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Declaration

I, Ingrid Hovda Storaas, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature…………………………………..

Acknowledgments

ABSTRACT

In November 2014, the film "Syrian hero boy" went viral. It depicted a young boy targeted by snipers. He dodges the bullets, and manages to save another child from the scene. After the story was published in newspapers worldwide, however, it became clear that it was a fabrication, shot and directed at a set in Malta. This thesis explores the media coverage of "Syrian hero boy" through a content analysis of 93 articles written about the film in online newspapers, asking how this coverage fit with the ongoing propaganda war in Syria. It also asks what this coverage might tell us of the media's potential for guarding the normative ideals of the public sphere, first and foremost those associated with sincerity and rational-critical debate.

34 online newspapers within the sample of this thesis published the film unverified, and the majority of these articles indicate that "Syrian hero boy" was understood as an activist film depicting a real life event on the ground. Seven of these 34 articles, however, debated the authenticity of "Syrian hero boy" in front of their readers, showing that there is potential within the media to perceive such user-generated content in a critical matter without ignoring it. The content analysis show that the majority of the 93 articles analyzed, 59, was written after it was revealed that "Syrian hero boy" was false. All of these articles focused on the fabrication and its possibly negative consequences. The film sparked enrage, which in turn indicate that deception is not accepted in the virtual public sphere, especially not by journalists.

This thesis argues that it is too simplistic to assume that unmediated information flows automatically contribute towards a deliberative democracy, and that the online journalism domain is an important actor when it comes to the safeguarding of democratic values on the Internet.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Monday November 10th 2014, a video from somewhere on the ground in Syria is published on a newly generated YouTube account. It shows a young boy in the midst of a sandy, war-torn environment as he tries to escape being shot by snipers. It seems as though the young boy is being shot, but, miraculously, he survives, and comes forward to save another child, a little girl, from the bullets. The title of the film is "Syria! Syrian hero boy rescue girl in shootout!", and the image is blurry, the camera shaking – it seems to be shot by amateurs. The film is being picked up by Shaam News Network, a group of activists known to distribute user-generated content from the conflict in Syria, and in a few days it has been viewed approximately 5 million times. It is published in numerous newspapers across the world, such as The Guardian, Huffington Post, BBC, Morocco World News and the Jerusalem Post (appendix 8.3), all of which praise the young boy's heroism. By Friday November 15th however, it is evident that the amazing story of the "Syrian hero boy" has a hitch: It is fabricated. The two children do not live in the midst of a civil war. Instead, they are actors, and their scene is a set in Malta also used in the 2000 blockbuster "The Gladiator".

The film was shot and directed by a group of Norwegian filmmakers, who, according to a press release, wanted to spur action on behalf of children affected by war. The tool they used in order to spur such a debate, was one "that's often taken used in war; make a video that claims to be real" (Klevberg, Løkke and Hagen 14.11.2014). Thus, when "Syrian hero boy" went viral, it was meant to be seen as one of the thousands of films and images showing the atrocities of the war in Syria online, and that has become fundamental to the coverage of this war in international news media[1]. This thesis explores how this false film was disseminated across the globe, as well as how it was understood both before and after the hoax was revealed. While false information and other types of propaganda have always circulated in times of war (Knightley 2004), Jowett and O'Donnell (2015) point to the fact that Internet amplifies these challenges, making it possible for new actors to participate in these

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[1] This description build on several reports discussing news coverage and Syria, first and foremost "Syria's Socially Mediated War" by Lynch et al. (2014) and "Deciphering User-Generated Content in Transitional Societies. A Syria Coverage Case Study" by Harkin et al. (2012). See also "Amateur Footage: A Global Study of User-generated Content in TV and Online News Output" by Wardle et al. (2014) and "Journalism in Syria. Impossible job?" by Reporters Without Borders (2013),

propaganda wars. What does this have to say for the possibility of having a meaningful, international debate concerning the war in Syria?

Such a meaningful debate often refers to the notion of the public sphere, and this thesis will use Jürgen Habermas groundbreaking 1962 work *The Structural Transformation of the public sphere* as a starting point for a discussion of how this sphere – or spheres – might look like today, in a transnational environment bound together by Internet. It will do so by applying the debate surrounding the false film "Syria hero boy" as a case study, exploring how false histories, fabrications and propaganda are met in such a sphere. Habermas (1989:27) wrote about what he perceived as the ideal, bourgeois, public sphere of the 17th and 18th century, a sphere of private people coming together as a public engaging in critical debate over governing relations, claiming their power based on their use of reason. The vehicle putting the public in touch with the leaders, then, was the world of letters, namely the press (ibid.:32-33).

Habermas (1989:184-185), however, while recognizing the importance of the press as a mediator of communication within the ideal public sphere, saw the commercialization of this press as a locus for the demise of this sphere, as it changed from being a free institution of the private public to becoming an institution for only a few members of this public. While social media, as an answer to some of Habermas concerns, are said to be of great importance to the virtual reach of the public sphere (Dahlberg 2001, Beers 2006), the press, or journalism domain, have always been regarded as important actors within this sphere (Splichal in Gripsrud and Moe 2010:29): It is through them people get their views through to the right authority. As Dahlgren (1991:1) notes, the way media, especially in their journalistic role, might help "citizens learn about the world, debate their responses to it and reach informed decisions about what courses of actions to adopt" is a fundamental part of the inquiry of the public sphere.

While Habermas' notion of the public sphere has been subjected to intense scholarly debate, for example regarding whether or not the bourgeois ideal public sphere really existed (Schudson in Chalhoun 1992), or if it makes sense to speak about one, overarching public sphere (Fraser 2007), his conception of the quality of communication within such a sphere can still be applied as a meaningful way of discussing existing challenges associated with the presence of false information and propaganda in the virtual arena, and how this might effect the development of a vivid transnational public sphere. The film "Syrian hero boy" is in many

ways an illustration of what the American writer Anne Applebaum calls "the disappearance of facts and the growth of Internet fantasy" (in Washington Post 10.12.2015), which in turn may have implications for democratic debates; If members of the public believe in everything and nothing, the basis for rational-critical debates might be eluded. Dahlberg (2006) claims that such issues have such urgency that they threaten to undermine the whole deliberative process. While public sphere theory does not explicitly deals with misinformation and propaganda, it regards the opposite as essential for democracy: Enlightened debates not influenced by neither states nor corporations (Crack 2008, Dahlberg 2004). In this framework, engaging in debates based on false premises is debilitating.

This thesis apply the dissemination of, and the following debate of, the false film "Syrian hero boy" as a case study, looking at how it was covered in online newspapers. This is done in order to explore how a false film can travel around the world, and which way the debate turn when it proves be false. Following George and Bennett's (2005:17) understanding of what constitutes as a case, it is not the film in itself that is of interest, but rather the events unfolding from the film was published until it was exposed as a hoax, and the debate that surrounded it. "Syrian hero boy" was published on YouTube before being picked up by traditional news outlets, illustrating something that has become to characterize the fragmentized coverage of the Syrian war, namely the use of so-called user-generated content as a replacement from the footage that journalists themselves are hindered from taking (Lynch et al. 2014, Harkin et al. 2012).

1.1 Research Questions

The aim of this thesis is twofold. It investigates how the false film "Syrian hero boy" was covered in online newspapers, as well as it wishes to explore whether or not such fabricated stories have implications for the functioning of a virtual public sphere. The questions that are attempted answered is thus: *How did the coverage of the false film "Syrian hero boy" in online newspapers fit with the ongoing propaganda war in Syria?* and *What can this tell us of the media's potential for safeguarding the normative ideals of the public sphere in a virtual arena?* Several concepts and assumptions are embedded in these questions. First, it assumes that the quality of communication within the public sphere is important in order to achieve its deliberative potential, hence placing this inquiry within a normative framework. Drawing on Habermas (1989), the public sphere it is built on an assumption that democracy is best served if the public engage in rational-critical debates free of manipulations from governments and

corporations, and that the results of these debates are taken into consideration by policy makers.

By asking how the film "Syrian hero boy" was covered, this thesis also assumes that the media, in this case understood as the actors conducting journalism[2] rather than just providing the facilities for communication, plays a role within the public sphere, and that it is of importance how this role is executed. While many recent studies on the virtual public sphere have online discussion forums as a starting point, one should, as stressed by scholars within the field (Dahlgren 1991, Garnham in Calhoun 1992, Volkmer in Allan and Zelizer 2002) not forget that media stations and journalists are important actors within the public sphere. After all, the opinions expressed in mass media "have been considered as the cornerstone of the national democratic public sphere", as expressed by Garnham (ibid). Both of the questions also assume that misleading or deceptive communication such as propaganda have implications for the public sphere, and that the coverage of the film "Syrian hero boy" is a good starting point for engaging in such a debate.

This coverage is explored by conducting a content analysis of 93 articles written about the film in online newspapers, sampled through a Google search (see appendix 8.2.). The analysis looks at whether or not the films authenticity was debated and whether there was a shift in the debate after the fabrication was revealed. It also looks at how the film was understood; When understood as an authentic film from the ground in Syria, who was the perceived sender, and who, if any, were framed as being responsible for the snipers? The answer to these questions put "Syrian hero boy" in a larger context, namely as part of the constant flow of amateur footage and images shot by citizen journalists and activists in Syria, and which international news agencies today have become dependent upon in their coverage of the war in Syria (Lynch et al. 2014, Harkin et al. 2012). Some of these images and footage have also proved to be false[3], meaning that "Syrian hero boy" is not unique when it comes to fabricating events on the ground in Syria.

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[2] See Deuze 2005 for an extensive discussion of a shared ideology of journalists across the globe.
[3] In 2012, for instance, BBC published a picture of hundreds of dead children claiming it was evidence of a 2012 Syrian government massacre in Houla in Syria. The image proved to have been taken by a professional photographer in 2003, and showed dead children in Iraq (Watson 2012 in O'Donnell and Jowett 2015:11).

1.2 Limitations and outline of the thesis

Before proceeding, it is worth to note that the public sphere theory encompasses several issues that will not be debated in this thesis. For instance, the thesis will not engage in any discussion as to whether or not the Habermasian ideal public sphere has existed. It is rather the normative ideals associated with this sphere that is of interest. Dahlgren's (1995, 2005) threefold understanding of the concept is useful in this regard. First, the public sphere constitutes of a structural dimension, he argue (2005:149), which, when looking at media, include their ownership and political economy, as well as possible government control of this media. Second, the public sphere constitutes of a representational dimension, referring to the output of the media. It is in this second dimension that issues such as "fairness, accuracy, completeness, pluralism of views, agenda settings, ideological tendencies" and so forth should be discussed, according to Dahlgren (ibid).

The third dimension of the public sphere is interaction, which refers to the democratic foundation of the public sphere, and whether or not the public has managed to shape the policies of the issues being discussed within this sphere. By discussing the norms guiding discussions within the virtual public sphere, this thesis will mainly focus on the second dimension. The reader should thus keep in mind that what follows is not a full debate on the existence of a true, transnational public sphere evolving around the war in Syria per se, but rather a discussion of a few elements that have the potential to make the functioning of such a sphere more difficult. This thesis also exclude any in-depth discussions of a national, Syrian public sphere. While this would make for an interesting inquiry due to the fact that some scholars (Lynch et al. 2014) argue that the war has decreased president Bashar al-Assads control with the media, giving the Syrian people a larger space of maneuver when it comes to expressing their views, thus forming some sort of public sphere.

This thesis will begin with presenting the methods used in order to be able to discuss the dissemination and debate associated with the film "Syrian hero boy", with a focus on how the content analysis has been conducted. The method section will also introduce additional data, as well as discuss some methodological drawbacks concerning how these data have been sampled. The next section will discuss the aspirations of a virtual public sphere, debate whether or not, and in that case how, this is possible, as well as identifying some issues concerning misinformation on the Internet. This section will also focus on the role of journalism as a mediator within such a sphere. Before proceeding to discuss the articles

analyzed in light of these debates, however, section four will introduce the context in which the film was published; a fragmented war illustrated by a just as fragmented news coverage, a situation where several actors use Internet as an active weapon in a propaganda warfare. The body of this thesis, the discussion, will follow. Here, the research questions will be attempted answered through a discussion of how the film "Syrian hero boy" was covered before the film was revealed as false, as well as a discussion of what kind of debate the revelation of the fabrication led to. This section will also discuss whether or not this coverage is illustrating for some of the general challenges associated with a virtual public sphere, especially those concerning propaganda in times of war.

2.0 PROCESS AND METHODS

Following what Lamont (2015:15) describes as the interpretive tradition within IR, this thesis, on the broad level explores the role of propaganda and misinformation in the virtual public sphere, and the media's role as a mediator in this regard. It does so by applying the dissemination of the false movie "Syrian hero boy" as a case study, examining the reach of the film, as well as how the debate looked in international media after the film was revealed as false. This section will introduce how the 93 online newspaper articles in the content analysis has been sampled and coded, as well as introducing additional data that thesis draw on. The choice of looking at online newspapers is based on the assumption that journalism, if conducted in certain ways, can play a vital role as mediator within the public sphere (Bennett et al. 2004:437).

2.1 Case Study as a method

A case study is a mainly qualitative method that allows the researcher to study issues that interests him or her, but are difficult to measure, such as conceptions like democracy, power and political culture (George and Bennett 2005:18). However, as highlighted by Yin (2013:4), it is not always easy to define what actually constitute a case, and whether or not a case study is the best method to explore what you wish to explore. The initial objective of this thesis is to explore whether or not the false film "Syrian hero boy" could be used in a discussion evolving around misinformation or propaganda in the public sphere. Following the understanding of George and Bennett (2005:17), the film itself is not the case, as such studies usually imply something more. George and Bennett (ibid) define a case as a well-defined aspect of a historical happening rather than the historical happening itself. Thus, it is not the film "Syrian hero boy" in itself that constitute the case of this thesis, but rather the events unfolding from the film was published until it was exposed as a hoax, and the debate that followed.

As Yin (2013:32) states, "you need to define a specific, real-life "case" to represent the abstraction". In this thesis, then, the dissemination of and the dissemination of "Syrian hero boy" is the specific case, while the abstraction it represent is the existence of false information in the virtual public sphere and how the media deals with such information. In addition, this case was also chosen based on an assumption that it would help explain what goes on in the intersection between social media and the journalism domain, as the film was first published

on YouTube before being disseminated in online newspapers. Case study methods within International Relations have received a notable amount of critique, first and foremost directed at what is seen as a lack of rigor and agreed-upon methodological standards. Maoz (2002:164-165 in Bennett and Elman 2007:172), for instance, write that "case studies have become in many cases a synonym for freeform research where everything goes". However, as stressed by Bennett and Elman (2007), there has been an increased focus on methodological rigor within this choice of method in the latter years. This thesis may best be perceived as a mixture; It has applied one well-developed method often used within journalism research, namely a content analysis, but the complexity

2.2 Data collection – Covering "Syrian hero boy"

When conducting a case study, the point is not to find out as much as possible about the case in itself, but as much as possible about the case that might be relevant for answering the research question. As mentioned, the main method used to answer the research questions, is a content analysis of news articles written about the film "Syrian hero boy" in online newspapers. This means that results from blogs, discussion forums and different organizations debating the film has been excluded, a choice that is made based on the second research question; the researchers desire to explore the role of the media when it comes to the existence of propaganda and misleading information in the virtual public sphere.

