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Covering the Syrian conflict : how Middle East reporters deal with challenging situations

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## **Introduction**

Reporters covering the Middle East are often confronted with situations where information is notoriously hard to verify, and where confrontations with witnesses' harsh realities can be extraordinarily intense. How does one deal with claims that there are no chemical weapons in Syria, for instance, if no foreign visitors are allowed to enter the neighbourhoods where the attacks allegedly took place? And how far does one go in adopting or contextualising the story of a crying little girl blaming 'terrorists' for destroying her life, if you are taken to her by a regime official, who considers every form of opposition an act of terror? Under such conditions, reporters can hardly rely upon seemingly self-evident routines, nor can they simply re-vert to general values such as impartiality or bearing witness without much further ado. Instead, they find themselves forced to make judgements on particular situations every time again. While this is arguably the case for any journalist, irrespective of the topic or place (s)he reports upon, covering the Middle East seems to drive these challenges to a rather extreme form. It is in these concrete situations, then, that more abstract values acquire their practical meaning.

More than a decade ago, these challenges attracted a great deal of scholarly attention due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Allan and Zelizer 2004a; Thussu and Freedman 2003; Tumber and Palmer 2004). This interest resurged more recently in the wake of the 2011 uprisings, leading scholars to explore a wide range of fascinating new topics, such as the role of social media in spreading user generated content (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013a; Harb 2011), or the rise of citizen journalism (Howard and Hussain 2013; Khamis and Vaughn 2011). This wide interest in social and citizen media, still leaves many questions unanswered though, most importantly perhaps, on how mainstream journalists continue their struggle to cope with the immense difficulties in covering these new conflicts. This article then, draws on the particular case of Dutch and Flemish reporters to provide at least some answers to the following two questions: first, what are the challenges encountered by journalists covering Syria, and how do they respond to these? And second, how do these journalists practically apply more general values through a series of particular judgements on actually emerging situations?

### **1. Studying journalistic practices through situations**

Understanding how these challenges are experienced and responded to by journalists, requires at least a minimal awareness of the cultural constructions guiding their practices. In this vein, the last few decades have seen a rising scholarly interest in journalistic cultures and values. These studies' merits are undisputed, as they allow, for instance, to distinguish different (national) journalistic cultures (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Hanitzsch 2012), to deepen our understanding of journalists' values and role conceptions (Boudana 2010; Pantti 2010; Zhang 2013), to trace longitudinal changes in these conceptions (Deuze 2005; Wu and Hamilton 2004) as well as in their practices (Archetti 2013; Hamilton and Jenner 2004) and to relate these to demographic, educational and organisational characteristics (Hess 1996; Weaver and Willnat 2012). Nevertheless, their methodological design provides us with primarily indirect links to how journalists deal with challenges in actually emerging situations, as they tend to incite self-reflexive responses on abstract value conceptions and general

role orientations. In other words, while this strand of the literature produces a great deal of information on what values *are*, and to which *structural variables* they relate, they tell us less on *how* these values work in practice, and how they translate into *judgments* on particular situations. What does it mean, for instance, to endorse a watchdog role if you have little more than unreliable rumours to pit against a more powerful actor? And under which conditions do journalists that are generally oriented more towards an impartial rather than an engaged role, revoke to more subjectivist, emotion-driven reporting styles?

Presumably the best way to explore these situated judgements is by conducting long-term ethnographies on how the news is made (Bird 2010; Cottle 2007; Hannerz 2004). One of the obvious difficulties in studying war journalism, however, is gaining access to the field – at least without running extreme risks or increasing those run by your respondents. This helps to explain why so few ethnographic studies of war correspondents exist (Pedelty 1996), apart from the surrogate of (former) journalists' autobiographical accounts.<sup>1</sup> To tackle these barriers, this article therefore explores the merit of a different theoretical and methodological approach, designed to bring these situated judgements to the fore.

In *On Justification* (2006) Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot devote considerable attention to ambivalent 'situations', in which actors encounter a number of subjects or objects that can be interpreted along the lines of different 'regimes' (e.g. market-driven efficiency or loyalty to traditional family structures). In contrast to more self-evident, routine interpretations and actions, these ambivalent situations require a particular judgement and possibly, a more extensive process of deliberation and discussion. The main advantage of focussing primarily on these situations is that it allows us to draw more attention to how actors deal with the structural ambivalences emerging from the incompatible logic of particular 'regimes', fields or systems. As such, situations serve as hot spots where more general values (e.g. verification, impartiality, watchdog role, engagement) are applied and realised in a more practical context. For our purposes, furthermore, identifying and describing these situations promises to be a relevant endeavour in and by itself, as the situations mainstream journalists encounter in Syria have received only scant scholarly attention (Salama 2012).

More precisely, a *situation* can thus be understood as a configuration of elements (whether they be human subjects or material objects) providing a challenge to journalists by requiring them to make a *judgement* on how the situation should be interpreted and acted upon. When journalists are brought by the regime to a group of expressively mourning women whose men have been allegedly killed by rebel forces, they are forced to make a particular judgement on precisely what it means to maintain an 'objective, impartial' stance, or how far they can go in relating these women's emotions as a 'subjective reality' to their political context. All the elements that are present in such a situation, thus need to be taken into account (e.g. by whom and why were they taken to these women? What role did journalists' own emotional response play in deciding how to cover this story?).

