

## Understanding the Death of “Citizen Journalist” Rami alSayed: Toward a New Interpretive Framework for Digital Journalism

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English-language Western news coverage of the 2012 death of Syrian Rami al-Sayed, who produced both recorded videos and live feeds of civil strife in the city of Homs, exhibits discursive uncertainty about the meaning of his journalistic work. To analyze this uncertainty, this article interpolates Foucault’s discussion of parrhesia into the digital realm. Parrhesia delineates the discursive space of truth telling through duties to speak the truth, to believe that truth, and to honestly represent oneself. Risks to speakers—both reputational and existential—undergird and activate this framework. Parrhesia also offers a critical framework for understanding the discursive space of digital journalism, particularly when it is both enhanced and pressured by nontraditional journalistic actors.

*Keywords: alternative journalism, citizen journalism, digital journalism, journalism, media resistance, news, radical media, social media, Syria*

On February 21, 2012, Rami al-Sayed died. In 2011, he began uploading videos documenting the Syrian military’s shelling of Homs following residents’ protests against the government of Bashar al-Assad. These videos—first recorded and uploaded to the SyriaPioneer channel on the United States-based website YouTube and later broadcast live on the Sweden-based website Bambuser—documented buildings destroyed by artillery fire, protesters fleeing military forces, sniper fire, and more. These videos, particularly the live footage broadcast on Bambuser, were then used by news organizations around the world, including Al Jazeera, the Associated Press, the British Broadcasting Corporation, CBS News, CNN, CNN International, SkyNews, and Reuters. In other videos, al-Sayed and his collaborators repeatedly issued calls for assistance from the international community, particularly for the evacuation of women and

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children and for medical aid and supplies. Under the SyriaPioneer handle, between 200 and 800 videos were uploaded to various sites between 2011 and the day al-Sayed died attempting to help three other residents of Homs reach a civil hospital for medical treatment. According to Bambuser's official blog ("We mourn the loss of a very brave Syrian journalist," 2012), they were attacked by mortar fire; those accompanied by al-Sayed died, and al-Sayed was grievously wounded. According to a Homs activist, al-Sayed died "because there was nothing to treat him with" (Reuters, 2012); specifically, according to the chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, "He could have lived if we had three blood bags" (Kumar, 2012, p. 11).

After his death, al-Sayed was called a "citizen journalist" in news outlets as varied as the blog TechCrunch (Butcher, 2012), the website of the U.S. radio network National Public Radio (Al Omran, 2012), Google's YouTube news blog (Houghteling, 2012), and the Australian newspapers *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* (Pollard, 2012a, 2012b). But he was also called a "photographer" (Reuters, 2012), a "digital journalist" (Maddow, 2012), an "activist and photographer" (Anderson et al., 2012), an "opposition videographer" (Abedine & Ahmed, 2012), a "citizen video blogger" (Pelley et al., 2012), and a "prominent opposition activist" (Reeves, 2012). The lack of consensus in describing al-Sayed reflects how, well into professional and scholarly discussion of citizen journalism, journalism has yet to sufficiently conceptualize such work and its value.

Of particular note is that al-Sayed died within 24 hours of two Western journalists, Marie Colvin (a U.S. citizen reporting for *The Sunday Times* of London) and Remi Ochlik (a French citizen working as a photojournalist for Agence France-Presse). Although other Syrians engaged in anti-Assad media work had also been killed, al-Sayed was the best known at the time, likely because his work was used widely by Western news media and because his death occurred so close temporally and spatially to Colvin and Ochlik, who died when Syrian forces shelled a media center that al-Sayed helped to staff. Although al-Sayed's videos were widely used and he worked alongside Colvin and Ochlik, reports on his death struggle to resolve his role, which straddled journalistic and activist work. Thus, this article aims to resolve what appear to be ongoing inconsistencies in conceptualizing the work of new journalistic actors like Rami al-Sayed. Wide agreement exists that the advent of digital media and the increasing democratization of the tools of media production and distribution created new spaces and new communities for journalism, but what exactly is new, or different, remains muddled. To more fully understand such spaces and communities, this article turns to Foucault's (2001) articulation of the ancient Greek concept parrhesia.

Commonly translated as "free speech," parrhesia implies that when one has the ability to speak freely, one also has the public duty to speak the truth, to sincerely believe that truth, and to honestly represent oneself when speaking. This notion closely aligns with traditional understandings of journalistic work (e.g., Adam, 1993; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Applying it to digital communication space, parrhesia accommodates the communicative acts of those who have the ability to practice journalism freely—those with access to press tools who have not been traditionally defined as journalists (Rosen, 2008), even when facing censorship or repression.

This article continues the interpolation of parrhesia into the realm of digital communications (Allard-Huver & Gilewicz, 2015; Gilewicz & Allard-Huver, 2012; Nayar, 2010). In this case, the concept

helps us to understand a new interpretive community of journalistic actors. This community is an emergent and syncretic journalistic public, one that predominantly operates in digital space where public functions of citizens and journalists overlap. Application of parrhesia demands attention to context that helps to repair the insufficiencies of extant literature about citizen journalism, clarifies various terms used to describe Rami al-Sayed and his work, illustrates the changing nature of journalistic publics, and shows how professional journalists have persisted in policing their profession.

