

Reporter power: News organisations, duty of care and the use of locally-hired news gatherers in Syria

Risk has drastically reshaped the reporting ecosystem in the Syrian conflict. This paper analyses the roles played by commissioning editors, staff reporters and international and locally hired freelance journalists who report the war in Syria. It gathers data from case studies of the reporting of the Sarin gas attacks in the Damascus suburb of East Ghouta in August 2013 and other examples of reporting in Syria which appear to raise ethical questions. The current lack of reporters in Syria has serious ethical implications for news organisations and their ability to inform the public sphere.

Keywords: Syria; duty of care; outsourcing; sub-contracting; freelances; news gathering

Introduction: Reluctance of UK newspapers to hire freelances

The starting point of this research was to examine whether news organisations, citing safety concerns, were increasingly refusing to commission work from independent journalists while located in an area of conflict, and particularly those who were uninsured. These are the international freelances who travel to areas of conflict and form an increasingly important part of the news gathering ecosystem, as we will explore below. For the avoidance of doubt, this paper will distinguish between international freelances and local journalists: the latter being the Syrian fixers, activists and other news gatherers whose work finds its way into the output of news organisations. They will be referred to as local freelances. The distinction is significant

and reflects a hierarchy of power within the foreign news gathering system. As we shall see, there is a separate system for hiring local freelances, that is not subject to the same scrutiny as their international colleagues.

In early 2013 several UK news organisations stated that they would not hire international freelances to work for them in Syria. After the veteran *Sunday Times* reporter Marie Colvin was killed in Homs in February 2012, her newspaper told UK-based freelance photographer Rick Findler that, though he had previously worked for them in Syria, they would no longer take his work, nor that of any other international freelances (telephone interview, 5 September 2013). Later, an executive at the same newspaper told a reporter from *Press Gazette* that neither *The Sunday Times* nor its sister paper *The Times* would be accepting contributions from international freelances working in Syria (Rodgers 2013). *The Sunday Times*, according to the executive quoted, did not want to encourage freelances to take risks:

After submitting pictures from Aleppo this week Rick Findler was told by the foreign desk that 'it looks like you have done some exceptional work' but 'we have a policy of not taking copy from Syria as we believe the dangers of operating there are too great'. Findler, 28, has been published before in *The Sunday Times* and has been to Iraq, twice, Libya and this is his third trip to Syria. He said: 'Surely it is that photographer's decision to choose whether or not they take the risks. I thought part of photography was the fact that some people in this world do take exceptional risks to show the rest of the world what is happening. I just don't know what else to do any more. I really feel disheartened and extremely let down' (Rodgers 2013).

Four other British newspapers, the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, *The Times* and the *Observer*, then also went on the record to *Press Gazette* to say that they too would not be taking the work of independent journalists (Turvill 2013). A producer for CNN agreed that the rules of engagement between international freelances and their clients, the news organisations, had changed. He put it down to the death of *Sunday Times* correspondent Marie Colvin: 'When Marie Colvin was killed, it scared the s**t out of a lot of [news] executives' (anonymous CNN producer, telephone interview, 24 October 2012).

Why a ban on international freelances reporting from Syria matters

Freelances of all kinds have become an increasingly important part of the news gathering community, a trend noted in the mid-1990s by Pedelty (1995). The traditional model of foreign reporting has largely disappeared. Other researchers, such as Richard Sambrook (2010), have noted a trend away from own-staff or own-country correspondents in conflict zones that is part of a wider change in the idea of foreign correspondence. Syria fits into a longer-term picture in this respect. Because the old business models of the news organisations are broken, there is less cash around to pay for staff reporters (Picard 2014; Franklin 2014). The problem is particularly acute in foreign news (Otto and Meyer 2012). This matters because in major conflicts – such as Afghanistan, Iraq and now Syria – because of risk, ever fewer staff reporters cover quite major developments (Cockburn 2013).

