is defined by content that is independently produced and shared by non-professional news organizations or individuals, such as blogs, independent websites, or community radio, allowing individuals beyond the traditional mainstream press to create and widely disseminate information (Beckett & Mansell, 2008; Nip, 2006). Much of the literature on citizen journalism focuses on how digital media are challenging traditional gatekeeping processes, claiming that the internet "defies the whole notion of a 'gate' and challenges the idea that journalists (or anyone else) can or should limit what passes through it" (Singer, 2006, p. 265).

Some scholars view citizen journalism positively as "a reconceptualization of traditional notions of the guard-dog media and the public sphere" (Antony & Thomas, 2010, p. 1280), characterizing it as a form of active citizenship that strengthens democracy (Harcup, 2011) and an invaluable resource for social movements (Kern & Nam, 2009; Kwong, 2015). Other scholars have been more critical, arguing that some public engagement practices embraced by news organizations, such as allowing user contributions on websites, are not true citizen journalism as these often serve not as actual news content but as news sources used by the professional journalists to supplement their own work (Bakker & Pantti, 2009; Storm, 2006).

The phenomena of so-called "participatory news" or citizen journalism is often defined rather partially, merely referring to the aggregation and production of news characterized by user-generated material (Deuze, 2007; Singer, 2006). Efficacious citizen journalism, however, would have impact beyond its production; the content would be readily distributed and shared through platforms that are removed from the gateways of traditional media. Beyond simply adopting participatory practices, citizen

journalism needs to move toward community-oriented media that does not simply package user-generated content into a final product controlled by legacy media but rather a system in which the community is involved in the entire cycle of the publication process (Nip, 2006; Witt, 2004).

Reddit, crowdsourcing, and user mobilization

With over 542 million monthly visitors and 8.19 billion monthly page views, in November 2017, Reddit is the 17th-most-visited website in the world and the fourth-most popular in the United States (Alexa, 2017). Founded by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian in 2005, this popular platform is a combination of social news aggregator, Web content rating, and discussion forum. Reddit's registered community members, called Redditors, can post external links or submit textual content directly hosted on Reddit called "self-posts." Redditors can also vote on other users' submitted content, increasing its visibility through upvotes or, conversely, lowering the submission's score with downvotes, contributing to a continuously updated ranking of the "hottest" submissions. Content entries are clustered by areas of interest in "subreddits." There are more than 850,000 subreddits in which content collections, conversations, and discussion take place, moderated by volunteers. Reddit was designed to draw on crowdsourcing—through users' submissions, comments, voting, and moderation—to capture, categorize, and rank diverse online content.

While it can be utilized for crowdsourcing political information, in the same way as Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms, Reddit, too, is first and foremost a social platform. Although political conversation exists, Redditors predominantly use the platform to talk about games and movies, exchange jokes and funny memes, and share entertaining or controversial news stories. To illustrate, the most trending subreddit on September 6, 2017, was /r/MakeupSelfies, a subreddit where subscribers post "all selfies that include makeup" such as those that "show off how your new lipstick looks with your hair color" (Reddit, 2017). As can be seen in Table 1, the list of 20 most popular subreddits include both entertainment-related subjects such as /r/funny (which is described as a place where "you may only post if you are funny"), /r/gaming, /r/movies, and /r/music as well as subjects like /r/AskReddit, /r/sci-

Table 1: Top subreddits (September 9, 2017)

Rank	Reddit	Subscribers
1	/r/announcements	18,754,551
2	/r/funny	18,003,457
3	/r/AskReddit	17,878,202
4	/r/todayilearned	17,709,430
5	/r/science	17,651,298
6	/r/worldnews	17,577,584
7	/r/pics	17,571,187
8	/r/IAmA	17,248,340
9	/r/gaming	16,914,012
10	/r/videos	16,805,518
11	/r/movies	16,514,138
12	/r/blog	15,985,303
13	/r/aww	15,959,547
14	/r/Music	15,912,518
15	/r/gifs	15,109,158
16	/r/news	15,044,616
17	/r/explainlikeimfive	14,714,027
18	/r/askscience	14,627,973
19	/r/EarthPorn	14,235,148
20	/r/books	13,738,273

Source: Reddit Metric, 2017

ence, and /r/worldnews. Similar to other social media platforms, Reddit features a range of topics that is reflective of the interests of its users.

Since its establishment in 2005, Reddit has been entangled with some major socio-political events, resulting in the mobilization of a large number of users. In 2007, Reddit users, somewhat inadvertently, became involved in a Greenpeace campaign to protect humpback whales from commercial whaling. While Greenpeace was tracking a whale in the South Pacific Ocean as part of a larger project to raise awareness about the issue, an online poll to name the whale was quickly turned into an internet meme as Reddit users organized a coordinated effort to vote for the name "Mister Splashy Pants," which was ultimately announced as the winner of the competition. The added publicity reportedly gave the Greenpeace campaign so much impact and visibility that the Japanese government announced a moratorium on its humpback whale hunt (Vago, 2016).

Following the 2011 introduction of the controversial Stop Online Privacy Act (SOPA) and the Protect IP Act (PIPA) in the United States Congress and Senate, Reddit became the unlikely head of an anti-SOPA vanguard, mobilizing its users and inspiring petitions and boycotts to challenge the proposed legislation. Many internet users were concerned that certain measures would negatively impact freedom of speech, the formation of online communities, the creation of user-generated content, and stifle the development of new intellectual property. On Reddit, several communities—most prominently, /r/SOPA—were created to organize and educate the public about the bills. Reddit was the first major website to announce a " blackout" by making its own platform temporarily inaccessible to users as a protest against the bills. Other major websites such as Wikipedia, Google, Facebook, and Mozilla followed suit, participating in the "black out" or including a link on their homepage to educate users about the legislation (Emerson, 2012).

