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The Eyewitness Texture of Conflict: Contributions of Amateur Videos in News Coverage of the Arab Spring

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Abstract: Our paper uses the events of the Arab Spring to examine amateur videos as a discourse of conflict produced by untrained and unpaid individuals, often at great personal risk, and which is taken up by, and incorporated into, news outcomes by professional news networks. The different semiotic elements comprising amateur images used in news coverage create what we call an “eyewitness texture” that reflects not only the generally low quality technologies in use and non-professional camera skills, but the sensibilities of a public desire for proximity and immediacy, which is sometimes utilised by news organisations as a means to authenticate their coverage with affective and narrative features.

The corpus of our study includes the amateur footage used in news coverage of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya during the first 100 days of the Arab Spring uprisings (December 17th 2010 to March 31st 2011) by *France 24* and the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)*. Our paper uses a multi-pronged discourse analysis to reveal a range of priorities at work in the selection and use of amateur images. We notice that the inclusion of the eyewitness textures of amateur produced images in some cases implied meanings that tied news narratives to larger and largely ideological forms of discursive significance.

Keywords: user generated content, amateur produced images, Arab Spring, eyewitness textures

Among the many changes introduced by new media technologies to news practices, the growing use of amateur images is one of the most challenging. Many dramatic examples of the significance of amateur videography can be found in news coverage during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2010/11. Amateur videographers captured dramatic events such as protesters being shot, beaten and run down by military vehicles; spontaneous protests in public spaces; clashes between different groups; and street celebrations, often creating the only visual record of events available. The availability of amateur images for use in news discourses is a phenomenon with as yet many unstudied impacts on professional news practices and outcomes.

Our paper uses the events of the Arab Spring to examine amateur videos as a discourse of conflict produced by untrained and unpaid individuals, often at great personal risk, and which is taken up by and incorporated into news outcomes by

several broadcasting networks. In this paper we are examining the use of amateur video in news coverage by *France 24* and the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)*. The different semiotic elements comprising amateur images used in the corpus of our study create what we call an “eyewitness texture” that reflects not only the generally low quality technologies in use and non-professional camera skills (e.g. shakiness, pixelated forms, de-saturated colours, poor framing, indefinite imagery, etc.), but also the sensibilities of a public desire for proximity and immediacy, which is sometimes utilised by news organisations not only for evidentiary value, but as a means to authenticate their coverage with visual elements. ‘Eyewitness texture’ describes aspects of imagery that influence meaning through other-than-rational means – for example, by creating a feeling of being there, of immediacy and proximity to events, even if the events depicted in the amateur footage are only indirectly related to the central subject of the news story.

The corpus of our study is constituted by the amateur footage used in news coverage of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya during the first 100 days of the Arab Spring uprisings (December 17th 2010 to March 31st 2011) produced by *France 24* and the *CBC*. Tunisia is where the Arab Spring began with the self-immolation of Tunisian fruit vendor Mohammed Bouazizi, Egypt was the second and arguably more affected country to which the uprising spread, and Libya was the third. Our focus was on the early phase of the uprisings (the total duration of which lasted at least until late 2012, if not beyond) when journalists from Western news organizations had the least access and were therefore more reliant on amateur visual content, a pattern confirmed in the decreasing frequency of amateur images in news stories over the course of the first three months of coverage.

Our paper uses a multi-pronged discourse analysis including aesthetic qualities, narrative fragments and metanarratives, and justificatory role(s) to reveal a range of priorities at work in the selection and use of amateur images in early coverage of the Arab Spring. These priorities include the evidentiary value of the images as a visual record of the contents of a news story, and also at times their rhetorical value as eyewitness texture in response to a public desire to know through the immediacy of being there, even when the images appear to serve no direct evidentiary function. Our paper is intended as an attempt to better understand how user-generated video incorporated into news stories is (re)shaping knowledge outcomes in the discourses of television journalism.

Eyewitness texture in the production of news

The production of amateur images is an act of ‘witnessing’ that transforms media viewers and consumers into what Axel Bruns (2006) describes as “producers”, a term that recognizes the hybrid quality of amateur production as blurring traditional boundaries between producers and users. According to Mortensen, ‘eyewitness’ in a media context “involves an individual sharing his or her experience of

watching or attending a certain event by making a statement, performance or representation” (Mortensen 2015, 19). “Eyewitness images”, which are auto-recorded, subjective, and ambiguous in terms of media institutions, emerge from a participatory stance of some kind (i.e. happened to be there, intended to be there, etc.) and are often decontextualized (Mortensen 2015). Eyewitness images according to Mortensen eliminate the distance between seeing and saying, but based on the results of the present study, the degree to which this is the case will depend on how the images are used. Amateur produced images have also been referred to as “citizen witnessing” (Allan 2014). The emphasis in all of these terms is on the witnessing aspect of the amateur producer’s relationship with the events recorded.

Other scholars use the term “user generated content” (Harkin et al. 2012; Popple and Thornham 2014; Singer and Ashman 2009), a term we also use at times, although we find it somewhat broad for the specific purposes of our study. While we do not take objection with the eyewitness terminologies¹, our preference in this study is for the terms “amateur images” and “amateur image producers” (see Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2011) in order to emphasize the ontological status of the images as emerging from outside of the institutional structures, conventions and values of professional news media organizations. We contend that it is these institutional boundaries and the ways they demarcate a set of professional practices and conventions regarding verification that are most challenged by the use of amateur images.

It is also important to specify the distinction we make between amateur production of images and what is sometimes referred to as ‘citizen journalism’, a form of news production by untrained and self-taught members of the public that includes current affairs-based blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness commentary on current events (Allan and Thorsen 2009, 2014; Goode 2009). As Goode (2009, 1288) has argued, the term can be used quite broadly to include activities like “re-posting, linking, ‘tagging’ (labeling with keywords), rating, modifying or commenting upon news materials posted by other users or by professional news outlets, whereby citizens participate in the news process without necessarily acting as ‘content creators’”. Mortensen also rejects “citizen journalism” as too widely used to be applicable usefully to eyewitness picture producers. In particular, the term occludes the singular attribute of amateur images as emerging from a grey zone between documentation and participation (Mortensen 2015).