The aim of this research was to test evidence that news organisations had become increasingly reluctant to take responsibility for international freelances working in Syria. The results indicated that this may be so, though it must be acknowledged that the conclusions are highly provisional. My research points, however, to a finding that is possibly more significant – that news gathering in the Syrian conflict has been outsourced to local people. These Syrian nationals either work directly for the news organisations or supply user-generated content on social media to them. The data show it is far from clear that news gathered in such a way accords with the core journalistic norms of impartiality, detachment and balance and this current research suggests a mechanism by which this outsourcing has happened. It could also be part of a longer-term trend away from verification and gatekeeping noted by Rosen. The latter's work suggested that in multimedia reporting some of these traditional norms have been discarded. The result has been fierce debate over what journalism is 'for' (Rosen 1999).

Methodology

The central hypothesis that I wanted to test with this research was: Do such changes – if they have occurred – serve to restrict independent news gathering? And, if news organisations will not hire international freelances to report conflict, then is there a hole in the model for contemporary war reporting? Above all, is the public sphere still being properly served? Specifically, what I wanted to understand is as follows:

1. Whether the rules of engagement for international freelances have, indeed, changed.
2. If true, why this had happened.
3. Finally, whether any such change in the working relationship between international freelances and their employers, the news organisations, had wider implications for conflict reporting and the audience that consumes news.

Approach to the research

The way news organisations, international freelance reporters and other news professionals, including locally-hired reporters, work with news sources on news stories from war zones is complex (see, for example, Venter 2005). I do not come to this subject as a strictly neutral observer. As a UK-based freelance news gatherer myself I am part of the international freelance 'tribe'. This research is my critical reading of the material gathered from a series of interviewees representing international freelances, news executives and staff journalists. It is difficult to disentangle how all the parties really interact, and the public conversations of all sides in respect of the terms of engagement are often somewhat different to those they have in private.

Goffman (1959 and 1969) would have called this the 'dramaturgical dimension'. Goffman is best known for his study of symbolic interaction, which took the form of a dramaturgical analysis of the performances that occur in face-to-face interactions. The insight he offered was that in theatrical performances there is the obvious aspect actors present to the audience. But there is also the hidden, backstage area, where actors can drop the identities they present publicly and be themselves. This is the area I am investigating.

For example, there were certain power struggles below the surface which affected how people answered me. Freelances are generally wary of complaining about the behaviour of their employers. Editors, news executives and staff reporters who commission international freelances are wary of making public pronouncements that may imply legal responsibility for people who are not under their control and whose behaviour may land their organisation in trouble. The result is that many individuals I talked to were reluctant to go on the record. Other researchers (Venter 2005; Pedelty 1995) have found the same thing. I examined three case studies:

1. The reporting of the Sarin gas attacks in Damascus in September 2013. At least one news organisation that had previously said it would not hire international freelancers in Syria appeared to change its mind when a major news story broke and there were few independent ways of verifying the truth.
2. A report by Hannah Lucinda Smith for BBC Radio's *From Our Own Correspondent* programme.
3. The death of a young Syrian photographer who freelanced for the Reuters news agency, named Molhem Barakat in December 2013. The case highlighted that reporting in Syria had been to a significant extent devolved from international journalists, whether staff or freelance, to local people. An investigation by the National Press Photographers Association gathered evidence that Syrian freelancers, again, working for Reuters, had staged photographs. If true, this would be evidence that Syrian news gatherers on whom the news organisations rely – as do their audience – are in some cases insufficiently supported to do their job truthfully and ethically.

Gathering data

I conducted semi-structured interviews with international freelancers who report on the Syrian conflict and the staff journalists and news executives who commission them. I interviewed:

- 19 international (i.e., non-Syrian) freelance journalists working in print, online, radio and television. These freelancers work for a range of news outlets, including the international news agencies (Associated Press [AP], AFP, Reuters), the BBC, *Die Zeit*, a range of Austrian news outlets (*Wiener Zeitung*, *Profile* magazine and the Austrian broadcasting corporation [ORF]), VICE News, Channel 4 News, CNN, Sky, al Jazeera, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Guardian*, *Rolling Stone*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *VICE* magazine, the New Zealand *Herald on Sunday*, and Swiss radio SRF.
- Seven staff reporters based in Beirut, London and Cairo. (These individuals work for the BBC, the *Daily Telegraph*, Channel 4 News and Reuters.)
- Six desk editors and news executives (working for CNN, the BBC, AP, AFP, Reuters, *The Sunday Times* and the *Guardian*).

