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 This file image made from video and released by Shaam News Network and accessed Thursday, Aug. 23, 2012, which is consistent with other AP reporting, purports to show the funeral of children in Daraya, near Damascus, Syria. Amid all the bloodshed, confusion and deadlock of Syria's civil war, one fact is emerging after 2½ years - no conflict ever has been covered this way. Amateur videographers - anyone with a smartphone, Internet access and an eagerness to get a message out to the world _ have driven the world's outlook on the war through YouTube, Twitter and other social media. (AP Photo/Shaaam News Network SNN via AP video, File)

SYRIA'S 'TWITTER JIHAD'



Social media is hardly immune from the fog of war.

For the first time in history, a full-blown conflict is playing out on social media.

Citizens on the scene and combatants themselves are the driving force behind what the world knows about the bloodbath in Syria that has left more than 100,000 dead and millions on the run.

Since violence flared in March 2011, tens of thousands of videos, photos, and eyewitness accounts have appeared on YouTube, Twitter, and other online platforms. When escalating warfare and rigid government restrictions sidelined the foreign press corps, social media filled the void.

Reporter Deborah Richards of the Australian Broadcast Corporation made an apt comparison. While Vietnam went down in history as the first "television war," the Syrian conflict has become "the first social media war – the Twitter jihad," she wrote in June (<https://au.news.yahoo.com/a/24287315/the-twitter-jihad-isis-insurgents-in-iraq-syria-using-social-media-to-re->

cruit-fighters-promote-violence). Richards noted that some combatants are tweeting as they fight.

A study earlier this year by the United States Institute for Peace bears her out. Researchers described (<http://www.usip.org/publications/syrias-socially-mediated-civil-war>) the Syrian war as “the most socially mediated civil conflict in history” and concluded “social media have revolutionized the way that the world has understood the Syrian conflict.”

“During the first Gulf War, we talked about the CNN effect,” says Marc Lynch, director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University, and one of the study’s authors. “In Syria, social media are driving the narrative.”

For traditional news outlets, the torrent of social media sources inside Syria has been a mixed blessing. Editors are faced with sorting out truth from the vicious propaganda generated by all factions in the civil war. “This information could not be independently verified” has become the dictum du jour.

Case in point: A video clip on YouTube shows a rebel commander bending over a dead Syrian Army soldier, hacking into his chest with a knife. He reaches down and pulls out what appears to be a lung.

Turning toward the camera, he says, “I swear, we will eat from your hearts and livers, you dogs of Bashar,” referring to loyalists of Syrian President Bashar al- Assad. He lifts the bloody lung to his mouth and bites into it.

Posted on a pro-government website in May of last year, journalists had to determine: Was the video staged to paint rebels as savages or did the barbarous act really occur? Answers are not easy to come by.

For foreign correspondents and local journalists reporting from inside Syria has been a logistical nightmare.



(<http://globaljournalist.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/AP606605223434.jpg>)

This July 15, 2013, file image taken from leaked video obtained by Ugarit News purports to show a fireball from an explosion at a weapons depot set off by rocket attacks that struck government-held districts in the central Syrian city of Homs. Never in history has a war been covered in the way that Syria's civil war has: A constant stream of hundreds of thousands of videos instantaneously bringing all the viciousness, brutality and gore instantaneously and vividly to millions of viewers across the globe via YouTube and social media. (AP Photo/Ugarit News via AP video)

For the second year in a row, the Committee to Protect Journalists has named (<http://cpj.org/2014/03/syria-the-most-dangerous-place-for-journalists.php>) Syria the deadliest spot in the world for the media. Sixty-four journalists have been killed and 80 kidnapped since the war started. Around 30 remain missing, including American freelancer Austin Price. CPJ calls the number of kidnappings "unprecedented."

From the beginning, President Assad's regime took an iron-fisted approach, threatening and arresting local journalists and expelling foreigners. Visas were issued sparingly, and security agents dogged those who did get in, restricting them to government-controlled areas.

Many journalists hired smugglers to guide them across the border, carrying only what they could jam into a backpack. Once inside, they operated covertly.