### **Interpretive Communities, Citizens, and Journalists**

An understanding of journalists as an interpretive community (Fish, 1980) implies that journalists also constitute their own public of readers—significant audiences for journalists are journalists themselves (Zelizer, 1993). But nontraditional journalistic actors, such as Rami al-Sayed, have intruded into the journalistic public, prompting questions such as: "What happens when the 'reading public' (audience or consumer) of modernity turns into the 'writing public' (user, 'prosumer' or 'ProAm') of global interactive media?" (Hartley, 2008, p. 42). This question remains unresolved. The reading public changes, and the writing public also changes, with journalists engaging in an increasingly immediate and iterative process of news production. A new framework, then, must accommodate both the reading public's move to produce material that was formerly and predominantly produced by journalists and the writing public's move to read and use that material.

Hartley's question echoes earlier debates surrounding the radical media, citizens' media, and alternative media concepts. Downing (1984, 2001) and Rodriguez (2001), working with, respectively, the terms *radical media* and *citizens' media*, both strongly emphasize how, by producing their own media, everyday people can develop enhanced political consciousness and some measure of self-determination. Both scholars connect media production to the generation of bottom-up social movements. Couldry and Curran (2003) prefer the concept *alternative media*, arguing that a politically neutral position better accommodates the ability to probe and counter any concentration of political power. Atton (2002) prefers the alternative label as well. He also takes great pains to distance the concept of alternative media from those of Downing and Rodriguez, arguing repeatedly that insufficient attention had been paid to the actual work of media production (Atton, 2003, 2008). According to Atton (2009), the subjects of their research "seem to have methods and ends so removed from the norms of mainstream journalism as to be unrecognizable" (p. 267). Missing from Rodriguez's work in particular, Atton argues, "are contextualized accounts of actual media production" (2008, p. 218).

Interpretive communities once considered separate have come to overlap, and this new space must be addressed. Deuze (2008) explains one way in which traditional approaches to studying journalism have been insufficient: They "rested on the premise that content actually exists, that it genuinely can be considered as a finished, static object of study. In a current media ecology of endless remixes, mashups, and continuous edits, that is a problematic assumption" (p. 861). Similarly, the articles of a special issue of *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* together recognize, according to Atton (2003), "that alternative journalism is practised in a multiplicity of hybridized, content-specific and contingent ways" (p. 269). Al-Sayed's videos were both finished and raw material, as they were reviewed, selected, edited, and redeployed by traditional journalists outside of their original contexts on YouTube and Bambuser. As such,

they were indeed “hybridized, content-specific and contingent.” And just as content is remixed and mashed up, so are communities. Through the work of people like Rami al-Sayed, interpretive communities of readers and journalists have, to an extent, blended. This clearly occurred in journalists’ use of al-Sayed’s videos and those of other Syrians (e.g., Al-Ghazzi, 2014; Wall & El Zahed, 2015).

As these interpretive communities merge, power struggles emerge. The coverage of al-Sayed’s death sometimes welcomed al-Sayed into the tribe of journalists and sometimes positioned him as an outsider, protecting traditional journalists’ interpretive authority. Past academic literature has treated a wide variety of communicative phenomena as citizen journalism, even when such phenomena neither relate to a producer’s status as a citizen (in Western democratic terms, a person with full rights in a state comprised by popular sovereignty; in radical democratic terms, a person with a political identity constructed through acts of self-empowerment) nor connect to the duties, be they professional or normative, of journalists.

Scholars theorizing citizen journalism often have folded functions of the newly emergent, blended interpretive community into traditional journalistic practice. Typologies of audience involvement such as Nip’s (2006) five models of audience connectedness, Outing’s (2005) “11 Layers of Citizen Journalism,” and Lasica’s (2003) six categories of participatory journalism all attempted to parse this phenomenon and present it holistically. Their observations are important, but they leave little theoretical understanding of the new interpretive community that seems to constitute citizen journalism or of how scholars or practitioners can articulate what might actually be new about the work of these new journalistic actors. Bruns’s (2005) notion of produsage, wherein audiences become producers who then also consume media, integrates the reader-writers whose origins lie in the community of readers. Scholars of alternative media do much the same, recognizing interrelationships of alternative and mainstream media as historically contingent and context-dependent (e.g., Couldry & Curran, 2003; Hamilton & Atton, 2001). However, rarely do scholars integrate the reader-writers whose origins lie in the community of journalists. The reader-writer community in contemporary news media integrates members of each, often contentiously—especially when journalists feel outsiders are imposing themselves upon the profession.