A content analysis is, in the words of Berg and Lune (2014:335) a systematic examination and interpretation of a specific body of material, and the aim is to identify patterns, themes, biases or meanings. The method is often said (Østbye et.al 2007:64) to represent a social constructivist understanding of the world: It assume that we do not have direct access to reality, we understand it through the terms and interpretations made by both ourselves and others. As pointed out by Østbye et al. (2007:58) no static formula exist for how to conduct a content analysis; one needs a perspective, certain terms and a problem statement in order to give direction to the analysis, and this needs to be designed for each study.

I have located the articles in the sample by conducting a Google search on the phrase "Syria* hero boy", and set the search engine to only include results within the time frame November 1st until November 30th 2014. These dates have been chosen because of some previous knowledge: I knew that many newspapers began publishing the film Tuesday November 11th, one day after it was initially published on a YouTube account named *Lawaff Law,* and from

there published on the YouTube site of the Syrian activist organization Shaam News Network. I also knew the hoax was revealed five days later, Friday November 14, when the film makers issued a press release on Twitter, as well as being interviewed by BBC Trending explaining the stunt. The Google search was also conducted in English. However, since the film had an English title – "Syrian hero boy" – some results also appeared in Norwegian, and these are included. The film was, after all, Norwegian-made, and it seemed logical to include these results in the sample.

2.2.1 Methodological implications

These choices, of course, have implications. The choice of searching for the articles in the sample via Google, for instance, might not have ensured that the articles analyzed represent the reality, i.e. all the articles published on "Syrian hero boy" in online Newspapers. As stressed by Berg and Lune (2014:29) and Yin (2013:105), internet searches are not necessarily representative of reality, of all the information out there. How do you know you do not miss *the* material? The fact that "Syrian hero boy" proved to be false, has potentially led to some online news outlets deleting the originally published articles. Thus, it is likely that the sample of this thesis is incomplete. In spite of these challenges, a Google search seemed to be the best method available for obtaining information on how online newspapers covered the film "Syrian hero boy".

It is also reasonable to assume that articles are excluded from the sample based on the language skills of the researchers. In addition to being titled in English, "Syrian hero boy" also had an Arabic title – both on the original Youtube account and on the page of Shaam News Network. The research conducted by Lynch et al. (2014:17) shows that studies of the media landscape concerning the war in Syria cannot be complete if Arabic content is excluded from the study, as Arabic is the dominant language in online debates and social media discussing the war in Syria. This affects the validity of this thesis, as the data might not represent what the research question asked for (Franklin et al. in Thyer 2010:10), namely how online newspapers in a virtual public sphere covered this film. Answers generalizing the coverage of "Syrian hero boy" in the online newspapers analyzed as applicable to the coverage of this film in all public spheres, then, will be misleading.

2.2.1 The coding process

The Google search for "Syria* hero boy", with the time frame set from November 1st until November 30th 2014 generated 236 articles. After having excluded all non-journalistic

content, meaning personal blogs, NGO sites and discussion forums, 93 articles remained. These were then coded into different categories. As Berg and Lune (2014:35) advices, open coding was applied first. This means reading through all the material, looking for trends and patterns, trying to come up with sensible ways of organizing it. First, I observed that the material mainly consisted of two broad categories: articles written before the film was exposed a hoax, and articles written afterwards. For the articles published before the hoax was exposed, I was particularly interested in whether or not the articles published the film as portraying a real life event, and in how they contextualized it. This required the development of so-called coding frames (Berg and Lune 2014:353), organizing the data into separate categories that in turn was divided in additional subgroups (appendix 7.2).

One of the categories that where developed relates to whether or not the film was published as though it was real, categorizing the material into three subgroups: As the truth, almost as the truth, meaning that they did not ask questions, but included some kind of disclaimer such as "cannot be independently verified", and, at last, articles that seriously questioned the film's authenticity. Dividing the articles in each of these categories requires a qualitative analysis; one cannot simply count words or phrases, as the very categories has to do with the impression left after reading the article as a whole. One article, for instance (Didelot 12.11.2014), states that the film "hasn't been independently verified for authenticity" only to proceed to write "The action you will see is the stuff that Hollywood movies are made of, only in this case, it is real." Here, I have looked at the main message of the article; what does the title, the lead and the first paragraph imply? As emphasized by Berg and Lune, a content analysis need not be either qualitative or quantitative, it can actually be both at the same time (2014:340). This allows the researcher to examine mind-sets, for example, while also grounding their analysis in a firm dataset (ibid:341). This also refer to another debate within content analysis, namely whether it should just be based on so-called manifest content – elements physically present and easily countable, or whether it should also include so-called latent content, where an interpretive reading is required (Berg and Lune 2014:341).

Out of the 93 articles in the sample, 34 were published before the hoax was exposed. 14 of these published the story of the "Syrian hero boy" without taking any precautions, while 13 included some sort of disclaimer. Seven seriously questioned its authenticity. I have also looked at who was cited as the source for the film, as I assumed it would say something about in what context the film was understood. 23 of the articles cited the anti-regime activist

network Shaam News Network as a source, while 9 claimed the film was from Youtube. The last 2 just wrote that the film was from the Internet, or that it "went viral". I also looked at whether or not the articles implied, or stated, who the snipers targeting the young boy was. 3 of them implied that the snipers were government soldiers loyal to the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, while the rest either did not discuss the issue, or wrote that one did not know who the snipers were. However, as will be discussed in the analysis, some articles also indicated that Assad was responsible without writing it in words.

For the 59 articles published after it became known that "Syrian hero boy" was false, it was measured whether or not the article debated the film. By this I mean that voices that criticized the film was interviewed, as well as voices defending it – only the filmmakers. 32 of the 59 articles did. All of these articles had the same narrative; that the film was false and that this might have damaging consequences of some kind.. Coding these articles requires rigor. As emphasized by Berg and Lune (2014:339), systematic criteria have to be developed when placing articles in these different categories. It is important to note that the practice of dividing articles into mutually exclusive categories can have an impact on the reliability of the research, especially when measuring things that are, in nature, not that easily measurable. The risk of this increases when there are elements of personal judgment involved (Østbye mfl. 2007:25). This risk can however be minimized by writing a codebook (see appendix 8.2), which explains how the researcher perceives the different categories, increasing the likelihood of another researching ending up with the same result if the process were to be replicated. This will, following the understanding of Franklin et al. (in Thyer 2010:355), increase the reliability of the study.

2.2.2 Triangulation: Archival research and qualitative Interviews

One of the great advantages of conducting a content analysis when exploring issues such as the dissemination of the film "Syrian hero boy," is that one gets closer to the underlying assumptions shaping the news content, assumptions that many journalists might take for granted (Kolmer in Löffelolz and Weaver 2008:117, Østbye et.al 2007:67). While this content analysis provided useful findings for a further analysis, additional data was also required to be able to answer the research questions. As emphasized by Berg and Lune (2014:6), multiple lines of sight or methods obtained to answer the research questions provides the researcher with a better, more substantive picture of reality. This refers to the term triangulation, that is most often described as the usage of multiple methods within the same study. It can also,

following Dezin (2010 in Berg and Lune 2014:8), be understood as an approach including multiple theoretical perspectives or multiple analysis techniques.

Many of the articles in the sample refers to Shaam News Network (SNN) as a source for "Syrian hero boy," and the context in which it was published here might give additional information needed in order to discuss the way online newspapers published the film. What information was available to the journalists when publishing the film? While SNN has removed all traces of "Syrian hero boy" from their website, there are tools that can be used in order to circumvent this obstacle: Wayback Machine is a site that allows you to search the net "as it was", using information from the so-called Internet Archive, which stores snapshots of internet sites. This allowed me to see what the site looked like the days that "Syrian hero boy" went viral. The film is the headline of SNNs YouTube site both Tuesday November 11 and Wednesday November 12, and the title is "SYRIA! SYRIAN HERO BOY rescue girl in shootout" in English, as well as the same words written in Arabic[4].

On Tuesday, November 11, 13 hours after the film was uploaded, it had been seen 61 628 times. The next day, November 12, the number has hit the roof, with 1 276 014 views. Wayback machine did not take a new snapshot of SNN's Youtube page until midnight between Friday 14th and Saturday 15th of November. At 01.03, "Syrian hero boy" is still the main story, having been viewed 3 537 702 times. However, a new snapshot is taken at 16.44 Saturday November 15th. Now, "Syrian hero boy" is nowhere to be seen, the film has been replaced by another story, a story not titled in English. It is also absent the next day.

2.2.3 Press releases and Interviews

This thesis also draw on two press releases issued by the filmmakers in the wake of the exposure of the false film; one exposing that "Syrian hero boy" was fake (issued 14.11.2014), and a second one apologizing for the project (issued 18.11.2014). While the first press release gives insight on the motivation for the filmmakers and the strategies they applied, the second tells us something about the turn of the international debate. The director of "Syrian hero boy" was also contacted during the work of this thesis, as an interview with him would have contributed towards ensuring that all information concerning the film and the strategies of the filmmakers is correct. After having first agreed to participate, however, he declined to do the interview. I have thus drawn on these press releases, statements that the filmmakers have

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[4] Translated by the researcher's former study colleague Ishraq Muse Yasin.

given to newspapers, and documents obtained from the Norwegian Film Institute, who founded the film under the work title "Enough".

As mentioned, I have used both content analysis and archival searches in order to obtain as much information possible the coverage of and the debate following "Syrian hero boy". Yet, the initial plan was to supplement these methods with qualitative interviews with journalists, something that would have ensured the triangulations of methods in the thesis to an even larger extent (Berg and Lune 2014:6). This could have provided a deeper understanding of the underlying processes lying behind a decision on whether or not to publish the film "Syrian hero boy" as well as an understanding of how journalists themselves understand their role in some kind of virtual public sphere when it comes to the dissemination of false videos or images. Several journalists have been approached during the course of this process, but only two of them has agreed to participate: The Syrian-French photojournalist Ammar Abd Rabbo, who has been to Syria to cover the war several times and Norwegian Journalist in the newspaper VG, Amund Bakke Foss. Rabbo was interviewed on Facebook chat because of his location in Lebanon, while Foss was interviewed on the premises of his working place.

Both of them have agreed to be named in the thesis, and this has been regarded as necessary because they are interviewed in craft of their occupation as journalists covering the war in Syria. They did not, however, write any of the articles in the sample of this thesis. This, and the fact that their number is only two, means that their contributions to this thesis are used mainly in descriptive manners; it is not part of the analysis per se, but can illustrate other findings of the analysis or be the starting point of discussions.

This thesis' wider understanding of a possible virtual public sphere evolving around Syria is largely based upon the previous work of Lynch et al. (2014), authors of the report *Syria's Socially Mediated Civil War,* in which they have investigated how Syrian citizen journalist and activists take use of social media in their work, as well as how Western journalists respond to this. A core part of their work is a quantitative analysis of more than 38 million Twitter messages of the Syrian conflict combined with a qualitative analysis of the 250 most popular Tweets, meaning the ones who were shared, or retweeted the most.

2.3 Reflections

This thesis explores a complex issue, and it is important to note that whatever findings it indicate, is just that, the result of exploration that might be used in further inquiries. While Google search was deemed the best method possible of searching online newspapers, it is not a method associated with rigor, and the chance of articles having been deleted, or not appearing in the Google search engine, is present. In addition, as Baliki (2014:17) notes, the information in media is not always reliable when it comes to the coverage of the war in Syria; "media bias in reporting remains a key challenge, plaguing the collection of useful data and misinforming researchers and policymakers regarding the actual events taking place". However, these challenges lie at the core of this thesis; the newspaper articles are not used in order to obtain factual information of an historical event, but rather to get an understanding of how the false film "Syrian hero boy" was covered – both before and after it was revealed a hoax.

Before proceeding to discuss this role, as well ass the role of misinformation within the public sphere, it is useful to sum of the most important findings of the methods undertaken: 93 articles written in English and Norwegian about "Syrian hero boy" has been analyzed, and they are published in online newspapers from 20 different countries. Most of them were English and American, with respectively 26 and 19 articles, while others were from countries such as Israel, India, Dubai, Lebanon and Morocco[5]. I have also found that almost twice as many articles were written on the film after it was exposed a hoax than before, and that just over 50 percent of these debated the film. In addition, I have found that while the number was small – only seven articles – an authenticity debate concerning "Syrian hero boy" existed online. While the revelation of the fabrication cannot be attributed to these newspapers (Klevberg, Løkke and Hagen 14.11.2014), the film had a relatively short life as a heroic story from reality; It only went five days from the initial upload November 10th, a monday[6], until the stories of the hoax was published November 14th, Friday the same week.

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[5] Full list of number of articles from countries: United States (26), England (19) Norway (12), Israel (5), Australia (4), India (3), France (3), Dubai (3), Pakistan (3), Malta (3), Lebanon (2), Ireland (2), Saudi-Arabia (2), Nigeria (1), South Africa (1), Singapore (1), New Zealand (1), Morocco (1), Qatar (1).

[6] Director Lars Klevberg told the BBC (14.11.2014) that the film was initially uploaded a few weeks earlier, but was not noticed. Hence, they deleted it before re-posting it with the added word "hero" in the title.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – A VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERE

This section will discuss the role of the media, or more precisely journalism, within the public sphere, as well as how this role might change when speaking of one or more transnational public spheres in contrast to the Habermasian notion of a public sphere bounded by a physical territory. In addition, this section will look at the quality of communication within the virtual sphere, especially drawing on the work of Dahlberg (2006), and discuss how the challenges of manipulated information might amplify in times of war. First, however, this section will introduce the most groundbreaking work conducted on the notion of the public sphere, namely Jürgen Habermas' 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the public sphere.* It is here that we find the normative foundations still guiding the discussions around the public sphere.

3.1 Habermas and the public sphere

While the notion of a public sphere has historical roots back to the Ancient Greece (Dean 2013) , discussions of it usually take up Jürgen Habermas groundbreaking work *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (originally *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit)* from 1962 as a starting point. This sphere, according to Habermas (1989), is a sphere where private people come together as a public to discuss political matters, eventually claiming the public authorities to engage in debates concerning governing relations, functioning as a deliberative democracy. In his book, Jürgen Habermas engage in an extensive analysis of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere, that, in the words of Habermas, needs several preconditions in order to take place in its idealized form (see also Dahlberg 2001, Crack 2008). The closest real-life situation Habermas sees to resemble these ideals, is the French salons, the German table societies and the British coffee houses of the 17th and 18th centuries, places that functioned as venues where people met to discuss matters of political nature – first and foremost those centered around matters of commodity exchange and social labor. Weekly journals where also published, and Habermas regards the press a central attribute for getting the "needs of the public" through to the right authority of the state.

