

From August 3–5 2012, international news agency *Reuters*' Twitter and blogging site were hacked for the purpose of disseminating misinformation on the Syrian Civil War. The company's media outlets had been utilized for what it called "an intensifying conflict in cyberspace," in which both opposition and regime forces fabricated rumors about drastic reversals and military gains in the hope of influencing the ground war.<sup>1</sup> Examples of the rumors posted included tweets implying a rebel collapse in Aleppo and false reports of the Syrian president's death. The hacking of *Reuters* was one of many cyber attacks perpetrated over the years by both sides of the conflict, but the goal was always the same: to turn digital media into a weapon.

As the world has grown more connected, increasing amounts of news has been spread through Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and online blogs. The abundance of information on digital media furthers the cause of journalism in a significant way: nowadays it is much more difficult for any authoritarian regimes to control and manipulate the news flow. In the case of the aforementioned Syrian Civil War, much of the reporting that has come out of the region has been done by citizens and activists via social media. Under the Syrian government's inexorable restriction on international media, these contributors' voices have been a vital source of information for mainstream media organizations.

The problem with relying on social media as a platform for news dissemination is credibility and accuracy. Of the innumerable videos, narratives, and commentaries posted by these self-proclaimed "citizen journalists," there are bound to be erroneous accounts. Factors like lack of training, hasty speculation, or deliberate obfuscation make this new breed of

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<sup>1</sup> Apps, Peter. "Disinformation Flies in Syria's Growing Cyber War." Reuters. August 7, 2012. Accessed February 2, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/07/us-syria-crisis-hacking-idUSBRE8760GI20120807>.

journalism highly unreliable. Often, factions employ their own citizen journalists to feed media organizations false information for propaganda purposes, or they employ hackers like the ones who attacked *Reuters*' online outlets.

When the world learned of the August 2013 Ghouta chemical attack near Damascus, citizen journalists inside Syria were the reporters who broke the news. The social media storm that surged onwards had its share of misinformation (either accidental or deliberate) and contradictions. According to Bill Keller of the New York Times, there was enough conflicting content to give the regime a legitimate excuse to place the blame on the rebels.<sup>2</sup> No conclusion was made even after the United Nations investigators surveyed the site. Ultimately, it was a professional journalist, C. J. Chivers, who found the evidence—"compass bearings for two chemical rockets"—to trace the attack back to the regime's military.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the accessibility afforded by the digital age, professional journalists are accountable now more than ever to seek out the truth and report it. The profusion of unfiltered and unverified information not only distorts the truth but also produces dire consequences in terms of public knowledge. There's no substitute for professional journalism that provides comprehensive and accurate coverage of current events. As Chivers told the Boston conference, "Social media isn't journalism. It's information. Journalism is what you do with it."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Keller, Bill. "It's the Golden Age of News." The New York Times. November 3, 2013. Accessed February 21, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/04/opinion/keller-its-the-golden-age-of-news.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/04/opinion/keller-its-the-golden-age-of-news.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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