However, not all mobilizations taking place on Reddit are positive. Cases such as #Gamergate and "The Fappening," both of which took place in 2014 and can be described as anti-feminist and pro-harassment movements, show how the site can be a hub for the mobilization of negative collectivism. In the #Gamergate case, a hashtag movement that was initially created to criticize a perceived lack of ethics within gaming journalism turned into a campaign of "a systematic harassment of female and minority game developers, journalists, and critics and their allies" (Massanari, 2017, p. 330). Meanwhile, "The Fappening" case refers to the mass dissemination of stolen nude celebrity photographs across the Web, notably on subreddit /r/thefappening. Both cases "were emblematic of an ongoing backlash against women and their use of technology and participation in public life" (Massanari, 2017, p. 330). Using these two cases, Adrienne Massanari (2017) argues that Reddit encourages the emergence of toxic cultures, termed "toxic technocultures," exhibiting "retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality, and race and push against issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism" (p. 333).

While acknowledging the existence of toxic collectivisms such as #Gamergate and "The Fappening," this article argues that as a socio-technical platform Reddit does not necessarily determine the culture created within the system. Reddit's techno-social design—its karma point system, ease of user account and subreddit creation, gover-

nance structure and policies around offensive content—does provide affordances for certain usages. Affordances are defined here as the "practices, social habits, and ways of living and interacting" (in Bivens & Hoque, 2018, p. 444) that are embedded within, and allowed by, different socio-technical infrastructures.

Reddit is not just a technical but also a social artefact (see Bivens & Hoque, 2018). The culture of Reddit is co-constructed with relations of its tehno-materiality, socio-cultural processes, and its users. Here it is contended that the culture created within this environment, whether it is democratic or toxic, results from the mutual shaping of and dynamic relationship between users and the platform. By analyzing this process through the case of r/SyrianCivilWar, this article demonstrates the increasingly complex relationship between legacy news outlets, social media, users as consumers and producers of news, and citizen journalism, without succumbing to techno-utopianism or overly optimistic claims of a media revolution. Utilizing r/SyrianCivilWar as a case study, the aim in this article is to illustrate both the strengths and limitations of citizen journalism projects, and the discourses associated with them.

Methodology

Focusing on the Syrian crisis, citizen participation and crowdsourced journalism, and how they relate to a larger media ecology, are analyzed. To do this, a platform analysis (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2016) of the subreddit r/SyrianCivilWar was performed, as well as a discourse analysis of some of its most popular and representative submissions. The origins of this information were also traced to various social media platforms and coverage by several legacy news media outlets. The discourse analysis of the Reddit threads is guided by Ryan Milner (2013), who performed a multimodal critical discourse analysis (CDA) of memes relating to the Occupy Wall Street Movement to explore polyvocality in mediated public discourse. Although Milner (2013) focused on internet memes, his use of CDA to unpack "the form and content of communicative artifacts … and the social practices that inform them" is useful here, as broadly speaking, CDA "emphasizes the relationship between what is communicated and the social realities tied to that communication" (p. 2362). This allows the exploration of not only the immediately present content of the artefacts (Reddit threads), but also, importantly, the context of the messages. CDA is centred around the "socially constitutive" and "socially conditioned" nature of discourse, approaching discourse as a text as well as a discursive practice in which "something is produced, circulated, distributed, consumed in society" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448). Although it traditionally focuses on textual structures, CDA more broadly considers intertextual relationships, unpacking how discourses may be transferred to other settings, practices, cultures, and so forth. Further, multimodal CDA explicitly steps beyond the textual to consider the role of visual images and other features (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). In other words, multimodal CDA examines the design, grammar, organization, and rhetoric of visual representations and other (non-textual) features. This is particularly useful for analyzing objects such as Web pages or other internet content, which often interweave text, image, audio, video, and other features, conveying meaning through a multitude of avenues that are often not explicit.

A corpus of threads was built from the subreddit, sorting by "most popular" of all time. Rather than selecting a particular number of the "top" submissions to analyze more deeply, a breadth of content was examined that reflected the nature of the subreddit, which sees a wide variety of submissions, such as user-created maps that detail the locations of strategic resources or other points of interest in Syria, text posts from users currently residing in Syria, or links to external sources of information such as Tweets or articles. Through this multimodal CDA, a reflexive analysis of the subreddit was performed to inform an understanding of the platform dynamics, as well as how users of the subreddit come together to share information and build a collective understanding of the complexities of the Syrian crisis.

r/SyrianCivilWar: Features, limits, and affordances

The r/SyrianCivilWar was created in May 2013 by Christopher Kingdon, a law student in Cambridge, England (Strochlic, 2013). Displaying its title "Syrian Civil War" in animated text that changes from grey to red and green, the colours of the Syrian flag, the front page of the subreddit r/SyrianCivilWar is not visually distinctive from the front pages of other subreddits. All subreddits look nearly identical, but each of them is somewhat unique in its topic and discussions. In its "About us," r/SyrianCivilWar is described as "news, analysis, discussion and investigative journalism of the conflict in Syria along with the regional and global ramifications." By providing a formal and specific description, r/SyrianCivilWar sets a serious tone and may, arguably, filter its potential members by encouraging only members who are serious about the topic.

In October 2017, the r/SyrianCivilWar had over 58,000 readers and it ranked number 1,505 out of over 1.1 million subreddits. As a comparison, r/funny (one of the top 10 subreddits) has over 18 million readers. Out of 58,000 Redditors, there are 28 moderators and 61 translators whose duties are to translate, and even transcribe, non-English materials (text, audio, and video). Further, there are also editors and contributors of *The Week in Review* magazine, which is the main publication of the subreddit.

The magazine is published regularly and features contributions from users such as news updates, analysis, infographics, and detailed maps that depict battle lines and other information. It provides in-depth and comprehensive information rarely found in the mainstream media coverage of the conflicts. The magazine is a product of crowdsourced journalism and, therefore, it relies on a large number of varied sources instead of official sources. Each issue of the magazine is posted in a Reddit thread where it is available for download as a PDF file or image files, and the contributors answer questions from other users about their pieces. Each issue is also posted on a Twitter account dedicated to sharing the publication, "@ScwWeekInReview."