Power matters. Downing (1984, 2001) conceptualizes radical media as a site of resistance; Rodriguez (2001) conceptualizes citizens’ media as generating bottom-up social movements. At the same time, Rodriguez calls for a nuanced approach to power dynamics to avoid essentializing actors as having power or not. Couldry and Curran (2003) contend that producing alternative media ultimately targets concentrations of media power wherever they exist. As Rodriguez (2001) writes, scholars considering media and power relations should recognize the need to create new concepts and methods that deal with fluctuating power dynamics. This article argues that power itself is perhaps the most significant context for practitioners working within radical media, citizens’ media, alternative media, or citizen journalism—and for scholars working to understand and elaborate those concepts and forms.

To fully address these phenomena, journalism studies need a model that integrates both producers-as-audience and audience-as-producers that accommodates the contexts in which production and distribution occur as crucial analytic elements and that considers power balances and differentials as a primary context.” As this case study will demonstrate, what Tilley and Cokley call “the clash of discursive

elements and interests around 'citizen journalism'" (2008, p. 111) is ongoing; even journalists who relied directly on al-Sayed's work do not fully admit him as a journalist.

Tilley and Cokley (2008) conclude that scholars should find a middle ground recognizing the polyvocality of contemporary journalistic media. Digital parrhesia offers such a midpoint, finding common ground in the similar communicative duties of those who have the ability to speak freely: to speak the truth, to sincerely believe that truth, and to honestly represent themselves when speaking. Digital parrhesia answers Deuze's (2008) call for a "liquid journalism" and explains how the roles of citizens and journalists can become much the same in digital communicative space. In digital parrhesia, risk balances the duty to speak truthfully, and in what Foucault (2001) calls the parrhesiastic game, speakers balance the risk to themselves with the duty to speak the truth: "The speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy" (pp. 19–20). To engage in the parrhesiastic game is a courageous act. When citizens do so, they adopt risks perhaps familiar to journalists but new to newly public citizens. The contemporaneous deaths of al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik make this brutally clear.

#### **Western News Coverage of the Deaths of Rami al-Sayed, Marie Colvin, and Remi Ochlik**

This study examined English-language news coverage of the deaths of Rami al-Sayed, Marie Colvin, and Remi Ochlik. First, it reviewed news articles retrieved from the Lexis-Nexis database and Google News using the search term "Rami al-Sayed" that were published between February 20 and February 29, 2012. After removal of duplications, a total of 34 articles and transcripts were reviewed. These documents were from digital, print, and broadcast news media from Australia, Canada, Ireland, Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.<sup>2</sup>

The second group of news articles analyzed was also drawn from the Lexis-Nexis database. Searches were conducted for the terms "Marie Colvin," "Remi Ochlik," and "Marie Colvin AND Remi Ochlik" for the same time period as the search for news stories about Rami al-Sayed. The search for "Marie Colvin" yielded 1,759 results (including duplications). The search for "Remi Ochlik" yielded 1,240 results (including duplications). The search for "Marie Colvin AND Remi Ochlik" yielded 1,217 results (including duplications). An initial review suggested that Colvin and Ochlik were treated similarly, with the death of one almost universally discussed in the context of the death of the other. This analysis, then, sampled the last set of results from the search for "Marie Colvin AND Remi Ochlik." Every 12th article was reviewed, for a total of 101 news stories. As with the al-Sayed article set, non-Western news sources were removed, yielding a total of 87 news stories. These stories again were from a variety of news media—digital, broadcast, and print—originating from Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

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<sup>2</sup> From Israel, a story from the *Jerusalem Post* was admitted because the story used information from a Reuters newswire story and was published in English; that newspaper has a target audience in the United States and Israel. From France, English-language stories from international television news channel *EuroNews* were admitted.

The descriptions of and appellations for Marie Colvin and Remi Ochlik and their work were highly consistent. Colvin was described by such terms as "*Sunday Times* war correspondent," "U.S. reporter," or "foreign correspondent," with "war correspondent" a descriptor in the majority of stories. Ochlik was almost universally described as either a "French photojournalist" or a "French photographer." This is unsurprising; Colvin and Ochlik occupied clear, traditional journalistic roles. Furthermore, many stories in this sample contextualized the deaths of Colvin and Ochlik with the evacuation of two of their colleagues: Paul Conroy, a photographer working with Colvin, and Edith Bouvier, a reporter working with Ochlik. The bulk of news stories presented Colvin's and Ochlik's work as fulfilling traditional journalistic roles with almost no variation, regardless of date, nation of origin, or media type.

Therefore, this article focuses primarily on the descriptions of and appellations for Rami al-Sayed and his work. These fall into two broad categories: positional roles and instrumental roles. Positional roles for al-Sayed were described by such terms as "citizen journalist," "activist," "digital journalist," "reporter," and "journalist." Instrumental roles focused more on media-specific acts executed by al-Sayed, and included terms such as "video blogger," "blogger," "photographer," "videographer" and "opposition videographer," and "cameraman."