The unreliable production of amateur images is now widely used by mostly self-regulated, traditional news media seeking to take advantage of visual content to which they would not otherwise have access and that their own workers have not (yet) produced (Allan and Peters 2015, Anden-Papadopoulos 2013, Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013, Mortensen and Kristensen 2013, Mortensen 2015). Amateur images are part of – and are an integral resource for – what some schol-

¹ In fact, we use it to a limited extent in our description of some of the aesthetic qualities of amateur produced images.

ars describe as networked journalism, a term being used to describe changed practices of journalism reflecting ways digital technologies and networks have transformed information sharing. Networked journalism reflects a shift in professional practices towards understanding journalists as functioning nodes within a vast network of information flows constantly being updated from many sources including traditional sources, but also amateur content made available online through social media, blogs, independent websites, etc. (Beckett 2010, Duffy and Dhahi 2011). Amateur produced content is an increasingly important element in these journalism networks in part because they respond to consumer and market demands for “immediate” information, and can enhance perceptions of “authenticity” (Ahva and Hellman 2015, Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Wardle 2010) and proximity to events (Pantti 2013), but its often murky ontology can also challenge established values of “objectivity” and “trust” at the basis of journalism as a business (Anden-Papadopoulos 2013; Mortensen and Kristensen 2013; Singer 2010). Lack of verification, however, has not been an absolute barrier to its use in professional reportage; rather, other strategies are relied on to justify its inclusion in news reports such as attribution to another media source (Mortensen and Kristensen 2013); our study observed that use of unverified amateur footage is also sometimes labelled as “unverified”. There have also been recent efforts to develop standards of verification specifically for amateur images such as the *Verification Handbook* published by the European Journalism Centre of the Poynter Institute (Silverman 2014). Changing standards of verification reflect the value of amateur content to professional news organizations: it may be the only way some visual materials in relation to a story can be obtained (Mortensen 2015, Ristovska 2016).

It is perhaps obvious that amateur images offer the possibility for visual evidence in relation to their content, but as mentioned above, the evidentiary value of images accounts for only some of the justificatory conditions supporting the use of amateur images. For example, amateur produced images are regularly included in news coverage with the caveat that the source of the images is unknown and the veracity of what they purport to show unverifiable, raising questions about why they would be included in coverage at all (MacFarquhar 2013, Cockburn 2013).

Lilie Chouliaraki argues that amateur contributions to Western journalism challenge “existing hierarchies of place and human life ... towards recognizing the voice of distant others” (Chouliaraki 2014, 51). And while distance can be significantly conceived in cultural terms, the observation is especially resonant in contexts where non-Western members of publics are recording images that are then circulated in Western news discourses. Chouliaraki is arguing for a new understanding of journalism in a converged, 21st century networked and digital environment, one whose practices more and more emphasize deliberation and witnessing over the traditional emphasis on the provision of information. Amateur contributions in this context represent a remediation of ordinary voices into news network discourses (Chouliaraki 2014).

But amateur images can be interpreted in other ways. For the audiences, ‘eyewitness textures’ can signify perceived proximities to the events they record and signal greater authenticity. Dovey describes this “amateurishness as guarantor of truth” where amateur aesthetics ostensibly signal raw, unmediated information that appears to “cut through the institution of the simulacrum (whilst at the same time taking its place in its palette of textures)” (Dovey 2000, 64). Yet within the conventions of professional journalism, these images may represent a risk of manipulation and lack of transparency, attributes suggesting a lack of authenticity. One way to explain this effect is to take into account how aesthetic, other-than-rational attributes shape news discourse outcomes (Lithgow 2012, Cramerotti 2009, Broersma 2007, Jonsson 2004, Barnhurst and Nerone 2001), including those produced by amateur images.

Amateur video clips demonstrate discursive complexity, often it would seem as a result of their ‘shortcomings’ in comparison to professionally produced visuals: poor resolution and composition, shaky images, blurriness, overly aggressive pans, etc. all of which contribute to varying levels of ambiguity about what exactly is being depicted. In addition, amateur images are often recorded by amateurs and selected by professional journalists because of their affective impact: dead bodies, wounded and bloody protestors, horrific acts of violence, pools of blood on the sidewalk, and so on. Add to this the difficulties frequently encountered in verifying where images come from and why they were recorded, and the result is often images whose significance both exceeds and depends on contextual news narratives: depends, in the sense that amateur images on their own are suggestive of many possible meanings and rarely only one. Or in other words, amateur images often do more, if less precise, discursive work than they are being called upon to do by the rational news narratives that include them.² One way to understand some of these excesses is through the lens of aesthetic experience. Jacques Rancière has argued that aesthetic experience can be understood as a (re)distribution of sensibilities: the organization of categories and range of perceptions shaping the ordering functions of language (2004; 2008; 2009). Or in other words, the aesthetics of amateur images may shape discourse in ways ignored or unregulated by the rational criteria generally applied to sense-making in the news.³

In addition, visuals including amateur video clips can also influence news stories in their role as visual fill to aid in telling the news story (what is sometimes referred to as B-roll in the news industry: meaning visuals indirectly related to but in support of the news narrative), as visual evidence in support of news arguments, through ideological content⁴, and as presenting and reflecting narratives/metanarratives.

2 Roland Barthes (1985), Walter Benjamin (1979) and Allan Sekula (1982) among others have written about the tension between the indexical ontology of photographic images and their dependence for meaning on discursive contexts.

3 The authors have explored the philosophical foundations of aesthetic discourse and analytic approaches to discursive aesthetics in previous work (see Lithgow 2012, 2013, 2017).

4 The presence and significance of ideological content in news coverage has been widely studied, see Gitlin 1980, Hackett 1984, Hall 1982, McChesney 1999.

Methodology

Our research set out to identify the discursive impacts of amateur images on news outcomes. While the use of the digital technologies by amateurs in the production and distribution of information extends to various types of media – television, newspapers, magazines, audio, visual, etc. – for this paper, we target the impact of user-generated content (UGC) coming from various social media on the television industry. The originality of the research is found methodologically in an international comparative analysis of the coverage of the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt (2010-11) by two television channels, *CBC* in Canada and *France 24*, operating in different countries. The reason for limiting our study to television is twofold: 1) to our knowledge, no serious studies on the topic have taken television as a case study, they are mostly focusing on print media; 2) the use of these images by television is more immediate than by newspapers and therefore more related to the concept of dis-intermediation. The time period covered by our analysis corresponds to the 100 first days immediately following the immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire in the city of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia on December 17, 2010. We chose a period of 100 days after preliminary examination of *CBC* newscasts⁵ which suggested this time frame as necessary for traditional media to be able to organize coverage by their own reporters and settle into a routine use of both professionally produced and amateur produced content.

CBC and *France 24* provided us from their archives all of the news stories during the first 100 days of the Arab Spring uprisings that incorporated amateur produced images. Our paper particularly targets coverage of the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. We analysed this corpus with a critical discourse analysis approach based on the broad category of “critical qualitative research” as defined by Kincheloe and McLaren (2003).

Aligning ourselves with a renewed interest among some scholars in textual analysis to excavate implied or contextualizing ideological and cultural assumptions (Fürsich 2009), we reviewed the corpus of news stories using amateur video and identified the following categories of significance in relation to the amateur video clips, each of which will be described briefly below: structural role, evidentiary value, aesthetic qualities (affect and picture quality), narratives (including narrative fragments and metanarratives) and degree of proximity to the events depicted.