Moderators, contributors, editors, and translators—all of these roles necessitate time, energy, and skills, yet are performed on a voluntary basis. Scholars reveal that in the digital media era, corporate internet media often depend on the exploitation of users' unpaid (digital) labour, with vast reams of content being produced, edited, moderated, and consumed by large audiences, whose various interactions with this content create value for the platform (Fuchs, 2014; Scholz, 2012). Reddit is arguably a prime example of this. Not only are the moderators of subreddits unpaid volunteers, but the

main "service" of the site—providing content that is conveniently organized and aggregated into the so-called "front page of the Internet"—depends on users freely submitting content, and engaging with it through votes and comments.

Although basic information about Reddit and subreddits—such as the number of subscribers—is readily visible, it is not possible to know the demographics of r/SyrianCivilWar. Some moderators and editors of *The Week in Review* magazine choose to identify their nationalities, which include Israel, Pakistan, Syria, France, and Canada. For example, user samsoninbabylon claims to be from Syria. There are also posts on the subreddit from users who are allegedly sharing firsthand experience, which the moderators have on some occasions claimed to verify. Yet for someone viewing the subreddit, it is not possible to corroborate these claims. While the subreddit presents itself in the vein of a grassroots movement, it is not possible to verify how much of the users and the subreddit's audience is composed of people living in Syria or elsewhere in the Middle East. The subreddit could very well be composed of "elites"— white, educated males living in the West—much like the general demographics of Reddit itself (Madrigal, 2013).

To gain an analytical understanding of the subreddit as a community and platform, and its limits and affordances, the following sections explicate four features that characterize exchanges formed in the r/SyrianCivilWar subreddit, namely: algorithmic driven public discourse, deliberative communication, reflexivity and transparency, and database journalism.

Algorithmic driven public discourse

A post titled "Map: Islamic State Pocket Completely Captured by the Syrian Arab Army" was the top "hot" post in the subreddit on September 23, 2017. Being upvoted 92 percent of the total votes, the map scores 307 points, making it one of the "hottest" posts in the r/SyrianCivilWar subreddit. The map was submitted by user SyrianCivilWarMap, who frequently creates and posts maps of the Syrian conflict that depict changes in controlled territories, captured resources, and other geographically based activities. The subreddit's front page displays the horizontal navigation menu where users can choose different ways to sort posts—such as "new," "rising," "controversial," "top," and "gilded"—in addition to "hot." However, as the default option, the "hot" pages are the most visible pages on Reddit and subreddits. To appear on "hot" pages, a post must have a high score based on a "hot" algorithm that uses two variables to generate ranks: the post's score (determined by upvotes minus downvotes) and time of submission (a time penalty is imposed to advantage new posts and diminish old posts) (Dover, 2008).

Ranking algorithms are central to Reddit users' experiences, activities, and exposures to information. In addition to sorting posts, similar ranking algorithms are also used to sort comments, such as "new," "old," or "top." By default, many subreddits, including r/SyrianCivilWar, sort comments by "best," a weighted algorithm that not only considers the raw score of a comment but the ratio of upvotes to downvotes. In sum, highly upvoted material, both links and comments, is more visible and, thus, receives more attention from users. While each subreddit embraces its own topic, discussion style, rules, and moderation policies, Reddit's all-encompassing ranking

algorithms are the unifying feature that shapes how information is curated, presented, exchanged, and consumed.

Some scholars suggest that crowdsourced online popularity, such as that generated by Reddit algorithmic ranking, reflect intrinsic quality (Stoddard, 2015) and high accuracy (Foody, 2013). In this context, the "wisdom of the crowd" helps users to filter and sort information based on its importance, quality, and accuracy (Weninger, Johnston, & Glenski, 2015). Others, however, suggest that the correlation between quality and popularity is weak, as factors such as social influence and inequality in visibility affect the process of making certain content popular (Muchnik, Aral, & Taylor, 2013; Salganik & Watts, 2009). The scan of "hot" and "best" comments produced in the r/Syrian CivilWar reveals that most popular material is generally of good quality; it was generated and/or synthesized from varied and reliable sources. However, it does not mean that this popularity is neutral from the biases of social influence and inequality in visibility: the "crowd" is neither monolithic nor egalitarian. In practice, algorithmic ranking tends to amplify the voices of a small number of Redditors, namely the most active users who spend considerably more time on the site and who are more outspoken on Reddit than others. As discussed above, although a number of the moderators and editors claim to be from the Middle East and North Africa, this is not possible for a casual viewer of the site to verify. Further, as mentioned earlier, the original creator of the subreddit is a White male law student from England. In their examination of Wikipedia contributors, Eszter Hargittai and Aaron Shaw (2014) found that despite the "egalitarian rhetoric surrounding online cultural production, profound gender inequalities remain," with the most likely contributors being "high-skilled males" (p. 424).

Indeed, these elite human operators have more social and technical influence than other users. Merlyna Lim (2017) describes this kind of formation as "algorithmic enclaves," in which "a group of individuals, facilitated by their constant interactions with algorithms, attempt to create a (perceived) shared identity online" (p. 422). Lim (2017) uses this concept to articulate "forms of tribal nationalism" in which social media users are further entrenched in their political identities and beliefs. What is relevant for the analysis here is the complex, dynamic relationship between users and algorithms, and the way in which this mutual shaping "facilitates amplification processes" (p. 423). In other words, human and algorithmic operators shape and reshape the public discourse on each and every subreddit. Together they govern what is important, determine what needs to be visible (and invisible), and, consequently, influence the direction of political discourse within the community.

Deliberative communication

Despite the fact that Reddit often describes itself as a "new type of community" that attempts to uphold the ideal of free speech and "ultimately be a universal platform for human discourse" (Robertson, 2015, n.p.), the site—and its network of subreddits, including r/SyrianCivilWar—is subject to various forms of gatekeeping. Particularly resonant with the community structure of Reddit is Axel Bruns' (2008) argument that the online news ecosystem is composed of accessible communities that allow people to contribute to collective bodies of knowledge, with gatekeeping transitioning into

gatewatching. In the context of Reddit, moderators perform both gatekeeping and gate-watching, while Redditors are gatewatching each other.