Yet, very few news stories described al-Sayed in only positional or instrumental ways; most used descriptions from both categories. *TechCrunch* described al-Sayed as a "citizen journalist," a "video blogger," and an "activist" (Butcher, 2012), mixing positional and instrumental descriptions. *The Toronto Star* called al-Sayed an "activist and photographer" ("Journalists' Voices Silenced," 2012); a host on CNN International's *Connect the World* used the same phrase (Anderson et al., 2012). Whereas Colvin and Ochlik fit quite neatly into professional journalism's categories for journalists, al-Sayed did not. The variety of descriptions and appellations applied to him and his work suggests that journalism does not have consensual terms to assess actors like al-Sayed.

Al-Sayed's work, contextualized with Colvin and Ochlik's work in news reports, is positioned both against and within the journalistic field. Sometimes he is positioned as an activist, with his work and risk discussed in terms similar to those of other resisters. Sometimes he is positioned as a journalist, with his work and risk discussed similarly to Colvin's and Ochlik's. Ultimately, positions of activist and journalist overlap—a point parrhesia helps to clarify.

First, even while recognizing al-Sayed's contributions to news coverage, journalists directly describe him as an anti-Assad activist and use quotes from other activists, resisters, or rebels who describe him similarly. A report on the website of the United Kingdom television station Channel 4 discussed one of al-Sayed's videos:

The film shows fighters taking huge gambles, firing back at pro-Assad troops as they run openly through the wrecked streets of Homs.

The citizen journalists using mobiles, laptops and social media to record and spread news of these battles are no less fearless. ("Syria's Citizen Journalists," 2012, para. 12, 13)

Here, al-Sayed, and others like him, occupies the same position as the street fighter, gun in hand.

CNN International correspondent Ivan Watson said that footage from actors such as al-Sayed is "an important source of information for international news organizations . . . barred from working freely inside Syria. At first glance, this little operation looks like a grungy Middle Eastern university dorm room, but these men see themselves as media warriors" (Stout et al., 2012). Again, actors such as al-Sayed are identified as "warriors" although they may perform media work. And the media work produced, in this case, is identified as a "source of information" rather than a kind of journalism itself—all of which positions al-Sayed and his work outside of journalism. Watson also appeared on domestic CNN news programs to discuss the deaths of al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik. On *The Situation Room*, he said:

[al-Sayed] managed to get live images up day after day of the Syrian bombardment of Homs, and it's people like him who have been documenting the human rights abuses, Syrian activists putting their lives on the line and smuggling the video out over the Internet. . . . These are very brave people and they are paying for their activist work with their lives. (Blitzer et al., 2012)

This could describe any journalist reporting from Syria without the permission of the government, but here, that work is called "activist work."

News reports identifying al-Sayed as a citizen journalist also used sources—often activists themselves—that called al-Sayed an activist. A story on the website of the U.S. radio network National Public Radio quoted one source who called al-Sayed "an amazing activist who risked his life to show us the world he lived in" (Al Omran, 2012, para. 9). *The Toronto Star* quoted another activist who called al-Sayed "one of the first activists who risked their lives and braved sniper bullets to film the protests in Homs" ("Brave Citizen Spread Images of Uprising," 2012, p. A6). These examples position al-Sayed's media work primarily as activist work—not as journalism. The appellation *citizen journalist*, though, bridges activist and journalist. Citizen journalists are discussed as targets of the Syrian government, as in Australia's *The Age*: "For those bearing witness to this tragedy—from seasoned war reporters to young citizen journalists—it seems there is no safe place from the reach of the Syrian forces" (Pollard, 2012a, p. 15).

News coverage of his death recognized the common risk al-Sayed and traditional journalists undertook. A blogger for YouTube wrote, "We were shocked at the deaths of legendary war correspondent Marie Colvin and award-winning photographer Remi Ochlik, as well as citizen journalist Rami al-Sayed, who were killed while working to document what was happening inside Syria" (Houghteling, 2012, para. 2). The job titles may have been different, but the common risk of "working to document what was happening inside Syria" is clear: death. A report on *CNN Newsroom*, after discussing the deaths of Colvin and Ochlik, identified al-Sayed as another journalist who had died:

A lot of the reporting comes . . . from courageous Syrians who risk their lives every day to get the word out on the brutal crackdown by the government. . . . Al-Sayed was one of the main opposition videographers. He was killed yesterday in the heavy shelling of

Homs. His death came as he was trying to help a family flee the bombardment.  
(Whitfield, Harlow, & Hamby, 2012 [television broadcast])

Here, al-Sayed's death is positioned in the context of helping a local family—behavior perhaps anathema to journalistic ideals of Western war correspondents—but he is identified with those correspondents because of their common risks.

The common work of media production also bound al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik in this discourse. According to *TechCrunch*:

Colvin was a decorated foreign correspondent. Ochlik had won a World Press Photo award. Obviously al-Sayed/Syria Pioneer had not had the chance to win such accolades. But his live broadcasts, using the startup video platform Bambuser did their part in showing the world what was going on in Syria. (Butcher, 2012, para. 3)

A report on the U.S. broadcast network CBS, which previously "showed you this video from [al-Sayed] showing the world what that siege is like," stated that al-Sayed was killed "telling the story of Homs" (Pelley et al., 2012).

