

An Archetypal Digital Witness: The Child Figure and the Media Conflict over Syria

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This article examines how children have been mediated as witnesses of the Syria conflict. I explore the symbolic demands placed on the figure of the child witness in a converging news media and social media environment, as if it can serve as the quintessentially authentic image and truthful voice able to speak beyond the complexities of geopolitics, war, and ideology, and regardless of the question of journalistic presence. I focus on two cases that unfolded in 2016 during the Russo–Syrian military campaign in East Aleppo: the image of three-year-old Omran Daqneesh, known as “ambulance boy,” and the Twitter account of seven-year-old Bana Al-Abed. I argue that the mediation of witness accounts was characterized by two tendencies: an assumption of the possibility of unmediated witnessing via digital technologies, and a forceful politicization of witness testimonies that empties out their signification as fast as they circulate on social media and news media. This reflects an ecology of competing witnessing that construed children as archetypal witness figures simultaneously prone to virality and co-optation.

Keywords: children, witnessing, Syria, user-generated content, news media

The convergence between social media and news media has produced a news ecology saturated with witness voices and images claiming to speak the truth and to project authenticity onto news narratives. Though initially assumed to result in the empowerment of ordinary witnesses, what has inadvertently emerged is a renewed politics of doubt and a “hermeneutics of suspicion” linked to the proliferation of conspiracy theories and extreme forms of speech (see Dean, 2009; Kuntsman & Stein, 2011). A primary context wherein the political ramifications of the ubiquity of witnessing has been felt is the 2011 Syrian uprising and the ensuing civil war and international conflict (Gregory, 2015). It has now become a cliché to call the Syria War the first YouTube war or the most socially mediated war given the absence of independent journalists and the reliance in global news on user-generated witness accounts (Lynch, Freelon, & Aday, 2014). In this article, I explore one aspect of the mediation of the Syrian conflict, which is the place of children as witnesses.

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Controversies about the figure of the child are intrinsic to modern warfare and international politics. Moeller (2002) notes that children have become “indicator species,” as if societies’ moral and political stances only take shape in reaction to images and voices of children’s suffering. Examples on the news mediation of children abound, from coverage of the Vietnam War to the Anglo–American invasion of Iraq. Amid this ubiquity, it is important to explore what form this phenomenon takes in the current networked news media environment under conditions of authoritarian restrictions over journalistic access, as has been the case in Syria—a situation that gave rise to multiple voices claiming to speak from the authoritative position of eyewitness. Since the early days of protests in Syria, the production and circulation of witness videos and images was characterized by an “aesthetic of authenticity” (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013). The ways witness accounts operated is intrinsically related to the mediation of voice under the neoliberal logic of the networked digital environment, where voice is celebrated, but not heard (Couldry, 2010), and the image is widely circulated, but ultimately not seen (Della Ratta, 2018). Accordingly, in this article, I ask, What role has the figure of the child played in the struggle over meanings of witness accounts mediated out of the Syria conflict?

I argue that two implicit tendencies characterized the operation of witness texts: The first is that digital communication technologies and social media can serve as vehicles for direct and unmediated witnessing of distant conflict. User-generated content has circulated through a binary of truth or lie, which leaves open the possibility that digital testimony can present a raw and direct access to events. The assumption is that while content is debatable, the user-generated form of media can show truth regardless of questions of mediation, curation, and subjectivity. That assumption fetishizes “on the ground” reporting and witnessing as if merely “being there” produces truthful accounts and is no longer a function of power (Zelizer, 2007). The second tendency is a desire for a witness figure that can similarly offer an unmediated account of what is happening on the ground. Children were given the roles of truth seers and truth tellers supposedly able to speak and give meaning beyond muddled geopolitics, bloody wars, and disconcerting ideologies, and regardless of the question of journalistic presence. Both tendencies characterized a reductive form of distant witnessing that hones attention on the details of individual incidents and makes them subjects of debate and conflict. Accordingly, the meanings these witness texts were meant to project is lost and emptied out, and the connections to broader circumstances and power relations these texts had is ignored.

This mode of digital witnessing, which implicates activists on the ground, international media outlets, and social media commentators, has pushed Syrian children to the forefront of news narratives and social media commentary. The child has been construed as an archetypal figure in the global circulation of digital witness accounts—simultaneously hyped up as the ultimate truth teller and/or dismantled as an intrinsically helpless victim of manipulation. In literature studies, an archetype refers to a particular figure or a category defined by its interrelationship within a text or body of texts (Pratt, 1981). Within the context of this article, a networked media logic that seeks a text’s virality favors the particularities of the child figure with its affective reach and its cultural construction as pure and as lacking agency. Indeed, while the circulation of children witness accounts coming from Syria was associated with moral outrage, the meanings of that outrage were subject to political stances and attitudes vis-à-vis the Syria conflict whether in the editorial policies of news channels or on social media. In other words, the individual child has been portrayed as a figure defined by its lacking agency; the

incident involving a child witness has been co-opted in broader, already-existing political debates; and an attitude toward digital witnessing has been perpetuated as if “the digital” can surpass the political and the discursive through providing access to some raw truth.