*Strategies*, then, are the practices journalists revoke to in order to endorse particular values (e.g. showing different perspectives, places and peoples of a single topic) in challenging conditions (e.g. physical access is available only to one of the actors involved). To effectuate these values in their professional practice, journalists or their editors covering Syria thus had to revoke to particular and

sometimes creative 'strategies', some of which were new to the actors involved. Even though journalists seemed 'forced' to revoke to particular practices in response to difficult situation, what interests us here is the variety and divergences between these responses. In a wider sense, these strategies can thus be related to a struggle to maintain and protect the autonomy of journalists from external pressure on their work (e.g. by some of the actors involved in the war) (Hannerz 2004; Schudson and Anderson 2009).

More generally however, Boltanski and Thévenot are interested in the justification processes with which actors decide on how to interpret and act upon a myriad of situations. Their primary objective is to map the total sum of arguments that are logically available to actors. In doing so, they rely theoretically upon six strands of political philosophy (e.g. on the merit of 'competition' for society at large), and empirically, upon handbooks and manuals (e.g. on how to make one's organisation more competitive). In this article, by contrast, the main emphasis lies not so much on the cognitive-discursive justification processes incited by such situations, but rather on the 'situated judgements' and 'practices' as such. This means, more, precisely that attention is drawn less to how journalists 'justify' taking a particular decision vis-à-vis their colleagues or editors, and more on what it is that makes them decide to act and interpret things in a particular way. The reason for taking this approach, is that it enables us to focus more on the role of unconscious processes impacting these judgements (e.g. editorial policies to which journalists are bound, or the role played by intense emotions), instead of overly concentrating on the verbal arguments that are logically available by the actors involved (Benatouil 1999). To sum up, the article proceeds by first identifying these challenging situations that are characteristic for covering Syria, before exploring how reporters have dealt with them through a series of particular judgements.

## **2. Method**

Methodologically, this article builds on in-depth interviews that were designed specifically to identify and explore concrete situations and the judgments they incited. More concretely, the interviews were preceded and informed by a preparatory study of the participating journalists' news stories, thereby mapping the general outlook of all their stories on Syria (which topics they dealt with most often, such as the refugee crisis, geopolitics or military evolvments) as well as providing an in-depth, qualitative analysis of up to 30 of their reports. While the results of this preparatory study will be discussed in fuller detail in a separate article, the main goal of the qualitative analysis for this article was to identify differences in reporting (e.g. phenomenological approaches), the narratives that were used (e.g. universal suffering stories), the news subjects and their voices (e.g. people that were interviewed or sites that were visited), and the vocabularies that were used (e.g. referring to the Syrian government or the Syrian regime). This served two goals: first, to provide us with leads on their different reporting practices and selection strategies. And two, this allowed me to develop interviews questions on *specific reports*, as opposed to general questions on value and role conceptions, or their overall practices. By designing questions in this manner, I sought to obtain as much information as possible on the situations they encountered, and how they judged these situations accordingly. Typically recurring questions thus included: How did this report come to be? Where did the idea come from?

Who was involved? What was the role of editors, fixers and your personal network in this particular story? What tools (e.g. camera, voice recorder, social media, wires) did you use? What obstacles or difficulties occurred, and how did you deal with them? Have you come across similar obstacles without being able to tackle them? After talking to several people on the scene, how did you finally select the stories included in your report?

Obviously, such an approach still has some major shortcomings, as it ultimately remains based on journalists' own (reflexive) account of their past practices, rather than the practices themselves (Archetti 2014; Bourdieu 1977; Hannerz 2004). However, the main goal was not to study direct *practices* - as opposed to discourses - but rather to focus on empirical *situations* in which judgements were made – as opposed to the tendency of interviews to incite conscious reflections on abstract values and norms (Boltanski and Thèvenot 2006; Lamont 1991; in the case of journalism, see Boudana 2010; Pantti 2010). Hence questions were not asked in the dominating scholarly form (e.g. 'what place do emotions have in your own work?'), but in a way that was tailored to actually occurring situations (e.g. how did this particular, emotional report come to being, and how did you experience that?). While such an account is still inevitably plagued by journalists' tendency to defend and in some cases even idealise their practices, it should nevertheless enable us to explore more precisely how norms and values are enacted in particular situations.

More concretely, this study is based on in-depth interviews with 14 Dutch and Flemish reporters who made reports on the Syrian conflict and its refugees in the neighbouring countries. Of the interviews 9 were conducted face-to-face, and 5 were taken through Skype. All but three of the participants were male. While attempts were made to include all reporters in the Dutch-speaking area that travelled to Syria, approximately two thirds of this group effectively participated in the research. Participating journalists were employed by a variety of media, including flagship news programmes and current affairs on public service and commercial broadcasters, permanent correspondents and free-lancers working for print and alternative media. This group thus includes reporters who had done plenty of shorter, factual reports, as well as free-lancers and specialised parachutists who had ventured into the conflict a bit deeper. This variety should enable me to identify a wider range of practices and situations, and to explore, in a forthcoming study, how divergences between these journalists' strategies can be explained. However, as some of the issues discussed are of a rather sensitive nature - given the insecure conditions of journalists working in and around Syria (Reporters Without Borders 2013) - the names, genders and affiliations of the participating journalists are anonymised.