The r/SyrianCivilWar subreddit, in particular, emphasizes rule-bound exchanges. Under the "SyrianCivilWar Rules" section, it prominently lists fifteen rules, which, compared to other subreddits, appears excessive. Political conversations on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, generally speaking, are free from rules and moderations and do not inherently imply the presence of, or the potential for, a rational critical discourse; rules on the other hand imply online communication that is reasoned and purposeful. In this context, the preoccupation of the r/SyrianCivilWar subreddit with rules prompts the investigation of its communicative practices from the lens of deliberation. Briefly defined, deliberation can be understood as "a dialogical practice during which [individuals] seek to convince each other through a discursive exchange" (Mendonça, 2015, p. 90). In his study of the r/Serial subreddit, Michael Buozis' (2017) argues that digital discourse on Reddit can represent a form of deliberative digital democracy where "crowdsourced evidence establishes the 'rational' nature of a constructive, public discourse about the practices of democratic institutions" (p. 2).

As a moderated community, r/SyrianCivilWar applies a practice of moderation that can help increase the deliberative quality of debates and "is crucial to enable respectful, rational, and inclusive online deliberation" (Friess & Eilders, 2015, p. 327). In terms of the general mode of communication, Reddit's asynchronous communication (as opposed to real-time) allows Redditors to participate at their own convenience and spend more time reflecting and justifying their contributions. This type of communication may point to "the deliberative dimensions of rationality, civility, and inclusiveness" (Friess & Eilders, 2015, p. 325). In the case of r/SyrianCivilWar, the rules further augment two of these dimensions, civility and rationality. For example, among r/SyrianCivilWar's rules are "keep all discussion civil," cautioning users to avoid "offensive, violent, bigoted or abusive posts and comments," with "racist, sectarian, or otherwise bigoted comments" resulting in "an immediate ban without warning." These rules exemplify the "civility" dimension. Additionally, the subreddit endorses "rationality" by advising users to post materials and to link only to sources that make claims with "primary evidence" (Syrian Civil War, 2018). It also clarifies that posts from users with "interesting personal stories or perspectives relating to the conflict" are "encouraged," but "must be vetted by the mods [moderators] and scheduled." The rules themselves are not necessarily limiting in their own right. However, the elite operators discussed above are the users who get to determine, shape, and even selectively enforce these rules, deciding, for example, what constitutes "offensive" content that should be removed.

This article does not argue that r/SyrianCivilWar is a digital version of a "public sphere" envisioned by Henry Jenkins (2006) or "a networked public sphere" by Yochai Benkler (2006). While accommodating certain dimensions of deliberative communication, such as civility and rationality, r/SyrianCivilWar lacks the equality and inclusiveness needed for deliberation to truly take place. In the Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 1991), all users have equal access, opportunities, and resources to truly participate, resulting in the empowerment of all. This is certainly not the case in r/SyrianCivilWar, a moderated and hierarchical community where moderators rule

the day and a small number of contributors are more visible than others. In the algo-rithmic community where attention is unequally distributed, the young, male, edu-cated middle class continue to gain more visibility and influence than others. Rather than constituting a Habermasian public sphere, r/SyrianCivilWar represents a stratified bourgeois sphere that produces unequal conditions of participation and exclusion (Habermas, 1991).

Reflexivity and transparency

In September 2017, a Redditor whose display name is guszi posted a map of all the grain silos in Syria (see Figure 1). This popular image, which received almost 600 net upvotes, invited a wave of comments. In total, there were 94 comments debating the importance of the grain silos as resources to control and which factions controlled var-ious areas on the map. Within the comments of the post, users debated military logis-tics and the significance of captured territory, and clarified the design and meaning of the map. This example—where content was produced by individual users, shared on a platform such as Reddit, and engaged with a broader interacting community—demonstrates the increased reflexivity and transparency that citizen journalism can encourage (Goode, 2009).

Figure 1: Location of grain silos in Syria
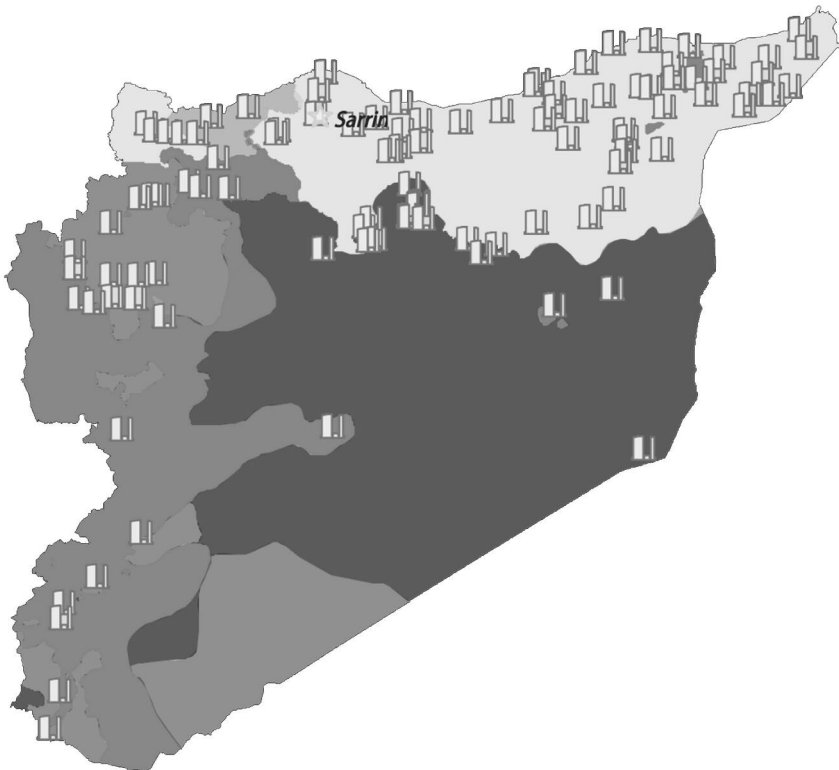
Another example concerns a thread posted on February 5, 2017. Titled "The Original Free Syrian Army Groups of 2011 & Early 2012, Their Commanders, and What Became of Them," it gained 515 points in net score and generated 140 comments. The post linked to an online album with photos and captions detailing stories of Free Syrian Army [FSA] commanders from 2011 and 2012. Other photos and captions in the album described the shifting allegiances and identities of FSA groups. In the comments, Redditors provided their own views on the broader conflict, debated the roles of various outside states and organizations (such as Turkey or the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]), and deliberated more broadly about the dynamics of revolution. Luke Goode (2009) argues that this type of content and the resultant exchange among a network of users construct the news that reflect a horizontal peer-to-peer conversation. The construction of the news is transparent to a larger community, which can scrutinize the decisions that go into the newsmaking.