The structural role of amateur video clips refers to how amateur clips are used in the larger structural make-up of the news story and its visual presentation. Within the standardized repertoire of visuals “consisting of many generic ingredients in the camerawork” (Dahlgren 2008, 5090), journalists sometimes refer to the narrative structure of a television news story as the “clothesline” on which news elements are ‘hung’ in the presentation of a television news story (Hansen 2004). The structural role of amateur clips describes how central or how peripheral they are to

⁵ From an archive located at Carleton University.

the overall visual structure of the story.

The evidentiary value of amateur clips describes whether clips function in relation to a news story as visual filler (or B-roll) or as visual evidence, i.e. the news story is directly and specifically about what is happening in the amateur produced images.

Amateur video clips as narrative fragments reflect what Georgakapoulou (2015) calls “small stories”, narrative fragments with less obvious and incomplete narrative structure, but which often emerge as events are unfolding and which in many instances reflect the narrativization of experiences discouraged or disallowed from cultural circulation. Recognizing that the clips have been created by individuals not employed by the news organizations that use them, our analysis sought to take into account any discursive implications of these “small stories”.⁶

What makes narrative fragments discursively interesting in this context, is when they imply other, larger (i.e. meta)narratives.⁷ Metanarratives reflect the degree to which narrative fragments can be understood to depend for their significance on contextualizing larger structures of meaning.⁸ For example, clips showing damaged property take on particular significance within a larger metanarrative of the collapse of social order under the ‘democratic’ pressures of protests in Arab states during the Arab Spring.

The aesthetic elements of amateur images describe aspects of the images that play a role in shaping their discursive significance but which lie outside of the rational criteria generally brought to bear on discursive legitimacy in a news context. In particular, the affective register of clips often distinguished amateur images from other images, especially in terms of shock, horror and/or heightened anxiety or urgency.⁹ In addition, amateur clips demonstrated unique pictorial qualities which distinguished amateur produced images from other images, and almost always suggesting inferior picture quality – resolution, composition, colour and often shot in a way that makes it difficult to determine what is being filmed (shaky camera, fast pans and zooms, blurriness).

6 Small stories are not “highly tellable”, but rather lack clearly marked beginnings middles and ends, often describing non-linear events situated within other forms of narrative-making, with an emphasis on the “detachability” of the narrative fragment and its ability to be recontextualized, and its use in the co-construction of meanings between teller and audience, Small stories are incomplete in context, often reflecting an immediacy of circumstance. “Sharing events as they are happening,” writes Georgakopoulou, “completely changes the handling of a story’s point: the point is not known to the teller (yet), but is emerging through the tellings in collaboration with the audience” (2015, 262). Further, as with the amateur videos in the Arab Spring, small stories often reflect the narration of experiences not allowed or discouraged from circulation by hegemonic forces. In this sense, “...small stories research serves as an epistemology rather than just an analytical toolkit. It becomes an ideological standpoint for the analyst who seeks to ‘listen’ to such counter-stories and make them hearable” (Georgakopoulou 2015, 263).

7 The presence and significance of narratives in news reporting has been widely studied, see Adam 1993, Bird and Dardenne 1988, Carey 1986, Chalaby 1998, Roeh 1989.

8 Metanarratives are structures of meaning that present assumed forms of knowledge and order of a time and place and which reinforce the status quo (Lyotard 1984; New World Encyclopedia 2014).

9 The importance of affect in connection with news images has been documented in various studies including Brantner et al. 2011, Gray 2007, Pfau et al. 2008, Seib 2002.

And finally, there is the attribute of proximity, which reflects the camera operator's closeness to the events being depicted in video clips. Often, amateur images are recorded from within the events taking place at extreme close proximity to people, actions and dangers. This quality of amateur footage has important implications for viewers.¹⁰

With these seven categories of discursive significance as our analytic framework, we proceeded to examine the corpus of amateur produced images in news coverage during the first 100 days of the Arab Spring by *CBC* and *France 24*. We turn now to this analysis, first applied to *CBC*'s coverage and then *France 24*. We consider the use of amateur images in each case, and then compare and contrast the two news networks use of amateur footage in our comprehensive analysis and findings.

***CBC* and *France 24* Coverage of the Arab Spring**

***CBC* news stories**

In the first 100 days (from December 2010 to March 2011) of *CBC*'s coverage of the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, there were 21 news stories that incorporated amateur footage. Among them, two referred to Tunisia, six referred to Egypt and 14 referred to Libya. These were the first three countries to experience social upheaval as a result of events associated with the Arab Spring.

Of the 21 stories that used amateur footage, only in two of them did it play more than a secondary role structurally, in the sense that the visual core of the vast majority of news stories in which amateur footage appeared was primarily made up of professionally shot images with amateur images strategically woven in. The first exception was a news story dated February 16, 2011 about Libya, narrated by a news anchor accompanied by amateur footage identified by the narrator as "amateur video". The second story was also from Libya dated February 20, 2011. The journalist narrating the story says at the beginning: "Accurate reporting from Libya is complicated because the country has blocked access to foreign journalists ..." (*CBC* February 20, 2011). Some of the images in the story are introduced with descriptors such as "with the postings online" and "these images are apparently of what's being called a massacre", or with graphic overlays stating "youtube video", while others (unlabelled in any way) are so pixelated and of such a poor quality that their contents are barely discernible, i.e. they have the hallmark visual qualities of amateur footage and in this sense demonstrate the eyewitness textures suggesting authenticity, but their meanings remain somewhat ambiguous. Our observation is that despite its widespread use in Arab Spring coverage, especially in the early days of the unrest when access to events was difficult or impossible for foreign journalists, the presence of amateur footage in news coverage by the *CBC* in the majority of cases was a subordinate addition to professionally produced video

¹⁰ As mentioned earlier, the proximity effect of amateur footage has also been explored by Pantti (2013).

imagery. As Chouliaraki (2014) has pointed out, the presence of ordinary voices in news network discourse is a phenomenon not often seen in the media, and the ratios of amateur to professional footage support this observation.

In terms of presentation, 15 of the 21 stories explicitly identified amateur footage either in voiceover narration or with a graphic overlay:

Table 1: Strategies for indicating amateur produced images in CBC news stories

Voiceover descriptors	Graphic tags (various stories)
“Amateur video” (AR 20110216 MCKENNA ANATOMY PART I) ¹¹	“unsourced video”
“Postings online...these images are apparently ...” (AR 20110220 HUNTER ARAB PROTEST (first 2:46 OF 1 hr)	“Youtube”
“even with these shaky cellphone pictures” (AR 20110221 HUNTER LIBYA MILITARY)	“Amateur video”
“Phone cams are still about the only way pictures are getting out of Libya”(AR 20110221 HUNTER LIBYA MILITARY)	
“these pictures purport to show ... “these images are from youtube. CBC cannot verify their authenticity” (AR 20110223 MACDONALD LIBYA TODAY)	
“these are images in a closed country loaded onto social media” (AR 20110223 MACDONALD LIBYA TODAY)	
“Images that cannot be verified” (AR 20110225 BONNER LIBYA BIG PICTURE)	
“Images of a citizens arrest ...made its way onto a social media website” (AR 20110226 DUNN LIBYA TODAY)	
“This unverified video purportedly shows” (AR 20110228 MACDONALD LIBYA)	
“this video is unverifiable” (AR 20110303 DUNN AIR RAIDS)	
“this video impossible to verify” (AR 20110304 DUNN STREET ANGER)	

In seven of the 21 news stories, the amateur footage was only indirectly related to the news story being told; that is, the specific events, places and times recorded in the images were not the focus of the story. In other words, in one-third of the cases examined, the amateur footage was used as secondary footage used to fill in the visual narrative, but which is not the direct object or event under scrutiny in the story.