All interviews lasted between one and two hours, and were taken in July 2014, with the exception of two early interviews taken in February, and one late interview taken in October of the same year. Hence, the situations and cases discussed here, refer to their reporting practices in the period beginning with the Syrian uprisings in March 2011, until all but three interviews were taken in July 2014. At that point, the Islamic State was only slowly beginning to rise and had not conquered such a large and coherent piece of land as it has done ever since the fall and winter of 2014, nor where there any foreign interventions lurking on the horizon. At the moment when the interviews were taken, the conflict had taken a decisively sectarian and geopolitical turn in global media coverage, while the

refugee crisis had consolidated with an estimated 6.5 million Syrians fleeing their homes and 1.5 million having crossed the border to seek shelter in its neighbouring countries.

### **3. Situations and Strategies**

#### ***Situation: restricted physical access***

One of the most elementary ways in which political actors in the Middle East attempt to steer media coverage, is by restricting journalists' access to parts of their territories. While much has been written on the sophisticated press releases, linguistic subtleties and forceful images designed to lead journalists into a particular direction (Tumber and Webster 2006; Wolfsfeld 1997), it are these ultimately physical barriers that prevent even the most critical of journalists to 'see for themselves' what is going on, or to include diverging perspectives by 'talking to the locals'. In Syria, more specifically, the problem was that journalists could enter the country *either* through the official channels by successfully applying for a government-approved visa, *or* through rebel-held areas. Journalists who entered rebel-held areas without permission of the Syrian government, were from then on considered to be collaborators, and would no longer be granted an official visa. Far from being an isolated case, one reporter remarked that "one of the *cardinal sins* you can commit, in the eyes of the Syrian government, was going into rebel-held area, *illegally* as they see it" (original emphasis). It should be noted that the Syrian regime has at its disposal a notoriously ubiquitous and professional body of secret agents, the so-called Mukharabat, assisted by the 'Ministry for Information'. According to the reporters participating in this research, both organisations are substantially more professional than, say, Egypt's or Iraq's intelligence services ever were. This became evident when the Syrian intelligence services traced down the remaining foreign journalists on its territory in the first few months after the start of the uprisings – in a period when absolutely no foreign media were allowed into the country. Three of the reporters I talked to were living in Syria at the time, and were either denied access when trying to return to country, or were arrested and evicted for doing 'illegal practices' – compare this to Egypt's rather clumsy response of taking journalists to court.

On the other hand, journalists who had first entered the country by means of an official visa, in some cases faced scepticism and distrust from rebel groups when trying to enter the country under their guidance. This attitude can be partly explained by the Syrian state television's creative use of foreign journalists' work. Three broadcast journalists, for instance, claimed to be aware that their images had been used at least at one point by the Syrian state broadcaster's main news channels, albeit with voice-overs added to their images. Besides their work being used for propagandistic purposes, this proved worrisome for journalists' physical safety, as they had to rely on either side of the parties for their trust and protection.

#### ***Strategies***

Some media organisations responded to these physical barriers by working out a division of labour among their journalists. At least two public service news or current affairs programmes, thus had one journalist entering Syria now and then through the official channels, whereas the other occasionally

entered rebel-held areas. In both cases the idea for this set-up emerged rather organically, that is, without being consciously planned in advance. This policy simply resulted from one of the journalists being unable to acquire official visa after entering rebel-held areas, which led the editors to decide that, from then on, the other journalist would enter the country only through the official channels. Syrian intelligence services thus seemed to exclude individual journalists, rather than media organisations – something that can be recognised with the BBC's Paul Wood and Lyse Doucet. Presumably, the intelligence services saw no reason to exclude journalists covering Syria from the good side of the land: at least in theory, their coverage would still be influenced.

By choosing for this division of labour, the editors seemed to put high value on covering a broader range of perspectives, places and peoples – a problem that was often criticised by media scholars working on the Iraq war (Boyd-Barrett 2004; Couldry and Downey 2004). More concretely, the labour division established for these two programmes was designed to ensure a long-term presence in the region, allowing them to produce news reports and analyses rather frequently as both journalists developed more sustainable contacts and networks within rebel groups and the Syrian state respectively. As scholars have noted, these trust relations are especially crucial to war correspondents, as they negotiate their autonomy through informal as much as through formal relations (Hannerz 2004; Murrell 2009; Palmer and Fontan 2007).

In spite of its practical advantages, however, this strategy led to professional frustrations with the individual journalists involved, who felt hindered to acquire a fuller perspective. As one of them recalled: “for me, that’s very *annoying* from a journalistic point of view. It’s the same for [my colleague], he can only produce stories on the opposition. I think it would be really *healthy* for both of us if I could go to East-Aleppo, and he could go to Damascus.” In other words, it was precisely by sacrificing individual journalists’ multiperspectivity, that the news programmes as a whole were able to cover a wider variety of perspectives, peoples and places. By doing so, the editors hoped to circumvent the problem other newsrooms ran by having only one specialised Middle East journalist, who would be more easily prone to residing with one side only.