Citizen journalism involves a re-evaluation of certain convictions, assumptions, and standards of journalism (Ahva, 2013). Whereas traditional journalism involves a separation between journalists and their coverage of an issue, citizen journalism emphasizes connection and engagement. The opaque gatekeeping process of newsmaking, in which organizations and journalists decide what is newsworthy, is also in stark contrast to the more open and transparent form that citizen journalism can allow. Traditional journalism may be characterized by "tensions that result from a clash between the institutional logic of professional control and an ethic of transparency" (Revers, 2014, p. 806). As a citizen journalism project, r/SyrianCivilWar encourages transparency and reflexivity where users may observe and engage directly with the newsmaking process, potentially re-articulating "their role as a helper, accessible collaborator, discussion moderator or 'connector'" (Ahva, 2013, p. 790).

Yet even on a platform that is apparently striving for transparency and openness, users are not privy to every detail of the subreddit's operation and, in turn, decision-making is somewhat "black boxed." Bruno Latour (1999) famously used the term to describe how the "internal complexity" of scientific and technical work is often obscured, with only inputs and outputs visible. In the context of r/SyrianCivilWar, the "black box" obscures not only the poorly understood sorting algorithms of Reddit, but also potentially some of the decisions made by moderators, who are given a more powerful and privileged position over other users and contributors. This practice arguably ensures a certain level of quality and focus, but also potentially undermines the ethics of transparency and openness that citizen journalism projects typically strive for.

Database journalism

Since its creation in 2013, the r/SyrianCivilWar subreddit has accumulated user-generated data and analysis that exemplifies what Goode (2009) describes as "metajournalism"—sites where news is no longer a "carefully composed narrative" but instead functions as "a database" (p. 1296). In contrast to traditional "news as narrative," with its agenda-setting function, "news as database" is a decentralized aggregate of individual data points from a diverse community of users.

The layout of r/SyrianCivilWar visualizes how data is collected, categorized, and curated. On the front page of r/SyrianCivilWar there is a section called "Links" that di-

rects users to pages such as *The Week in Review* magazine, as well as an "Official Subreddit FAQ and Information Guide." The frequently updated "guide" provides a "general overview of the Syrian Civil War," including a content archive of videos, pictures, maps, as well as a timeline with over 100 videos from the first period of the Syrian uprising in 2011. Other information in the guide includes a list of commonly used acronyms, guides to the "factions of the Syrian civil war," information on the population, terrain, weapons and warfare, charities working in Syria and Iraq, and a "Media Bias Guide."

The Media Bias Guide is a comprehensive example of how data is aggregated and then curated for public knowledge. The guide lists media organizations and "their respective biases" where, for each entry, the media organization's supposed bias and its alleged effects (e.g., on opinion pages or new reporting) are listed, along with a summary on its position on the Syrian civil war. The list includes media from varied political alignments such as the Israeli news portals Ha'aretz, which is described as "left-wing [and] pro-peace," as well as Arutz Seva, which is described as "far, far right [and] anti-peace." In this page, commenters are welcome to add additional information, as demonstrated by user iComeWithBadNews, who added information on Al-Akhbar, an Arabic language daily, and user 2ManyFallacies, who added information on a number of media outlets in France.

Among the most comprehensive information posted in the comment area is a detailed post from user purpleolive. This post provided an "overview of the Islamic State's media apparatus," arguing that the group uses a wide range of channels to "project their own image of themselves to the wider world," serving as an important recruitment tool that most Western legacy media outlets overlook. To further the argument, the user described that:

> The IS media apparatus is made up of 38 provincial-level media offices in 11 countries from West Africa to Afghanistan, that all answer to the IS central media command. On top of that, the central media command further controls another 7 media offices tasked with producing nasheeds in a multitude of languages, daily radio reports, longer documentary-style propaganda videos, multiple online magazines, shorter battlefield reports, and more.

The post includes an infographic that illustrates this network of media production (see Figure 2).

The notion of "news as database" (Goode, 2009) is clearly reflected in the practices of crowdsourced journalism of r/SyrianCivilWar. This article argues that r/SyrianCivilWar is a convincing example of the move toward content aggregation, whereby the truth-seeking function of journalism is not necessarily being disrupted, but taking shape in a different form—a database of information, analysis, and commentary. This "curational" form of reportage goes hand in hand with the outburst of online engagement and the declining cost and ease of use of digital technologies and web platforms (Daniel & Flew, 2010). By collecting and presenting the smaller, individual contributions of many users into a more comprehensive package, r/SyrianCivilWar effactually transforms crowdsourced contents into a curational form of reportage, database journalism.

Figure 2: The media apparatus of IS

Portability and the limits of crowdsourced journalism

Despite its limitations, the case of r/SyrianCivilWar demonstrates that the structure, features, and affordances of the Reddit platform allow for the development of online communities that promote and sustain citizen exchanges and engagement. As exemplified by the case of r/SyrianCivilWar, such communities can also facilitate citizen crowdsourced journalism projects to potentially challenge legacy media narratives. The production of in-depth, nuanced, and comprehensive coverage of the Syrian crisis in the form of *The Week in Review* magazine is among the most exemplary outcomes of this crowdsourced journalism project.