Risk and work are not distinct but intertwined in this discourse. *The New York Times* aligned al-Sayed and other citizen journalists with traditional journalists who "have been killed recently in what activists interpret as part of a deliberate campaign to choke off news of the opposition" (Nordland & Cowell, 2012, p. 8). A National Public Radio report found both common risk and work:

News of the carnage committed by [the Syrian] army often comes out through videos posted on the Internet by activists. . . . Journalists go to places like Syria because they feel they must bear witness to such scenes Colvin and Ochlik were not alone in paying with their lives. Yesterday, a rocket-propelled grenade killed a prominent opposition activist, a Syrian citizen journalist called Rami al-Sayed. (Reeves, 2012)

Even with work generating common risk, al-Sayed is still positioned here as "a prominent opposition activist." *The Sydney Morning Herald* grouped al-Sayed with Colvin and Ochlik as journalists-as-witnesses:

Views of war intersect in individuals such as Colvin and Ochlik—and another witness to the brutality of the Assad regime's assault on its people, Rami al-Sayed, a blogger who died the day before. . . . In bearing witness to the suffering of victims and the crimes of their oppressors, the messages journalists send to the outside world is the one most feared by the powerful. ("The Death of a Witness," 2012, p. 12)

Journalistic work—in this case, exposing state violence—connects the three. Their deaths, according to an Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio report, were "a tragic reminder of the dangers faced by foreign correspondents who bring us news from the world's war-zones—the death in Homs on Wednesday of American Marie Colvin, Frenchman Remi Ochlik and Syrian Rami al-Sayed" (Cave, 2012). Here,



nationalities distinguished them, not work. The report that followed reinforced this, giving equal space to discussions of Colvin and al-Sayed, perhaps because they equally faced the dangers of operating without permission as journalistic actors inside Syria. Similarly, Rachel Maddow, host of an eponymous U.S. cable news program, drew no distinction between their work in a report about a demonstration in Homs that honored all three:

A third journalist was also honored at that same demonstration, a Syrian man named Rami al-Sayed. . . . He was one of the reasons the world had any idea what was happening in Homs. He was a digital journalist. He kept a live stream of the bombing there. His videos, many of them too disturbing to show on TV, were uploaded to a YouTube channel that showed almost unbelievable atrocities in Syria. (Maddow, 2012)

Ultimately, journalists position al-Sayed as both activist and journalist; through him, the roles of the activist and the journalist overlap. This position is the least comfortable of all for traditional journalists: If activists can do journalistic work—especially in conflicts deemed of global significance—then what role do journalists have? As Al Omran (2012) wrote on NPR.org, "International media have had very limited access to Syria since a popular uprising began in the country 10 months ago, and citizen journalists like al-Sayed have played an important role in getting information to the outside world" (para. 8). The chairman of Bambuser, which distributed al-Sayed's live video feed from Homs, told the BBC,

Those live pictures that Rami and his friends have brought to the world are the only live pictures that have come out of Baba Amr over the past two weeks. So I think it's very important. . . . We've also seen pretty much all major media in the world, like CNN, BBC, Sky etc., broadcasting his live pictures on TV. ("Obituary," 2012, para. 9–10)

Bambuser has motivation to publicize al-Sayed's importance (and by extension, the platform's importance), even while legacy media have motivation to downplay that importance. And so the question remains: how to understand al-Sayed's work?

As seen above, al-Sayed—along with other citizen journalists—was understood as a target of the Syrian government for one similar reason to Colvin and Ochlik: because they all reported news against the will of that government. According to *The Toronto Star*,

Much of the news from Syria in the past year has come from local bloggers or activists. They, too, have been killed in record numbers. On Tuesday, well-known Syrian activist and photographer Rami al-Sayed was killed in the same district of Homs as Colvin and Ochlik. ("Journalists' Voices Silenced," 2012, p. A6)

Again, al-Sayed is both activist and photographer, perhaps then doubly targeted, even if he is loosely grouped with the foreign journalists who were also killed. Similarly, EuroNews also reported: "Syrian journalist Rami Al Sayed was also killed in Homs on Tuesday. Al-Sayed ran a YouTube channel, including information from other activists, set up to document and inform people about what is going on inside Syria" ("Two Foreign Journalists Killed in Syria," 2012). Here, al-Sayed is a "Syrian journalist," but the

SyriaPioneer YouTube channel includes "information from other activists," setting up a syntactic and thus structural parallel between al-Sayed and activists—again suggesting that even if al-Sayed's work is journalistic, he himself is outside of journalism.