While Habermas saw the press as the organs of the public, crucial in the facilitating of discussion within the public sphere, it is also what he refers to when describing the demise of the public sphere. One of Habermas' main arguments regarding the demolition of the ideal bourgouis public sphere is based on the assumption of a media becoming more and more

commercialized, capitalizing on public opinion instead of facilitating for it. While the liberal model of the sphere (Habermas1989:188) meant that the press, as an institution of the public, engaged in rational-critical debate without the risk of interference by public authority because they were "at the hands of private people," this privatization has turned to become a threat to the public sphere itself. The reason was that it made the media more "accessible to pressure of certain private interests". In this situation, the mass media seem to be feeding the public what it wants in order to be entertained rather than what it needs in order to enhance democracy and freedom. As Habermas (1989:164) puts it; you always had to pay for books, theaters, concerts and museums, but not for the conversations about what you had read, seen or heard. Now, even the conversation itself is administered, in the form of panel discussions, private people appearing as guests in the talk shows of broadcasters and the like. This is not true debates, Habermas (ibid.) argue, as the "presentation of positions and counter-positions is bound to certain prearranged rules of the game; consensus about the subject matter is made largely superfluous by that concerning form".

This development then, would be in sharp contrast to the very essence of the Habermasian public sphere, namely the people's public use of reason – *öffentlighes Rässonement* (1989:219). It was the use of reason as a way of obtaining a consensus in the public that made the bourgeois public sphere something new, something unprecedented in history, Habermas argue. It would ensure a debate in which the polemical nuances of both sides are included in discussions, and also a debate in which the truth is taken use of. The objective was for this reasoned debate to form into a consensus, in other words a public opinion. In her reading of Habermas, Ward (1997:367) argue that the notion of the public sphere is important precisely because it highlights an ideal process that is to make sure the public opinion actually represent a true consensus among the people. This is obtained when opinions are being challenged and assumptions investigated, which in short is what it means to participate in reasoned debates (ibid.). In his readings of Habermas, Calhoun (1992:2) sums up the most important trait of the communication within the idealized public sphere, namely that it is the quality of the arguments that should matter, rather than the one's performing them.

3.1.1 Debating Habermas: Transnationalizing the public sphere

Habermas' notion of the public has been heavily discussed as well as criticized since the English translation of his account on the bourgeois public sphere appeared in 1989. Nancy Fraser (in Calhoun 1992) criticizes Habermas for idealizing the bourgeois public sphere

without having explored other public spheres, noting that this bourgeois sphere was not at all that inclusive, since it was not open for women, for instance. As Calhoun (1992:3) notes, Habermas' ideal bourgeois public sphere were not representative of the public, but rather "narrow segments of the European population, mainly educated, propertied men". This, of course, shaped the debates they undertook, making them "prejudicial to the interests of those excluded" (ibid.). Fraser (in Calhoun 1992) also criticizes Habermas for taking for granted that the existence of one, overarching public sphere enhances democracy while the opposite – the existence of several and somewhat overlapping public spheres contribute to it's demise.

Later discussions evolving around this 1962 work of Habermas have evolved around whether or not it makes sense to expand the public sphere so that it also becomes transnational. If so, there are many questions. Can there ever be one, global public sphere for instance, or does the concept allow for the existence of multiple, overlapping public spheres, or perhaps even multiple, separate public spheres. If one does not discuss the possibility of a transnational sphere, and fails to come up with a common understanding, the very notion of the public sphere itself might not survive as a meaningful concept, Fraser (2007:14) argue. It thus makes no sense discussing it in a strictly national level, as "mobilizations of public opinion rarely stops at the borders of territorial states". Fraser (ibid.) stresses that the public sphere is not just a term used to understand information flows, but rather a contribution to a normative, political theory on democracy. The process towards this deliberative democracy is supposed to be inclusive and fair, while "publicity is supposed to discredit views that cannot withstand critical scrutiny and to assure the legitimacy of those that do (ibid).

Angela Crack, who have worked with making public sphere theory applicable to scholars of International Relations (2008:65) aligns with this, arguing that the transnational public sphere is related to, but not the same, as the national public sphere. It can rather be "understood as a site of deliberation in which non-state actors reach understandings about issues or common concerns according to the norms of publicity" (ibid). These norms of publicity follow Habermas in their ideals, and are generally understood as referring to an inclusive debate, both in terms of access and status, as well as to a debate that is free of impact from both corporations and governments (ibid.58-65). Bohman (2004:152) is among those seeing the potential for a transnational public sphere, but argues that the current situation looks more like a public of publics rather than one, unified public sphere that is based on a shared culture or identity. A dialogue across borders, he argue, would only be possible if there were agents who

"make it so and transnational institutions whose ideals seek to realize a transnational public sphere as the basis for a realistic utopia of citizenship in a complexly interconnected world" (ibid: 153-154).

Sociologist Manuel Castells (2008:80) operate with the term the *new* public sphere, arguing that the notion of the public sphere still provides meaning when researching the global civil society, communication networks and global governance. He argues that such as sphere exists within a space that is not shaped by any sovereign power, but rather shaped "by the variable geometry of relationships between states and global non-state actors (Guidry et al 2000 in Castells 2008:80). Benhabib (in Calhoun 1992:87) perceives it somewhat different, speaking of multiple public spheres rather than one, singular. She argues that the public sphere is not something constant, but rather something that "comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, evaluating their validity". In effects, there may be as many publics as there are controversial general debates about the validity of norms," Benhabib claims (ibid). This assumption is also shared by Crack (2008), who argue that it makes sense to speak of multiple, overlapping spheres instead of *the* sphere. While seeing a potential for transnational public spheres, she argues that they, for now, only can exist in specific circumstances and be formed around particular issue-areas.

Lynch (2003), who has worked extensively with public spheres in an Arab context, refers to such spheres as "sites of communication within a society in which members of an identifiable public discuss matters of collective concern before an imagined audience" (2003:58). As Crack (2008), Lynch (ibid.) advocates for an understanding of multiple public spheres rather than just *the* sphere, arguing that it makes more sense to conceive them as "spheres that emerge around particular issues and in various settings". Such an issue might be the war in Syria. Risse and Van de Steeg (2003:15) argue that transnational public spheres can evolve around specific issue areas, but that it is not present at all times. Using the global mobilization concerning the American intervention in Iraq in 2003 as an example, they argue that "worldwide debates, heated arguments, and social mobilization" indicate a global public sphere, but that this sphere is not "out there" at all times. The public sphere, Risse and Van de Steeg argue, emerge through both social and discursive practices, "in the process about arguing about controversial questions" (ibid).

3.2 Virtual public spheres

As Splichal (in Gripsrud and Moe 2010:29) argues, the development of computer-mediated communication in the 1990s increased the popularity of the public sphere, perhaps precisely because it's opportunities answered to many of Habermas' concerns about the mass media and the demise of the public sphere. Internet enables people to communicate with each other without having to be present in the same countries, and it opens up for more direct communication, communication that is not filtered or edited by a – in Habermas' words – corporate-influenced mass media. In short (Splichal in Gripsrud and Moe 2010:29), Internet was believed to "offer new possibilities for political participation leading to a kind of direct democracy not only locally but even at the (trans)national level".

In his theories of the network society, Castells (2008:89-90) labels this form of communication mass self-communication. This, he argue, is communication that take place without a mediator, hence bypassing the control regime of a mass media influenced by corporate interests or a mass media under governmental control. One of those perceiving this in a highly positive manner is Beers (2006:110), who argues that Internet in many ways resembles the bourgeois public sphere of Habermas before it's decline, revitalizing it. His main argument is that corporate mass media has led to a lack of alternative viewpoints in media, something that makes the outcomes of debates not represent the true public opinion. The virtuality, however, allows for more independent media, which, in turn, can provide the basis for a new media-sphere where one doesn't need to take corporate considerations into account (ibid). In this view, Internet becomes a new site in which the public sphere can thrive, enabling communication across borders.

One of these arenas is the site Youtube, where the film "Syrian hero boy" was first published before being retransmitted into more mainstream media. Milliken et al. (2008:4) sees a great deliberation potential for sites such as this, which they claim "bears a greater resemblance to the model of discourse in public sphere theory than traditional media organizations." This argument holds true, they argue, even though YouTube is a commercial website, because of the traits of the site; it's come from all over the world, it facilitates easy communication between those who post content and those who view it, and it does not cost money to use it. While optimistic in its outlook, the research conducted by Milliken et al. on Canadian YouTube users also echoes some of Habermas' concerns: 93% of the videos that were discussed on the site were what Milliken et al. call "non-public sphere related", meaning that

they did not have any politically relevant qualities, and that entertainment was their main – and perhaps only – function. Thus, although the potential of these sites as more democratic institutions exist, one can – not yet – argue that it is fulfilled (ibid).

This implies that while the Internet constitutes a public space, it is not necessarily a public sphere. As stressed by Papacharissi (2002:10), a virtual *space* enhances discussion, while virtual *sphere* also enhances democracy". Papacharissi sees a virtual space of several actors operating within the same arena, but not necessarily in the same sphere. It is only if operating within the same sphere that one can talk about the virtual arena as an arena bridging the gap between politicians and the public, he argue (ibid). Cammaerts and van Audenhove (2003:183) are also among those who see limitations in this virtual sphere, arguing that internet plays a rather schizophrenic role when it comes to one of Habermas' most central criteria: inclusion. It can be seen as inclusive because it "facilitates the organization of civil society actors, it enables new – less forms of civic engagement beyond the national", but also as exclusive as the access is not universal yet, and the knowledge and ability regarding how to maneuver and take use of this public sphere is not evenly distributed.

3.2.1 Journalism in the virtual public sphere

While Internet enables communication without a journalistic intermediary, the journalism domain still constitutes a vital element within the virtual public sphere (Dahlgren 1995). The question, Butsch (2007:4) claims, is what role it is to play in this regard. While scholars disagree on whether or not mass media can contribute to deliberative democracy, these media are nevertheless perceived as necessary, as they mediate communication. As Page (1996:3) put it, direct communication between all citizens is simply not possible, meaning that one has to accept a division of labor when it comes to political communication. While Wessler and Schultz (in Butsch 2007:16) emphasize the role of mass media as a mediator, arguing that it has become the "most important forum for truly public deliberation in modern societies", they also recognize that that these media often fail to fulfil their role in terms of public deliberation.

In his exploration of a possible ideology binding journalists together across the globe, Deuze (2005:447) argues that the notion of providing a public service is a powerful component of this ideology; "Journalists share a sense of 'doing it for the public', of working as some kind of representative watchdog of the status quo in the name of the people". This notion, of

course, aligns with how Habermas (1989) saw the press in an ideal public sphere; As servants of the public, the media becomes, ideally, a servant for democracy, and a facilitator for enlightened debates on political matters. Page (1996:5) refers to journalists as professional communicators who "assemble, explain, debate, and disseminate the best available information and ideas about public policy, in ways that are accessible to a large number of citizens".

When news outlets across the globe are covering the same conflicts and publishing live updates constantly, they become, in Volkmers words (in Zelizer and Allan 2002:237) reflectors of some sort of global reality otherwise inaccessible, but that still "shapes the context for the identity of political communities within a new global public sphere". Journalists can thus be perceived as operating in some sort of "sphere of mediation" between the national and global political space, a sphere that has direct influence on the public sphere itself (ibid). This deliberative process, Wessler and Schultz (ibid:19) argue, needs to rest on three normative pillars: Equal opportunity for access, use of reason in the argumentation, and finally innovations and the achievement of reasoned dissent. Similar values are emphasized by Garnham (in Calhoun 1992:367-368) who argues that this mediated communication requires of the press to fulfill two crucial duties: First, they have an obligation to listen to the views of others and to be open for alternative versions of events, and second, they need to understand that participation in debate is linked with a responsibility for the actions that follow these discussions. Bennett et al. (2004:438), drawing on Habermas (1989), have defined access, recognition and responsiveness as the most important qualities for such mediated communication.

How the press applies to these norms, and whether or not they should apply to these norms, are important inquiries. It is important to recognize that the media, as professional communicators, is not assigned this role by the general public; they have not been elected. Page (1996:5) stresses that it cannot be taken for granted that journalists share the interests and values of the rest of the public. The crucial question then, following Page, is not whether or not mediated communication *can* deliberate, but rather how well it tries to do so. Örnebring (in Butsch 2007:77) aligns with this, stressing the importance of understanding media as agents who might have agendas or desires of its own, rather than perceiving them in a merely structural manner, as something being influenced by outside actors such as corporations and governments. If one is to discuss the possible decline of the public sphere, Örnebring argue

(ibid.:82), one needs to assign journalists both agency and responsibility; After all, they should ideally function as servants of the public, facilitating for enlightened debates on political matters.

3.3 The normative basis for communication

Following the notion of the public sphere, then, one might argue that the media has a responsibility exceeding that of simply providing the infrastructure of debates; it also has the responsibility to ensure that these debates proceed according to the norms of the public sphere. In his work inspired by Habermas' later work *Theories of communicative actions* (1984), Dahlberg (2004:2) has identified six conditions that he believes needs to be in place if the public sphere is to function in its ideal form. These are the reasoned exchange of validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity*,* formal inclusion and discursive equality, as well as autonomy from state and corporate power. While they all are important, the most relevant to this thesis is the importance Dahlberg attributes to the notion of sincerity within this sphere, as well as the latter concerning autonomy from state and corporate power (ibid:2). As the very functioning of the public sphere builds upon the fact that public opinion is to be formed on the basis of a free, rational-critical debate, it is evident that propaganda precludes this in some way.

In this context, Dahlberg refers to sincerity as an image of the quality of communication within the public sphere itself: Argumentation should be based on "honesty or discursive openness in contrast to deception, including self-deception (Habermas 2001:34 in Dahlberg 2004:9). If communication is to be rational then, the participants must mean what they say and make a "sincere effort to make known all relevant information, including that which relates to their intentions, interests, needs, and desires" (ibid). Crack (2008:189-191) is also concerned with the fact that communication needs to be free and undistorted if one is to speak of a fully functioning public sphere. She has identified three structural preconditions that needs to be in place if the public sphere are to function on a transnational level: Transborder communicative ability, transformations in sites of political authority, and finally, transnational networks of mutual affinity, which is of special interest for the research questions asked in this thesis. It speaks directly of distorted information, referring to an idea that the normative foundation of the public sphere require of the parties in a dialogue or discussion to have some sort of normative commonality. This, in turn, is built on an assumption that the dialogue

within the public sphere should be "free and open, unhindered by censorship and undistorted by manipulative publicity from governments and corporations" (ibid:70).