Yet this proclivity for nuanced, comprehensive debate and coverage is arguably the same characteristic that prevents a community such as r/SyrianCivilWar from achieving further recognition across the broader Reddit platform and beyond. Despite being covered and sourced by major legacy news media, such as *Time* magazine and the *Daily Beast*, the impact of r/SyrianCivilWar has been somewhat limited. Its Twitter account, @SyrianCivilWar, for example, has only 315 followers. Similarly, with only 65 likes and 64 followers, its Facebook community group also suffers an extremely low exposure. Further, while *The Week in Review* may have high production values, its circulation through broader networks is notably constrained, as evidenced by the relatively low number of retweets and likes on Twitter and engagement on other social media platforms. There are often as few as nine or ten retweets and likes of the tweets from the @SCWWeekinReview account.

Compared to other, markedly more popular Reddit-based activism, such as the anti-SOPA and PIPA initiative or the "Mister Splashy Pants" petition, the broader circulation of r/SyrianCivilWar may be hampered by the very nature of the community. Whereas the other movements could be reduced or distilled into a small, digestible concept that was conveyed easily and quickly (stop SOPA/PIPA because they will infringe on privacy rights and creativity; simply name a whale), the very point of r/SyrianCivilWar is to challenge simple, dominant narratives and offer up alternative, more nuanced discourses. Portability, a term coined here to refer to the capacity for movements and initiatives to be distilled into readily-spreadable narratives, may be an important factor in the success (or failure) to spread into mainstream consciousness.

In *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013) describe the concept of "spreadability," which refers to "the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes" (p. 3). Jenkins et al. (2013) argue that media content designed for spreadability must be built on an understanding of audience's motivation, needs, and desires. Further, they maintain that spreadable content is meaningful, is easily accessible, invites conversations, encourages users to share, and allows users to convey something of themselves (Jenkins et al., 2013). Hence, they deem that the spreadability is largely user-driven, arguing that spreadable media can be manipulated and circulated by everyone. The notion of portability works against this backdrop. In practice, not everyone has (equal) access to content production and circulation. Further, the content preferences of users are not independent from the culture of consumption built into the larger media landscape. In this vast environment, portability is the currency.

Portability can be defined as a characteristic attributed to archetypal content that can be easily carried by and/or moved across multiple and overlapped media networks. Hence, the portability of a social movement or initiative refers to whether or not its substantive meaning can be effectively distilled and conveyed, such as the Occupy Wall Street movement being reduced to the "99%" concept[1] (Milner, 2013), resonating with the larger public by connecting to broader ideas about economic inequality. Similarly, the SOPA/PIPA protests on Reddit took complex legislature and policies and distilled them into a simple message: that creative expression and online community were being threatened (also see Dobson & Knezevic, 2018; Knezevic, Pasho, & Dobson, 2018).

The media landscape is an overcrowded environment where the networks are vast, the content is overabundant, and the attention spans are extremely short. In this milieu, portability enables a campaign or initiative to travel widely to the larger mainstream public, and maybe even translate into populist initiatives, by embracing the principles of the contemporary culture of consumption, namely: light, oversimplified, hyped, and sensationalized (Lim, 2013). Further, portability is also less likely "when the narrative is contested by dominant competing narratives generated in mainstream media" (Lim, 2013, p. 638). In the context of the Syrian crisis, the nuanced, balanced, and comprehensive coverage of r/SyrianCivilWar is at odds with overly simplistic legacy media narratives that predominantly revolve around ISIS and terrorism.

As a community-oriented media production, r/SyrianCivilWar embodies what Bruns (2008) terms "produsage," a paradigm shift marked by collaboration and distribution through alternative, open networks. Scholars argue that such platforms increasingly allow sources beyond the legacy media to produce and widely distribute information (Hamdy, 2009; Noor, 2017). This argument is in line with predictions of citizen journalism becoming increasingly mainstream (Greer & McLaughlin, 2010), with "hybridized practices" of participatory content aggregation through social networking sites challenging traditional conceptions "of 'what counts' as a valid form of journalistic evidence" (Anderson, 2013, p. 1008). Contrary to this prediction, this analysis of r/SyrianCivilWar demonstrates that this social networking environment is part of a larger media system where the logic and practices of the legacy media are prevalent. On one hand, through its hybridized practices of citizen crowdsourced journalism, r/SyrianCivilWar offers an avenue for bypassing the gatekeeping of news production, releasing it from economic considerations, advertiser pressures, and organizational norms and values (Harmon, 1989; Livingston & Bennett, 2003). On the other hand, the spreadability of its content to the larger public is constrained by the practices of news consumption of the larger media landscape. In this market-driven environment, the commodification of news and news corporate power still prevail.

Conclusion
The r/SyrianCivilWar case provides an instructive case study for the dynamics of a citizen journalism project with a network of highly engaged contributors and readers working together—within the constraints of the platform—in an attempt to provide more comprehensive coverage on an issue. This analysis identified four features—algorithmic driven public discourse, deliberative communication, reflexivity and trans-

parency, and database journalism—that undergird the functioning of the community, and have broader implications for citizen journalism projects. While representing an operative crowdsourced project where users play an active role in information sharing and newsgathering, r/SyrianCivilWar is by no means an egalitarian community. Reddit ranking algorithms and the stratified nature of the community lead to unequal conditions for participation and obscure the decision-making process.

The r/SyrianCivilWar case also brings to a critical lens an uneasy and paradoxical relationship between alternative journalism and the larger media system. Alternative media practices, including citizen and/or crowdsourced journalism such as r/SyrianCivilWar, operate within and are embedded in systems of control, power, and domination in the larger media system. Hence, issues and interests that dominate legacy media prescribe what is portable and what is not. In this context, the portability—the capacity for a complex issue to be distilled and communicated—may explain the relative lack of broader success for r/SyrianCivilWar, and may be a useful tool for understanding the resonance of certain social issues and movements.

Referring to content generated by social media users, Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) once said, "If it doesn't spread, it's dead" (p. 293), arguing that a spreadable content is, at least, meaningful. A comprehensive coverage of the Syrian crisis produced by r/SyrianCivilWar may not be meaningful for everybody, but is certainly evocative of filling the need for a deeper and better understanding of the world. Further, it is also in accordance with the purpose of "meaningful" news journalism, a utility to empower the informed (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). The commodified landscape of media, however, is too crowded for alternative, multifaceted citizen crowdsourced journalism. In this market-driven environment, if it is deep, nuanced, or complex, it is dead.