In this article, I will first discuss the politics of witnessing that emerged in relation to Syria. I will then give a brief account of controversies about children since the beginning of the country’s conflict. I focus on two cases that unfolded in 2016 during the Russo–Syrian military campaign in eastern Aleppo that aimed to drive out militant groups. The UN humanitarian chief described East Aleppo at the time as “one giant graveyard” as hundreds were killed and thousands made homeless (Borger, 2016). The first case is the viral image of three-year-old Omran Daqneesh, known as “ambulance boy.” The second case is the Twitter account of seven-year-old Bana Al-Abed, whose witnessing of the Aleppo conflict was widely reported and discussed. I will situate these cases within the broader context of the global mediation of children’s voices and images in the Syria conflict.

Witnessing Children and Media in Conflict

The way political discussions on morality and authenticity emerge in reaction to the distant witnessing of children suffering is an old phenomenon and is intrinsic to the mediation of modern warfare. Though a child is easy to define as anyone under the age of 18, discursively the child is a complex and ambiguous figure that is often deployed to mirror adult hopes and anxieties (Livingstone & Third, 2017), and whose recognition is dependent on factors like race and class (Banaji, 2017). The child figure is often mythologized as if its voice is unimpeachable (James, 2007); and its visual representation is typically framed as an archetype of victimhood (Holland, 2004). The myth of childhood innocence empties the child figure from its political agency to fulfil the symbolic demands placed on it (Kincaid, 1992). The child is also a global figure in its signification of what is irreducibly and essentially human, which is often invoked in celebration of “the world community” and in denigration of what divides it (Malkki, 2010). More specifically, Arab children’s innocence has been mainly portrayed in relation to victimhood (such as in Palestine) or vulnerability to radicalization in a post-9/11 world (Sabry & Mansour, 2019). In the case of the Syria story’s circulation in the West, the mediation of children must also be considered against the background in which Syrian adults are racially and culturally marked as Arab Muslims. Syrian children visually appear more familiar to Western audiences. For instance, commentators noted that part of the reason the image of the drowned boy, Alan Al-Kurdi, went viral and initially engendered sentiments of compassion by Western publics was the boy’s fair skin and Western appearance (Fisk, 2016).

Children are also temporal figures. The deeply rooted cultural construction of children as innocent is based on the notion that they are in the process of becoming agentive persons, rather than already being (Uprichard, 2008). The future orientation of the child figure steers attention away from their actual experiences as rooted in the past and the present and also conflates who children are with what adults think they are (Hanson, 2017). Children are favorite news pegs in stories about the future, particularly because they embody the principle of hope on which a futuristic utopia depends (Malkki, 2010). Accordingly, because conflict is an interruption of that hopeful narrative, war commentary is often focused on children and the witnessing of their suffering.

In relation to witnessing, the mediation of the child figure in news representations about Syria has taken place within a new networked digital media environment. Mortensen (2015) points out how digital media's immediacy of access and volume of content has eliminated the distance between "seeing" and "saying." The research focus in witnessing literature "has shifted from the existential struggle of the witness to the assessment of the authenticity, meaning, and significance of eyewitness images" (p. 1398). In relation to audiences, Chouliaraki (2015a) describes this shift as resulting in the emergence of a "radical doubt" over remediating witness accounts. As for its impact on news media, Zelizer (2017) points out that the proliferation of digital technologies and the enabling of various actors to play the role of eyewitness has shifted user-generated content from operating as an asset to journalists into becoming a substitute for them (p. 53).

In the Syria story, user-generated content was not only used to make up for the absence of journalism but also ended up undermining journalism. Digital eyewitness accounts and texts became the currency that news broadcasters, such as American CNN, Russian RT (formerly Russia Today) or Qatari Al-Jazeera used to give selective attention to aspects of the conflict and about which they offered opposing interpretations and moral claims. Children were the most valued texts within that media ecology and its neoliberal logic that operates as a marketplace for witness texts. Though the myth that digital witnessing can be unmediated was left unquestioned through the celebration of its aesthetics of authenticity and truth, the process of selection of what witness testimonies to highlight, and how to editorialize them, politicized and destabilized their content and meaning.

This politicized form of witnessing is particularly relevant to prolonged conflicts, which differ from the empirical backdrop to many studies in the literature on witnessing that focus on single incidents. Though the signifiers of proximity and participation give audiences a sense of access to understanding distant moments of crisis (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013), the distant witnessing of prolonged crises (such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict) happens in a different temporal context—which is not one of surprise, but an unfolding of what one has already formulated an opinion or attitude toward. Given the duration of the Syria conflict, modes of witnessing emerged that approach what is happening from different political vantage points and that shape how individual witness media texts were circulated and given meaning.

This form of witnessing is also affective, particularly because it is circulated in a networked media environment wherein the news is enmeshed with social media content and reaction. As Beckett and Deuze (2016) point out, the role of emotion in journalism is changing along with what technology has introduced to the production and consumption of news. Power and influence are "redistributed emotionally" in new ways (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). Witnessing is at the heart of these transformations as witness accounts are consumed within different affective registers corresponding to political stances. This environment encourages binary formulations of political affiliation.