3.3.1 Propaganda in the virtual public sphere

As the very functioning of the public sphere builds upon the fact that public opinion is to be formed on the basis of a free, rational-critical debate, as stressed by Crack (2008:70), it is evident that propaganda precludes this in some way. While this is not problematized in much public sphere theory, it is highly relevant for the aim of this thesis, an understanding of how "Syrian hero boy" fit with the ongoing propaganda war in Syria and what the media coverage of this film. While the term propaganda is often used to describe the dissemination or promotion of particular ideas (Jowett and O'Donnell 2015:2), the most usual understanding of the term implies a little more. Following Jowett and O'Donnell's definition, propaganda can be seen as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (ibid:7). Hence, propaganda is something that is planned and executed on purpose, and somewhat structured or systematic (ibid:23). This does not necessarily imply that there is no public sphere if there is propaganda, it simply means that propaganda has potential to affect the quality of debate within the public sphere.

While the challenges of sincerity and deception in the virtual public sphere might not be greater than in the old, face-to-face version, it is, nevertheless, different. Dahlberg (2001) points to the fact that both "documents, photographic evidence and whole organizations can be fabricated" online, and that issues of misinformation on the Internet have such an urgency to them that they preclude the functioning of a virtual public sphere. This can be problematic in times of war. Christensen (2008:172) write that videos and images showing abuse of civilians or other acts of violence "have a great impact because they reveal a side of military activity that is meant to be hidden from the citizens who both fund the war and vote for the politicians who support it". If these images prove to be false, it has the potential to undermine the basis upon which the public might get engaged on behalf of civilians in a war. Thus, those participating in online forums need to be skeptical of unverifiable claims and information, just as those participating in offline discussion, Dahlberg argue (ibid.). While he sees some of this skepticism as already existing, in the form of claimants being expected to provide "convincing support […] for their assertions before their positions become accepted by other

participants," Dahlberg claims that one cannot take for granted that participants in online forums and the like will detect deceptions specifically aimed at misleading them (ibid).

All propaganda does not equal lying, however, it can also be the deliberate spread of a skewed image, of a particular narrative at the cost of another (Jowett and O'Donnell 2015:17). Nevertheless, the concept of propaganda involves some sort of manipulation of the public, hence serving as an enemy to the normative ideals of the public sphere. In a previous work, Dahlberg (2001) points to the very idea of the public sphere as a site for deliberation, a site where democracy is enhanced. Dahlberg (ibid) argues that "intentionally misleading others about one's claims, including relevant information about one's identity, undermines the whole deliberative process". Such notions lead Papacharissi to warn against too much of a celebratory rhetoric when speaking of the internet as a facilitator for a global public sphere, calling much of the thoughts on this issue, such as the belief in computer-mediated discussion as a facilitator for democracy per se, utopian (ibid).

Due to these issues, many scholars see journalism as crucial for online deliberation, especially within the field of journalism research. While it is widely recognized that wars such as the one in Syria amplifies the journalistic challenges when it comes to the truth, Nohrstvedt and Ottosen (2014:11) argue that if the press fails to fulfill its role in times of war, it directly threatens citizens right "to information in a democratic system, and the possibility of forming enlightened opinions about the conduct of their elected leaders in conflicts, politics and warfare". In other words, a press that is not free, or a press that fails to fulfill its purpose, might threaten the foundation for a vivid public sphere. The view of journalism as so essential to democracy is, in part, criticized by Curran (in Dahlgren and Sparks 1991), who argue that a majority of what the mass media engages in, are not politically relevant, and that journalists often overestimates their own importance (ibid).

However, when dealing with discussions around war, it makes sense to perceive the link between a free press and a democracy as necessary. The role of media when it comes to disseminating – or exposing – misinformation such as propaganda, is thus of crucial importance – perhaps especially when it comes to public spheres evolving around wars and possible policy implications. As emphasized by Seib in the essay collection *Selling War* (2014:3-4) the way media cover wars matter, because they, as mediators within the public sphere, take part in forming the public's perception of these wars. Using the U.S. media

coverage of the American intervention in Iraq as an example, Seib (ibid:4) argues that sloppy journalism leads to a suffering public "because government influence expands to fill the vacuum left by the news media's nonperformance". Seib proceeds to claim that the war in Iraq left many American news organizations, among them The New York times, to retreat "from it's proper place in the public sphere, ceding ground to the government". This proper place is, according to Seib (ibid:5), a "spot in which the news media can monitor discourse and encourage a broad array of voices to participate in debate".

3.3.2 Alternative voices

What happens if one doesn't like these voices? It is not obvious that the public, in general, will have an interest in advocating for the greater good, for progress in the world, and work together towards a cosmopolitan reality. Calhoun (in Edwards 2011:316) stresses that different citizens – both national and global – may have different interests. Some believe that the public interest lies in oil drilling rather than recycling, and others might have interests in the incentives that come with waging war. Obtaining this view, however, do not necessarily mean that one moves away from the freedom aspect of the public sphere, Calhoun (ibid) argue – one can just as well perceive freedom as "the right of people to form such self-organized efforts, with a presumption that where these are not in harmony with each other they will at least be limited by respect for the others" (ibid). What distinguishes the civil society from the state, then, is precisely the absence of "any master plan for progress" (ibid).

Downey and Fenton (2003) operate with what they call counter public spheres; spheres that evolve when there are groups of the population that do not feel that their views are taken into account in the general society. These counter spheres can also, according to Downey and Fenton (ibid.:3) attempt to thwart the public sphere. As they state, there is "no essential link between civil society and civilized society" (2003: 192). Referring to the Ku Klux Klan and the Mafia, and also to hostile anti-asylum groups, they show that civil society will not always engage in ways that promotes the cause of the cosmopolitans. This is also stressed by Dahlgren (2005:6), who argues that "online discussions do not always follow the high ideals set for deliberative democracy. Speech is not always so rational, tolerance toward those who hold opposing views is at time wanting, and the forms of interaction are not always so civil".

As Crack argues, there are significant variations in these so-called counter public spheres, and many of them fall short of the public spheres ideals. Crack (2008:140) mention Taliban as a

repressive group with a considerable presence online, while Lynch (2006) has shown that groups such as al-Qaeda has applied highly professional media strategies using social media in order to reach out both to traditional media and to people across the globe. The case of the Islamic State resembles this. The article "Inside the surreal world of the Islamic State's propaganda machine" (Miller and Mekhennet 20.11.2015) shows that videos with strategically crafted narratives are disseminated across the globe. Upon first glance then, it seems that the virtual arena debating the war in Syria is flooded with fabrication and alternative versions of the truth. Dean (2003:106), who do not regard the net as a virtual public sphere, offer this description of such a reality: "It is a space of conflicting networks and networks of conflicts so deep and fundamental that even to speak of consensus or convergence seems an act of naïveté at best, violence at worst".

4.0 CONTEXT: THE SOCIALLY MEDIATED WAR

As this thesis explores how online news media covered the film "Syrian hero boy" both before and after it was exposed a hoax, it is crucial with a basic introduction to the context in which this film was published before proceeding to a discussion of journalisms role in the virtual public sphere relating to this film. As stated in the introduction, "Syrian hero boy" was created in order to resemble authentic footage taken by amateurs (press release 14.11.2014), perhaps with the camera of a smart phone. This goes to the core of the challenges associated with misinformation on the virtual scene that Dahlberg (2006) attributes at having potential to preclude the functioning of a transnational public sphere itself. The purpose of this section is to point to a few challenges in this regard identified as crucial for the understanding of a possible virtual public sphere having evolved – or evolving – around the war in Syria.

The media coverage of the Syrian civil war has been extremely fragmented, due to a number of reasons. Most of the international news stations have not been present with people on the ground – it has been viewed as too dangerous, or they have not been granted access. The Syrian regime was practicing strict regulations on the media even before the war broke out, and afterwards it has become almost impossible for journalists to get access (Harkin et. al. 2012). Making matters worse, the areas in which the Assad regime does not control, is simply too dangerous, with the Islamic State, or Isis, as the most immediate threat. According to the Committee to protect journalists (CPJ), 94 journalists had, by October 2015, been killed in Syria since 1992 – all of them since the uprisings started in 2011. Out of these 94, 85 were killed *because* they were journalists, according to the organizations database (04.11.2015). The lack of professional news coverage leads scholars such as Lynch et. al (2014) and Varghese (2013) to argue that the international society does not necessarily have a clue what is going on on the ground.

4.1. Blurred lines between fact and fiction

However, this does not mean that the public has no access to information from the war. Quite the contrary seems to be the case. Authors of *Propaganda and Persuasion,* O'Donnell and Jowett (2015:11) refer to the war in Syria when explaining how digital technology enables both false images, reports and videos to spread instantly across the globe, and how they find their way into traditional, western news media. Lynch et al. (2014) argue that the case of Syria is unprecedented in this matter: Never have we (i.e. people across the globe) had access

to so much information, in the form of images and videos, from a war than we have from Syria. The trouble is the separating of the true stories from the untrue ones. The film "Syrian hero boy" is by no means a unique example in terms of being false. While it is impossible to track all misinformation, the amount of false stories, images or videos that have been exposed might say something about the size of the problem. In November 2015th, for instance, an image showing a Beirut in flames appeared on Twitter as an illustration of a large-scale attack by the Islamic State November 12th (Fisher 16.11.2015). The image, however, was from Israel's war on Hezbollah in 2006 (ibid). Another false story was exposed when the girl behind a popular blog showing the daily life of a gay girl in Damascus during the war proved to be an American man blogging from his University in Edinburgh (CNN 14.06.2011). Put in other words, as stressed by Lynch (2014:5); user-generated content such as videos from the field might give the impression of offering *the* accurate account of the conflict, when these flows are, in fact "carefully curated by networks of activists and designed to craft particular narratives" (ibid).

Nevertheless, because of the challenges associated with being present on the ground in Syria, international news outlets continue to publish so-called user-generated content from the war in Syria, much of it footage resembling the false film "Syrian hero boy" (Lynch et al. 2014, Harkin et al. 2012, Wardle et al. 2014). In their study of how the two news organizations BBC Arabic and Al Jazeera cover Syria, for instance, Harkin et al. (2012) show that the user-generated content applied by the news outlets is a natural continuation of the role citizen journalists gained throughout the Arab spring. This has several effects one would associate as benefiting the existence of a vivid public sphere evolving around Syria: News organizations, and thus citizens worldwide, get access to images and histories they would never have gotten access to otherwise, thus increasing the basis for posing enlightened debates on, for instance, possible policy implications concerning Syria. Because these images might spark some sort of sentiment or call for action, it should not be controversial to argue that these images should be real, not staged. As Lynch et al. writes, the Obama administration began their quests for military intervention in Syria when videos and images "depicting the horrific aftermath of an alleged chemical weapons attack on East Ghouta" (2014:5).

4.2 Fighting for the truth

Several studies show that it has proven difficult to assess the veracity of the reports, images and videos coming from these citizen journalists (Varghese 2013, Harkin et.al. 2012).This is

crucial because if the general public debating in the public sphere form a consensus based on false principles, their debate has not – truly – been a debate within the public sphere in it's ideal form. In Syria, the actors spreading either misinformation or other types of propaganda are many. Ottosen and Øvrebø (in Orgeret and Tayeebwa forthcoming) argue that at least three parties take part in this propaganda war: The Assad regime (often supported by Russia), the US and Nato, and finally the opposition, including the Islamic State, or Daesh, which it is called in Arabic. Ottosen and Øvrebøs (ibid) analysis of the Norwegian newspaper Aftenpostens coverage of a chemical attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta in August 2013, shows that the Norwegian press also took part in what they call a "blame-game", aligning with the American narrative of the events. The sarin gas attack killed hundreds of civilians, and the Obama administration blamed Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and his regime for conducting the massacre on its own people. Russia, on the other hand, blamed the Syrian rebels, some of whom are supported by the United States. There is still disagreements as to who committed the attacks[7].

The Islamic State, on the other hand, follows the legacy Al-Qaeda who according to Lynch (2006:50) were early in taking advantage of the opportunities provided by new media and Internet, and thus invested heavily in propaganda from the very beginning. In the book *Trusselen fra IS* (The threat from IS, red.anm.), Norwegian journalist Mah-Rukh Ali (2015) describes an organization that takes propaganda seriously, carefully crafting separate narratives for the Arabic public and to the possible foreign-fighters in western countries. The Islamic State is also supposed to have their own media-centre, and they have a glossy magazine called *Dabiq*, published in both English, French and German (ibid:199).

The Syrian intelligence services are also known to work extensively with social media, setting up fake Facebook pages and groups in order to "spread disinformation to the world's media" – often with success (Harkin et.al:32, Regaledo et.al. 2015). In 2011, the internationally recognized news agency AFP reported that the Muslim Brotherhood had claimed responsibility for a bomb attack in Damascus just before Christmas. However, AFPs source proved to be a fake website for the Brotherhood, in reality set up by Syrian intelligence

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[7] The Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Seymour Hersh has published the essay "The Red Line and the Rat Line" (2013), pointing towards the rebellion group the al-Nusra front as the possible perpetrator, arguing that they must have been supported by Turkey. URL: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n08/seymour-m-hersh/the-red-line-and-the-rat-line. These claims are again accused of "not adding up" by other journalists (Higgins and Kaszeta 2014). URL: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/22/allegation-false-turkey-chemical-attack-syria

(ibid:26). Reporters without borders (RSF) label Syrian state media as the non-military arm of Bashar al-Assads policies, and in an interview with RSF former journalists of the state-run satellite channel SANA describe the Assad regime as working extensively with crafting a specific narrative for the outside world. News presenter Ahmed Fakhoury, for instance, says that, during the demonstrations in Hama in 2011, "official television showed pictures of the protesters, filmed at close range to show far fewer people than actually took part to make it look like a failure… The instructions were clear: the demonstrators must be described as terrorists and snipers as agents working for foreign parties" (in rsf 2013:25).

This echoes what is stated by Lynch et al. (2014:8), namely that the Syrian regime does what they can in order to form an image of their opposition as radical Islamists supported by Saudi-Arabia and Qatar. This is in sharp contrast to the perceptions of the opposition, who, in turn, have worked hard to "craft a narrative for the international media of a peaceful, pro-Western uprising". A large amount of the user-generated content coming out of Syria belongs to this latter category, stemming from activists and citizen journalists. Varghese (2013:1), among others, shows that also activists continuously use social media channels systematically to showcase their side of the story – especially the alleged war crimes of the regime. The measures they use in order to obtain this, however, is not always accurate. Harkin et al. (2012:16), for instance, interviewed an experienced Arab for their study, finding that he had been tricked by what he believed was a recently arrived Syrian refugee in a camp in Lebanon whom he had interviewed covered in fresh blood. A day after having filed his dramatic story, the journalist returned to the refugee camp, only to find the same man retelling his story to another journalist, once again covered in fresh blood (interview cited in Harkin et.al. 2012:16).

The credibility of the footage and stories coming from Syria also became an issue in march 2012, when the Syrian video journalist Omar Telawi admitted to the British television station Channel 4 that he had added smoke, as a special effect, to the backdrop of a film from the city of Homs (Flock 2012 in Lynch et. al. 2014). Other activists have admitted to censoring images to make them fit the narrative of a peaceful opposition, for example by removing footage where anti-Assad activists are shown taking up arms (Harkin et al. 2012:16). Lynch et al. (2014) warns against perceiving social media as a site for rational, enlightened debate amongst a global public, arguing that such a perception might give a "dangerous illusion of unmediated information flows," when the reality is that several actors in the Syrian civil war,

as well as the global powers, take use of these "unmediated" channels in order to try to control the image the world has of the war (ibid:3).