Note

1. "We are the 99%" is a political slogan coined and widely used by the Occupy movement that refers to the majority of people who have vastly less income and resources than the "1%" of wealthy elites.

References

Ahva, Laura. (2013). Public journalism and professional reflexivity. *Journalism, 14*(6), 790–806.

Alexa. (2017, November 17). *Reddit.com traffic, demographics and competitors.* URL: https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/reddit.com [January 26, 2018].

Al-Ghazzi, Omar. (2014). "Citizen journalism" in the Syrian uprising: Problematizing Western narratives in a local context. *Communication Theory, 24*(4), 435–454.

Anderson, Christopher William. (2013). What aggregators do: Towards a networked concept of journalistic expertise in the digital age. *Journalism, 14*(8), 1008–1023.

Antony, Mary G., & Thomas, Ryan J. (2010). 'This is citizen journalism at its finest': YouTube and the public sphere in the Oscar Grant shooting incident. *New Media & Society, 12*(8), 1280–1296.

Bakker, Piet, & Pantti, Mervi. (2009, September). *Beyond news: User-generated content on Dutch media websites.* Presented at the Future of Journalism Conference. Cardiff, UK: Cardiff University.

Beckett, Charlie, & Mansell, Robin. (2008). Crossing boundaries: New media and networked journalism. *Communication, Culture and Critique, 1*(1), 92–104.

Benkler, Yochai. (2006). *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bivens, Rena, & Shah Hoque, Anna. (2018). Programming sex, gender, and sexuality: Infrastructural failures in "feminist" dating app Bumble. *Canadian Journal of Communication, 43*(3), 441–459.

Blommaert, Jan, & Bulcaen, Chris. (2000). Critical discourse analysis. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *29*(1), 447–466.

Bruns, Axel. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: From production to produsage.* Bern, CH: Peter Lang.

Buozis, Michael. (2017). Doxing or deliberative democracy? Evidence and digital affordances in the Serial subReddit. *Convergence*, 1–17. doi:10.1177/1354856517721809

Chomsky, Noam, & Herman, Edward. (2002). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media.* New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Cozma, Raluca, & Kozman, Claudia. (2015). The Syrian crisis in the news. *Journalism Practice*, *9*(5), 669–686.

Deuze, Marc. (2007). *Media work.* Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Di Giovanni, Janine. (2016). *The morning they came for us: Dispatches from Syria.* New York, NY: Liveright.

Dobson, Kathy, & Knezevic, Irena. (2018). "Ain't nobody got time for that!": Framing and stereotyping in legacy and social media. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *43*(3), 381–397.

Dover, Danny. (2008, February 7). Reddit, Stumbleupon, Del.icio.us and Hacker News algorithms exposed! URL: https://moz.com/blog/reddit-stumbleupon-delicious-and-hacker-news-algorithms-exposed [January 26, 2018].

Emerson, Ramona. (2012, January 11). Reddit calls for blackout to protest anti-piracy bills. *Huffington Post.* URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/11/reddit-blackout-sopa-pipa-protest_n_1198740.html [January 26, 2018].

Foody, Giles M. (2013). Rating crowdsourced annotations: evaluating contributions of variable quality and completeness. *International Journal of Digital Earth*, *17*(8), 650–670.

Friess, Dennis, & Eilders, Christiane. (2015). A systematic review of online deliberation research. *Policy & Internet*, *7*(3), 319–339.

Fuchs, Christian. (2014). Social media and the public sphere. *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, *12*(1), 57–101.

Ghadbian, Najib. (2001). Contesting the state media monopoly: Syria on Al-Jazira television. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, *5*(2), 75–87.

Goode, Luke. (2009). Social news, citizen journalism and democracy. *New Media & Society*, *11*(8), 1287–1305.

Graber, Doris A., & Dunaway, Johanna. (2017). *Mass media and American politics.* Washington, DC: Cq Press.

Greer, Chris, & McLaughlin, Eugene. (2010). We predict a riot? Public order policing, new media environments and the rise of the citizen journalist. *The British Journal of Criminology*, *50*(6), 1041–1059.

Habermas, Jurgen. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society.* Cambridge, MA: MIT press.

Hackett, Robert A., & Zhao, Yuezhi. (1998). *Sustaining democracy? Journalism and the politics of objectivity.* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Hamdy, Naila. (2009). Arab citizen journalism in action: Challenging mainstream media, authorities and media laws. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, *6*(1), 92–112.

Harcup, Tony. (2011). Alternative journalism as active citizenship. *Journalism*, *12*(1), 15–31.

Hargittai, Eszter, & Shaw, Aaron. (2015). Mind the skills gap: The role of internet know-how and gender in differentiated contributions to Wikipedia. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(4), 424–442.

Harmon, Mark D. (1989). Market size and local television news judgment. *Journal of Media Economics*, *2*(1), 15–29.

Human Rights Watch. (2010, July 16). A wasted decade: Human rights in Syria during Bashar al-Asad's first ten Years in power. URL: https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/07/16/wasted-decade/human-rights-syria-during-bashar-al-asads-first-ten-years-power [January 26, 2018].

Ingram, Mathew. (2013, December 17). *Lessons in the crowdsourced verification of news from Storyful and Reddit's Syria forum.* URL: https://gigaom.com/2013/12/17/lessons-in-the-crowdsourced-verification-of-news-from-storyful-and-reddits-syria-forum/ [January 26, 2018].

Jenkins, Henry. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide.* New York, NY: NYU Press.

Jenkins, Henry, Ford, Sam, & Green, Joshua. (2013). *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture.* New York, NY: NYU Press.

Kern, Thomas, & Nam, Sang-Hui. (2009). The making of a social movement: Citizen journalism in South Korea. *Current Sociology, 57*(5), 637–660.

Khashanah, Khaldoun. (2014). The Syrian crisis: a systemic framework. *Contemporary Arab Affairs, 7*(1), 1–21.