This article notes that the witnessing of the Syrian war mostly took the form of a binary stance of opposition or support of the Syrian regime and its Russian backers. For instance, during the Russo-Syrian 2016 military campaign on East Aleppo, Western and Arab media outlets from CNN to Al-Jazeera used eyewitness footage and voice to highlight the human suffering caused (while, for instance, failing

to deploy that frame in other conflicts, like Yemen's). On the other hand, pro-Syrian government media outlets (including RT) counter these images and voices with already established frames that claim they are fake and/or in discussing what is happening through the discursive prism of the "war on terror," as opposed to the frame of human suffering. In tandem, they deploy their own witness texts that offer a point of view in line with their version of what is happening.

This media environment of competing witnessing produced a desire for a figure supposedly able to tell the truth without effort. It favored a nonthreatening figure, to which audiences can be easily "affectively attuned," as Chouliaraki (2015a) puts it. Media controversies about Syrian children centered on what a child's image means and what his or her witnessing voice proves. It did not matter how much detail emerged about a child witness: a child's image, a child's oral testimony on Twitter, online videos and media interviews, the voices and testimonies of his or her parents. All of those details would get engulfed by editorial slants, political positions, and divergent discursive frameworks. In the following section, I give a brief account of the Syrian uprising and war through the main controversies that mediated children.

Children in the Syrian Uprising

Demonstrating the power of suffering children in mobilizing publics, it is worth noting that the Syrian uprising's spark, which took place in February 2011, involved pictures of bruised children that went viral on mobile phones and social media. Inspired by the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, a group of boys sprayed antiregime graffiti on their school wall in the southern Syrian city of Dara'a, which led to their detainment. The incident prompted unprecedented protests in March 2011 that were met by a forceful army response that killed scores of civilians. With the protests escalating and the situation getting out of hand, the boys were released, but their bodies showed signs of torture. When the boys' pictures went viral in Syria, the protests and the unrest only intensified (Doran, 2017).

Historically, the Syrian regime under Baath Party control has long placed infantilization at the center of its political domination symbolism. As Wedeen (1999) argues, the late Hafez Al-Assad's (in power 1971–2000) authoritarian cult-like state posited him as the father figure of "citizen children" who owe him obedience (p. 51). Syrian children were made to perform allegiance, for instance, in shouting out slogans to glorify Al-Assad in daily school exercises. Similarly, adults were infantilized as they were expected to make outlandish proclamations of loyalty to the state (see Wedeen 1999). Though much has changed under the rule of his son, Bashar Al-Assad (in power since 2000), the apparatus of the Baathist police state reappeared in full force since 2011. As mentioned, the spark of the 2011 uprising came partly from rebellious Syrian youths and from adults standing up to the state in rejection of the detainment and torture of their children.

During the initial stage of the uprising, the figure of the child was a primary medium in the push and pull between a state trying to instill fear back into people and protestors channeling anger over the subjection of children to violence as a way to surmount fear. As Pearlman (2016) notes, what the initial protests accomplished in Syria is to resist a "silencing fear" of the regime's threats to punish citizens for political transgressions into a "surmounted fear" experienced by Syrians, whom, while still aware of

potential reprisals, mustered the courage to act and protest anyway (p. 26). The outrage over images of tortured children had the effect of mobilizing people into action, as evidenced by the growing protests. However, soon after, the use of children for mobilization was neutralized through government media tactics of projecting doubt over digital witness accounts, partly through propagating counterwitness texts—that is, the deployment of one witness testimony against another.

This dynamic can be noted not only in relation to the graffiti incident but also in its aftermath, particularly with the case of the slain 13-year-old Hamza Al-Khatib. By May 2011, protests were happening across Syria, and the civilian casualties were in the hundreds. In June, the opposition claimed control of a northwestern town after clashes with the police—one of the first signs of the conflict's militarization ("Timeline," 2013). At the time, a new media controversy centered on a child-dominated news coverage and social media activity. The boy, Hamza Al-Khatib, was arrested in a protest in Dara'a in April 2011, as members of his family initially stated. In May, Al-Khatib's family received his body, and a horrific video circulated on social media showing his tortured and mutilated body. Activists claimed that the boy was tortured to death during his arrest. Progovernment media eventually reacted to the story by denying the boy was arrested and claiming that he had been killed in crossfire ("Surya," 2011).

The boy immediately became the center of rallying cries against the horrors taking place in Syria as his apparent torture fueled anger within and outside the country. Activists launched Facebook and Twitter pages dedicated to him. Protests on Friday, June 11, 2011, were mobilized under the slogan "freedom's children." The "We are all the martyred child Hamza Al-Khatib" Facebook page is still active as of July 2018 with almost 900,000 followers. The page posts mostly about children in its online activism. At the time of the controversy in 2011, Al-Khatib was mentioned by Western officials as another indication that President Bashar Al-Assad had lost legitimacy ("Syrian Unrest," 2011).