As conditions deteriorated, newsroom managers scaled back operations inside Syria, moving personnel to Turkey, Lebanon and other regional hubs. News outlets were forced to rely more on second-hand and unverified informa-

tion.

Magda Abu-Fadil, director of the Beirut-based Media Unlimited, calls reliance on social media “a double-edge sword.” “[Social media] help provide vital information that traditional media have been unable to obtain, but they also have misused it to disseminate disinformation,” says Abu-Fadil, a veteran journalist in the region. “One has to take it on a case-by-case basis.”

She points to safeguards, such as computer programs that can detect fake photos and videos, and to social media users who are also quick to call out misleading reports.

Sometimes, all it takes is a keen eye.

On Sept. 7, Reuters distributed photos by free-lancer Hamid Khatib of a 10-year old working in a munitions factory alongside his father for the Free Syrian Army in the town of Aleppo. The headline (<https://nppa.org/news/reuters-denies-ethical-allegations-while-some-syria-photos-still-questioned>) read: “Boy Rebel Makes Weapons.”

Donald Winslow, editor of News Photographer, the magazine of the National Press Photographers Association, spotted obvious red flags.

“The captions bear no explanation about how a 10-year-old child knows how to build mortar shells and repair artillery. Also, there are no other workers seen in the empty, dimly lit warehouse. If this is indeed a rebels’ munitions factory there is no explanation of why a child is alone there, working and unsupervised,” Winslow wrote in a March column.

Reuters did not respond to his inquiries about vetting procedures. They refused to comment on whether Khatib still worked for them. Reuters issued a [statement \(http://www.bag-newsnotes.com/2014/03/were-reuters-boy-in-a-syrian-bomb-factory-photos-staged/#sthash.lhf2fLn7.dpuf\)](http://www.bag-newsnotes.com/2014/03/were-reuters-boy-in-a-syrian-bomb-factory-photos-staged/#sthash.lhf2fLn7.dpuf) saying they had thoroughly investigated the claims “and established to our satisfaction that the pictures were not staged.”



(<http://globaljournalist.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/AP427940449439.jpg>)

This May 29, 2013 file image made from video posted by Shaam News Network, which is consistent with other AP reporting, shows a Free Syrian Army fighter firing a rocket propelled grenade in Aleppo, Syria, targeting a Syrian regime stronghold. (AP Photo/Sham News Network via AP video)

In this case, the jury still is out. The film clip of the rebel leader biting into a lung was verified when TIME magazine tracked him down.

During a May 14 interview with TIME, Khalid al-Hamad, commander of the Omar al-Farouk Brigade, explained his actions. "We opened his cell phone and I found a clip of a woman and her two daughters fully naked and he [the dead soldier] was humiliating them, and sticking a stick here and there," Hamad told TIME (<http://world.time.com/2013/05/14/we-will-slaughter-all-of-them-an-interview-with-the-man-behind-the-syrian-atrocity-video/>).

"These 27 seconds of footage provide a glimpse at how brutal the Syrian war has become — and a startling example of how technology appears to be fueling that brutality," wrote Ayn Baker, TIME's Middle East bureau chief.

Baker's comment raised the questions: When terror groups self-promote by showing off their slaughter, how much should be included in news reports? How does the principle of minimizing harm fit into the equation?

Reporter Stephen Marche faced that quandary in a June 26 story for Esquire about the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, known as ISIS.

Marche portrayed the black-clad militia as, "A new, purer form of radical jihad — more terrify-

ing and more evil than any brand the recent past has seen. Nowhere is this clearer than in the truly infernal propaganda they have recently distributed online.”

He described (<http://www.esquire.com/blogs/news/isis-propaganda>) ISIS's latest online videos as “virtually indistinguishable from snuff” and chose not to include a link in his story. Instead, he focused on what the horrifying propaganda revealed about terrorists who leave atrocities in their wake.

For better or for worse, cyberspace has changed how the world is watching war. There is no going back.

Social media will remain an important point of first contact, a way to gain access to the action on the ground, says Middle East expert Marc Lynch. What is playing out in Syria could be a template for future conflicts, especially in situations where traditional news correspondents are held at bay.

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