Some of the staff reporters have commissioned both international and local freelancers to work for them in Syria. One of these staff journal-

ists, BBC producer Stuart Hughes, conducted an investigation into the death of Molhem Barakat (Hughes 2013) which yielded useful data.

Interviews were conducted by telephone, email and using social media. Facebook was by far the most useful social media site for conducting interviews. Facebook interviews are available to download later, which is convenient for a researcher. But the use of Facebook goes far beyond that in contemporary conflict reporting. Murrell (2014) found war reporters and their collaborators use this social media platform to conduct their reporting and discuss aspects of their work. So it is a convenient way to conduct research in this area.

Two of the interviews with international freelancers and one with a staff reporter led to face-to-face interviews in London. I conducted one face-to-face interview in Turkey with a freelance cameraman/director, named Mani, who works for Channel 4. I also questioned a news executive from *The Sunday Times*, Sean Ryan, at an event at the Frontline Club in London in order to follow up an earlier phone interview. The face-to-face interviews tended to be more wide-ranging than the interviews on Facebook. Asking a question at a public event was the least useful way of gathering data.

The most 'offstage' (Goffman 1959 and 1969) data came from a series of posts on a closed Facebook site made by staff reporters and commissioning editors trying to solicit international freelancers to report on the previously mentioned Sarin gas attack in the hours after it occurred. At the time of writing this Facebook group is used by 932 journalists, workers in non-governmental organisations and other specialists, such as chemical weapons experts, who research, report on and visit Syria. Most of the site's members are journalists. Like the larger, related Facebook group, the Vulture Club (see Murrell 2014 for more on these Facebook groups), it is administered by Human Rights Watch. I have not named it because it is supposedly a secret group and contains logistical information useful to those wishing to do its members harm.

Results

Kidnap threat in Syria

At the time of writing (March 2015) the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists estimates about 20 journalists who have been abducted by kidnap gangs remain in Syria (CPJ 2014). The journalists who emerge from Syria tell terrifying tales of mistreatment (see Chivers

2013 and Loyd 2014). Two kidnapped international freelancers, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, have been murdered on camera by Islamic State, a self-proclaimed Caliphate aiming to unite Sunni Muslims worldwide. Kidnapping is an effective way of intimidating journalists (Beals 2013). Yet for the first two years of the Syrian conflict, from approximately 2011 to 2013, it was on international freelancers that the news organisations relied to gather news.

Freelancers in Syria

At the beginning of the conflict Syria was largely a freelance's war. The number of journalists killed bears this out. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2015a), nearly half – 46 per cent – of the 80 journalists killed in the Syrian conflict were freelance. This compares to a global figure of 17 per cent over the same period (CPJ 2015b). The greatest risks in Syria, however (as in most 'new' wars) are to local news gatherers. Locals make up 85 per cent of the journalist deaths in Syria. They also make up the overwhelming majority of the freelance deaths (CPJ 2015a).

I first heard of new restrictions news organisations were imposing on international freelancers from photographer and video journalist Robert King, who had previously worked for AP Television News (APTV) and CNN while in Syria (interview via social media, 10 October 2012). He told me that Channel 4 News wanted him to leave Syria before looking at material he had shot in Aleppo. This was later confirmed by a source on the foreign desk at *Channel 4 News* (interview via social media, 16 October 2012). It became apparent that other international freelancers also felt they had to jump through more hoops than formerly in order to work with news organisations:

In a phone conversation, Sky told me no before they even knew who I was, and said we need people to have done hostile environment training. I said I had done such a course in 2007 and they said it needs to have been done within last three years. Al Jazeera said no as well – I can't remember if it was a blanket ban on freelance stuff, but I remember the message being: 'Don't bother approaching us with your stuff' (international freelance journalist, interview via e-mail, 23 May 2013).