On the regime side, Hamza's story was said to be fake. The evidence eventually provided was a counterwitness testimony. Progovernment Syrian Addounia TV aired an interview with a forensic pathologist who claimed that the deceased child's body was not subjected to torture and that the signs of mutilation were due to decomposition (HananNoura, 2011). In early June, President Bashar Al-Assad met with Hamza's father and uncle—who also provided further countertestimony by expressing allegiance and praise to the president. For government media, the family testimonies were supposed to discredit the initial witness account of the first video that showed the boy's mutilated body. For their part, antiregime Syrians dismissed the testimonies of the child's family as a result of government threats and intimidation ("Qissat Hamza," 2011).

The case of Hamza Al-Khatib, like the graffiti boys, again demonstrated to the Al-Assad regime and to opposition activists the power of the child figure to mobilize publics and capture the attention of Syrians as well as Arab and Western media and audiences. It also showed that a witness media text can be countered with another witness text. It was the first in a number of cases of children that played out in similar cycles: a media text propagated by Syrian activists for mobilization, echoed by anti-Al-Assad Western and Arab officials and media, then an opposing narrative emerges from pro-Al-Assad media and figures aiming to discredit opposition witness texts and testimonies. When the Hamza story broke out in the summer of 2011, the Syrian conflict was at the stage of a popular uprising subjected to state

brutality. It was just before the militant stage of the conflict, wherein the state lost control over territory to rebel groups, several of which harbor radical Islamist ideologies (including the Al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State group). It was also before the Russian military intervention that escalated in 2015 and changed the course of the war. The more militarized and internationalized the Syria conflict became, the more voices circulated on networked news and social media—purporting authority of knowledge over what was happening there and participating in a cacophony of claims based on morality and truth. Along with the proliferation of military interventions in the country, the digital mediation of the story, and its child protagonists, became further globalized.

The two cases I focus on took place during the 2016 battle for East Aleppo, when the Syrian army, proregime militias, and the Russian air force launched a campaign to clear that part of the city from rebel groups in the name of fighting terrorism and regaining Syrian sovereignty. Eventually, the rebels, including but not limited to Al-Nusra, and the remaining civilians were evacuated from the area, mostly into the northwestern rebel-held province of Idlib. On Twitter, hashtags such as #SaveAleppo #StandwithAleppo #SOS were used by Syrian activists and opposition figures to expose and report on the casualties of the bombing campaign and to call for global attention and support. International news media heavily relied on the witnessing accounts of antiregime activists. Furthermore, pictures and stories about children featured heavily on the Twittersphere and news media. Two cases that relate to children stand out at the time—those of Omar Daqneesh and Bana Al-Abed, both of which exemplify how stories about children circulated.

Omrان Daqneesh

On August 17, 2016, and in the aftermath of an airstrike on East Aleppo, a picture of a three-year-old boy, Omran Daqneesh, circulated and went viral online. It was of a bloodied and traumatized boy sitting in the back of an ambulance with debris all over his tiny body and dried blood on his face. Without crying, he stares helplessly and traumatically into the distance. The image of the boy quickly went viral on Twitter as it was retweeted by activists, journalists, and Western officials and reported extensively on international media. With more visibility, media attention narrowed down from the reporting of the battle of East Aleppo and the killings and displacements of thousands into chatter about one child and his picture. Similar to the case of Hamza, the witness voice of Omran's father was used to discredit the boy's picture. Furthermore, exemplifying how competing witnessing operates, another picture that was said to implicate one of the photographers in a war crime was presented, as if to counter Omran's image.

From the outset, the photo captured international attention. The late U.S. Senator John McCain issued a statement in reaction, saying that "images of the carnage in Syria must do more than inspire shock and outrage. They must compel us to action" ("Statement," 2016, para. 4). CNN's report about the child went viral in its own right because the news reader fought back tears while reporting on the child's trauma. President Barack Obama made a reference to the picture in a speech at the UN Refugee Summit, in which he read a letter he had received from a New York boy asking him to bring Omran to the United States (Puglise, 2016). A year later, a child actor playing Omran appeared in a TV commercial for Kuwaiti telecom giant, Zain—a depiction widely condemned by Syrian activists (Bakour, 2017).

As Omran's picture first went viral, another picture of one of the photographers at the scene, Mahmood Raslan, was circulated by Russian media and pro-Russia/Syrian regime commentators that shows him taking a selfie with fighters of one Western-supported militant Islamist group, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement. Fighters from that militia had committed a harrowing war crime in July 2016, a mobile phone video of which circulated online. The video shows armed men beheading a boy, Abdullah Issa, with a knife. The selfie was remediated as a "meaningful trace of the self" (Chouliarakis, 2017, p. 81) and accordingly as a witness text that implicates one of the photographers in the beheading. Propagating that photographer's selfie with war criminals became a tactic as if meant to cancel out any moral or political meaning one might draw from Omran's image. On its own, that case shows the selectivity of what grabs Western and Gulf Arab media's attention and what produces emotive reporting. The story about a Western-backed group failed to stir moral outrage on Western and Gulf Arab news channels. In its relation to the photo of Omran, the association of the photographer with the Al-Zenki Movement was used by pro-Syrian government media to discredit the outcry over Omran's picture as part of a propaganda campaign (see, e.g., Barlett, 2017).