These individual journalists, in turn, developed an altogether different strategy, by first visiting Syria through an official visa, before entering areas held by a range of oppositional groups, including secular, fundamentalist and Kurdish rebels on different occasions. Even though this way of proceeding prevented them from gaining access through the official channels afterwards, it did enable them to cover the different aspects and actors of the conflict at least once. This strategy was particularly deployed by parachute journalists, who were, at the time of their first visits, more often than not unaware of the implications caused by entering the country through rebel groups. Again, this way of dealing with the situation emerged organically rather than reflexively: it was the nature of the situation and their past acts that led them to act in this way. As with the news programmes organising a labour division between their Middle East specialists, these journalists sought to maintain the ideal of presenting a plurality of perspectives. The main difference with these individual reporters, however, is that their response to the situation was not designed for frequent reports and analyses, but rather for occasional, more subjective stories deepening the reports made by desk journalists. As a result, the

labour-division taking place here, was between specialised parachute reporters, and their desk-based colleagues.

The implications of this type of response were twofold. On the one hand, these parachutists were relatively satisfied with their work as it covered what they considered to be the most important actors of the war: the official regime, Islamic fundamentalists and the more secular rebel groups. As one of them explained: "I feel pretty confident that I have, in my own little way of doing fieldwork, tried and explored the three different routes", adding that he felt not to have "anything to add" to the news coverage of the conflict at the time. As far as he was concerned, other wars and conflicts across the globe deserved as much attention as the one in Syria. On the other hand, however, the news programmes these journalists worked for became more reliant upon desk-based reporting through press releases, video footage, NGO reports and analyses by colleagues working in the region. In short, by having one reporter showing different sides of the conflict, these news programmes inevitably exposed themselves to less readily verifiable sources.

Print journalists resorting to a much safer approach used Skype to interview people of different political persuasions on either side of the border, as Skype has long been considered one of the safest communication means for rebels and activists in the Middle East (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013b). Even though this approach did provide journalists with access to particular individuals, it also left them with little means to verify and control the accuracy of their accounts. Furthermore, Syrians' general caution of intelligence agents emerging in the most unexpected of disguises, also meant that they were often reluctant to identify themselves or substantiate their claims with concrete names and places. Journalists responded to this situation in two general ways, both of which were designed to control for the comparably low reliability of their mediated witnesses. Some relied on a very wide, more superficial network of individuals they could reach through colleagues, fixers and friends. They would use these networks (through telephone and social media) to do background checks on the persons they interviewed and the stories they told. They made their judgment by taking into account a wide range of opinions and interpretations, which would allow them to assess the perils and caveats of any particular statement. Other reporters used an apparently opposite type of strategy, as they claimed to rely on skype interviews only for interviewing individuals they had known personally for quite some time. This precautionary measure did not so much lead them to trust what their interviewees said, but rather to estimate their background and affiliations by themselves, so that this could at least be taken into consideration. While these reporters of course also possessed a wide personal network, they would thus use more in-depth relations to deal with the uncertainty inherent to mediated interviews.

More exceptionally, some of the print journalists were able to keep their options open by reporting anonymously from rebel-held or besieged areas. This response was available only to those who had lived in Syria for a longer period of time, which meant they could rely on the support of comparably elaborate personal networks. Even though abductions were relatively rare at the time, reporting anonymously remained highly dangerous, not only due to the ongoing violence, but mainly because of the threats their beloved ones would receive from the intelligence services, even to the point of physical intimidation. While the services were careful enough not to harm them – as journalists they remained in power of spreading their witness to the world – the message to leave the country was

communicated clearly enough. Lastly, it should be noted that this strategy was generally limited to the first six months after the start of the uprisings in March 2011: it thus took the intelligence services less than half a year to expel at least all Dutch-speaking journalists from its territory.

### ***Situation: being embedded***

Once journalists had acquired an official visa, they still had to deal with the 'minders' sent along by the 'Ministry of Information'. While officially serving to 'guide and protect' as fixers normally do, these government employees wrote down reports on journalists' precise whereabouts and activities, whilst leading them to places that were 'safe' both for the journalist and for the Syrian government. In a particular case, one reporter visiting Damascus was repeatedly refused entrance to a public park and a public school where refugees had settled, both by his minder, and by locals apparently coincidentally hanging out on the corners of the park. Furthermore, these minders were known to deliberately mistranslate interviewees' stories, and sometimes even force the latter into giving the right answers through verbal and in some occasions even unabashedly physical intimidation. In one case, a reporter recalled noticing a group of men approaching behind him as he was talking to a man who had found shelter in a public school that was now governed by the Syrian army. Within one sentence, the man swiftly changed terms from 'forces of resistance' to 'terrorists'.