4.2.1 Towards a ground truth?

Despite these examples, many of the journalists interviewed by Lynch et al. (2014:7) seemed to believe that the video clips posted in social media, and later published by them, have the potential to offer some sort of "ground truth" not available in previous wars. This is also highlighted by Varghese, who argues that Syria has shown us that the "fog of war that once obscured our view of conflict zones is quickly giving way to rich information environments due to vast amounts of social media data" (2013:2). This information, combined with new data analysis tool might bring us closer to gaining some kind of ground truth on Syria, he argue (ibid). These aspirations go to the core of the scholarly debate on whether or not the virtual arena has the potential to bring the public sphere back in it's idealized form, the form Júrgen Habermas described as diminishing in his groundbreaking 1962 work *The Structural transformation of the public sphere* (English translation 1989).

5.0 DISUSSION: DEBATING 'SYRIAN HERO BOY'

As stated in the introduction, this thesis explores how the fabricated film "Syrian hero boy," depicting a young boy under heavy sniper fire in Syria, was covered in Norwegian and English newspapers. Much of the following discussion builds on the content analysis conducted of 93 such articles. While the previous section showed that the film was published in the midst of a propaganda war largely taking place on the Internet, this section will look at how "Syrian hero boy" was understood in the midst of this. It will also discuss whether the coverage of "Syrian hero boy" can tell us something about how mediated communication can assist in safeguarding the values of the public sphere as stressed by Habermas (1989), namely a rational-critical debate open for all, free of manipulations from governments and corporations.

5.1 "Syrian hero boy" goes viral

Within five days, " Syrian hero boy" was viewed 3.2 million times on the YouTube account of Shaam News Network and almost 3.4 million times[8] on the YouTube site of the account *Lawaff Law,* where it was first published. It was also viewed by thousands of people reading about it online newspapers, such as the 93 articles analyzed in this thesis. The dissemination of the film is, in many ways, illustrated by an infamous quote by the American war correspondent Edward Murrow, who covered the WWII for CBS: "A lie can go around the world while the truth is still getting his pants on" (in Kovach and Rosenstiel 2010:200). "Syrian hero boy" shows a young boy being targeted by snipers; it looks as though he is shot, and voices in the background are yelling "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar". The boy, however, rises from the ground, and proceeds to save a young girl hiding behind the burnt wreck of a car. In many ways, the popularity of the film might be explained by the fact that it depicts children. Freelon et al. (2014:24), who have analyzed popular Twitter messages about the war in Syria, found that "photos and videos depicting suffering Syrian children and civilians were extremely popular" within the virtual domain.

While "Syrian hero boy" was viewed by many, its lifespan as real was relatively short-lived. The film was uploaded on YouTube Monday November 10[th,] and exposed as a hoax Friday November 14th, when the filmmakers issued a press release (Klevberg, Løkke and Hagen

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[8] This number is obtained by using the tool Wayback Machine, which is presented in section 3.2.2. The URL of the film was stated in the press release; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cceu478rN_c

2014). The fact that the film was exposed however, cannot be attributed to the media, as it was part of the initial strategy of the filmmakers (ibid). Out of the 34 articles written of "Syrian hero boy" before the hoax was revealed, 14 published the story without taking precautions, urging readers to see a "Harrowing video shows boy saving girl from sniper fire in Syria" (Perez 11.11.2014) or "Heroic Syrian boy 'fakes death' to save girl from sniper" (Al Arabiya 12.11.2014). An additional 13 articles about the heroic young boy in Syria was published, including some sort of disclaimer typically "cannot be independently verified" was included (see appendix 7.2). The remaining seven articles published on the film before its fictional nature was revealed, seriously questioned its authenticity.

While only English- and Norwegian-written newspapers have been included in the sample, the results of the content analysis nevertheless show that this film got a global reach. A majority of the articles were from countries such as Norway, the Untied States, Australia and the Untied Kingdom, but there were also articles from countries such as Saudi-Arabia, Lebanon, Morocco and Qatar[9]. While this indicates that an audience across the world has witnessed the debate evolving around "Syrian hero boy," it does not say anything about whom. Because articles written in Arabic are excluded from the sample, as discussed in the method section, alternative narratives might have been left out of the sample, thus excluding, to some extent, the Arab public sphere. Lynch (2003) argues that such a sphere has evolved around media such as Al-Jazeera and online newspapers, and that it "increasingly shapes politics throughout the region". Nevertheless, this discussion will treat the debate evolving around the film "Syrian hero boy" as taking place in some sort of transnational public sphere – first and foremost one being played out in Western newspapers. Crack (2008:194) argue that any notions of a transnational public sphere is problematic in itself because, no matter how transnational the issues being debated are, the participants are often located in the Western hemisphere.

5.1.2 "Syrian hero boy" as propaganda – The activist narrative
"Syrian hero boy" found its way to journalists worldwide via the organization Shaam News Network. They, in turn, picked it up when the filmmakers sent the link to their YouTube account *Lawaff Law* to different activists on Twitter. The film did, in other words, originate on YouTube, which, in the words of Lynch et al. (2014:11) has become *the* source of video content from the Syrian war. Such journalistic use of user-generated videos in the coverage of

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[9] See section 3.3 or the dataset in Appendix 7.3 for the full list

important events is be perceived as largely positive from a public sphere perspective. Antony and Tomas (2010:2), for instance, show that footage taken with the cellphones of co-passengers in the case of the Oscar Grant shooting in Oakland, California led to widespread debate on racially motivated police violence in the United States. This, Tomas and Antony (ibid:12) argue, can be perceived as an example of how ordinary citizens can act as agenda-setters rather than letting an overly "elitist-media" decide which issues are up for debate in a particular society. Christensen (2008:155-156) shows that YouTube played an important in balancing the image of American soldiers in Iraq in 2003. While the "Operation Enduring Freedom" had its own YouTube channel posting what Christensen (ibid) label propaganda, alternative images of the soldiers were soon uploaded on YouTube. These showed American soldiers engaging in violent, anti-social act, and were far more brutal in nature than the videos disseminated by the US State Department[10].

A reading of the 34 articles written of "Syrian hero boy" leaves the impression of the film being understood in a similar way; as being shot by activists fighting oppression. 23 of the 34 articles written about "Syrian hero boy" before it was revealed as false, state that Shaam News Network (SNN) is the source of the film. This is an activist organization known to aggregate user-generated content from the war in Syria, and the video might not have gotten the same reach if it was not picked up by such a network. If my sample represent the wider discourse, "Syrian hero boy" was understood as belonging to the narrative associated with the Syrian citizen journalists (Lynch et al. 2014:12), namely that the content they provide depicts the real truth as opposed to the lies of the regime. According to Harkin et al. (2012:13), SNN has been one of the most visible sources for videos, images and stories provided by activists within Syria. Their study of how Al-Jazeera and BBC Arabic use user-generated content in their coverage of the war show that SNN was a major source of such content for the two channels, and that "some journalists, including some interviewed from BBC Arabic, see SNN as a generally reliable source" (ibid).

If the film was understood as content vouched for by Shaam News Network, it is crucial to understand how this network – and networks like it – fit amidst the other actors fighting for a Syrian truth. SNN has an English Facebook page posting news, images and pictures from the ground in Syria, as well as they provide contact information to their own experts, people who

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[10] Christensens (2008:167) findings show that a majority of these videos were uploaded by American soldiers themselves.

can help western journalists verify events or videos from the ground in Syria. Lynch et al. (2014:9) points out that Facebook groups and websites such as Shaam News Network became "primary sources of credible information from the conflict, especially of what happened on the ground". SNNs slogan is, a bit ironically in light of this thesis, "Truth as it is", and Setrakian and Zerden (2014:8) write that the network, at least in the beginning of the Syrian civil war, played a crucial role among citizen journalists and activists attempting to fill the information gap of the Syrian civil war. They started as an anti-regime outlet who began organizing a network of photographers that would offer the world a narrative that Setrakian and Zerden (ibid) perceive as "dramatically different from the Syrian government narrative".

5.1.2 Framing Assad

The Norwegian filmmakers behind "Syrian hero boy" write in a press release that they wanted to "see if the film would get attention and spur debate, first and foremost about children and war", and that they wanted to do so by making a video that resembled real footage from the war (Klevberg, Løkke and Hagen 14.11.2014). To some extent, "Syrian hero boy" did spark such a debate. The International Business Times (Varghese 11.11.2014), for instance, cite a report by the Oxford Research Group that claims that at least 389 children in Syria have been killed by pro-government snipers, and that Syrian government soldiers have "subjected children to several inhumane practices, including being used as human shields". This article further supports the narrative of the citizen journalists in Syria, writing that the snipers targeting the heroic boy are "reportedly said to be the government forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad". The article also states that this is not the first time "Pro-Assad gunmen have targeted children in the nearly four years of the bloody civil war in Syria".

The International Business Times article is one of three in the sample clearly framing Assad for being responsible for the snipers targeting the children in the film (see appendix 7.3 for dataset). Huffington Post (Jones 11.11.2014) cite a source from Shaam News Network who says that "The Assad regime continues brutal human rights violations against its own people for the fourth year in a row, with no more than symbolic statements and condemnations from the International community". A few lines below, however, the newspaper states that "it is not clear from the video who is shooting at the children". My argument is that the reader is still left with the impression of the Assad regime being responsible. The third article framing Assad is The Telegraph (Ensor 11.11.2014), who cites reports from the Oxford Research group and the UN stating that hundreds of children have been targeted by snipers since the

war began in 2011. These words alone does not indicate that the Syrian regime is responsible for the snipers, but read together with the next sentence: "The UN has previously accused the Syrian regime of "crimes against humanity" – including the use of snipers against small children", they clearly do. As Ottosen and Øvrebø (in Orgeret and Tayeebwa forthcoming) found that the Assad regime was framed as responsible for the massacre in Ghouta in a majority of the Norwegian newspaper Aftenpostens coverage, one could, perhaps, have expected the number to be higher in the case of "Syrian hero boy". However, there are clear differences between the scenarios: In the case of Ghouta, the Assad regime was also pointed at by policy makers, among them the American administration.

While there were only three articles clearly framing Assad, there are still indications in the sample that Shaam News Network managed to get their narrative through to social media. None of the articles indicates that rebellion groups were targeting the children, and sources from Shaam News Network was invited to speak of the films authenticity. Shaam News Network can thus be perceived as part of the Syrian propaganda war. Harkin et al. (2012:16) show that Syrian citizen journalists fight the Assad regime's propaganda with their own propaganda, leading to incidents of downplaying incidents of for instance sectarian violence or other types of action they do not want to be associated with, such as the example mentioned in section 4.2 of activists admitting to remove weapons from images depicting anti-governmental demonstrations. It cannot, therefore, automatically be assumed that the citizen journalists of Syria always provide accurate information. In the case of "Syrian hero boy," however, the articles within the sample of this thesis indicate that this is, to some extent, was assumed by the media; they were quick to accept this activist narrative in their coverage.

Research conducted by Lynch et al. (2014:9) show that this is not unusual: They argue that the coverage of SNN and other activist groups has been celebratory and uncritical, "presenting the Syrians producing and disseminating these videos in overwhelmingly approving terms". It is, however, important to note that this sentiment seems to have changed somehow during the course of the conflict, Lynch et al. (ibid.) write. The narrative associated with the Syrian opposition is not static, and they have, to some extent, become increasingly affiliated with armed groups, sometimes even moderate Islamist groups (ibid).

From a public sphere perspective, this acceptance of the Syrian activist narrative could have been potentially devastating if the false nature of the film was not revealed or if it was revealed after more time had passed. Possible calls for actions in order to save the children of Syria would, in this scenario, have been founded on false premises. As stressed by Page (1996), democracy generally does not work very well if the information provided to the public is "inaccurate, incomplete, misleading, or full of outright lies." In such scenarios, Page (ibid) argue, even rational publics can be fooled. The material that this thesis builds on does not support an argument claiming that "Syrian hero boy" fooled the general public. However, it is clear that it fooled many members of the public. One can, of course, as they did themselves (Klevberg, Løkke and Hagen 14.11.2014, 18.11.2014), that the intention was good, and that it is never wrong to debate the children's situation in a war. However, that would be to dismiss the whole concept of deliberative democracy (Dahlberg 2001:620, namely that sentiments and opinions within the public, hence also a possible consensus, is to rest on a rational-critical debate free from manipulation of any sort.

5.2 An Authenticity debate

However, the debate did not just evolve around children in war and the atrocities of the Assad regime. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, seven of the 34 articles published about "Syrian hero boy" before the hoax was revealed, questioned its authenticity – perhaps indicating an increased expertise within media when it comes to generating user-generated content. Newspapers such as BBC (Turner 2012) have started their own verification hubs, designed in order to answer questions such as "Is this video real or fake?" While BBCs verification hub has existed for almost 10 years, they tells the Nieman lab (ibid.), which is a joint effort to enhance the quality of journalism, that they made a fatal error when it comes to publishing unverified content from Syria as late as in 2012. The station published a photo showing dead bodies lying in rows, bodies that were supposed to have been killed in a government massacre in Houla May 27th 2012. However, once the photo had been published, a photographer from Getty Images recognized the picture, which he had taken in Iraq in 2003, and he wrote on Facebook that "Somebody is using my image as a propaganda against the Syrian government to prove the massacre" (Turner 2012). In an interview for the Nieman lab (ibid.), BBCs social media director Chris Hamilton says that the incident showed the station that "governments don't have monopoly on spinning the media".

How BBC and the six other newspapers seriously questioning "Syrian hero boy" undertook these debates might provide insight into the very way journalists follow role of mediators in the virtual public sphere, or as Örneberg (in Butsch 2007:82) claim, as "the only true guardians of public discourse and debate". As early as November 11th, for instance, the same day that "Syrian hero boy" went viral, The Times published the film (Coghlan 11.11.2014), asking whether the "girl's rescue from Syria sniper was amazing heroism or elaborate hoax." While stating that Shaam News Network was the source of the film, the Coghlan has also spoken to other activists about the footage. Abdurrahman Saleh, a spokesman for the Islam Army Rebel group in Aleppo says that the accents of those yelling "Allahu Akbar" in the film suggests it has been shot in or near the town Aleppo. Saleh however, tells Coghlan that he knows most of the activists working in Aleppo, and that he has not heard of the incident portrayed in the film. This leads Saleh to suggest that the footage is staged, a claim somehow commented by Coghlan, who writes:

> Footage faked to discredit opponents or to misrepresent events is not unheard of in Syria. Previous examples have included video of atrocities from previous wars represented as Syrian war crimes, or deliberately faked footage, such as a group of supposed Free Syrian Army special forces who turned out to be carrying children's toy guns.
>   *(Coghlan 11.11.2014)*

The fact that this journalist proved to be right questioning the film's authenticity is not what makes this interesting from a public sphere perspective. Rather, it is the fact that he shares doubts and uncertainties with the viewers that is of interest. This indicates some sort of communication or relationship between the public and the mediator; Coghlan invites them into his way of thinking, after having noticed that millions of people are watching this film online. This can be regarded as contributing to the quality of debate within the public sphere. Bennett et al. (2004:439), for instance, argue that the conditions for what they call audience deliberations are best maintained when news accounts report diverse voices while also identifying and "comparably value those voices". As emphasized by Wessler and Schultz (in Butsch 2007:17), the substance of justifications provided in mediated communication is important from a public sphere perspective because it, in addition to allow for direct communication between journalists and audience, allows those who do not participate themselves to be part of the deliberative process. This, in turn, as noted by Dahlgren (1995:1) enlightens the public in some way, an important criteria for democratic deliberation.