Witness accounts then were used to trump one another. Western and Gulf Arab media focused on Omran as a symbol of human loss and suffering because of the Russo-Syrian military campaign. For their part, pro-Syrian regime and pro-Russian media criticized the Western and Gulf coverage as "profiteering from suffering" (Sama Channel, 2017, 0:13). On Syrian and Russian media, the voice of the parent was deployed to clarify the supposedly misrepresented image of the child. The father was interviewed several times by Syrian progovernment media outlets, as well as by allied media of Russia, Iran, and China. In one interview on progovernment Syrian Sama TV, Omran's father said his son's picture "is authentic. . . . But they (the rebels) wanted to use it for other purposes in order to harm the Syrian state and the army. The truth is different" (Sama Channel, 2017, 3:14). The father's testimony was supposed to provide the proof of the manipulation by Syrian rebels and activists and also by Western and Gulf Arab media. It is the voice that is meant to counter the image.

The photo recirculated and created new controversy a year later in June 2017, when CNN chief correspondent Christiane Amanpour interviewed Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and showed him Omran's picture ("Russian FM," 2017). Amanpour's move stirred a backlash by Russian officials and media. The RT editor-in-chief referred to Omran's image as "one of the most terrible deceptions about Syria" and challenged Amanpour to go to Aleppo "if she has enough courage and journalistic ethics" (RT UK, 2017, 0:22). The insinuation is that if Amanpour reports from the ground, the truth would become apparent, presumably when talking to the family. Of course, missing from the Syrian and RT media reporting is whether the family of Omran, now living in government-controlled territory, has the freedom to express any opinion that is different from the Al-Assad regime line or even whether they have the ability to decline to appear on official Syrian media without fear of repercussions on their safety.

Russian foreign ministry spokesperson also reacted by accusing Amanpour of using the photo "to manipulate public opinion." In its report about the issue, RT contrasts the viral image of traumatized Omran with more recent footage of him playing and laughing— insinuating that the latter footage reflects truth, while the former does not. One RT journalist stated that Omran became a "massive tool for demonizing what Russia was doing in Syria." RT interviewed Omran's father again, who said "I did not

ask for anything with regard to Omran, no media, no fame, nothing. They photographed him without my consent" (RT UK, 2017, 0:55). For their part, Syrian opposition activists dismissed the interviews with the father as conducted "under duress," and one opposition media activist described him as "a prisoner under the regime control, forced to say every single word" (McKirby & Tawfik, 2017, para. 6).

What comes across clearly in the interviews conducted with Omran's father is that he wants to be left alone and for the attention to wither away. This desire opens up an ethical question of consent in media coverage—even when framed as empathy. For instance, when CNN's Amanpour used Omran's image in her interview about a year following the incident, the family was put under the spotlight again as Omran and his father appeared in several interviews to give a counter narrative. Some aspects of the story, such as that Omran's older sibling was killed in the airstrike that night (New China TV, 2017) are ignored. And the larger context of the story that the Russian and Syrian air forces were relentlessly bombing an area with a large civilian population becomes overshadowed by discussions of one viral image of one child. On pro-Al-Assad media, the photo was deemed as manipulated, but the parent's voice is supposedly authentic and clarifies the much-needed truth.

I argue, however, rhetorical claims about seeking truth can in fact operate as distortion when they reduce complexity into a fetishized voice or image or when they use one witness account against another in a tit-for-tat media battle. Presumably, Western and Gulf Arab news media's intention of focusing on the picture was to highlight the horrors of war and its impact on vulnerable children. However, when an image of a child becomes the story, the risk is that the meaning it was meant to signify, which is the plight of the residents of east Aleppo, is emptied out as attention shifts to the single photograph as if it is a standalone witness text. The result ends up that the photograph, and the child and his parents, are reduced to recyclable images and soundbites circulating widely within political orbits and a media system functioning as a marketplace wherein witness texts acquire exchange value. In this case, Syrian and Russian media deemed voice as more valuable than the image to propagate their established political narrative.

Unlike Omran, the virality of Bana's (Figure. 1) story does not only concern her image but also her voice. Bana is a seven-year-old child who delivered one of the most prominent witness accounts in English from East Aleppo during the 2016 Russo-Syrian bombardment campaign. Retweeted more than 950 times, her first tweet on September 24, 2016, was "I need peace." Since then, Bana's tweets went viral and captured global attention. As of July 2018, Bana has more than 348,000 followers. She was written about and interviewed dozens of times by international media. Twitter reactions again ranged from unbound sympathy and calls for action to rescue East Aleppo from Syrian and Russian strikes, to doubts over the authenticity and purpose of the Twitter account, to online attacks and trolling targeting the seven-year-old and her family.