¹¹ AR 20110216 MCKENNA ANATOMY PART I is the archival reference name attached to the digital file viewed at CBC studios: a CBC news story aired on that date as part of the 11 pm evening news and containing amateur produced footage. All similar references are the names attached to digital files viewed at the CBC.

An example may help to illustrate this. In a news story dated February 26, 2011 amateur footage was used in a story about events on the previous day – fighting between Gadhafi troops and rebel troops in Libya’s Tripoli, and the emergence of a citizen run impromptu government to keep city infrastructure running in Benghazi.¹² The total story length is 1:54 minutes. The amateur clip – identified as “un-sourced video” by a graphic overlay and by the narrator who says: “what appears to be a citizen’s arrest of one apparent mercenary has made its way onto a social media website” – is five seconds in length, showing a man in khaki uniform on the ground with his hands bound lying in a pool of blood, pleading with people dressed in civilian’s clothes. The relevance of the clip is an implied meaning in the context of the news story: that this was a scene from the previous day. In terms of its evidentiary value, however, most of the factual contents of the images in the amateur clip remain ambiguous: who, where, when and even why are uncertain. Moreover, the presence of mercenaries in the conflict is not discussed or examined in any substantive way, merely mentioned in passing (it is considered more substantively in another news story that used the same amateur clip two days later¹³). The images create a sense of urgency and immediacy (and in this case, the affective disturbance of witnessing the brutality portrayed), while offering little in the way of traditional “facts”. These hyperfactual sensibilities add what we are describing as ‘eyewitness texture’ to the news narratives being relayed, while also still challenging existing hierarchy of places in the media by recognizing the voices of distant others, as Chouliaraki (2014) would say.

When we looked more closely at what amateur clips were depicting (whether directly or indirectly related to the news story in which they are used), we found most uses of amateur clips (90%) evoked a high affective state – of horror, revulsion, outrage – by depicting shocking, dramatic events such as protestors being injured or killed, physical clashes between police and protestors and between different factions of protestors, destruction of property, angry mobs and also the immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi. Most amateur clips (90%) located the viewer in close proximity to events being depicted, i.e. amidst protestors being shot and injured, facing police retaliation, in conflict with other protestors, etc. Together these qualities created a ‘proximal urgency’ associated with most uses of amateur video.

In all cases, the images were of comparatively poor quality: washed out colours, pixelated, shaky camera work and poor composition. In at least one case, the image was virtually indecipherable in the sense that it was difficult to determine what was happening in one viewing; the meaning relied heavily on context and implication.

In the 21 news stories, there were 86 separate clips of amateur footage. Whether or not they were used directly as evidence or were instead indirectly related to the main narrative in the news stories where they appeared, the clips had their own

¹² AR 20110226 DUNN LIBYA TODAY

¹³ AR 20110228 MACDONALD LIBYA DIPLOMACY

narratives, or what we called narrative fragments. For example, in a story about the president of Tunisia stepping down, one of the amateur clips in the story depicts men carrying an injured man through the streets, i.e. a narrative fragment of protestors being injured in the street.¹⁴ The clips depict specific situations of people and actions, but whose meanings and significance are subsumed into the news stories in which they appear.

In descending order of frequency, narrative fragments identified were: citizens/protestors taking to the streets, the injury of protestors, state attacks against protestors, protestors creating property damage, protestors fighting against police/military, protestors clashing with each other, the immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi and ambiguous images. We then looked for metanarratives within which these narrative fragments potentially drew meaning and significance. We identified five broad themes, each of which requires some explanation:

The most common theme was the violent tyranny of Arab states, with clips suggesting that the protests were a response to tyrannical states who are either violent towards their citizens, and/or tolerate police violence against citizens. This was not always stated explicitly in the news stories, but was clearly implied. For example, in one news story, the news narrative is about the significance of a video clip uploaded to YouTube getting a lot of attention. The newscaster describes the video (in which an Egyptian protestor is shot, falls to the ground and is helped away by another protestor) with the following narration:

“Confrontations between protesters and police are being captured on camera and uploaded to the internet. Today we came across one particular video on youtube that’s attracting a lot of attention, and it’s easy to understand why. The video shows the man collapsing to the ground after the sound of gunshots. Another man runs to help him, and the victim is carried away. The person who posted the video claims it was filmed during the protests in the last five days.”¹⁵

The news narrative about attention being attracted by graphic amateur video footage from Egypt and the narrative fragment about a civilian shot in the street both take on a deeper significance within a metanarrative about tyranny and violence by Arab States (in this case Egypt) against their own citizens, something which is not mentioned explicitly in the news story.

The second most common theme suggested by amateur video clips was the collapse of social order as a result of the citizen uprisings. For example, in one news story the news narrative is about protests spreading to Iran, stating that the only images getting out are through social media and that in the face of protests the Iranian regime is organizing counter protests chanting death threats at students and protestors.¹⁶ The news story is about spreading Middle-eastern turmoil and

14 AR 20110114 CBC NATIONAL AIR FRI 2300

15 AR 20110129 CBC YOUTUBE VIDEO

16 AR 20110215 MACDONALD MIDEAST TURMOIL

uprisings. There are two amateur video clips: one showing crowds in streets covered in debris and rubble with overturned objects on fire; the second showing crowds in the street, smoke in the air and then the crowd turning and running. Over these images the narrator says: “Protesting in Iran takes something almost beyond courage given the tendencies of the clerical authorities and yet Iranians are doing it by the thousands according to some reports all over the country.”¹⁷ The property damage in the first clip and the smoke hovering in the air in the second clip take on particular significance within a metanarrative of the potential for social and political collapse.