Another interesting finding in this regard, is how BBC Trending, a site reporting and discussing issues that is popular in social media, chose to cover "Syrian hero boy". Their

story is not only about the heroism of the young boy or the situation for children affected by war in Syria, but about whether or not the film is authentic. The article refers to the fact that the film's "authenticity has been widely questioned," and is followed by a video showing clips of the film, before asking if it is genuine. No clear answer is given, but Amira Galal, who works at the Middle East team of BBC monitoring is interviewed by the station, and she refers to the polarized debate surrounding the situation in Syria in general, and this video in particular. "People are very vocal in discrediting it saying it is a complete fabrication, and there are other people who are saying that it is […] not a fake", Galal says, before concluding that "There's nothing certain in Syria".

This way of reasoning in front of the audience can also be indications of a public wanting more, perhaps as an answer to the increasing amount of false information "out there". In the book *Blur. How to know what's true in the age of information overload,* the American journalism scholars Kovach and Rosenstiel (2011:7) argue that we today live in the "show me era" of news, which they see in sharp contrast to the "trust me" era of news in the past, when news anchor Walter Cronkite was "the most trusted man in America". Internet, Kovach and Rosenstiel argue (ibid), has changed the perceptions of truth, that is, at least, how you obtain it. This "new way of knowing", they argue, "is no longer a lecture by professional authorities but rather a dialogue, with all the strengths and weaknesses that implies". This, in turn, demands a partnership between information consumers and the gatekeepers, i.e. the journalists. The line of reasoning offered by Kovach and Rosenstiel's (2011) would thus imply that journalists no longer possess hegemony when it comes to several crucial issues within the public sphere, such as what issues should be debated and who is to participate in the debates.

5.2.1 Taking user comments into consideration

In a blog[11] published November 18th, the social media editor of BBC Chris Hamilton (2014) explains that there were many reasons as to why BBC was hesitant regarding the film's authenticity: They could not get in touch with whomever had filmed it, they thought the voices could have been dubbed, and they questioned the moment where the boy was shot, as he appeared to have been hit without getting wounded. In addition, Hamilton refers to the fact that viewers on both Youtube and Reddit questioned whether or not the film was real. While recognizing that this is "not uncommon with Syrian video, as both sides engage in a fierce

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[11] Because this is a blog, it is not part of the sample for the content analysis conducted for this thesis.

propaganda war", Hamilton states that "the volume seemed high" (18.11.2014). The latter remark is supported by Lynch et al. (2014:10), who points to the fact that there has been fierce battles over the interpretation of videos from Syria online; both in terms of their authenticity and of their narrative.

From a public sphere perspective then, the fact that Hamilton refers to YouTube users when explaining why BBC was skeptical towards the film, is interesting, especially when it comes to the criteria of access to debates within the public sphere. As their views are taken into accounts, these YouTube users can be argued to have indirect access to the debate. Calhoun (1992:13) states that in the idealized public sphere, everyone with access has "at least a potential claim to the attention of the culture-debating public". Australian 9 News (11.11.2014) also refer to viewer comments on YouTube when debating the film's authenticity, writing that "some viewers have speculated the boy fakes being shot in order to get a break in the gunfire, before running up and shepherding the cowering girl to safety, while others have declared the entire clip a viral hoax". Other articles in the sample also points towards user comments on YouTube when referring to the film's authenticity. Daily Mail (Malm 11.11.2014), for instance, write that "Several YouTube comments claim the video is fake, but experts told The Telegraph they have no reason to doubt its authenticity". Likewise, The Independent (Saul 11.11.2014) write that "some reports suggests that the events within it could have been staged, with doubts cast over the moment the boy appears to be shot". On a side note, this is the same scene the filmmakers referred to when they later, in a sort of sting towards the media outlets that chose to publish the film, claimed that they provided the viewers with a clue that the gripping scene was not real (Klevberg, Løkke and Hagen 14.11.2014).

A study conducted by Graham and Wright (2015:331) also indicate that journalists take user comments seriously. They have looked at the comments written below articles in the online edition of the British newspaper The Guardian as well as interviewing the journalists who wrote these articles, and found that this user-participation had some impact on journalistic practices, for example by providing expertise or suggesting new stories or angles. Their findings (ibid) also indicate that journalists becomes more aware of what they write because they know that if they write something wrong, it will be debated in social media. Several of the journalists interviewed saw user comments as a way of ensuring a rational-critical debate, not only directed towards other readers, but also ensuring that the arguments of the journalists

holds up. One journalist, for instance, says: "Amid all the noise, I can still see my ideas being bested and either improved or rejected, which I find very useful indeed" (cited in Graham and Wright 2015:332).

However, the journalists interviewed by Graham and Wright were also skeptical towards the comment field in the Guardian, which they attributed to the nets opportunities for shielding ones identity. This, the journalists argued (2015:331) increased the likelihood for vested interests attempting to "manipulate debates, be it political activists or commercially backed lobbies such as from the fossil fuel industry". The film "Syrian hero boy", in many ways, illustrate how easily it is, with modern techniques, to both make something that appears to be real, as well as disseminating it across the globe. Following the two press releases issued by the filmmakers (Klevberg, Løkke and Hagen 14.11.2014, 18.11.2014), it becomes clear that they were to take use of what Dahlberg (2006) write of as the cyberspace's control over self-presentation, which of course also offer the opportunity for "conscious deception of identity". Using these words, Dahlberg refers to participants who "intentionally misleads others into believing that intentions, needs, desires and interests have been honestly presented" (ibid). In the case of "Syrian hero boy" a lot was done in order to make this identity appear different than what it was in real life. The film was, as stated, uploaded on a newly generated Youtube account with the nickname *Lawaff Law,* and it was titled in both English and Arabic. In addition, it did not provide any information of when and where the film was shot.

5.3 A hoax is exposed and condemned

Friday November 14th, a press release is issued on the Twitter account of the Norwegian director Lars Klevberg, revealing that the film "Syrian hero boy" is a fictional film. It is signed by Klevberg himself, as well as by the two producers Petter Løkke and John E. Hagen. The three of them write that "The film aimed to appear authentic, but the children surviving gunshots was supposed to send small clues it was not real." They also state that it was shot in Malta over a few days, and that the process was planned in detail. The press release also states that the filmmakers are "pleased that the film spread widely and that the debate has indeed focused on the children's lives during war" (Klevberg, Løkke and Hagen 14.11.2014). It did not, however, focus on this for very long. The findings of the content analysis conducted for this thesis indicate that the nature of the debate quickly changed after the fabrication was a fact: It did no longer discuss children's conditions during wars, but rather the possibly devastating consequences of the actions of a group of Norwegian filmmakers.

Headlines such as "Syrian 'hero boy' video faked by Norwegian director sparks anger" (Finn 15.11.2014) and "Norwegian Director Slammed for 'Syrian Hero Boy' Hoax Video" (Varghese 16.11.2014) are illustrating for what followed. 59 articles within the sample of this thesis is written on the fabrication, and 33 of them debates the film, meaning that they include sources critical of the film, as well as statements and comments issued by the filmmakers. The rest merely state that the film is false[12]. Fred Abrahams of the Human Rights Watch (HRW) is quoted in several articles, arguing that Klevberg "made it easier for war criminals to dismiss credible images of abuse" (Arab News 17.11.2014). The Norwegian journalist Pål T. Jørgensen called the filmmakers "idiots" (Stakkestad and Oppegård 15.11.2014), and the Syrian citizen journalist Aboud Dandachi told BBC Trending that "this has been the biggest setback to citizen journalism since the concept began" (Tomchack 14.11.2014).

Lars Klevberg, the films director and Åse, Meyer of the Norwegian film institute was interviewed in the latter article, and judging from their answers it seems as though journalist Anne-Marie Tomchack (14.11.2014) asked quite critical questions. Meyer of the Norwegian film institute, for instance, starts by saying that "it was not a cynical way to get attention. They had honest motivation". When speaking to Klevberg, Tomchack writes "Were they comfortable making a film that potentially deceived millions of people?", whereas Klevberg answer "I was not uncomfortable," before telling the journalist, hence also the reader, of his and the other filmmakers wish to spur debate about children in wars. This article does not include other sources – it was published just when the fabrication was revealed – but I perceive the journalist as taking use of her role as a guardian of the norms within the public sphere, thereby assuring that the film is being debated. The story ends like this: "How those viewers will react to learning that it's a work of fiction remains to be seen. 'We are really happy with the reaction,' Klevberg said. 'It created a debate'" (Tomchack 14.11.2014).

In addition to journalists, the kind of sources identified as criticizing the film in my sample was Syrian activists and citizen journalists, who were concerned the film would undermine their credibility. It was also NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Save the Children, who argued that it was unethical to fabricate an incident that could just as well have happened in real-life. I have only been able to locate one article containing a voice criticizing the media

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[12] Some of the articles are written by the same newspapers: One revealing that the film was false, before reactions followed later that day or the next few days.

for publishing the film. Norwegian TV 2 (Bentzen and Oppegård 18.11.2014) has interviewed the British journalist and blogger Elliot Higgins, who says he is disappointed by media publishing the film before it was verified. Other sources seem mostly disappointed by the filmmakers. In another article in the same media, the foreign correspondent Pål T. Jørgensen is interviewed. He has been to several trips to Syria in order to cover the war, and says the film is idiocy, and that the children of Syria do not deserve to have people making fake films about them (Stakkestad and Oppegård 15.11.2014). Syrian Aboud Dandachi, who was also interviewed by BBC, says to the newspaper The Middle East Eye, which is run by the former The Guardian correspondent David Hearst, that "The story now isn't going to be about child victims. It will be about the fabrication itself. It will also stop people from retweeting or sharing other videos" (Finn 15.11.2014).

5.3.1 Apologizing for 'Syrian hero boy'

The film was also condemned in an open letter addressed to Lars Klevberg as well as to the Norwegian Film Institute and the Audio and Visual Fund of Norway, who funded the film. The letter is, by November 2015, signed by 135 people, and the organization issuing it was Bellingcat, a foundation for citizen investigative journalists (17.11.2014). The letter argues that the main problem associated with this film is that it "calls to question, both ethically and professionally the work being done to document these crimes inside Syria". The letter highlights that the dissemination of the film was intentionally misleading, arguing that it was already a difficult task deciphering the real from the fake when it came to content from the war in Syria.

Following this letter, and all the other reactions, it did not seem that the filmmakers had any other choice but to issue a second press release. November 18th, four days after having revealed their fabrication stating that they were "pleased that the film spread widely", they wrote that they wanted to "sincerely apologize for releasing this film as real and the outcome since the film's release" (Klevberg, Løkke and Hagen 18.11.2014). They also write that:

> We didn't take into consideration some of the advice we received from the Norwegian Film Institute, and we realize that we should have informed about this film being fiction earlier. In the application for support from the Audio and Visual Fund from Arts Council Norway, we also state that we would reveal sooner than we did. We were overwhelmed by the attention the film received in such a short amount of time, on the web and media, and we needed time to strategize the best way to handle it.

The next day, November 19th, the Norwegian Film Institute (Tharaldsen 2014) issued an apology of their own, stating that they "advised the filmmakers they should announce the

intention of the film shortly after it was launched, but unfortunately it took them too long before that information was published". In addition, they wrote that "the damage was done and the rest of the handling was unprofessional and reprehensible (ibid).

The reactions "Syrian hero boy" was met with might partly be explained by the fact that the filmmakers, by issuing it, broke one of the most elementary norms, or codes of conduct, within the public sphere. As Dahlberg (2004:8-9) write, the Habermasian focus on rational argument assumes that "all communicative action presupposes the truthfulness of expression". This is not just a normative pillar within public sphere theory, and ethicists such as Sissela Bok (1978:81) argue that truth has always been an essential value in our society. While recognizing that altruistic lies – lies made in order to achieve some sort of common good – might be considered more mildly than other lies, Bok (ibid) does not regard such lies as making any difference to the overall discussion of truthfulness and deception. Echoing what happened in the case of "Syrian hero boy," she states that "the possibilities of error about one's good intentions are immense. But even if these intentions *are* good, they are obviously no guarantee of a good outcome." (ibid). This is also stressed by Dahlberg (2006), who in a later work on the quality of communication within online discussion forums saw that when deception was exposed, it had a tendency to lead to some kind of punishment; Either in the form of humiliation, or in the form of suspension from the group. In the case of "Syrian hero boy", the most suitable term for how the filmmakers were perceived within the public sphere after their fabrication was revealed, is the humiliation Dahlberg refers to.

5.3.2 "Syrian hero boy" as propaganda

Dahlberg (2006) argue that the motivations for precluding the virtual sphere with false claims can be numerous. Often, it is merely the desire to commit a "good prank", he argue, while it in other times can hardly be described as anything but propaganda, with strong political motivations as the driving force. Initially, it was asked how the film "Syrian hero boy" fit into the ongoing propaganda war in Syria. While the former sections on activists and Shaam News Network said something about how it was understood *before* the hoax was revealed, there are other aspect worth mentioning *after* it was exposed as false. The fact that "Syrian hero boy" proved to be a fabrication might, for instance, have had consequences for the narrative of the citizen-activists as providing the ground truth as opposed to the supposed lies coming from the Syrian regime. This assumption is supported by the fact that "Syrian hero boy" is not unique when it comes to fabricating of images, something that has been attempted stressed

throughout this discussion. Setrakian and Zerden (2014:11) of the site Syrian Deeply, for instance, have experienced that some activists will lie in order to bolster their own narrative, often in a desperation to "advance their cause or receive funding".

