



May 2019 - When private individuals, normally the consumers of journalism, start generating their own news content, they become what is generally known as citizen journalists.

This is what accidentally happened to Wael al-Omar, a young teacher from Syria, as the peaceful protests that started the Syria uprising were forcefully quenched by the regime.

UNRIC has talked to Wael ahead of world press freedom day celebrated annually on 3 May.

Since [January 2019](#) , 8 journalists, 1 citizen journalist and 1 media assistant have been killed.

On average, a journalist is killed every [four](#) days.

Syria – one of the deadliest countries for reporters

Today, only Afghanistan ranks worse than Syria when it comes to the safety of journalists – two countries in stark opposite to Norway, Finland and Sweden who top the list with Denmark in place 5 and Iceland 14th.

Defying risks, citizen reporting often isn't a conscious choice but rather a result of a series of events, says Wael.

"I moved to the countryside when the violence began, around 2012. My house slowly became a strategic spot where lots of supply – humanitarian as well as other equipment – switched hands and were transported, or smuggled, into Homs. There was lots of communications devices, also a satellite device. I had some technical skills and also spoke English so people started asking me to translate this, to install that and then things just started evolving. It wasn't planned.", says Wael al-Omar.

Amateur journalists around the world produce news in many forms, ranging from podcasts and videos to a reporting about a demonstration or even conflict setting – often via video. Social media plays a major role in disseminating news and promoting citizen journalism content.

"We got a laptop, then got our hands on a camcorder. As I knew my way around social media, we started recording and I started uploading", Wael tells UNRIC. "I sort of became an expert in the matter, somewhat involuntarily. And whenever heavy shelling began and people started running away, I was running in the other direction in order to document."

As the general public today has unprecedented access to technology, citizens are often the first on-scene for breaking news, getting these stories out more quickly than traditional media reporters.

During that period, shelling and bombing was heavy. No Western journalists could share footage from Syria, which made the role of the civil journalists all the more important, according to Wael. Often, he was able to provide first-hand accounts and eye-witness videos, using social media for dissemination.

But whether professional or civilian, reporting from a conflict setting means running heavy risks.

“I was part of setting up a media centre, but people actually didn’t know I was involved. I kept my secrecy and worked in the shade. It was best that way in order to protect both them, me and my family. It’s best to work by yourself, not to be connected to a group or ideology.”

Then, suddenly, came a turning point that caught the Western world’s attention.

“The international war correspondents Marie Colvin and Paul Conroy had managed to enter Syria illegally, and they had been taken to Homs. Because of my English skills I ended up being their guide”, says Wael. “That’s also how the other people at the media centre found out about my role – they had had no idea that the equipment they were using had passed through me, or that I had been part of reporting. They went like “what are YOU doing here?”

Wael worked closely with Marie and Paul, helping them to get out a story on the “ [Widow’s basement](#) ” that stirred debate all over the world after having uncovered the plight of the civilians in Syria through “official” channels.

The article became Marie Colvin’s last report. The media centre was discovered, and she lost her life in the targeted bombings that followed. Paul Conroy and Wael al-Omar were both injured but survived. Their compelling story was later turned into an award-winning documentary, “Under The Wire”, that was screened by UNRIC’s [UN Cinema](#) earlier this spring in several European capitals.



[UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#)