Die Zeit Online, the leading German news site for whom I work, sent me a ... formal mail the other day. They say they are not ready to endorse my trip to Syria. That

they are not ready to admit that they knew in advance I would be going ... This was strange, since I have been writing from Syria for them for two years (international freelance journalist Petra Ramsauer, interview via social media, 13 September 2013).

Another international freelance was unhappy that news organisations were refusing to take the work of all his international freelance colleagues, even the responsible ones. He considers himself one of the latter group. He also complains of the 'hypocrisy' of the news organisations in still using freelancers (both international and local) who work for the news agencies – of which more later.

I think it is a bad habit to ban [international] freelance work altogether, like *The Sunday Times* did (and others). As these newspapers still buy photos from the wire – which is often delivered anyway by [international] freelancers. So such steps seem to me hypocritical and in the end only minimise the money a[n international] freelance can earn. [This is because] via the wire you often get less money than if you sell it directly to a newspaper – and the newspaper itself pays less money to get wire images (interview via email, 23 May 2013).

International freelance journalist Petra Ramsauer says the traditional rivalry between staff and freelancers also plays a part. She says that a foreign desk (staff) reporter who commissions her conceded as such:

He did admit that he would use each and every opportunity to 'kick [international] freelancers' out of an assignment. And pointing out the security risk is such an opportunity. So the safety issue will also be raised and possibly 'used' by people like him against hiring freelancers (Ramsauer, interview via social media, 20 September 2013).

Richard Spencer, Middle East correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, says *Telegraph* news executives are as concerned as those from rival news organisations about the consequences if things go wrong: 'From a corporate perspective the management of the *Telegraph* are concerned about the costs of getting people out of kidnap situations,' he says (telephone interview via Skype, 23 August 2013). This is not to ascribe solely negative motivations on the part of news organisations to their decisions about international freelance use. Undoubtedly, news executives really do want to protect

inexperienced, naive and untrained individuals who unwittingly put themselves in harm's way. Yet news providers who take responsibility for international freelancers also face extremely large bills. Online news company *Global Post* commissioned American freelance James Foley to do the reporting from Syria which resulted in him being kidnapped and beheaded. The firm later spent millions of dollars trying to secure his release (Nye 2014).

Nor is there much agreement among international freelancers about how much support they should demand from their clients, the news organisations. Independent news gatherers compete intensely with each other, and an exceptional piece might win an award. So freelancers do not speak with a single voice when it comes to their terms of employment. The Frontline Club, a body that represents largely international freelance news gatherers who work in areas of conflict, asked its members what they thought of the restrictions that news organisations place on hiring them. Two thirds of those who responded to a survey (Frontline Club 2012) said they would forgo the support of news organisations if it was the only way they could sell their work. Freelancers with fewer skills and less experience were more likely to agree with the proposition. Such people were less likely to have done hostile environment training or be able to afford insurance. These are precisely the individuals whom news organisations are likely to be reluctant to employ. One international freelance acknowledged that they were obliged to work responsibly with the news organisations:

I think it should be natural that if you work on assignment for a special newspaper or magazine to cover an event inside Syria that both sides respect each other's demands. If a newspaper or magazine hires a[n international] freelance on the ground or wants to buy their stuff I think they should for sure put in some of their resources to advance the security of the freelance, like giving him the same protection level like staff members. That means including him in their security assessments ... probably providing him with a satellite device (often too expensive for a single freelance), keeping in regular contact with him and try to help him out if there are problems – and working on a risk plan in the case he gets abducted. On the same issue it should be natural for the [international] freelance to listen to the newspaper or magazine and agree to the terms they have, like the security approach etc. It is mutual giving

and taking (British freelance journalist and photographer Benjamin Hiller, interview via email, 29 May 2013).

International freelance journalists say that restrictions on hiring them are designed to protect the news organisation from having to take responsibility for freelancers if they get into trouble, rather than any other reason. According to another international freelance, the way it works is as follows:

If you ask someone before they go in you can influence their safety and planning arrangements but you can potentially be considered liable for their safety. If someone is already inside it is:

- convenient;
- they have not yet come to harm;
- you have no control or influence of their safety;
- are not liable for them as they went of their own volition;
- it's cheaper as you can commission a piece without discussing covering costs as, well, they are there anyway (international freelance, interview via social media, 2 September 2013).