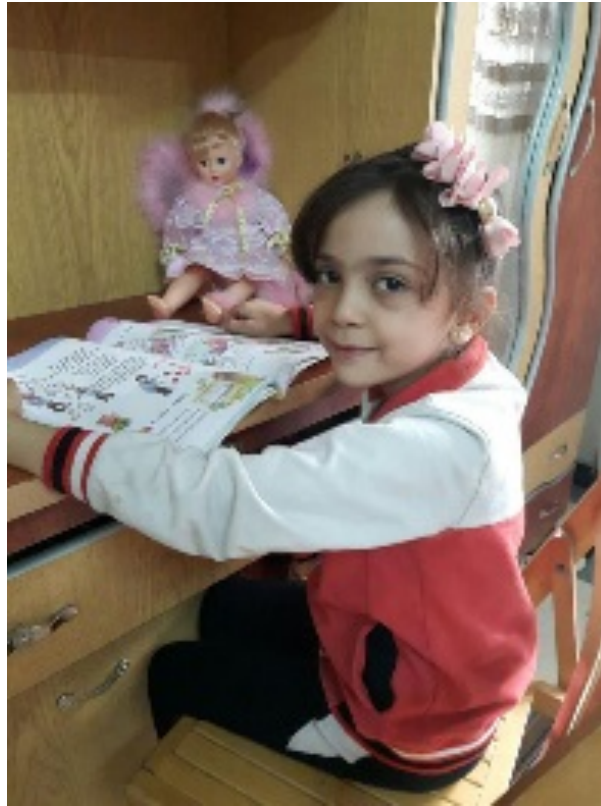
Bana Al-Abed

Figure 1. Picture tweeted by Bana Al-Abed on September 26, 2016, with the caption "Good afternoon from #Aleppo I'm reading to forget the war."

Some of Bana's tweets, video messages, and pictures were about her daily life, what she was doing, her fear of bombs, and her sadness when one of her friends was killed in an airstrike. Bana echoed an anti-Al-Assad narrative as her tweets showed civilian suffering due to the regime military campaign. Most of her tweets were not explicitly political, but about the suffering of war and the desire for peace. Others were framed as messages to "the world"—sometimes as pleading to individual leaders such as U.S. President Donald Trump to help Syrian children. "You must do something for the children of Syria because they are like your children and deserve peace like you. I beg you, can you do something for the children of Syria? If you can, I will be your best friend," she said to the U.S. president in January 2017 (McKernan, 2017a, para. 2). She also thanked Trump when the United States launched cruise missiles targeting a Syrian military base in April 2017. "I welcome Donald Trump action against the killers of my people. . . . Putin and Bashar al Asad bombed my school, killed my friends & robbed my childhood. It's time to punish the killers of children in Syria," she tweeted (McKernan, 2017b, para. 4).

Bana and her family were evacuated from Aleppo in December 2016 and settled in Turkey. When they arrived, they were met in the presidential palace in Ankara by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Bana's family posed for cameras with the Turkish president and first lady. Bana sat on Erdoğan's lap and said, "I would like to thank you for supporting the children of Aleppo and help us to get out from the war. I love you" as he kissed her and her younger brother (ODN, 2016, 0:53). Clearly, the Turkish president capitalized on Bana's fame to portray himself as a protective father figure to suffering Syrian refugees. Since her new found freedom, Bana published a book in English called *Dear World* about her ordeal. She was invited to take part in the Oscars ceremony in Hollywood in March 2018, where she appeared on stage as part of a performance to honor activists (Harding, 2018). While in Turkey, she has also met several celebrities and UN officials reiterating her main message asking the world to save the children of Syria. In news articles and interviews, she has been repeatedly celebrated as a brave voice and dubbed the "Syrian Ann Frank" in reference to the famous Jewish diarist and Holocaust victim.

The case of Bana drew in particularly intense criticism and speculation spearheaded by Russian and official Syrian media. Compared with Omran, Bana is an older child who had a voice and was purportedly in control of her image and was producing a plethora of audiovisual material that commented on daily life. However, her extensive media presence was not taken as evidence of an authentic voice by many critics but as an indication of the opposite: manipulation. Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad dismissed the case as "a game of propaganda" ("President Al-Assad," 2016, para. 21). On Syrian progovernment media, Bana's case was ignored and dismissed as, on the one hand, another example of propaganda, and on the other hand, insignificant within the larger picture that the Syrian army and state have to take back control from "terrorists." On Twitter, pro-Al-Assad accounts considered her witness testimonies a prime example of alleged media manipulation.