The third most common metanarrative theme conveys public protest as a form of democratic uprising. For example, in one news story, the news narrative is about the importance of cellphone video in the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings.¹⁸ One of the amateur video clips shows a group of demonstrators in the street at a municipal building in Tunisia. The narration says: “A day after Mohammed Bouazizi burned himself, friends and relatives went to the provincial office and loudly protested the injustice that drove him to such desperation. This cellphone video of the event was instantly circulated to tens of thousands of Arabs through Facebook and Twitter ...shortly after that protest, far larger protests began to appear in the capital of Tunis”¹⁹. The story is about technology being the cause of civic unrest in the Arab world. The amateur clip shows an example of this unrest, which takes on particular significance in the context of a growing movement of protest against unfair treatment by state officials.

The fourth metanarrative theme that emerged was the idea that the Arab Spring was caused by new media and digital technologies. This is a technological determinist narrative about Western technology being the cause of middle-eastern democratic uprisings. For example, in one of the news stories the news narrative was about Egypt having blocked the Internet that day, as a result of online circulation of voices of defiance having grown in concert with the protests, the result of a sophisticated network of young people using social media to incite a revolution.²⁰ An amateur clip in the story shows a man lying prone in the street on a pool of blood, two persons crouching to help. Although the images in the clip are not representing any link with new technology, the narrative mentions that “... technology is nothing new to dissidents. Iran’s failed uprisings two years ago were called the cellphone revolution after images of police brutality were captured that way.” The clip takes on particular significance in the context of a narrative about digitally driven revolutions.

And finally, the last metanarrative theme observed had to do with gendering the Arab Spring uprisings as an expression of male Arab anger. This metanarrative

17 AR 20110215 MACDONALD MIDEAST TURMOIL

18 AR 20110216 MCKENNA ANATOMY PART I

19 AR 20110216 MCKENNA ANATOMY PART I

20 AR 20110128 CBC NATIONAL AIR FRI 2300

emerged from the amateur clips as a whole in which the vast majority of clips (95%) figure only men in the images who are screaming, chanting, in conflict with state forces, and firing weapons.²¹

What makes these themes interesting and significant is that the amateur video images draw excess meaning from the discursive contexts in which they appear, i.e. Western mainstream culture. These images are thus at risk of serving broader ideological motifs. For example, the theme of ‘male Arab anger’ obfuscates many other realities of the Arab Spring including the important role of women in organizing, supporting and participating in all forms of protest (Al-Ali 2012; Al-Natour 2012; Hafez 2014; Johansson-Nogués 2013; Radsch 2012), and the many different kinds of activities and participants involved in Arab Spring protests. The theme of the Arab Spring uprisings as a product of new media obscures significant offline organizing efforts by activists and social movement leaders that both preceded and occurred during the uprising (Aourgh and Alexander 2011; Hassan 2012; Salvatore 2013) and shifts causation to something emerging from a Western context, i.e. digital technologies. The theme of social collapse obscures the ways Arab states, like Western states, have rich histories of social unrest preceding the Arab Spring (Bunce 2013; Cole 2013; Hanafi 2012). And finally, the theme of tyranny obscures the many ways Arab states affected by the uprisings operate on more complex terms: for example, that tyrannical repressions are directed at some social groups more than others; that some aspects of despotism and tyranny in Arab contexts may have parallels in Western liberal contexts (Kroes 2017); that Arab states are routinely demonized in information campaigns tied to foreign policy strategies and may obscure, among other things, cultural attributes heralded in Western contexts such as institutions of science, education, fine arts, market economies, etc. (Herland 2017; Ventura 2016). Amateur videos in these instances appear to be doing discursive work over-reducing complexity in an arguably orientalist framework.²² So while the amateur images used and recognized in some respects the voice of distant others, to use Chouliaraki’s (2014) words, there remained limitations in the metanarratives supported by how these voices were incorporated into news narratives for a Western audience.

France 24

In the first 100 days of *France 24*’s coverage of the Arab Spring, there were 11 news stories that incorporated amateur footage: four covering the event in Egypt and seven covering events in Tunisia.²³ In nine of these stories, amateur footage played a central structural role, i.e. made up the majority of the footage and/or was the

21 Other studies of orientalism in news and Western moral panics about Muslims lend support to these findings. See: Bonn 2012, Karim 2006, Said 1978, Saeed 2007.

22 Hanafi (2012) argues that the term ‘Arab Spring’ itself is orientalist, preferring instead the regionally employed term “Arab revolutions”. Hanafi argues that the Arab revolutions should be “read as continuities in a long history of protest in the region rather than a total rupture” (41).

23 In the video clips supplied by *France 24*, none of the stories using amateur footage in the first 100 days were about Libya. The small number of stories with amateur video footage might be due to the fact that, according to the editors responsible for the inclusion of amateur videos in the news at the time of the data collection, all videos used were verified.

central organizing feature around which the story was organized. Eight stories opened with amateur footage suggesting a strategic placement of the footage in terms of framing. Most uses of amateur footage by *France 24* (80%) appeared to be directly at issue in the story, in terms of the time, place and events depicted, i.e. as visual evidence of the story content.

The majority of the amateur clips (80%) evoked a high affective state – of horror, revulsion, outrage, urgency – by depicting shocking, dramatic events such as protestors being injured, physical clashes between police and protestors, and between different factions of protestors, and also the immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi. All of amateur clips located the viewer in close proximity to events being depicted, i.e. amidst protestors being shot and injured, facing police retaliation, in conflict with other protestors, etc. Together, these qualities created a ‘proximal urgency’ associated with most uses of amateur video.

In all cases, the images were of comparatively poor quality: washed out colours, pixelated images, shaky camera work and poor composition. In at least two cases, the image was virtually indecipherable in the sense that it was difficult to determine what was happening as the meaning relied heavily on context and implication, which were not clear. But in this sense, their meaning(s) were all the more authentic for the viewers in that they were obviously created, to use Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2011, 12) words, “as first hand recordings by individuals who witnessed or experienced an event while it was happening” rather than from within the conventions of news institutions. The indecipherability in these instances is related directly to their perceived authenticities.

In the 11 news stories, there were 38 separate clips of amateur footage. The narrative fragments depicted in clips (these are distinct from the narratives of the news stories being supported by the clips) broke down as follows (in decreasing order of frequency): citizens taking to the streets (walking, shouting, throwing stones at barricades); people in streets proximal to property destruction (cars, buildings, rubble, fires, etc.); the immolation; state violence against protestors; injured protestors; ambiguous; protestors clashing with police; protestors clashing with each other.

We examined narrative fragments in the way we did for the Canadian channel, as described above, looking for metanarratives from which these narrative fragments might draw discursive significance and meaning from. We identified five broad themes, all of which were also found in the Canadian example (described above): (i) clips that suggest the Arab Spring as an expression of male Arab anger; (ii) clips that suggest the Arab Spring as a collapse of social order; (iii) clips that suggest the Arab Spring protests as a democratic uprising; (iv) clips that suggest the protests as a response to tyranny; (v) finally, clips that suggest the Arab Spring as an East vis-à-vis West clash of civilisation. Each of these themes was described above in detail.