Of course, rebel groups were equally keen to show journalists their version of the facts, whether they were secular groups de-emphasising the role played by sectarian motives in the conflict, or extremists claiming precisely the opposite. In one particularly striking case, it turned out that some of the female Kurdish fighters who had been widely covered in the international media, were set-up precisely to reframe the media coverage and to attract more sympathy from the West. In two cases, journalists had encountered at least one group of 'staged' women fighters before finding one that truly participated in the YPG, the Kurdish People Protection Units. The story of independent, emancipated women was thought – rightfully so, it turned out – to draw the attention of the secular West, as it provided an interesting side-story to the orientalist stereotype of head-scarfed women repressed by their men.

### ***Strategies***

All of the journalists entering the country through official visa devoted considerable attention to minders' efforts to prevent independent coverage. In one case, a reporter who had been given the permission to report from Damascus, set out to produce a news story on, first, the Yarmouk refugee camp – which was at the time rumoured to be starved to death by the Syrian forces – second, to persons taking refuge in a public school controlled by government staff, and third, to refugees gathered in a public park. While none of these attempts were granted by the accompanying minders, in the case of the public park some 'locals' intervened as well, saying that there was nothing to be seen, and that it would not be safe for journalists to go there. Subsequently, the topic of the news story did not focus on the refugees' fate, but rather on the obstacles thrown up to prevent journalists from reaching them. In addition, some journalists produced additional side-reports on 'how the news was made'. Two broadcast reporters, for instance, published 'behind the scenes' footage on social media, whereas one journalist provided his alternative medium with a text on the relevance of fixers and

unreliable local contacts. As these journalists found themselves in situations where the limitations of reporting as the more or less transparent representation of facts became all too obvious, they thus reacted by shifting their attention towards the representation itself, as it formed part and parcel of the conflict they were covering.

This strategy can be related to some of the criticisms of the standard of 'objectivity' (Hallin 1992; Deuze 2005; Stoker 1995) – and, accordingly, to some of the criticisms raised in the coverage of the Iraq war (Tumber and Palmer 2004). As Boudana (2010) noted, the French war correspondents in her study generally rejected the notion of 'objectivity', conceived of as a form of neutrality, in favour of values such as 'honesty' and 'modesty'. As their working conditions often did not allow them to verify or double-check the facts which was needed to take the position of an omniscient reporter towering above the earthly turmoil of their news subjects, they felt it more useful to re-vert to values of honesty and modesty, meaning that one needs to be fair enough to report simply what you have seen, and to communicate on the limits of your particular point of view.

However, while these strategies were quite visibly present in journalists' reports on the Syrian regime, they seemed to be much less articulated in reports that were made by going embedded with rebel groups. This is at least partly due to the professional, more openly systematic manner in which Syrian government-minders were preventing journalists from talking to particular people or visiting specific sites. While the fact that they were being 'embedded' with rebel groups was openly announced by journalists at the beginning of their reports, the consequences thereof were only mentioned in terms of their willingness to tell us their story, or to show us which homes had been destroyed or which bodies had been killed by the Syrian regime. Overall, journalists did not explicitly thematise rebel groups' attempts to prevent them from seeing particular sites or persons. In this sense, I do not recall any reporter, neither written nor broadcasted, publicly communicating the staged nature of some of the female Kurdish fighters – even though two journalists noted their awareness of this practice in the interviews.

Some of the journalists I spoke to, furthermore, claimed to have made use of a more intricate strategy to bypass some of the constraints posed by going embedded, as they developed confidential relations with particular minders. In Syria, as in other Middle East states, some minders would allow journalists to move about more freely than others, albeit within certain limits of course. Hence, if a reporter succeeded in developing a more friendly relationship with some minders, the latter might re-vert at least from physically intimidating the subjects they would try to interview. While such relationships clearly did not provide journalists with all the freedom they desire, it did seem to give them a little bit of breathing space, enabling them to estimate the context of their environment slightly better. Especially to well-known visitors, the Ministry of Information also allowed a little bit of leeway in moving about: two reporters even said to have filed complaints with the Ministry on minders that did not sufficiently allow them to do their work properly, after which they were assigned other minders on their next visits. Together, the impediments I described thus far fed into the more general problem of providing evidence for the claims journalists made in their reports. In other words, the accuracy of the information they disseminated was often hard to verify, and generally impossible to double-check. In response to these difficulties, some journalists felt confident enough to interpret rumours and

statements in their own manner, in a way reminiscent of Tuchman's (1972) editor, who explained that 'analysis' served as a name for news reports that could not be boiled down to verified empirical facts. These journalists felt able to estimate both the likeliness of unverified information, as well as actors' true intentions, thereby situating them within the more general course of affairs. This form of guaranteeing the accuracy of news reports, however, was based on journalists' wider knowledge of the conflict, the region, and his capacities for drawing the right conclusions out of vague and shattered bits of information (Hannerz 2004). These insights were thus only accessible to either long-term permanent correspondents in the region, or to strongly specialised parachutists (e.g. in Middle East conflicts), whereas generalist parachutists or free-lancers would rework, respectively, the verifiable facts irrespective of their low informational value, or to the subjectivist approaches sketched below.