Most of the international freelancers voiced cynicism about the motives behind any ban by the news organisations on accepting their work. They surmised that the motive for the news organisations to – as one put it – 'come up with increasingly bigger hurdles' in the way of employment was for their employers to avoid proper responsibility for looking after them. According to this view, the motive was largely legalistic and had to do with concerns over the legal duty of care which may make an employer liable for an employee.

Duty of care

The impact of concerns over duty of care on news gathering has been little discussed. A briefing paper by BBC reporter David Loyn (2013) remains the best analysis on the subject. But what is duty of care, and how have expectations over what care needs to be provided changed? Duty of care is a longstanding legal obligation under English and United States civil law that governs the responsibility owed by, for example, employer to employee. Such debate over the application of duty of care to conflict journalism as has occurred has coincided with the professionalism of risk management within news organisations described by Loyn (ibid).

Such debates happen at all levels of the news industry and money does not have to change hands to prompt concerns that one is taking responsibility for someone if they supply goods and services. Nor are legal professionals usually involved in such discussions. Few freelancers ever sue news organisations over their failure to provide a reasonable duty of care – photographer Tim Page won a case brought against *Time* magazine in 1981 (King 1981). There has been no recent test in court of how far duty of care extends to international freelancers and locally-hired journalists. But as reporters become targets, the question has become more pressing for news executives (CPJ 2014).

Did *The Sunday Times* really ban international freelancers from working in Syria?

After speaking to all parties (*Press Gazette*, the newspaper and British freelance Rick Findler), it is still unclear whether *The Sunday Times* really did stop working with international freelancers. Sean Ryan, Associate Editor of *The Sunday Times*, told the author that the ban was ‘all a bit of a misunderstanding’ (telephone interview, 29 August 2013). Ryan said that, in fact, the newspaper had been open for business all along with ‘responsible freelancers’. However, he conceded that no work from international freelancers in Syria had been published since the *Press Gazette* piece. Ryan also said that the colleague who made the statement to *Press Gazette* was misquoted. When that was put to the *Press Gazette*, the latter said the quote came in an email from the paper (telephone interview, 30 August 2014).

The contradictory statements made by different news executives at *The Sunday Times* perhaps point to concerns over duty of care. But it was difficult to get a clear answer. When asked at a Frontline Club event what *The Sunday Times* lawyers had told him about how far their legal responsibility for duty of care extended to international freelancers, Ryan said he personally had never been given any such advice (Frontline Club 2013). While this may be strictly true, he declined to elaborate what the other executives at the paper might have been told. Another broadsheet correspondent, whose newspaper had not ‘banned’ international freelancers, pointed out that any such ban by *The Sunday Times*, its sister paper *The Times* and the rest was never absolute. *The Times* had sent the most famous war photographer of all to Syria during the period of the supposed ban (Lloyd 2012).

As they themselves say it’s obviously not really true – they’ll send Don McCullin (as they did) and likewise if they get a killer pic whose provenance can be quickly identified they’ll use it – what it really means is that the likely need for an offered story or pic and the quality of the person offering is not worth the time and effort that will be required to discuss all the issues involved and take a view on the product. But perhaps, try again when we really need you (Richard Spencer, *Daily Telegraph* Middle East correspondent, interview via social media, 29 August 2013).

In fact, says Spencer, he is not sure the policy on hiring international freelancers is so different in Syria now:

Actually British broadsheets would have that policy re. war zones all the time - we ‘generally’ only send staffers and retained stringers who have been through our HET [hostile environment training] programmes and are on our insurance ... though we will make exceptions in special circumstances. I’m not sure for most of us that has changed in any way (ibid).