To give a sense of how the analysis is developed and applied to one specific example, let us look at the video of Mohammed Bouazizi's immolation (figure 1 shows an image extracted from that video). The story was shown on *France 24* on December 30, 2010 and lasts 1:48 minutes. It begins with footage showing a group of mostly male citizens taking to the street in the city of Sidi Bouzid, where the immolation occurred. They are, so the commentary tells us, protesting against the high level of unemployment: no mention at this stage of the immolation or of the anger of the Arabs. After 10 seconds, the story shows another 10 seconds of footage about a different manifestation happening in another city, where lawyers (again mostly males) are protesting against the corrupt legal system. The bad quality of the images (washed out colors, shaky camera work, poor composition) of both clips (in addition to the fact that the story was selected by *France 24* from their archives because of its amateur produced footage) identifies these images as amateur produced footage. The comment informs the viewers that in both manifestations, the mood was tense, though peaceful.

These two amateur clips are followed by professional and formal footage showing the president Ben Ali talking about the manifestations as damaging the country reputation. The commentary translates the words of the president saying that these protests are encouraged by a small group of villains who attempt to convince other people to follow them and thereby disturb the peace of the country. The comments also assert that Ben Ali blames the media for broadcasting information that had not been verified, false information hostile to the government and to Tunisia. Ben Ali, the commentary says, asserts that those people will be subjected to the law, which will be applied firmly and severely. There is no mention of the lack of democracy in Tunisia or the context of tyranny for the government ruling.

The comment goes on explaining that the manifestation began with Mohammed Bouazizi's immolation, 'a jobless graduate', in response to the police confiscation of the few fruit and vegetable he was trying to sell to earn a living. The video here shows, for nine seconds, very fuzzy images of what appears to be a fire, and that we are to believe was the immolation. It is followed by another, which shows a quiet crowd in front of a courthouse, no explanation is given for that assembly.

The video ends with views of streets with orderly cars and the comments saying that protests in Tunisia are rare because ruling institutions are keeping a firm lead on dissent, suggesting without saying that the uprisings are a form of democratic response to the tyranny of the state (as opposed, say, to mob rioting, extremist sensibilities, radical activists, etc.).

Although the two amateur produced footage clips at the beginning of the story are structuring the content in the sense that they are showing manifestations against the government's bad administration and corruption, this kind of structuration is not always the case. As we mentioned earlier in our conceptual discussion, in the production and distribution of information by media organisations, amateur pro-

duced images and their use by the television channels constitute a complex system of relationships – generated by human interventions often in unstructured situations – which sometimes seem hard to explain.

For example, the footage showing the immolation is of such bad quality that its representative value is limited as it could actually be anything. So, we can assert that its introduction into the story is indirectly related to the articulation of rational arguments in the explicit news narratives, suggesting possibly a gendered dimension to the uprising as a whole and a kind of chaos and breakdown of social order. Thus, although the commentary is making some effort to rationalize the events, the images are not always simply providing visual evidence. In such cases, there is the possibility that excess meaning (i.e. in excess of the explicit news narratives) is imported into the news discourse.

As mentioned above, other studies of Western ideological tendencies in coverage of events in the Middle East support some of these findings.²⁴

CBC vs. France 24: Similarities and differences

In assessing the excess narrative content of individual clips of amateur footage, we saw similarities and differences in the themes represented. In terms of similarities, in both cases the most common theme was citizens taking to the streets, including crowds shouting, throwing stones, standing behind barricades or just peacefully walking; these are ‘conventional’ expressions of conflicts between states and crowds of protestors. Moreover, both *France 24* and *CBC* at times used images, which were *indecipherable* either because of the quality of the image, of the lack of pertinence of the footage or the lack of contextualisation. So, one could say that in these cases, the effect of ‘heightening authenticity’ is virtually lost. Mortensen (2015, 30) says that amateur produced images close the gap between “seeing is saying”, but when closing the gap also makes the image *indecipherable*, it is not saying anything. So the question is then: why are the clips included? Our answer in part is that they serve to create eyewitness textures that have less to do with who/what/where/why/how and more to do with creating a sensibility suggesting proximity, immediacy and authenticity. As well, most of the amateur clips in both cases evoked a high affective state, by which we mean horror, revulsion, outrage and shock by depicting events such as protestors being injured, clashing between the police and protestors, and the immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi. Finally, both *France 24* and *CBC* mostly used amateur clips (90%) that located the viewer in close proximity to events being depicted, i.e. amidst protestors being shot and injured, facing police retaliation, and in conflict with other protestors.

However, there were important divergences. While we found themes in both *France 24* and *CBC* expressed by the strategic use of amateur footage, the frequency of themes differed for each network, as did some of the topics of the themes themselves. In *France 24*’s coverage of events, the most common theme we identi-

²⁴ See footnotes 21 and 22.

fied was the subjectivity of protesters through visual representations of Arab men in groups using angry gestures – shouting, throwing stones, etc. (six clips focused on these kinds of images). There was a noticeable absence of female subjectivity displayed in the amateur clips overall. There were only two clips that contained representations of females. One clip showed an Arab female shouting angrily in a crowd in the street, a woman we believe to be the mother of Mohammed Bouazizi. The other showed an Arab female being dragged on her back through the street by police in Cairo, her shirt ripped open, and a soldier violently stomping on her chest. So we have only these two very different female representations during the conflicts, one as resistant and the other as victim.

For the *CBC*, this was one of the least common themes as it only included the theme of male Arab anger in about 10% of news stories. *CBC*'s most common theme was the tyranny of the Arab state, whereas tyranny came only fourth in the French channel coverage. In both cases, the second and third rhetorical themes were (2) collapse of social order followed by (3) democratic uprising, which were expressed as such. *France 24*'s second most common visual narrative was showing crowds in the streets proximal to property destruction (cars, official buildings, houses, rubble, etc.) whereas *CBC* concentrated on injured protesters. The third most common narrative for *CBC* was state violence against protesters, while it was the immolation of Bouazizi for *France 24*. In fact, for some reason (perhaps to spare the feelings of their viewers), *CBC* used the footage showing the immolation only sparingly. Then followed state violence against protesters for *France 24* and, for *CBC*, people in the streets proximal to property destruction (cars, official buildings, houses, rubble, etc.). Finally, *France 24* only briefly mentioned the issue of police violence (even torture) against the prisoners while it was mentioned several times by *CBC*.

Table 2: Themes in Excess of Explicit News Narratives

<i>CBC</i>	<i>France 24</i>
(1) Arab Spring as the expression of the tyranny of Arab states	(1) Arab Spring primarily as an expression of male Arab anger (with minor representation of Arab Spring including angry women, and victimized women, and peacefully demonstrating male professionals)
(2) Arab Spring as collapse of social order	(2) Arab Spring as collapse of social order
(3) Arab Spring as democratic uprising	(3) Arab Spring as democratic uprising
(4) Arab Spring as expression of male Arab anger.	(4) Arab Spring as the expression of the tyranny of Arab states
(5) Arab Spring as the product of new media, i.e. technological determinism	(5) Arab Spring as a clash of civilizations East v. West

The finding that these themes are not found in the same frequency between broadcasters supports the thesis that the clips are doing discursive work in excess of what is ostensibly their intended purpose, something audiences, journalists and news editors should be cognizant of.