These subjectivist approaches often entailed what has been characterised as more 'phenomenological methods' (Kester 2010; Murrell 2009 and 2010) or 'naturalist' techniques (Graddol 1994), that is, limiting oneself to a detailed description of what one sees, senses, smells or hears. These descriptions then serve as a 'proof' only of how reality was at a certain point of time in a certain place, instead of telling their audience of the general state of affairs, from the perspective of an omniscient, objective spectator. Rather than being driven by a shift in general journalistic ideals (Deuze 2005; Hallin 1992), these methods seemed to spring from the difficult situations they faced in Syria, as a full-blown form of objectivity seemed to be out of reach. These techniques thus served to cover at least a modest piece of reality truthfully. One reporter for instance, was allowed to visit parts of a besieged town that had just been recaptured by the Syrian army. While the scene and its people were real enough, they were also arranged in the sense that journalists were presumably meant to report on the misery of people returning to their destroyed homes and neighbourhoods for the first time in several years, and to link their misery to what the regime considered to be its main perpetrator: the rebel forces. The journalist responded to the situation by writing down simply what he saw, as part of the reality he encountered. That is, by deliberately *not* including the structural-political context of the scene, he sought to escape from a form of partial, biased news coverage in favour of the regime. Hence the story he told was one of the *experience* of war, rather than its politics.

Furthermore, this method was put to use by some journalists in a rather ingenious way: some of these phenomenologically described stories functioned as a complement to a news event that had been verified by experts or authoritative media. In one particular case, a reporter set out to visit neighbourhoods where chemical weapons had been deployed, to explore what the impact had been, how the locals had experienced those attacks, and what they thought about the international commotion it had caused. By focussing on the particular topic of chemical weapons, the reporter was thus able to develop his story on the facts gathered by international weapon experts and NGOs on the ground. The double-checking of facts and information had thus been done elsewhere. In a variant on the same reporting technique, a reporter visiting the Zaattari refugee camp in Jordan focused in detail on one particular family's story, precisely because their story could be linked to already verified information on the refugee flow of which their group (coming from a particular area and minority in Syria). While the accuracy of their particular subjectivity story could thus not be verified, the availability

of more general information nevertheless provided it with a grounding that was deemed sufficiently reasonable.

### ***Situation: physical risks and dangers***

The physical risks and dangers journalists face when entering a war zone, are a different but well-known type of practical impediment for doing their work properly (Tumber 2009). Besides the general violence inherent to the frontline, this also includes exposure to singular terrorist attacks, as well as abductions – which have become a widespread phenomenon in Syria, as it did in neighbouring Iraq a decade before (Reporters Without Borders 2013). No matter through which channels they entered Syria, journalists always put their lives in the hands of the groups they were embedded with. In this sense, the protection one might have expected from the Syrian government when travelling with official visa and security staff, did not always live up to its expectations. One of the reporters had survived a surprise terrorist attack on a convoy of foreign journalists, in which one of his colleagues was killed. The precise timing of the attack led the surviving journalists to suspect the Syrian government itself to be responsible, even though they were never able to substantiate those suspicions. Perhaps even more so than in previous Middle East conflicts, the war in Syria has seen journalists themselves become the subject of deliberate attacks and abductions, rather than part of the mere accidental casualties inherent to any warfare.

### ***Strategies***

Compared to their allegedly better equipped colleagues at the BBC and CNN, the Dutch and Flemish reporters had no security staff at their disposal. Instead, their local fixers served as security agents by guiding them to safe places, and by helping them to pass borders and rebel-held checkpoints. The judgment these journalists made, in other words, was to seek to maintain their safety not through physical protection, but rather through strengthening their local ties, relying on native speakers and fixers who would lead them away from hazard in the first place. While this judgment seemed to be incited by their comparably smaller financial capabilities - as they simply could not afford to hire more specialised security staff – it seemed to enable them to slightly change the situation to their advantage, by putting higher stakes on sustainable relations with fixers. The backside of this strategy, however, was that it increased journalists' dependency on fixers in providing access to news stories, as has been scantily but increasingly documented by scholars (Murrell 2009 and 2010; Palmer and Fontan 2006). In line with the findings from these scholars' work, the journalists I interviewed tried to tackle this issue by using only those fixers that had been recommended by at least one of their (inter)national colleagues or, in other cases, by relying on Dutch or Flemish fixers who had been living in the region for quite some time.

And yet in the Syrian case, this situation of dependency seemed even more complicated compared to the one faced by journalists in Iraq a decade before. Not only is the access to 'ordinary people' limited by the fixer's own network and identity in spite of his best intentions, as Palmer and Fontan (2006) remarked, in Syria, all fixers are themselves strongly dependent upon their network within particular rebel groups. In other words: there are no 'ordinary Syrians' left out of the civil war: the only way to

access them is not through an unconsciously biased fixer, but through the increasingly professional communication staff working for particular movements involved in the conflict themselves.

### ***Situation: Emotional and Moral Intensity***

Besides these practical challenges to journalistic autonomy, reporters covering the Middle East quite regularly find themselves in extraordinarily intense and morally ambivalent situations (Allan and Zelizer 2004b). More often than their colleagues working at home or as foreign correspondents in liberal democracies, they encounter horrific scenes of human suffering, interviewing men and women who have just about lost everything, their house, their family, their freedom. Rather than posing a clear-cut challenge to implementing journalistic principles, these intense situations force journalists to *reinterpret* the key values underlying their work (Frosh and Pinchevski 2009; Silverstone 2007). How much room should they provide, in such dramatic encounters, for emotional accounts and gruesome images? Should such suffering be linked to political responsibilities and structural causes, even if you are brought to these victims by one of the actors involved?