The freelance photographer, Rick Findler, accepts there may be a security reason not to accept work from international freelancers while they are in Syria. There had been suspicions that *Sunday Times* reporter Marie Colvin died because her live broadcasts made her easy to locate:

I think Marie may have been killed by targeting her electronic transmissions when she was filing. So if the pictures will wait and the publication I am working for insists I leave before I file and I think there *may* be a risk, I will file when I am out of Syria ... I don’t have a problem with that (Findler, telephone interview, 5 September 2013).

Finally, it may be that a loose or non-existent ‘ban’ on international freelancers is a useful way of filtering out non-staff journalists that a news organisation is unsure about working with – for a range of reasons including but not limited to safety.

Desk editors have a stockpile of useful phrases for fobbing off freelancers while trying not to discourage them and this is a quite useful one for this situation. (See also, ‘sounds really interesting but we’ve just got no space what with Syria/royal baby/Miley Cyrus etc.’) Saying, ‘we generally don’t accept freelance

copy' to the photographer is what any editor's going to do on any subject, meaning, if you're going to take up my time, make it bloody good (Spencer, interview via social media, 29 August 2013).

Case study: Sarin gas attacks in August 2013

Some data that reveal how staff reporters and editors actually work with independent journalists – as opposed to how they say they do – came from the reporting of the Sarin gas attack on the people of the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on 21 August 2013. The gas attack was significant because it was a major news story that quickly became a test of whether the United States and its allies should intervene in the Syrian conflict. If it could be proven that chemical weapons had been used, that would appear to cross what US President Obama had said was a 'red line' that would trigger intervention. Very few international journalists – either staff or freelance – were in the area at the time of the attack so it was difficult to find out who was responsible. Again, the data appear to show how ambivalent news organisations are about using international freelances in the most dangerous areas of conflict.

Within hours of the August 2013 Sarin gas attacks, one British newspaper which had previously said it was not going to commission international freelances, but was now desperate for copy and pictures, ended up soliciting them on the closed Facebook group mentioned above. Phoebe Greenwood, Assistant Foreign Editor of the *Guardian*, was one of several editors who went looking for (international) freelances. Other news organisations included the *Mail on Sunday*, *Channel 4 News* and the *Daily Telegraph*. Of those outlets, the *Guardian* had previously stated they would not use (international) freelances working in Syria (Turvill 2013). On 22 August 2013, the day after the gas attacks, Greenwood said that her newspaper was looking for 'any freelances currently working in Damascus'. Greenwood later said that she was only looking for 'corroboration' for the gas story, not to actually hire a journalist (telephone interview, 5 September 2013). Quite how she was hoping to convince a fellow professional journalist to report for her without the individual insisting on either a byline or payment was not made clear.

Case study: Use of international freelancers by the BBC

Another case appeared to show how ambivalent news organisations are about working with international freelances in Syria. Brit-

ish freelance reporter Hannah Lucinda Smith scripted and performed a voice piece for the Radio 4 programme *From Our Own Correspondent* about snipers in Aleppo (2013a) after she had left the country. Smith had been commissioned by an executive in BBC radio at a time when BBC staff reporters had been ordered out of the area. However, I had previously been told by a BBC news executive that there was a ban within the Corporation on using international freelances: 'The principle is that we don't want to create a market which encourages people to take risks. It's not fair to encourage people to do that' (telephone interview, 27 June 2013). It then became apparent that my source had had a row with the BBC Radio editor who had commissioned the freelance, because he believed all departments at the BBC should have the same policy. I was referred to the BBC press office: 'We use our own staff on deployments,' they said (via email, 4 September 2013).

So if international staff and freelances are notably absent from large parts of Syria, who is doing the reporting? It turns out to be the locally-hired freelances.

The news agencies step in

What is remarkable and significant about the reporting of the Syrian conflict is that locally hired news gatherers have almost entirely replaced a large part of the international press corps. And it is international news agencies ('the wires') that have largely enabled this change. After foreign reporters largely had stopped going to Syria (by the summer of 2013), news organisations began to rely on the wire services to fill the gap. Why did that happen? News organisations pay a flat fee to use as much material from the wires as they want and contractual arrangements for staff are handled by the wires. In this way, the news organisations are not responsible for the safety of the people who provide pictures, words and video that fill the foreign pages of their newspapers and their news websites day after day. Loyn says this is by far the safest option for news executives who are concerned about duty of care:

Few organisations want to ask questions of whether international news agencies were operating with the same ethical standards that newsrooms adopt for material they buy directly. News organisations take risks up to a certain level, and then pull back to rely on the agencies (Loyn 2013: 6).