Discomfort with the overlapping positions of al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik is evident. CNN.com refers to al-Sayed as an "opposition videographer" but also quotes "a friend and volunteer at Homs Media Center," who told reporters, "We will really miss him, especially the medical team who relied on him to document all the civilian injuries and deaths on video" (Abedine and Ahmed, 2012, para. 3). Contrasting with other quotations from al-Sayed's fellow activists, this one indicates that some activists view his work as having documentary, and possibly journalistic, elements. The same CNN.com story quotes a doctor and activist, translating from a video about al-Sayed's death:

I want to bring you the latest news, the martyrdom of one of the most important cameramen and one of our most important journalists in Baba Amr. . . . Rami was killed because he was documenting and sending real-life stories from Baba Amr. Rami was killed because he was filming the facts. (Abedine and Ahmed, 2012, para. 5, 8)

A slightly different translation appeared in an NPR story: "Rami was killed because he was transmitting the true picture of Baba Amr. Rami was killed because he was filming the truth. A thousand Ramis will come forward, with God's permission. Life doesn't stop with Rami" (Kenyon, 2012). The reporter contextualized this quote:

Colvin's body was found with that of French photographer Remi Ochlik, not long after Syrian video blogger Rami al-Sayed was killed. . . . The deaths have made it that much harder to get the news from Homs, a fact not lost on the volunteer doctor who spoke in this YouTube video while standing over what appeared to be Rami al-Sayed's body. (Kenyon, 2012)

The deaths may have made it more difficult to get news from Homs, but that assessment is clearly the reporter's. The doctor, as quoted in the story, said that al-Sayed was killed for reporting the truth, but also that "Life doesn't stop with Rami." In fact, the doctor expresses hope that even more people will rally to report the truth.

Professional journalists recognized the journalistic work of al-Sayed and admitted him as a journalistic actor but often positioned him against the field in the same stories. CNN correspondent Ivan Watson lionizes al-Sayed's work but still ostracizes him from the journalistic field:

[al-Sayed] was killed by a similar artillery strike, by shrapnel, the kind that killed Marie [Colvin] and this young photographer Remi [Ochlik] from France and countless others in Homs. And we have met the young activists. These are young, idealistic, mostly men, sometimes women, who are running out with little cameras without a TV [network] to back them. They have been broadcasting the images of these atrocities around the

world for 11 months, Brooke. They are also getting killed. (Baldwin et al., 2012, para. 22)

Watson calls al-Sayed both a "citizen journalist" and a "prominent activist" but groups al-Sayed more strongly with the activists—but notes that these "activists" have performed the role that Western journalists only recently had adopted.

Journalists recognize that al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik all fulfilled the duties implied by parrhesia: to speak the truth, to honestly believe that the truth one speaks is true, and to truthfully represent oneself while speaking. The matter of risk activates a space as parrhesiastic; all three faced enormous personal and physical risk when executing journalistic actions. In both duty and risk, then, al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik occupy similar positions, yet descriptions of and appellations for al-Sayed persistently position him outside of the journalistic field. This positioning seems inconsistent and suggests that journalists are, in their coverage of al-Sayed, once again policing the boundaries of their profession.

Of the 34 news stories reviewed for this study, three lend particular insight into such boundary work. On the breaking news blog of *The New York Times*, an early report on the death of al-Sayed made his contribution to news coverage clear, for his "images of the fierce military assault in the city of Homs were broadcast around the world in recent weeks" (Mackey, 2012, para. 1). Nonetheless, the post also questioned the authenticity of such videos. Mackey writes,

Just hours before his death, Mr. Sayed recorded the wrenching scene of a badly wounded father weeping over the body of his baby son. While restrictions on independent reporting imposed by the Syrian government often make it impossible to verify the authenticity of videos posted online by activists, Marie Colvin, who is reporting from Homs for *The Sunday Times* of London, was present in the makeshift field hospital in Baba Amr on Tuesday when that boy, who was 2, died. She discussed his death in telephone interviews with CNN and BBC on Tuesday night, and described it as the result of intense and indiscriminate shelling of a civilian home. (Mackey, 2012, para. 15)

Here, the eyewitness report of a fellow journalist qualifies as verification of events, but video documentation does not.

The boundary work runs into problems, though, through discussion of, as Mackey puts it, "restrictions on independent reporting imposed by the Syrian government." A CNN correspondent said much the same when referring to "international news organizations like CNN, . . . which are barred from working freely inside Syria" (Stout et al., 2012). Al-Sayed's work can be admitted into journalism because professional journalists position themselves as unable to report from Syria. As these journalists present it, al-Sayed's contribution is exceptional and circumstantial.

The actual boundary is more fluid, or more shared, than presented. In a *New York Times* blog post, Stephen Farrell constructs the work of al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik as essentially the same:

In the digital age, of course, newspaper and broadcast journalists are no longer the only conduit. Other vital outlets are the citizen journalists and Syrian bloggers working alongside them and in places where Western journalists cannot go. But they too are vulnerable . . . Is the Assad regime deliberately targeting journalists? If it is, is it doing so through the electronic footprints of the satellite telephones often used by Western correspondents to file their stories[?] Or does a regime with an extensive intelligence network already know the places used by Western media and Syrian bloggers? (2012, para. 25–27)

Again, al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik are equally targeted, absorbing equal risk, and their work is a “conduit” of information about Syria to the world beyond. And again, an internal contradiction exists in this post: How can al-Sayed be grouped with those working “in places where Western journalists cannot go” and also with two Western journalists reporting from the very same place?