### ***Strategies: critical distance and subjectivist engagement***

The literatures on distant suffering and media ethics have widely recognized two broad stances towards situations such as these (Chouliaraki 2008; Pantti 2010; Silverstone 2007). One type of response entails a more objective, 'realist' perspective in which journalists attempt to maintain their critical distance. The other advocates a more subjective, 'naturalist' approach allowing more room for personal experiences and emotional narratives. Both types of responses comprise a wider range of more concrete strategies to deal with these morally or emotionally intense situations.

The more objectivist approach is characterized first and foremost by the relatively marginal and succinct inclusion of emotional experiences. In such an account the emphasis lies more on, for instance, the verified facts. In one case, a reporter who was shown dozens of corpses stacked up in a mosque, felt reluctant to cover it in detail because he had not been there when any of the action had happened, and could not dispose of any reliable information as to the identity of the bodies nor of its perpetrators. His sense was that he needed to stick to the facts of situation, whatever they may be, and they were simply not clear enough for him to go into detail on the corpses themselves. Thus, the inability to verify the factual context provided by the locals, in this case, led him to give it no central, visual place in his report. In a slightly different vein, one reporter decided to include the heavily tortured man who had shown him his wounds, yet without concentrating on the visual image of the wound, but rather to put his story into the broader context of the politics, the interests and tactics that caused that suffering. Instead of what he described as "indulging the audience" into the gruesome picture, this reporter chose to use that man's story as an exemplifying vehicle to discuss the political impasse as two sides blamed each other for their atrocities.

Interestingly, reporters who tended towards this objectivist stance, would allow more intense emotional accounts on the apparent condition that they fitted into more established, conventional story lines, such as a visit to the Zaattari refugee camp. More precisely, they seemed to be reluctant to include

more intense stories and images unless they involved pure, de-politicised victims, such as young children. This selective openness towards more emotional accounts can be understood from a more strict interpretation of professional norms and values: in order for an emotional account to make it into the story, the latter had to fit within one of the established journalistic formats or 'story lines' (Hannerz 2004) allowing such an exceptional leniency.

Perhaps more characteristic for the objectivist, professional stance, is the way some journalists dealt with trust relationships. Reporting on Syria includes generally sensitive topics, requiring a great deal of mutual trust between journalists and their interviewees, even more so when there are cameras, microphones and security staff involved. To develop these trust relationships, journalists and/or their fixers need to invest in long, personal talks and elaborate conversations on seemingly irrelevant topics. When the interview is finished and the story is sent to the editors, journalists generally have very little time left to maintain or deepen much of these personal interactions as new stories are waiting to be made. Hence, this involvement at least potentially throws up questions on how a journalist balances between developing these personal relations through mutual respect and empathy on the hand, and maintaining a professional distance on the other. Arguably both are needed to deliver a good story within ethically desirable boundaries, yet due to the central role of (emotional and moral) empathy in such situations, journalists are bound to position themselves differently along the continuum of engagement and difference.

In one case, a dispute arose between two reporters travelling to a small village in Lebanon. A few months earlier, one of them had interviewed a man diagnosed with cancer, and the reporter wanted to make some time available to stop in his particular village and ask around how this man had been in the meantime. Whereas that reporter felt obliged to do so after taking credit for the ill man's story, the other one considered such a stop to be both a waste of time, and an inappropriately personal way of going about. Even though it should be noted that the latter did express his concerns for the subjects presented in his stories, he seemed to endorse a more minimal account of good journalism's ethical boundaries. While not returning to the village of the ill man was denounced as something immoral by the more engaged journalist, the same response was defended by his colleague as a matter of mature professionalism.

In general, the more engaged stance entailed the use of phenomenological methods, in which emotions and subjective experiences were considered to be part of an objective reality (Pantti 2010). Of crucial importance here, is that these decisions to do so were often taken by listening carefully to one's own emotions. In one particular case, when a reporter and his colleagues visited the Zaattari refugee camp, a little girl collapsed into inconsolable hysteria after being told that her favourite toy is still at home, right in front of the recording camera. One of the difficulties emerging from this situation, was whether or not this emotional footage should be given a central place in the wider report or not. The journalists and editors involved thus had to make a judgment on the precise place of emotion, context and facts within the small batch of time that was available to this particular story. At the moment this happened, most of the producing crew, either burst into tears or walked away from the tent to prevent them from doing so. The decision was then taken collectively, I was told, to use the footage not only used as a dominant part of the story, but also to briefly show the journalist himself as

openly displaying his empathy. The rationale behind that move, was that the team's emotional reaction reflected the broader reality of the refugee camp and its approximately 200.000 children, which it could then bring closer to the audience watching the news in West-Europe. In a similar vein, another reporter's decision to build his story around a tall man whimpering over the remnants of his home, was taken only after he had heard the shivering in his own voice as he interviewed the man, when listening to his recorder on the way home.