On Russian RT, and on social media, critics wrote extensively about the case of Bana. Initially, Bana's Twitter account was compared with the blog of "Gay Girl in Damascus" ("Doubts Raised," 2016), when a viral 2011 blog supposedly by a lesbian Syrian American opposition activist turned out to be a work of fiction authored by a straight American man based in Scotland (see Al-Ghazzi, 2017). When Bana's existence and identity were verified, the criticism focused on her level of English proficiency. Indeed, several of Bana's tweets bore a level of sophistication and knowledge that makes it difficult to associate with a seven-year-old nonnative English speaker. Her Twitter account specifies that it is managed by her mother, Fatemah, who is an English teacher. Asked in an interview with the BBC about who is the author of the tweets, Fatemah said using social media was Bana's idea, but often the writing is hers. She said she usually asks Bana what she wanted to write and then would write the tweet herself. Other times, Bana would ask to say something or to shoot a video herself, the mother claimed. In the same interview, Fatemah describes Bana's account as a weapon against the Al-Assad regime and her daughter as "a big fighter there" (BBC News, 2016, 1:28). For their part, critics continued to spread doubt over who exactly was tweeting, and many alleged the case amounted to child exploitation. Accusations that her family is involved in terrorism were also common. This was a line of attack by guests on RT, who claimed Bana's father and family have been working for and with the Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front groups (RT UK, 2017).

Children's Voice and the Noise of Neoliberal Circulation

It is beyond the purpose, scope, and capacity of this article to provide evidence for accusations and claims that link Bana's family members with terrorist groups or, for that matter, to establish who exactly constructed the tweets, who shared them, and to what extent did Bana have a say in the process. Rather, the purpose is to address the political and media work that the child figure is doing in contemporary conflict coverage and mediation. Clearly, children have been used to influence publics and as texts that circulated across media platforms within a struggle to control Syria and to shape global interpretations of what the massive suffering there means, and who is responsible for it.

Though the child witness figure is popular in the news because it signifies a powerful innocent voice that can speak about victimhood, its reading as pure and lacking in agency is also what makes it an archetype in relation to digital media's capacity for speedy circulation and political co-optation. The mediation of children's voices in the new digital media ecology ends up an act of muting via the generation of noise. Couldry (2010) discusses voice as a process that is not only limited to speaking out but also involves working against systems that silence, such as the neoliberal strategy of emptying out meaning. Neoliberal logic reduces political, cultural and economic complexity to the market and its functioning. Under neoliberalism, voice is celebrated as a trope but undermined as a process that makes it matter (Couldry, 2010). Within global news cultures, neoliberal logic can be identified in the ways authenticity and truth get reduced to an aesthetic and a trope to amplify one's own voice rather than vulnerable others (Chouliaraki, 2013). The same applies to visibility, wherein the pursuit of utmost visibility and shareability of violent images reflects the dark side of the networked practices and economies of peer production and participation (Della Ratta, 2018).

This dynamic was also apparent in the mediation of chemical attacks on rebel areas when the news became saturated with images of children, whether as dead gassed bodies or as suffocating and traumatized survivors. For instance, in April 2018, a witness video of an attack in the Damascus suburb of Douma, which showed suffocating and panicking children, was circulated on news media and social media. It was getting shared by those who condemned the attack and those who claimed the video was staged. At the time, an 11-year-old boy, Hasan Diab, became the star witness of Russian and Syrian government media. Hasan described in interviews how he took shelter with his mother because of fighting, and the next thing he knew, he was taken by strangers to the hospital and sprayed with water. On RT Arabic, the boy was interviewed in the same location of the attack video to explain what happened. His statement about his terrifying day was framed as proof that no attack happened and was meant to cancel out the initial witness video. The boy's father was interviewed repeatedly as well, in addition to testifying in The Hague-based Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in support of the Russian delegation claim that the video was a stunt by militants (RT Arabic, 2018). The OPCW session was boycotted by the UK, France, and the United States and was described as an "obscene masquerade" (Nair, 2018). Critics and Syrian opposition activists dismissed the testimonials, pointing out that the family and the child had likely been forced to make those statements and accusing Russia of child exploitation ("Tanaqudat," 2018).

Two other cases also emerged from eastern Ghouta, the rural and suburban area outside Damascus. A hub of protests in 2011 and then a base of antiregime militant activity, the area had been under government

siege since 2013. In February 2018, the Syrian army, aided by its Russian, Iranian, and Lebanese allies, launched a military campaign against the militant groups until a deal was reached that saw them surrender and evacuate the areas under their control ("Eastern Ghouta," 2018). In that period, two Twitter accounts by young locals dominated news and social media activity. The first account was by two sisters, Noor (10 years old) and Alaa (eight years old). Both girls tweeted and shot videos, talking about their suffering. Like Bana, they eventually settled in Turkey and were met by President Erdoğan for a photo opportunity. Mohamad Najem was the other case. At 15 years old, Mohamed was also a Twitter figure (24.6 thousand followers as of July 2018) who shot selfie witness videos about Ghouta and continued to do so after he escaped to another rebel area, Idlib. Given the ubiquity of these cases, the question is not whether these children are telling the truth, but rather why there is an expectation for children to tell the truth, and why they are at the forefront of controversies about mediation.