At the structural level, in about 80% (9 of the 11) of the stories shown by *France 24*, the amateur footage was central to the news coverage, in the sense that the footage in these cases was the centre of visual narrative. As such, it makes it all the more important to be able to 'read' it. In contrast, for *CBC*, all amateur footage played only a secondary role in the news story since they were added into a much larger visual narrative as either visual evidence or as eyewitness texture.

Another difference between the two channels was the identification of the amateur footage as such. For instance, in *France 24*, such footage was never explicitly identified; we singled them out based largely on the picture quality (from news stories identified by *France 24* as containing amateur footage). On the other hand, with *CBC*, fully three-quarters of the news stories specified the use of amateur footage either with graphic overlay or in the voice over narration. In addition, with both broadcasters, most of the amateur footage related directly to the main issue of the coverage.²⁵

Of some interest, each of the networks had a theme unused by the other: in *CBC* coverage, some amateur clips suggested the excess theme of a technological determinist argument linking the Arab spring to social media;²⁶ in *France 24* coverage, some amateur clips suggested the excess theme of the clash of civilisations between East & West.

Discussion

The use of amateur footage at the time of the Arab Spring was still a relatively new phenomenon, one that has now become well integrated into newsgathering and production routines in many news organizations, and that has been taken seriously by some scholars as we have seen earlier. The Arab Spring is a snapshot in time of a changing profession and no doubt findings reflect some of those instabilities and inconsistencies.

What is important in our findings from our perspective is the idea that amateur images can at times import themes in excess of intended narratives, an outcome

²⁵ The question of unlabeled amateur video remained unanswered, in part due to the length of time that had passed and our inability to locate the individuals directly involved in the editing decisions at the time. The most likely explanation is that it had been verified to the satisfaction of the broadcaster.

²⁶ Anecdotally, one of the researchers was in Rome at the beginning of February 2011, and watched the news coverage of the Arab Spring from *France 24* since it was the only available channel in French there. She noticed that this technological deterministic argument was coming up regularly in the comments accompanying the visual narrative.

most crucially linked to the absence of verified facts in the content of amateur clips. Many times, the clips in a sense ‘float’ free of verification procedures, and in this way, we suggest, shape news outcomes in subtle and unexpected ways. The affective foundation of amateur clips generates in some cases an eyewitness texture that draws viewers into close proximity with urgent events that fit into larger historical narratives while, at the same time, giving “distant others” a “voice into news network discourse” (Chouliaraki 2014).

The selection of clips is seemingly something which occurs in a highly compressed timeframe, as amateur footage is most relevant and useful to news organizations in situations of breaking, urgent news. At the time of the Arab Spring, the protocols for using amateur footage, at least in the case of the *CBC*, lacked the benefit of what occurred in the years following both technologically and in terms of news practices. In order to heighten the authenticity of the information they provide, most television newsrooms today have been restructured in whole or in part to incorporate user generated content in many different forms, in addition to amateur video, into all routines of production. In fact, the distinctions between television news production and production for other platforms are increasingly irrelevant in the structure of contemporary news rooms where content is gathered and packaged by a news team, and then later circulated on different platforms.

One unexpected finding was in relation to the structure of integration of amateur videos into news coverage. The structure does not show any specific rules, at least with *France 24*, except that of opportunity, and of adapting to the situation of the moment, which sometimes creates decontextualized moments suggested by Mortensen (2015). The consequence of relying on opportunity is that, as the conflict prolongs, the use of amateur videos becomes less and less frequent, since, in most cases, news organisations had the time to dispatch professional reporters. So the pattern is that, after a few weeks, in some cases the only usefulness of including amateur videos appears to be to add authenticity to a report, namely in providing an ‘eyewitness texture’ that satisfies the sensibility of a public desire for proximity and immediacy.

The lack of specific rules seems also to be the case for the length of the amateur videos used by *France 24*. Although, as mentioned earlier, the time allotted to amateur videos in news coverage is generally longer at the beginning of a conflict, it is usually limited to a minute or so. If the quality of the video is rather bad, like that of the immolation (see Figure 1), it is curtailed to a few seconds.



Figure 1: Still frame image taken from amateur footage of the immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor in Sidi Bouzhid, Tunisia that appeared in multiple news stories by *France 24*.

Another characteristic of the structure of integration of amateur video into news by *France 24* is that very short clips are sometimes stocked together in a montage done by professional editors of the channel. This can be verified either by the different qualities of the footages or by the divergent backgrounds of the image. The idea behind this practice is not clear, as some of the footage does not appear to add new meaning to the video; rather, they appear to be ‘filling’ the space with ‘authentic’ images that produce an eyewitness texture, which is not always successful.

This type of practice raises the question whether the amateur videos used in news coverage provide “immediate” information, as suggested by Ahva and Hellman (2015), or whether they are sometimes re-used by the news editors. We have, more than once, seen the same footage used in different news stories published on various dates. This diminishes, if not cancels, the effect of the immediacy of amateur videos. The silence of the commentators on this issue is suggestive, and at the very least reflects an entirely unanticipated and unclear intention.

Another important aspect of amateur images used in coverage of the Arab Spring is their peculiar and easily identifiable visual qualities: shaky images as, usually, the amateurs are trying to remain at proximity of the events, while remaining at a safe distance. They are often made of de-saturated colours and pixelated forms as is obvious in the immolation video (see Figure 2). On the one hand, these images can provoke ambiguities in terms of their legibility, while on the other hand, the bad quality of the amateur video suggests immediacy of coverage and authenticity of the image. It satisfies the desire of news organizations and viewers alike to be ‘eye witnesses’ to events. When such a poor quality video is part of a professional report – sometimes only a few seconds – it discursively constitutes proof that what the reporter is discussing has really happened, or even better, what is happening right now. It provides textures of authenticity, proximity and immediacy in the report.