The outsourcing of news gathering to local stringers in dangerous reporting environments

is not new (see Pedelty 1995 for a discussion of the practice in Salvador). Murrell has noted that the same thing happened during the insurgency in Iraq some years earlier. In her analysis, locally-hired news gatherers working for the wires had become a kind of reporting backstop: 'When a news editor doesn't feel able to send their own staff person, there will usually be something available on the wires' (Murrell 2010: 126). But in Iraq the news organisations had international staff in bureaux in Baghdad to supervise the locally-hired news gatherers – and there were coalition troops to guarantee the safety of the bureau staff. In Syria international journalists are operating in unfriendly terrain: no major news organisation has an office in Damascus with international staff to give locally-hired news gatherers daily support. There is also a large number of other Syrians who gather news, including 'activists' and other sources. This raises questions about whether news gathered in this war accords with the core journalistic norms of objectivity and impartiality (see Rodgers 2012: 47 for a discussion of these related areas). There is nothing new in such concerns. Accordingly, organisations such as the BBC have rules warning of the dangers of using news gatherers with a personal involvement in the story: 'Our audiences need to be confident that the BBC's editorial decisions are not influenced by the outside activities or personal or commercial interests of programme makers or those who appear on air' (BBC Editorial Guidelines). The way locally-hired Syrian staff were contracted by the news agencies caused something like a moral panic in the news industry at the end of 2013.

Case study: Use of locally-hired photographers by Reuters

It is surely asking a lot of Syrians to expect them to be impartial when reporting their own civil war. Yet the death of 18-year-old Reuters photographer Molhem Barakat in Aleppo in December 2013 shone a light on the difficulties facing news agencies relying on local hires to gather news. Reuters faced accusations that the ethical practice of its news gathering had been undermined by the constraints of operating as a news gatherer of last resort. Initially, the focus was on Barakat's youth; Barakat's age was variously reported as 17, 18 or 19. News insiders were scathing: 'We're entering uncharted territory in terms of the "reportability" of Syria and I fear this is the inevitable result. There's no way Reuters would have put a staffer into Aleppo – but they're prepared to give a teenager camera kit and send him on his way' (BBC News producer Stuart Hughes, interview via social media, 24 December 2013).

But it soon also became apparent that Barakat was no neutral bystander and that had implications for his ability to be impartial. Like many other locals working for international news organisations in Syria, Barakat was deeply involved in the conflict. He was killed alongside his brother Mustafa who was a rebel fighter for the Tawhid militia. According to a *New York Times* investigation (Estrin and Shoumali 2014), Barakat would accompany his brother to battles, taking pictures of his brother and his comrades-in-arms. Sometimes Barakat carried a gun. A journalist who befriended Barakat says the latter had considered becoming a suicide bomber for al Qa'eda:

In the end he didn't join al Qa'eda; he started working as a photographer, hoping to emulate some of the journalists he was hanging around with. He often asked me if he could work with me and I refused, because I didn't want the responsibility of an eager seventeen-year-old with no war-zone training and little experience on my shoulders. Soon afterwards I saw that he was filing photos for Reuters. I hope that they took responsibility for him in a way that I couldn't, and I hope that if he was taking photographs as he died in the hope of selling them to that agency, they also take responsibility for him now (Smith 2013b).