All three were in the same physical space, for similar social reasons, and died at the hands of the same people. Only one article from those reviewed for this study fully articulates the parrhesiastic implications. An *Ottawa Citizen* column titled “Bullets, and Readers, Don’t Discriminate” openly recognizes the equivalencies between al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik:

On Tuesday, Rami al-Sayed was reported killed in Homs, Syria. He had risked his life over and over to tell the stories of Syrians under attack from their own government, through live online video streams and clips uploaded to websites. On Wednesday, the American war correspondent Marie Colvin and French photographer Remi Ochlik also died in Homs, and other journalists were injured. . . . The rockets and shrapnel made no distinction between al-Sayed, uploading video to social media sites, and Colvin, sending reports back to The Sunday Times. What mattered, what ended their lives, is that they chose to go to a dangerous place to gather information and disseminate it to the public. . . . What matters is whether you get the job done. If you bring courage, thoughtfulness and responsibility to your newsgathering, I don’t care whether you tweet it or stream it or mimeograph it. (Heartfield, 2012, p. A12)

In this place where “Western journalists cannot go,” Western journalists died, alongside al-Sayed, for similar reasons. Ultimately, the ways in which journalists discuss al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik overlap. Al-Sayed’s position does differ from Ochlik and Colvin, but not for the reasons stated in the news stories reviewed by this study. Al-Sayed’s position is different because he is Syrian, and a resister. He is not a citizen journalist, not least because he is not a citizen by a Western democratic definition of the word. Al-Sayed is (and should be) understood as both activist and journalist, and journalism has difficulty resolving the two.

### **Digital Parrhesia and Its Publics**

Researchers and theorists have long held that media constitute both culture (e.g., Carey, 2009; Mitchell & Hansen, 2010) and events themselves (e.g., Hall, 1997; Jackson, 2007). Nayar’s (2010)

position on the digital communications realm is similar: "Digital cultures create a new communications culture, which generates a new community, the global civil society . . . and the globalisation of conscience. [WikiLeaks] is an embodiment of this new form of communications-leading-to-community, a digital *parrhesia*" (p. 29). Digital parrhesia, as explored by Nayar and this article, is not a rupture. Nonetheless, new communities do emerge in the context of and because of new technologies, for digital media can frame social reality and define its content (Couldry, 2012). This article posits that digital parrhesia, especially because it explicitly integrates power differentials and attends to context, will continue to prove very useful in analyzing digital communications: The various historical forms of parrhesia, when brought together and interpolated, offer a holistic view of truth telling.

Foucault (2001) extensively articulated three significant historical roles that parrhesia played in ancient Greece. First, Foucault argues the Phaedrus "concerns the difference between the *logos* which speaks the truth and the *logos* which is not capable of such truth-telling" (p. 21); parrhesia, the fulfillment of the former, is the opposite of rhetoric, the latter. Thus, parrhesia is rational discourse that speaks and seeks the truth.

Second, parrhesia's political role in ancient Greece changed over time. In democratic Greece, "*Parrhesia*, which is a requisite for public speech, takes place between citizens as individuals, and also between citizens construed as an assembly. Moreover, the *agora* is the place where parrhesia appears" (Foucault, 2001, p. 22). Nayar (2010) seeks to port this aspect of parrhesia to digital communications. But all functions of parrhesia may shed light on the digital realm, partly through interpolating parrhesia's role in ancient Greek monarchy and tyranny. In what Foucault called the parrhesiastic game, advisors are given permission to speak freely to the sovereign, with the expectation that the sovereign will listen rationally to their advice. The sovereign reveals himself as a tyrant when punishing advisors who have been given the right to speak freely; at the same time, all others who do not have the ability to speak freely—whether in democracy or under monarchy—cannot practice parrhesia and are as slaves (Foucault, 2001). Full participation in political life in democratic Greece is predicated on an individual's ability to practice parrhesia, in Foucault's interpretation.

Third, parrhesia not only stood in opposition to rhetoric and as a political tool (and as a sign of full citizenship) but also played a philosophical role in what Foucault articulated as the care of oneself. Socrates' parrhesiastic role was a guide to truth—leading his interlocutors to uncover their memories of truths that live within. In this way, "By the time of the Epicureans, *parrhesia*'s affinity with the care of oneself developed to the point where *parrhesia* itself was primarily regarded as a *techne* of spiritual guidance for the 'education of the soul'" (Foucault, 2001, p. 24).

In all three forms, risk undergirds and explains the role of a person who practices parrhesia. In the first, the truth speaker, risking his reputation, may lose arguments to those who flatter their audience. In the second, such a loss may result in expulsion from the *polis* if the truth speaker is deemed to threaten the stability of the democratic community; in the case of monarchy, a truth speaker who has not been given permission to speak freely risks death, and in the case of tyranny, can expect it. In the third, guiding people to clear thinking or true paths may offend them—as, in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates constantly challenges the axioms of his interlocutors, which leads to his death.