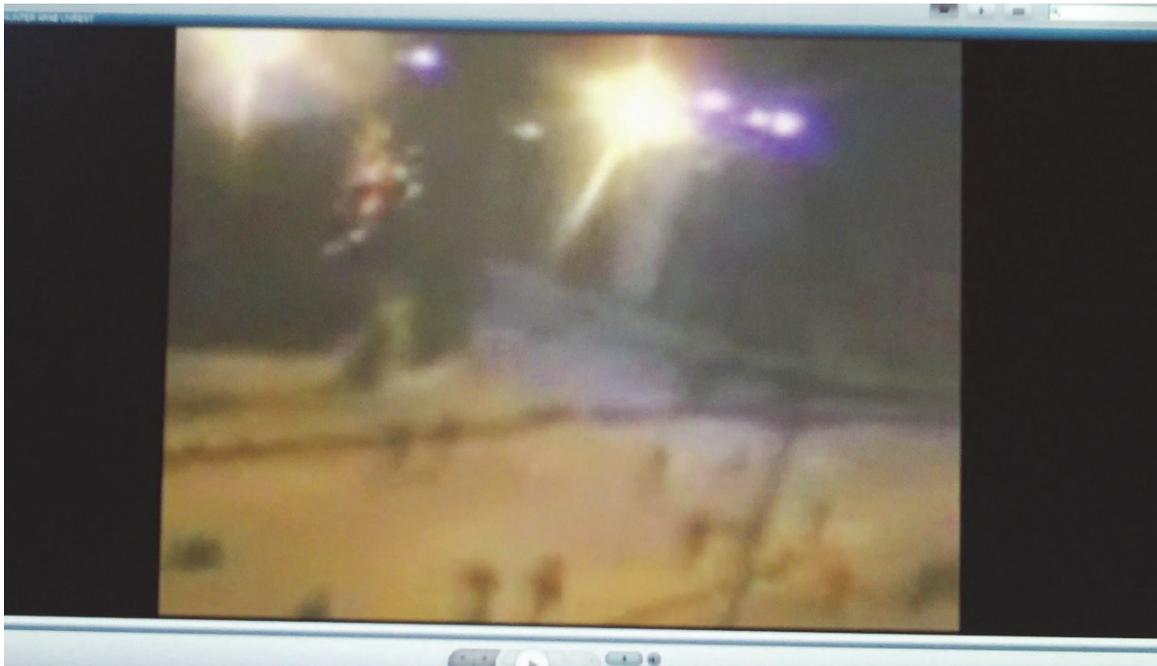


Figure 2: Still frame from amateur footage used in a *CBC* news story about protests in Tunisia

The narrative implications of amateur video are perhaps the most intriguing. Once relieved of any evidentiary implications for the images recorded, amateur footage presents a fascinating palette of visual epistemic potential. What do the images mean? And what do they mean within the tightly edited argumentation of a short news story? In addition to the textures of authenticity they provide, the images can also evoke and invoke cultural themes, norms and values. The eyewitness textures are not value neutral and often, in our case, challenge existing hierarchies, as Chouliaraki (2014) suggests. For the *CBC*, the most common themes woven into news narratives included the Arab Spring as an expression of public responsiveness to Arab state tyranny, as the collapse of social order in Tunisia and Egypt, and as forms of democratic uprising. For *France 24*, the most common themes woven into news narratives included the Arab Spring as an expression of male Arab anger, as the collapse of social order, and as a democratic uprising. To understand the significance of these themes emerging routinely in news stories, we can imagine other possibilities that could be produced by other kinds of images: the Arab Spring as a form of sedition or terrorism, the Arab Spring as an integrated aspect of Arab social order (the way protest is understood as part of Western liberal democratic social order), the Arab Spring as a highly organized and peaceful attempt to shape political outcomes by men and women from all strata of society, etc. The amateur images, at least in some cases – despite their heightened status as authentically ‘eyewitness’ and neutral – do much of the heavy lifting, so to speak, in aligning news outcomes within hegemonic discourses.

The amateurs who are providing this type of video to *France 24* have a peculiar status in the labour structure. They are unpaid and have no official professional recognition. Although *France 24* sometimes uses the Internet to get their amateur videos, they usually employ the pool of ‘collaborators’ they have established rela-

tionships with over a period of years. The pool contains about a hundred individuals, according to Julian Pain, the chief editor of this specific section of news production at the time of the Arab Spring²⁷, and *France 24* has all their personal information, in case they want to contact them, either to verify information or to ask for footage. Indeed, Pain asserts that the channel never put amateur videos on unless the team of professional editors verified their ‘authenticity’. Pain pretends that there is no competition between professional and amateur reporters, although he said that a very few amateurs are sometimes turned into professionals and offered jobs by *France 24*. Other collaborators are provided with good quality cameras to produce better videos. Thus the boundaries between amateur and professional reporters seem to have become thinner over the years.²⁸

Conclusion

One of the questions we must ask is whether the different self-regulated systems of incorporating amateur footage into the two distinct media organisations we examined resulted in divergent content of information conveyed by their coverage of the Arab Spring? *France 24*, with its system of having a pool of ‘collaborators’ had the opportunity to use more amateur produced images than *CBC*, yet, as we have seen it did not make much difference. Both organisations used only very short clips inserted in their regular coverage.

We have said earlier that amateur produced images organise audience encounters with ‘reality’, giving rise to news outcomes that exceed the intended results of professional conventions for verification and objectivity. So, how do amateur produced images influence the coverage of conflicts? Is it truly a decentralized and unregulated way of producing authentic information on the conflicts covered? The fact is, that the average length of the clips used in each of the channels examined was very short (less than a minute) and it was used not only sparingly, but prudently and strategically. In a society in which news is consumed increasingly bit by bit on platforms such as Facebook (particularly by the youth)²⁹, a few seconds of amateur produced images may be long enough to give viewers the sensation that they were there, which is no doubt good for the market of news production.

Of particular interest in our findings is the idea that amateur images can introduce discursive values based on the ‘voice of distant others’ into news outcomes in excess of the news narratives intended. For example, the corpus of images we examined could suggest that Arab Spring protests were almost exclusively male, that protests were spontaneous outbursts of anger caused by new media forms of collectivity in a sudden collapse of Islamic civilization within the larger historical con-

27 Personal interview on 27 May 2015. Julian Pain is not with *France 24* anymore.

28 An article in preparation will be particularly dedicated to the productive aspect to the issue.

29 From a study carried by the American Press Institute, quoted in ‘Online bias a real concern’, Emma Teitel, *Toronto Star*, 15 May 2016, p. A20.

text of a clash of civilizations between East and West. This outcome elides many critically important aspects of the Arab Spring including an active demographic of women protestors involved throughout the Arab Spring uprising, and the significance of pre-existing grassroots networks of activists and their sophisticated skills in planning, organizing and mobilizing large-scale public engagement (Al-Ali 2012; Al-Natour 2012; Hafez 2014; Hassan 2012; Hirst 2012; Newsome and Lengel 2012; Radsch 2012; Warf 2011). It also obscures the complex and ongoing political, economic and military relationships and alliances between Western governments and the Arab countries affected by the Arab Spring uprisings (Hamid 2015). The inclusion of the eyewitness textures of amateur produced images in some cases implied meanings that tied news narratives to these larger and largely ideological forms of discursive significance, something which, in our estimation, editors and journalists alike – and the public – should be aware of when navigating the complexities of incorporating user generated content into news narratives.

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