Reuters, the news agency that hires the most Syrian photographers in Syria, paid Barakat a day rate of \$150 to file for them, and provided his cameras and a flak jacket and helmet. Four other Syrian photographers who worked for Reuters said they were not given the medical, safety or ethics training which would be provided for staff photographers and international freelancers who regularly worked for the agency. It was claimed that Barakat and other Syrian news gatherers were largely left to work by themselves. There were no foreign photographers in town on the day Barakat was killed (Estrin and Shoumali 2014). BBC News producer Stuart Hughes asked Reuters whether they had checked Barakat's age, and what was Reuters' policy on purchasing freelance material — in this case from locally hired news gatherers — in Syria. The head of PR at Reuters responded:

We are deeply saddened by the death of Molhem Barakat, who sold photos to Reuters on a freelance basis. To best protect the many journalists on the ground in a dangerous and volatile war zone, we think it is inappropriate to comment any further at this time (Hughes 2013).

Hughes is concerned that the death of Barakat indicates a wider problem. He says locally-hired news gatherers working in other areas of conflict are normally supervised far more closely than they currently are in Syria:

When Reuters put out statements like the one they gave me I do despair. Big news organisations (mine included) are looking to social media and citizen journalism etc. as a way of telling stories in a different way, increasing access to places like Syria etc., but when they feel threatened they think they can pull the shutters down and say nothing. Hopefully this case will help show that's not an option anymore – they've got to be more transparent (Hughes, interview via social media, 24 December 2013).

The New York Times's investigation also claimed that Syrian photographers had provided Reuters with staged photographs that were in some cases improperly credited (Estrin and Shoumali 2014). Finally, a separate investigation suggested another example where a Reuters stringer had faked pictures, such as those of a ten-year-old boy supposedly working in a munitions factory (Winslow 2014). In all these cases, Reuters denied their photographers had been working unethically.

Discussion and conclusion

To sum up, the current study looked for evidence that news organisations had become reluctant to take responsibility for international and locally hired freelancers working in Syria. It initially investigated news production and hiring processes relating to two specific stories, the gas attacks of August 2013 and a BBC radio piece through interviews with a broad range of freelancers, staff reporters and news industry executives. It found that news organisations are sorely challenged by the current situation in Syria. The result is that they are struggling to perform their core duty to inform the public sphere. The focus of the final part of the research shifted away from international freelancers, and on to the people who have ended up doing most of the news gathering – locally-hired news gatherers. But it is unclear whether the increased use of the latter is a change of principle rather than simply a change of scale of use in previous conflicts. The conclusion that news organisations find it difficult to find a way through the resulting contradictions concerning ethics and impartiality is supported by the data gathered from all three case studies.

In the end, this study is really about reporter power. International staff reporters are located at the top of the reporting hierarchy and have the most power. International freelancers are located lower down the hierarchy than staff reporters and have less power. Local reporters have least status and the least power. This is in line with Pedelty's (1995) findings about the relative status of the staff, freelancers and stringers or locally hired journalists.

Does the data from this research project have broader implications for journalism and conflict reporting? Syria fits Kaldor's (2006) description of 'new wars' in which control of information spaces became part of the war, to the extent that aspects of the conflict become near invisible. The Islamic State group has successfully closed down the information space by killing freelance international journalists, at the same time as it calls attention to its own radical public relations strategy. It is tempting to connect these two elements. If that connection could be proven that would be an interesting development in the debate about the mediatisation of military forces (see Cottle 2006, Maltby 2012). The long-term trend may be away from robust, independent reporting on the ground. Former BBC reporter Martin Bell, for example, paints a bleak future for conflict journalism. Talking to John Simpson, World Affairs editor at the BBC, Bell said: 'I do not believe that war reporting as we used to do it, from among the people, is any longer possible' (Simpson 2012). Indeed, the number of countries where reporting by international journalists on the ground is little practised now includes Afghanistan, the tribal areas of Pakistan, North Caucasus and Somalia and certain areas in the Middle East. In none of these places are international reporters protected by friendly forces. Before the current war in Syria, a generation of war reporters had grown up with the embedding system in Iraq and Afghanistan (Tumber and Palmer 2004). It has been a shock for many reporters working in Syria to discover how exposed they are when not protected by Nato troops. Cockburn (2013) makes the case traditionally made by war reporters – that there is no substitute for on-the-ground reporting. But journalists and their audience are getting used to the idea that increasingly it just isn't possible.

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Note on the Contributor

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