Another aspect is the fact that the film received funding from the Norwegian Film Institute and the Audio and Visual Fund Norway. This is especially problematized in the Norwegian-written articles, and the fact that these institutions were, to some extent, aware of the strategy the filmmakers intended to apply in order to disseminate the film is criticized. Norwegian TV 2 (Stakkestad and Oppegård 15.11.2914), for instance, when interviewing correspondent Pål T. Jørgensen, links the fact that the film has been made by support of these Norwegian institutions with this quote, which is here translated to English[13]: "I thought the video was made with support of the Assad-regime, in order to make people doubt other videos coming from Syria". The fear that the Assad regime might take advantage of "Syrian hero boy" to do precisely this, is also debated in several articles, especially those citing the condemning letter from the organization Bellingcat (17.11.2014). One of the 135 people who have signed this letter is Ammar Abd Rabbo, a Syrian-French photojournalist who currently lives in Lebanon. In an interview conducted through Facebook, he says that he still endorses its message. For him, the problematic nature of "Syrian hero boy" is that it made people question his truthfulness as a journalist covering the war. In the wake of the film, Abd Rabbo says he has been accused of supporting the west in their justification for conducting bombing raids in Syria:

> As a journalist reporting on the ground during many visits or trips to Syria, it is very difficult to hear many people, mainly close to Syrian Assad regime, but also "alter world" activists or "mass media skeptics" accusing me and other journalists of conducting false reports to serve an "anti-Assad propaganda," that is supposed to help western countries bomb Syria with the support of western public opinion prepared by our "false reporting"   (Abd Rabbo 29.09.2015)

While this cannot be said to represent the articles in the sample, a wider search on Google shows that there are voices "out there" perceiving "Syrian hero boy" as Nato propaganda made and disseminated in order to spark support for a Nato intervention in Syria. The American Ron Paul institute (McAdams 14.11.2014) for instance, while itself having clear policy agendas, emphasize that the film has received funding from the Norwegian film institute, which in turn are funded by Nato-member Norway, writing the following: "How

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[13] In Norwegian: "Jeg trodde videoen var laget med støtte fra Assad-regimet, for å så tvil om andre videoer som kommer fra Syria. Folk i Syria risikerer livet sitt for å dokumentere den brutale virkeligheten." URL: http://www.tv2.no/a/6236161

convenient this is at a time when so many NATO-member countries and the usual interventionist suspects are pushing hard for the US government to retrool its Syria anti-ISIS campaign to first target the Assad government for construction." While such a view, if knowing how the processes of providing such grants in Norway works, seem dubious at best, it is – nevertheless – worth to note that there are voices on the Internet indulging in such theories. Such voices illustrate the challenges of achieving one, global public sphere based on consensus, aspirations called "utopia" by scholars such as Dean (2005).

5.3.3 Propaganda and the media

However, while "Syrian hero boy" was not propaganda issued by the Assad regime or Nato, it could, perhaps have been so. Citizens of different countries have different levels of trust towards their leaders, opening up for such assumptions. While propaganda is nothing new in wars, the Internet has, arguably, increased the dissemination of it, and made it easier for all parties of a conflict to take use of it, not just powerful governments. We saw it during the American invasion in Iraq in 2003 (Allan and Zelizer 2003, Ottosen 2004), and we see it again today, surrounding the war in Syria. The very existence of such propaganda online has potentially devastating potential for the public sphere, Dahlberg (2006) argue, because it undermines the very rational-critical debate it is built upon. When media aligns with the governmental line in such cases, it has clear, damaging potential for the functioning of a public sphere, as stressed by Page (1996). By its very nature, and according to its own ideals (Deuze 2005), journalists are supposed to be servants of the public, not of the government or corporations.

If "Syrian hero boy" had been Assad initiated propaganda, or Nato propaganda for that matter, it would thus have been the first time that filmmakers and journalists have disseminated propaganda. As Phillip Knightley (2004) show in the *The First Casualty. The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq,* false news reports reached large news outlets both in the second world war, the Korean war, and even the American civil war. In his case study of the war in Iraq, Knightley argues that American media went far in terms of redistributing propaganda coming from their government (Knightley 2004:527-548). Concerning Iraq, the controversial rescue operation of U.S. private Jessica Lynch from a hospital in Iraq stands out. She was injured when her convoy was ambushed, and transported to a hospital, in which she was rescued in a dramatic helicopter operation. Media worldwide covered the successful rescue mission, but it later proved to have

been superfluous; the doctors of the hospital had already agreed to deliver her to the U.S. military in an ambulance. In the words of BBC's John Simpson (cited in Allan and Zelizer 2004:8), the story was the "invention of the US Army Spinners, and a credulous press desperate for some genuine heroics in a war which seemed disturbingly short of gallantry". Later, a doctor of the hospital told BBC (in Ottosen 2004:24) that "it was like a Hollywood film. They cried 'go go go', with guns and blanks without bullets […] They made a show for the American attack on the hospital action movies like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan" (in Ottosen 2004:25). Filmmakers have also taken part in the American propaganda machinery. Ottosen (ibid) refers to the collaboration between Hollywood and Pentagon, writing that during the American intervention in Iraq, the stage of the press centre in Qatar was "designed by Hollywood consultants to make the performance of the military spokesmen more convincing" (2004:22).

Viewed in light of this, it is perhaps no wonder that some understood "Syrian hero boy" in a similar way after it was revealed a fabrication. Syrian-French journalist Ammar Abd Rabbo says he has been collecting false stories from the war in Syria since it broke out in 2011, and that he has heard many rumors claiming that footage and images spread by activists are fake, "shot in northern Iraq or in Qatar by Hollywood and CIA special units who were enacting the shots of demonstrations and army shooting at them" (ibid). "Syrian hero boy" did not help the situation, he argues:

> Millions of people believed this, and then Klevberg, even coming 2 or 3 years after these rumours, and with very good will, but definitely it "confirmed" for many people that films are fake, shot by professional well trained themes, and look like reality while they are "action/cut films…" (29.09.2015).

Örnebring (in Butsch 2007:82) stresses that journalists also have responsibilities when it comes to the dissemination of such propaganda. After all, the media cannot be perceived as passive units under the influence of governments, corporations and dubious filmmakers. Miller (2004:2) for instance, argue that journalists to some extent increases the likelihood of deception if they rely on anonymous sources within the government, in this context meaning that the journalists do not expose these sources. Miller (ibid) argues that this allows the government to deny that the information came from them if it later proves to be false. This, he argue, make claims made in newspaper articles or TV stories hard to trace, as "off the record briefing, disguised sources and the like are a fundamental part of the system and are fully exploited by government in the US and UK" (ibid).

5.4 Mediating the debate

So far, the negative aspects of the revelation of the fabrication of "Syrian hero boy" have been highlighted. The fact that this revelation sparked such outrage, however, can also be an argument of the media fulfilling their role as facilitator for, and guarder of, the quality of debates within the public sphere: Once the film was revealed as false, the nature of the debate changed. Now, the challenge of false information in the virtual arena was on the agenda, rather than the story of the heroic young boy escaping sniper fire. The following debate also evolved around the challenges associated with covering the war in Syria. The Middle East Eye (Finn 15.11.2014), for instance, wrote that "fake or doctored videos, sometimes used to serve political agendas, have become a defining characteristic of media coverage of the war. There is fear among Syrians that the Norwegian video will dent the public's trust in news coming out of the country". An AFP article (16.11.2014), which was also published in the Gulf Times, cited Human Rights Watch as saying the filmmakers "good intention had been overrun by the negative consequences of the hoax".

This debate has some qualities associated with the notion of the public sphere: It was quite rational, and it included the voices of affected parties such as Syrian citizen journalists and the filmmakers themselves. In addition, the debate had elements of enlightenment in it, as it informed the general public – or at least those reading these online newspapers – of the challenges associated with covering the war in Syria. According to Fraser (2007:20), discussion in an ideal public sphere should be open to everyone who has a potential stake in the outcome. The nature of the debate following "Syrian hero boy" also represent, to some extent, what Bennett et al. (2004:438) call responsiveness, a crucial quality within their perception of an ideally mediated public sphere. The term refers to the dialogue between sources in the debates, asking whether there is some sort of mutual responsiveness between the sources making different claims or have different issue positions. While a more thorough analysis of the number of sources in each article is required for determining how the articles on "Syrian hero boy" meet the standards of Bennett et al. (ibid:439), they at least include sources with opposing views, which in turn are asked to justify their claims.

This indicates that journalistic endeavors can lead to deliberation. The contributions of citizen journalists to the coverage of the war in Syria is crucial, and the public would have a less complete picture of what goes on in the country if it was not for them. Still, there are obvious challenges associated with the sole reliance on such content. For one; It is difficult to operate

according to journalistic standards such as objectivity (Deuze 2005) when one is also part of the conflict, and second as highlighted by Reporters without borders (2013:26), untrained in journalistic methods and ethics. This urges a discussion of the role of traditional media – or journalism – within the public sphere. Nohrstedt and Ottosen (2014:181), for instance, do not believe that democracy will survive if journalism does not, arguing that today's situation threatens the very notion of the public sphere. In their words (ibid), increased security challenges for journalists coupled with cutting of budgets in newsrooms, constitute a "looming threat to citizens right to information in a democratic system, and the possibility of forming enlightened opinions about the conduct of their elected leaders in conflicts, politics and warfare."

5.4.1 Closing the gap

When discussing the role of journalism within the public sphere today, it is, as Örneberg (in Butsch 2007:81) writes, not so much where this mediating takes place that matter, but rather how this process is conducted, and whether or not journalists fulfil the role attributed to them as servants of the public. Following this line of reasoning then, it is not a dichotomy between mass media and new media when it comes to public deliberation. While Habermas (1989) was concerned for the future of public deliberation because of a commercialized mass media, such mass media has also proven to have the potential to deliberate. BBCs coverage of "Syrian hero boy" is an example. Volkmer (in Zelizer and Allan 2002:236) has argued that also mass media contribute to public deliberation, writing that media, in the wake of September 11, was perceived as important in the "establishment of a worldwide discourse that was be sensitive to the different perspectives arising from local situations," hence inviting a wider array of the possibly affected public into the debate.

Crack (2008:189) regards this access as crucial for the possibility of a transnational public sphere. She argue that what she calls transborder communicative capability needs to be improved, particularly when it comes to closing the digital gap, as well as the gap between cultures and languages, which she regard as limiting the international dialogue. Traditional media can, of course, not assist in all of these matters. However, it might have potential to assist with closing another gap: Kovach and Rosenstiel (2011:200) argue that the most crucial gap is no longer between those with access to internet and those without, but rather between "those who have the skills to create knowledge and those who doesn't: A gap between *reason* and *superstition*".

Following this perspective, more responsibility is assigned to the individual journalists. As argued by Deuze (2005:447) journalists across the world seem to agree upon at least a minimized set of ideals, making up some sort of "journalism ideology," in many ways resembling the ideal role placed upon media by scholars of the public sphere (Dahlgren 1995:1). There are indications that journalists regard a connection with the public as an essential part of fulfilling their role as mediators (Lynch et al. 2014, Grahm and Wright 2015), and that such a connection can improve the quality of mediated communication. While the articles in my sample did publish the false film "Syrian hero boy", for instance, some of them had clear deliberative qualities: Both The Times (Coghlan 11.11.2014) and BBC Trending (Tomchack 11.11.2014) invited readers to a debate concerning the films authenticity.

Many journalists, such as Amund Bakke Foss in the Norwegian newspaper VG, also take use of social media actively in their work, arguing that it improves their reporting. In an interview conducted for this thesis (25.11.2015), he says that "While there are challenges associated with verifying information on the Internet (…), it also provides opportunities. Every morning, I can get up an speak to someone in Syria." He refers to a story he wrote after Russia's first bombings in Syria (Foss and Ashraf 01.10.2015), which Russia claimed was directed towards the Islamic State, as an example of how journalists can attain information of their own, even when superpowers such as Russia advocate their versions of what happened. After the bombings, early October 2015, Foss spoke to a Firas Alsaid via Skype. He was located in the town Talbiseh, where the bombs were dropped, and claimed that the Islamic State was not present in this area, and that all the casualties were civilian. "If we did not have this technology, we would not have had this voice, Foss claims (25.11.2015). The reports of Lynch et al. (2014), Harkin et al. (2012) and Wardle et al. (2014) show that journalists across the globe work in similar ways, actively looking for alternative sources when covering the war in Syria.

The fact that such journalists are looking for sources on the ground in emphasized by Setrakian and Zerden (2014:134) as crucial when it comes to enabling citizens of Syria to access the international debates concerning their country. They state that new media such as Skype plays a large in the dissemination of information from the ground in Syria; "As an alternate to government-monitored telephone and mobile phone connections, Skype allows

activists and rebel groups to use private chat rooms for sharing information and posting real time battle updates". Much of this information is also posted on Facebook and Twitter, where it sparks debate among Syrian users. In addition, many reports argue that the war has increased the space of maneuver for Syrian citizens within Syria, as opposed to the regime-controlled media. Taki (2012:9) attributes the internet as a possible deliberation site for Syrians who have the need to more freely discuss what goes on within their own country, "Social networking sites […] allows users the freedom to publish raw unedited material, ensuring bottom-up communication where everyone's voice is heard and that is not subject to state-controlled gate-keeping." (2012:9).

5.4.1 Crafted narratives and clusters of communication

The very presence of such activists and citizen journalists online is important and positive from a public sphere perspective in that they contribute to a wider array of voices, thus avoiding what Page (1996:9) perceive as the most common path towards public deception in times of war, namely that governments have monopoly over information. Their presence also offers alternative viewpoints and narratives. Downey and Fenton (2005:197), for instance, refer to how activists used Internet in the wake of the second (Al Aqsa) Intifiada in Israel and Palestine to support the Palestinian struggle for human rights. In the words of Downey and Fenton (ibid), the intention was to "provide publicity to counter what many activists see as a Zionist version of history and politics that produced (…) by the vast majority of mass media in Europe and North America. After having established that these voices are important, however, it is important to recognize that not all of them have an idealized public sphere as the motivation for their online presence, as stressed by Dahlgren (2005:6), and Downey and Fenton (2005:197). The latter argue that Internet use "is contributing simultaneously to new forms of social solidarity and fragmentation", and a further strengthening of what they label counter public spheres.

While such counter-spheres are by no means a threat to democracy in itself[14], they might be if they do not communicate, or attempts to engage in rational-critical debate, with other public spheres. A study by Freelon et al. (2014) points to some worrying trends in this regard: They have conducted a content analysis of Twitter messages shared on the conflict in Syria between 2011 and 2013, and found that one, distinct group discussing Syria online was a community

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[14] Both Fraser and Benhabib write of feminism as counter public spheres in Calhouns 1992 book «Habermas and the public sphere»

of English-speaking journalists. However, this group did not correspond much with the other clusters discussing Syria online, such as Syrian revolutionaries who, the words of Freelon, Lynch and Aday (ibid:173). While they found that the amount of coverage on Syria in mainstream media was highly correlated with the amount of discussions in the Twitter sphere, the tweets in Arabic and English had a tendency to focus on different topics, and the groups did not communicate with each other. There are, in other words, signs separate publics evolving around the war in Syria.