Throughout the Syrian uprising, opposition activists used the power of the child figure in speaking to foreign publics through a morally relevant affective orientation as if to infiltrate global news agendas. There were many opposition media campaigns centered on children—for example, in July 2016, photographs of children in besieged Syrian towns holding pictures of Pokémon characters and appealing for help were published by the opposition alliance, the Syrian National Coalition ("Syrian Opposition," 2016). Another opposition media stunt was to dress children in orange jumpsuits and place them in a cage, while a flame lit in front of the camera—mimicking an Islamic State group execution video (Barnard, 2015). The photograph was meant to highlight that Western media attention should focus on suffering under the Al-Assad regime, rather than only under the Islamic State. The stunt succeeded, as the photograph made it to the front pages of global newspapers. However, beyond the immediate coverage, the child-focused media strategy ignores the power structures that determine the operationalization of narratives of suffering others in international media. It ignores that Western (and certainly Arab and Russian) media deployment of voice is more dependent on foreign policy priorities, rather than vice versa (Chouliaraki, 2015b). The distant witnessing of the plight of children in Syria, thus, has been shaped by mutually reinforcing trends of, on the one hand, the quest for and assumption of the possibility of unmediated witnessing, and on the other hand, the politicization of witness accounts and the pitting of one aspect of a witness account against another.

Conclusion

The circulation of witness accounts in international media, whether Western, Russian, or Middle Eastern, outsourced the labor of truth telling and meaning making to the most marginalized and traumatized victims of that conflict to end up emptying out meaning and losing track of pursuing truth. This dynamic not only involved distant news actors but also victims of conflict, like activists, who use the most vulnerable among them in desperate attempts for attention from, and influence over, global media. Ultimately, the reporting and commentary on Syria involved the summoning of the voices and images deemed most authentic and truthful, such as those of children, and pitting them against each other in accordance to their utility in already-established political orientations.

Despite the differences in the circumstances and media use, Syrian children, have been ultimately silenced, as their images and voices were used in narrow controversies that honed in on individuals and incidents. They were deployed as texts to solidify editorial policies of news media and political positions of

social media commentators. International attention afforded to children through media circulation often took the theatrical form of posturing and maneuvering by political actors at the expense of understanding the realities of suffering and victimhood in war or the structural conditions that limit the possibilities of truthful reporting in an authoritarian country facing a devastating war. In other words, the passive quest for an authentic voice to tell the truth about Syria outside of discursive complexity, in addition to the active co-optation of suffering, made the figure of the child a valuable media text in the neoliberal digital environment, whose signification can be exchanged, and whose value can be depleted and replaced by another.

The child as a media figure became an archetypal digital witness, whose "innocent" testimony is prone to widespread and viral circulation, but whose meaning hollows out as it circulates. No matter how much detail a child's story entailed, it ultimately has not engendered a situation wherein a testimony of a child and his or her parent got near to being the last word. On the contrary, viral eyewitness testimonies acted as the initial text that produced a cacophony of claims and counterclaims purportedly interested in authenticity, truth, and morality. In the absence of discursive sensibility, witness testimony becomes only the beginning of communication processes that end up undermining voice. Similar to debates on child witness testimony in court, children as media witnesses are simultaneously hyped as seers of "emotional truths" and easily dismissed as unable to tell truth from fiction (Malkki, 2015, p. 70), and thus victims of propaganda. It is that malleability that lends itself to virality, since the same text can be used to consolidate opposing narratives.

Sadly, it does not seem to matter whether the child is alive or dead for the politicization and co-optation of children's suffering to unfold. For instance, the interpretation of the viral image of Alan Al-Kurdi, who drowned off the shore of Turkey, ultimately mirrored controversies surrounding living and speaking children. Research has shown that though Alan's heartbreaking photo initially forcefully established "an impromptu public of moral spectatorship" (Mortensen & Trenz, 2016, p. 1) and a spike in humanitarian reporting (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017), in the long run the story and image of the four-year-old's tiny dead body got incorporated into preexisting discourses including fears of migration and instability (Bozdog & Smets, 2017).

Parallel to the way children become favored witnesses, there is a fetishization of digital technologies' ability to transmit raw witness accounts and to leapfrog over questions of power within mediation. New technologies are deployed as if they have an intrinsic function of shrinking the affective distance between sufferers and spectators and as if by design they are able to amplify voice and create empathy. This not only concerns the convergence of mobile digital technologies, social media, and news media, which has been the focus of this article, but also the increasing use, particularly by human rights groups, of virtual reality (VR) technology as a nonmediated "empathy machine" that immerses viewers in visual texts that show the suffering of others, and unsurprisingly the protagonists in VR texts are often chosen to be children (Irom, 2018). Yet, as other critical scholars have pointed out, no matter the technology, the creation and circulation of meaning is inescapably tied to the politics of representation, (re)contextualization, and affect.

Finally, this article also aimed to show that approaches centered on accusations of propaganda, when based on a reductive binary of truth and lie, are limited in their understanding of the mediation of a

fractured and politicized digital and news media environment. Those approaches do not capture the complexity of reporting and representing a conflict, such as Syria's, that has brought in multiple global powers, each with its agenda of influence and powerful media arms and supportive social media publics. The binary of truth/lie or the floating signifier of "fake news" cannot fully account for the ecology of competing witnessing wherein snippets of witness accounts are mobilized to discredit others and to affectively mobilize politicized publics. Amid these media battles, Syrian children have been conscripted as archetypal digital witnesses of the actual devastating battles that are killing them.

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