Grouped together, these forms of parrhesia shed light on how digital communication could be analyzed more holistically. Nayar (2010) makes an affirmative argument for WikiLeaks as a defender of what he calls the *agora* of information and a culture of digital truth telling. His argument is compelling, but the implications of parrhesia were historically wider than the agora, and digitally, are both wider and deeper. To fully consider digital communication and its social functions, we need to consider parrhesia in all its forms; the agora is a useful (though extensively problematized) place to work with democracy, but nondemocratic contexts also are socially significant. So are the notions that truth speaking stands in opposition to flattery and that parrhesia functions in the care of the self. Ultimately, digital parrhesia circumscribes a discursive space where individuals engage in truth-telling practices and where we can understand those practices more clearly.

### Conclusion

This article focused largely on the discursive space of journalism. In doing so, it advocated for the adoption of digital parrhesia as a theoretical framework for understanding new journalistic actors such as Rami al-Sayed. Discursive uncertainty over Rami al-Sayed's role reveals that even while professional journalists recognize his contributions, they police their professional boundaries. Academics, too, have struggled to conceptualize such work, as seen in ongoing contest over terminologies, taxonomies, and social meanings of new journalistic actors. Digital parrhesia helps to explain that whereas al-Sayed's work was similar to that of other journalists, he also took a different kind of risk because the intent of his work differed from Colvin's and Ochlik's.

Parrhesia offers two additional insights. First, it facilitates recursive analysis. As discussed above, when writing about al-Sayed, journalists police the boundaries of their profession. Journalism is also a parrhesiastic space: If journalists ally with anything, it is the duties to speak the truth, to believe the truths they speak, and to honestly represent those truths. And the oft-repeated cliché about speaking truth to power in journalism bears a parrhesiastic element. Journalists who understand their work in this way implicitly recognize the risk of speaking from a position of lesser power than many of those on whom they report. That said, journalists also defend their own interpretive power and the discursive space that they claim as their own. In his final video, posted hours before his death, al-Sayed said,

Baba Amr is facing a genocide right now. . . . We need campaigns everywhere inside Syria and outside Syria, and now we need all people in front of all embassies all over the world. In a few hours, there will be no place called Baba Amr and I expect this will be my last message and no one will forgive you who talked but didn't act. (Maddow, 2012)

Al-Sayed's explicit calls for assistance challenge journalists who may describe dire situations but who will not issue those same calls. Essentially, al-Sayed's work says to journalists: What you do is not enough. In their interrelationship, traditional journalists have relatively more power than al-Sayed. Thus, his media work helps to define the boundaries of journalism, precisely because it provokes journalists to defend those boundaries.

Second, while the work of al-Sayed, Colvin, and Ochlik manifested in discursive space, their physical bodies in physical space subjected them to discipline by the Syrian government. The street

disruptions in Homs and elsewhere were both discursive and physical contests. Controlling discourse may control physical activity, but controlling physical activity necessarily restrains discourse—especially when actors publicizing antistate discourse are killed. Death ends the ability to access the discursive space outlined in this article. Journalistic activity is both discursive and physical—in reporting from conflict zones, it requires a body in that conflict zone, largely because journalism privileges eyewitness reporting (Zelizer, 2007). Syrian authorities may have wanted to silence all reporting about protests and state violence occurring in Homs. But al-Sayed's status is not the same as Colvin's and Ochlik's. Al-Sayed is a journalist, but also a Syrian. His acts were those of a journalist, but also of a resister. As such, he can be considered doubly targeted by the Syrian military: to silence his voice as a journalist, and to force him, as a Syrian, back into line through raw physical force.

At the ends of their lives, Colvin, Ochlik, and al-Sayed all practiced journalism in a nondemocratic state. Colvin and Ochlik, as other Western journalists, were warned of the risks and were warned that their reporting would not be tolerated, and they were citizens of democracies, practicing their profession in Syria. This is where their similarity to al-Sayed ends. Colvin, a U.S. citizen, and Ochlik, a French citizen, were to report to democratic publics; their roles had more to do with the nations in which they published (the United Kingdom and France, respectively) than with Syria, despite their presence there. To call al-Sayed's work "citizen journalism" in fact misunderstands and diminishes his sacrifice. Al-Sayed was not a citizen if a citizen is one who participates in a state determined by popular sovereignty; rather, he was born into and resided in a state that operated under a state of emergency from 1963 to 2011, one that suspended any constitutional protection for Syrians, and one that, as of this writing, continues to brutally engage those who call for an end to one-party rule. Al-Sayed's work provided one window into the lived experience of Syrians during the revolts of 2011 and 2012—experience that was shared and shareable. He also shared the journalism space occupied by Colvin and Ochlik and the interpretive space occupied by YouTube and Bambuser users and commenters. To analyze the work and the roles of people like Rami al-Sayed, and to honor their work properly, a new theoretical framework is necessary. To this end, this article proposes digital parrhesia as one such framework.

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