Another type of strategy was included in the same story, but returned time and again among the journalists I interviewed. By focusing on 'ordinary people's suffering', they sought to universalise the 'human condition' of war. Thus, by putting the crying refugee child or the whimpering tall man into the heart of the story, they maintained a central emphasis on the emotional experience without necessarily taking (political) sides. The emotional register of these reports thus consisted of an empathic stance, as distinct from a form of indignation that stems forth from a particular people's suffering, caused by specific perpetrators (Boltanski 1999). Such reports emerged primarily in the early period of the Syrian uprisings, where journalists often took sides with 'the public' and their suffering inflicted by the regime, and resurged with the repeated chemical weapons attack at the end of August 2013.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

This article set out to provide some tentative answers to two questions. First, it sought to explore and present the challenges encountered by reporters covering the Syrian conflict, and the strategies they developed in response to them. Second, how do they apply more general values through a series of particular judgements on actually emerging situations? The most important weakness of this *descriptive* design, as I see it, is that it lacks convincing *explanatory power* for the strategies that are being used. Instead of asking *which* journalistic values are predominant among Middle East reporters, this article concentrated on *what it means* to endorse specific values in real-life, ambivalent situations. To address the first, rather than the second question, requires an altogether different type of analysis which could well take Bourdieusian, New Institutional (Benson 2006; Dickinson 2008; Author) or profession-based perspective (Schudson 2003). Such analyses would enable scholars to draw more systematic connections between these strategies and more structural factors, such as the degree of individual journalists' education, their previous employments, as well as the position of the organisation they work for within the (national) media landscape.

Nevertheless, by describing how these situations and strategies work, a number of valuable results came to the fore. First, several forms of subjective, phenomenological strategies emerged here as a response to objective values that no longer seemed to fit with the actually occurring situation. In covering Syria, these strategies seemed primarily useful precisely to maintain an acceptable form of journalistic 'honesty' (Boudana 2010) in spite of having difficult access to a variety of places, peoples and perspectives. In some cases reporters endorsed these phenomenological methods more or less pertinently, as they had specialised in covering conflicts such as these. In other cases, however, reporters that were generally oriented more towards objectivist values, revoked to these methods more through formats that seemed 'safe' or 'conventional', such as Christmas reports on a family living in a refugee camp. In other words, the situational approach allowed us to move beyond the ideal-

typical divide of subjective and objective reporting styles (Hallin 1992; Deuze 2005), and to improve our understanding of the precise and shifting context in which they acquire their meaning.

Second, we saw the relevance of universalising human suffering as a guiding rationale for subjective engagement, as opposed to more politically oriented forms of engagement, such as indignation or advocacy (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2013). This particular strategy allowed journalists to engage morally and emotionally with the subjects they reported on, without immediately politicising their condition. What is new or valuable to this insight, is that this rather well-known form of de-contextualisation (Chouliaraki 2008) seemed to be incited, by a situation where reporters felt they were being steered by either the Syrian state or rebel groups, in order to draw attention to the fate of their enemies' victims. It was thus in response to these external attempts to influence journalists' practices, that de-contextualisation appeared as a strategy to maintain loyal to the more central values of naturalism (showing reality as it is) and impartiality (not explicitly taking sides).

Third, the editorial context influenced not so much which values were deemed crucial, as how they were they were interpreted more practically. For instance, the ideal of multiperspectivalism was applied differently on the level of the individual (in case of fewer specialists and less frequent reports) than on the level of the newsroom (in case of employing more specialists, more frequently reporting). An additional example appeared with those journalists who were not able to afford specialised security staff, which led them to rely on local fixers for their safety and guidance, as a way of putting a difficult situation to their favour, without having too many resources at their disposal. Fourth, difficult conditions in terms of access and physical danger meant that journalists became even more dependent upon fixers and minders, as they did in previous conflicts (Murrell 2009). Developing sustainable, confidential relationships of trust was a common response to this situation (Palmer and Fanton 2007). A different, sometimes complementary strategy consisted of developing a wider network of more superficial contacts, to estimate and situate individual statements (Hannerz 2004).

To conclude however, it seems useful to note that this situation-strategic approach can and should be developed more elaborately in the future. In this article, the main focus was directed to the general nature of the situations with which journalists covering Syria were confronted, and the range of strategies they developed to cope with them. However, such an approach can also be developed further by analysing the process of these situations and their responses in much more detail, thereby drawing attention to the precise elements involved in every phase of the production process (e.g. voice recorders, types of cameras, which fixers they relied upon and why, which stories to select out of the witnesses one encounters). Such a more fine-grained analysis, however, would also imply limiting the number of situations to be discussed to two or three. As it stands, analysing how Syria is being covered therefore remains a task well-open to future inquiries.

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<sup>i</sup> One of the accounts that comes closest to a social-scientific study of journalistic practices, is Joris Luyendijk's *Hello Everybody* (2003). While it surely helps that Luyendijk studied anthropology before becoming a Middle East correspondent, it should be taken into account that his book was written as a polemic rather than as a full-flown academic treatise.