As Lynch et al. (2014:26) notes in a later report, their findings indicate two troublesome trends: That English-speaking journalists are influenced by their bias and culture rather than what is actually going on and thought within Syria and elsewhere in the Arabic region, and that social media have the power to "draw people into like-minded networks that interpret the news through the prism of their own information bubbles". Cammaerts and van Audenhove (2005:143) have found similar trends in their studies of online activist groups, concluding that while the issues under debate was transnational, the participants were often located in western countries. In addition, discussions also took place between activists with the same opinions (ibid). Dahlgren (2005:152) calls such clusters "cyber ghettos", referring to fragmentation and the tendency of public spheres "veering toward disparate islands of political communication".

5.4.2 A pressing challenge

There is thus no reason to assume, based on previous research, that completely unmediated information flows automatically generate more democracy, or progress toward a common good. This point is also stressed by Papacharissi (2002:22), who claims that "cheap, fast, and convenient access to more information does not necessarily render all citizens more informed, or more willing to participate in political discussion". He argues that if Internet has the potential of bringing people together, it must also "bear the danger of spinning them in different directions" (ibid:16). In the case of Syria, of course, the obvious actor in this regard is self-proclaimed calipate the Islamic State. While this groupuse social media actively in order to spread their propaganda throughout the world (Ali 2015), hence constituting some sort of counter public sphere, they also, due to the nature of the videos they distribute[15], take a clear stance against such a public sphere and any participation in rational-critical debate.

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[15] In the article "Inside the surreal world of the Islamic State's propaganda machine," a former photographer within the Islamic State is interviewed, claiming that he often had to film public beheadings for distribution oline (Miller and Mekhennet). URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-the-islamic-states-propaganda-machine/2015/11/20/051e997a-8ce6-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_story.html

While this thesis will not debate this thoroughly, the following is still an important question to ask: Will excluding an extreme group like this from the public sphere enhance democracy by leading to a more rational debate, or does it have to be granted access if one is to talk of a true public sphere? Journalist in the Norwegian newspaper VG Amund Bakke Foss (25.11.2015) advocates for the latter. While recognizing that the Islamic State has made the media dependent on using their propaganda material, he believes some of this material should be published in mainstream media, as it is a form of documentation, if verified.

> I believe that the alternative is much worse, not to write about the videos they publish and what they are doing. We need to know who we are dealing with (…) This is also why I believe, if you as a journalist get the chance to speak with these people, that you should do so. You cannot just assume they are blood-thirsty monsters without a strategy behind their actions. (…) it is essential to make these ideas visible, in order to debate them.   (Foss 25.11.2015)

Wessler and Schulz (in Butsch 2007:18) also emphasize debate as "essential in order to problematize claims, even those of oppressed groups, as well as their foundations and expectations", but they do not specifically mention radical groups opposing the very foundations in which the democratic society is built upon. Nevertheless, it would be naïve, they argue, to believe that inviting such groups group to the table will lead to a consensus on the matters discussed. A true consensus, Wessler and Schultz (ibid) argue, is unlikely to happen when speaking of large-scale public deliberation with the media as a mediator.

6.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this thesis has been twofold: It has attempted to answer how the coverage of the fabricated film "Syrian hero boy" in online newspapers fit with the ongoing propaganda war in Syria, and it has attempted to discuss what this coverage can tell us of the media's potential for safeguarding the normative ideals within the virtual public sphere. A content analysis of 93 articles written about "Syrian hero boy" indicate that the fabrication of the film was regarded as bigger news than the film itself, and that the online newspapers assisted in directing the debate towards the film's potential damaging consequences. Thus, while "Syrian hero boy" showed how easily large groups of people can be deceived in the blink of an eye, it also led to an interesting – if yet unnecessary – debate.

34 different articles have been identified as being published before the film was revealed as false, hence also before it was verified. The analysis of these articles indicates that the media, because the film was distributed by Shaam News Network, treated "Syrian hero boy" as just another "activist film" coming from the war torn country. Their understanding of reality seems to have been taken for granted, and some of the articles framed the Assad regime for being responsible for the snipers targeting the children. Even before revealed as false, then, the film fit into the ongoing propaganda war in Syria, supporting the narrative of an increasingly fragmented opposition. Lynch et al. (2014:12) perceive incidents of fabrication of user-generated content within this narrative as particularly problematic because it has relied upon an image of showing the real truth as opposed to the lies coming from the regime.

On a positive account, seven of the articles in the sample did question the authenticity of "Syrian hero boy" before it was revealed as false. In this context however, it is not the fact that they were right that matters, but the way they present their doubts regarding the film to the readers. By turning a viral talking point into an important debate on the importance of crosschecking facts and verifying content, these articles show that such qualities exist within the online journalism domain. There were also positive elements characterizing the debate following the revelation of "Syrian hero boy" as a hoax. Mainly, it showed that deception is not accepted within the virtual public sphere, especially not by journalists. In addition, it led to a debate where the challenges of covering the Syrian war was highlighted, as well as the amount of propaganda and false information existing in the virtual public sphere.

The latter elements, however, might also have negative implications for the nature of the virtual public sphere, at least when it comes to a sphere debating the situation in Syria. "Syrian hero boy" showed people that videos disseminated online cannot be trusted, which in turn might lead to a sense of apathy; what is the point in getting enraged over what you see in a photograph from the Syrian civil war if this photograph might be a fabrication? To some extent, the coverage of "Syrian hero boy" illustrates both the best and the worst the net has to offer.

The latter question addresses the quality of the debate within the public sphere, and the responsibility of the media in this sphere. As argued by Habermas (1989:219), it is through the use of reason that the debates within the public sphere can ensure that the nuances of both sides are taken into account. No clear answer has been given to the latter research question, asking what the coverage of "Syrian hero boy" can tell us about the potential of the media for safeguarding the normative ideals within the virtual public sphere. However, I argue that it shows that the potential is there, but that it is by no means fulfilled. I also argue that it might never be, especially not in times of war, in which truth is often said to be the first casualty (Knightley 2004).

This thesis has attempted to argue that it is too simplistic to assume that unmediated information flows automatically contribute towards a deliberative democracy. While there are elements of the Internet clearly enhancing participation and increasing the opportunity for access to debates (Antony and Thomas 2010), there are also other elements contributing to the opposite, such as the vast amount of misleading information and propaganda being disseminated. As the mere beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 showed the potential of social media in terms of contributing towards a public sphere (Andèn-Papadopouos and Pantti 2013:2186I), the continuation of the conflicts, especially in Syria, illustrate how actors take use of these new media for propaganda purposes.

The scope of this thesis has been wide, and it has generated more questions than answers. However, the research has been driven by a desire to understand a complex reality. The war in Syria is still ongoing, as is the propaganda war characterizing it. However, I have shown that the fabrication "Syrian hero boy" sparked international debate. I have also shown that "Syrian hero boy" was perceived as coming from Syrian activists and citizen journalists, and that its

dissemination might have decreased the credibility of these actors. However, as Fraser (2007) stresses, the very notion of the public sphere is associated with more than rational-critical debate, it also requires some sort of link between the different spheres towards the center of decision-making, and this thesis would have benefited from a thorough assessment of the international debate evolving around the war in Syria, and whether or not this fills any public sphere criteria. Lynch et al. (2014) has begun this work by analyzing the Twitter discourse. It would be an enormous task, but such an assessment, including all participants, as well as obvious non-participants, could generate a deeper understanding of whether or not transnational public deliberation is possible or not.

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8.0 APPENDICES

8.1 Full description of the film "Syrian hero boy"

Monday November 10th 2014, a video is published on Youtube, on an account with the name *Lawaff Law.* The video lasts for 1 minute, and the title is "SYRIA! SYRIAN HERO BOY rescue girl in shootout. SEE THIS!", while the additional text read "Watch this! Boy from Syria is getting shots but saves a little girl. Syrian hero boy for us. Unbelievable!". Both texts also appear in Arabic. I got it translated, and the phrasing is pretty much the same, with one exception: In the end, it reads "who is this boy?" and "He is still alive". The translator was unsure of whether the last phrase was meant as a question or not (Yasin 25.11.2015). The first frame shows the remains of a brick building; two arched entrances with another brick wall in front of them. Large rocks are lying on the ground in front of the wall, which has an opening the size of an adult person. Old tires are also lying around, collecting sand from the desert-like surroundings, and everything is either grey, or the color of the desert; sandy. It is a war zone.

The image is blurry and shaky, everything seems to be filmed with a handheld camera, perhaps a smart phone. As is the case with much of the other footage coming out from Syria up until this point, it seems to be shot by amateurs; either activists, civilians happening to be nearby, or someone who is fighting themselves. After a few seconds, voices in Arabic are heard, before gunshots are fired, and a man comes running from one of the open arches. The camera follows him to the right, as he is running past at least seven white, blue and red barrels. Loud voices are heard from somewhere the viewer cannot see. They are shouting "Allah akhbar, Allah akhbar!". The man runs out of the image frame, the camera tries to follow him, making the image even shakier. The burnt wreck of a car appears to the left, as more of the surroundings are revealed. The camera moves slowly, before something appears. It is a small boy. He lies on the ground on the left side of the burnt car wreck. He tries to get up, but as soon as he rises, shots are heard again. The unseen voices are shouting again, they seem to be coming from the person or persons filming.

By now, the image is shaking heavily, and it is difficult to see what is going on. A shot is fired. Everything stops. It seems as the boy gets hit in his back, the voices yelling "Allah Akhbar!" are hard again. The boy gets down on his knees, before collapsing to the dusty

ground. "Allah akhbar", "Allah akhbar". Miraculously, the boy gets up, trying to reach the rear end of the car. He dodges the bullets, runs the few steps over to the car, and reaches out his hand. He disappears behind the car for a second, before he shows up again, holding a small girl with a pink sweater in his arm; She follows him reluctantly. They run onto the open space, bullets hitting the ground around them. They are not hit, at least this is not captured on the camera, and they run out of the frame. The film lasts for a few seconds more, leaving the viewer in the war zone; dust, sand, blown-out windows and ruins.

8.2 Codebook for the content analysis on "Syrian hero boy"

1) Newspaper
2) Date
3) **Narrative**
    1. As the truth: No precautions are taken. "Syrian hero boy" published as a miracle from reality.
    2. As a false: Articles written after the hoax was exposed (these articles are referred to as a separate category in the method section).
    3. Publish "Syrian hero boy" as an amazing story, but includes a small disclaimer, typically "The video cannot be independently verified"
    4. The film's authenticity is questioned in the main message of the article, leaving the impression that it is just as likely to be false as it is being real.
4) **Blaming for snipers**
    1. Not stated
    2. Assad regime fighters
    3. Rebellions
    4. Not relevant
5) **Source for the video**
    1. None given (went viral)
    2. Shaam News Network
    3. Youtube
    4. Norwegian film makers (often in the name of Lars Klevberg)
6) **Speaking of authenticity**
    1. None
    2. Another media outlet
    3. Experts (not given names)
    4. An acitivist group (Shaam News Network)
    5. Not relevant
7) **Debating the film**
    1. No: The articles merely state the fact that the footage is fake, including one or to statements from the press release of the filmmakers
    2. Yes: Critical voices and filmmakers.

8.3 Dataset

Newspaper	Date	Narrative	Blaming	Source	Verifying	Authenticity	Country
Daily Star	10.11.2014	1	1	3	1	1	Lebanon
Deccan Chronicle	11.11.2014	1	1	2	1	1	India
Jerusalem Post	11.11.2014	1	1	2	1	1	Israel
Morocco World News	11.11.2014	1	1	3	1	1	Morocco
Express	11.11.2014	1	1	3	1	1	Pakistan
The Mirror	11.11.2014	1	1	2	1	1	UK
New York Post	11.11.2014	1	1	2	1	1	US
Ryot	11.11.2014	1	1	2	1	1	US
Int. Business Times	11.11.2014	1	2	3	3	1	US
ABC 7	11.11.2014	1	1	3	1	1	US
Irish Mirror	11.11.2014	3	1	2	1	1	Ireland
Independent	11.11.2014	3	1	2	3	1	UK
Daily Mail	11.11.2014	3	1	2	3	1	UK
Daily Telegraph	11.11.2014	3	2	2	3	1	UK
The Telegraph	11.11.2014	3	1	2	3	1	UK
NY Daily News	11.11.2014	3	1	2	2	1	US
Huffington Post	11.11.2014	3	2	2	1	1	US
Fox News	11.11.2014	3	1	2	3	1	US
9 News	11.11.2014	4	1	3	2	1	Australia
Metro	11.11.2014	4	1	2	2	1	UK
The Times	11.11.2014	4	1	2	4	2	UK
NAIJ	12.11.2014	1	1	2	1	1	Nigeria
TV2	12.11.2014	1	1	1	3	1	Norway
YOU South Africa	12.11.2014	1	1	2	1	1	South Africa
Gulf Elite Mag	12.11.2014	1	1	2	1	1	US/Abu Dhabi
Al Arabiya	12.11.2014	3	1	3	2	1	Dubai
Inquisitr	12.11.2014	3	1	3	2	1	Israel
The Guardian	12.11.2014	3	1	1	1	1	UK
Breitbart	12.11.2014	3	1	2	2	1	US
Yahoo News	12.11.2014	3	1	2	3	1	US
The Australian	12.11.2014	4	1	2	4	2	Australia
Fox 13	12.11.2014	4	1	2	3	1	US
Business Insider	12.11.2014	4	1	2	3	1	US
The Telegraph	14.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	UK
Independent	14.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	UK
BBC	14.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	UK
New York Post	14.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	US
Int. Business	14.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	US

Times							
CBS News	14.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	US
BuzzFeed	14.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	US
BBC	14.11.2014	4	1	3	1	1	UK
Sydney Morning Herald	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Australia
Al Arabiya	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Dubai
Zee News	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	India
Deccan Chronicle	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	India
RTE	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Ireland
Jerusalem Post	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Israel
Times of Malta	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Malta
Malta Today	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Malta
Malta now	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Malta
TV2	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway
TV2	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway
Dawn	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Pakistan
Pakistan today	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Pakistan
The Straits Times	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Singapore
The Mirror	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	UK
Daily Mail	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	UK
ITV	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	UK
Middle East Eye	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	UK
The Times	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	UK
NY Daily News	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	US
The Blaze	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	US
Huffington Post	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	US
Vice News	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	US
UPI	15.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	US
Emirates 24/7	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Dubai
EuroNews	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	France
AFP	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	France
Times of Israel	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Israel
The Daily Star	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Lebanon
NZ Herald	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	New Zealand
NRK	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway
NTB	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway
VG	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway
Aftenposten	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway
Gulf Times	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Qatar
Arab News	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	1	Saudi-Arabia
Int. Business Times	16.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	US
News Australia	17.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Australia

Dagbladet	17.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway
Arab News	17.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Saudi-Arabia
BBC	17.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	UK
Daily Mail	17.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	UK
The Atlantic	17.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	US
Huffington Post	17.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	US
France 24	18.11.2014	2	1	4	5	2	France
VG	18.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway
TV2	18.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway
New York Times	18.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	US
NY Daily News	18.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	US
Haaretz	19.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Israel
Rushprint	19.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway
Rushprint	20.11.2014	2	4	4	5	2	Norway