Knezevic, Irena, Pasho, Julie, & Dobson, Kathy. (2018). Of "bigots" and "barbarians": Debating rights with #Sealfie. *Canadian Journal of Communication, 43*(3), 421–439.

Kovach, Bill, & Rosenstiel, Tom. (2007). *The elements of journalism: What newspeople should know and the public should expect.* New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Kress, Gunther R., & Van Leeuwen, Theo. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design.* East Sussex, UK: Psychology Press.

Kwong, Ying-Ho. (2015). The dynamics of mainstream and Internet alternative media in Hong Kong: A case study of the Umbrella Movement. *International Journal of China Studies, 6*(3), 273–295.

Latour, Bruno. (1999). *Pandora's hope: Essays on the reality of science studies.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lim, Merlyna. (2013). Many clicks but little sticks: Social media activism in Indonesia. *Journal of Contemporary Asia, 43*(4), 636–657.

Lim, Merlyna. (2017). Freedom to hate: Social media, algorithmic enclaves, and the rise of tribal nationalism in Indonesia. *Critical Asian Studies, 49*(3), 411–427.

Lim, Merlyna, & Kann, Mark E. (2008). Politics: Deliberation, mobilization and networked practices of agitation. In K. Varnelis (Ed.), *Networked publics* (pp. 77–107). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Livingston, Sonia, & Bennett, Lance W. (2003). Gatekeeping, indexing, and live-event news: Is technology altering the construction of news? *Political Communication, 20*(4), 363–380.

Madrigal, Alexis C. (2013, July 3). Reddit demographics in one chart. *The Atlantic.* URL: https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/07/reddit-demographics-in-one-chart/277513/ [January 26, 2018].

Massanari, Adrienne L. (2017). #Gamergate and the Fappening: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New Media & Society, 19*(3), 329–346.

McChesney, Robert W. (2008). *The political economy of media: Enduring issues, emerging dilemmas.* New York, NY: NYU Press.

Mendonça, Ricardo Fabrino. (2015). Assessing some measures of online deliberation. *Brazilian Political Science Review, 9*(3), 88–115.

Milner, Ryan M. (2013). Pop polyvocality: Internet memes, public participation, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. *International Journal of Communication, 7*(34), 2357–2390.

Moore, Jack. (2017, March 13). *Syria war death toll hits 321,000 with further 145,000 missing: Monitor.* URL: https://in.news.yahoo.com/syria-war-death-toll-hits-171426253.html [January 26, 2018].

Muchnik, Lev, Aral, Sinan, & Taylor, Sean J. (2013). Social influence bias: A randomized experiment. *Science, 341*(6146), 647–651.

Nip, Joyce YM. (2006). Exploring the second phase of public journalism. *Journalism Studies, 7*(2), 212–236.

Noor, Rabia. (2017). Citizen journalism vs. mainstream journalism: A study on challenges posed by amateurs. *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications, 3*(1), 55–76.

Ovadia, Steven. (2015). More than just cat pictures: Reddit as a curated news source. *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian, 34*(1), 37–40.

Plantin, Jean-Christophe, Lagoze, Carl, Edwards, Paul N., & Sandvig, Christian. (2016). Infrastructure studies meet platform studies in the age of Google and Facebook. *New Media & Society, 20*(1), 293–310.

Reddit. (2017). MakeupSelfie. URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/MakeupSelfies/ [January 26, 2018].

Reddit Metric. (2017, September 9). Top Subreddits. URL: http://redditmetrics.com/top [January 26, 2018].

Revers, Matthias. (2014). The twitterization of news making: Transparency and journalistic profes-
      sionalism. *Journal of Communication, 64*(5), 806–826.

Robertson, Adi. (2015, July 15). *Was Reddit always about free speech? Yes, and no.* URL: https://
      www.theverge.com/2015/7/15/8964995/reddit-free-speech-history [January 26, 2018].

Salganik, Matthew J., & Watts, Duncan J. (2009). Web-based experiments for the study of collective
      social dynamics in cultural markets. *Topics in Cognitive Science, 1*(3), 439–468.

Scholz, Trebor. (2012). *Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory.* London, UK: Routledge.

Singer, Jane B. (2006). Stepping back from the gate: Online newspaper editors and the co-production
      of content in campaign 2004. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 83*(2), 265–280.

Stoddard, Greg. (2015). Popularity and quality in social news aggregators: A study of Reddit and Hacker
      News. In *Proceedings of the 24th International Conference on World Wide Web* (pp. 815–818).
      New York, NY: ACM.

Storm, Elizabeth Jordan. (2006). *The endurance of gatekeeping in an evolving Newsroom: A multi-
      method study of web-generated citizen content.* Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina.

Strochlic, Nina. (2013, November 7). How the Syrian war subreddit scoops mainstream media. URL:
      http://www.thedailybeast.com/how-the-syrian-war-subreddit-scoops-mainstream-media
      [January 26, 2018].

Syrian Civil War (2017, January 7). *The Week in Review: The Battle of Allepo, rebel perspective.* URL:
      https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BzdGQubygdCbVW9CUWZ1ao1uVnM/view [January 26,
      2018].

Syrian Civil War (2018). Important new rules/guidelines regarding Twitter content posted to the
      subreddit. *Reddit.com.* URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/syriancivilwar/comments/55nob0
      /important_new_rulesguidelines_regarding_twitter/ [January 26, 2018].

Vago, Mike. (2016, April 17). *A decade before Boaty McBoatface, the internet came together to name a
      whale.* URL: https://aux.avclub.com/a-decade-before-boaty-mcboatface-the-internet-came-
      t0g-1798246349 [January 26, 2018].

Weninger, Tim, Johnston, Thomas James, & Glenski, Maria. (2015). Random voting effects in social-
      digital spaces: A case study of reddit post submissions. In *Proceedings of the 26th ACM con-
      ference on hypertext & social media* (pp. 293–297). New York, NY: ACM.

Witt, Leonard. (2004). Is public journalism morphing into the public's journalism? *National Civic
      Review, 93*(3), 49–57.