

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> 10007140 Birmingham City University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 34 – Media and Cultural Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Check Global: Improving digital literacy and strengthening citizen journalism and media activism in the Global South		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014 - Present		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Dima Saber	Reader in Media & Cultural Studies	2014-present
Dr Jerome Turner	Lecturer	2006-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Our research on digital literacy and social impact has led the way in enhancing digital media skills for activists, journalism students, archivists and human rights advocates across the Global South. Through a partnership with Meedan, a US-based technology organisation, and an extensive network of over 20 civil society groups in the North Africa Western Asia region, in Latin America, East Africa, and the Philippines, our research has:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. improved media literacy skills for a total of 7,407 beneficiaries through the provision of online and offline training, strengthening their role as investigators and contributors to the public sphere;</li> <li>2. created a replicable programmatic framework, including a monitoring and evaluation toolkit, which has helped partner organisations expand and thrive, now used in 24 countries as the main evaluation tool;</li> <li>3. transformed the scale and quality of citizen journalism activity documenting the Syrian uprising-war and preserved the work of these citizen photographers and videographers.</li> </ol>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The underpinning research was carried out by Saber and Turner and built on work which focussed on the North Africa Western Asia (NAWA) region in UoA34 since 2014. The research emerged as a response to the need for Arab journalists, media activists, journalism students, archivists and human rights advocates to operate as efficient voices of dissent in the aftermaths of the 2011 Arab uprisings.</p> <p>Saber and Turner's research was conducted alongside the Check project, which was launched by technology partner Meedan in 2014, with funding from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). The project is focussed on three main interventions: a) the provision of online and offline training; b) the establishment of effective collaborations which can address issues of shared concern between grassroots organisations from across the region; c) and the development of a public and open-access verification tool, freely available to an extensive network of regional partners. These aims are achieved through a programme designed around five interconnected strands of action research: training, network, technology, academic evaluation and dissemination, and data. The research team co-produced the design and delivery of this programme, enabling them to identify the main barriers facing the delivery of digital literacy projects in the NAWA region, and in producing and disseminating effective interventions to address those barriers.</p> <p>In addition to managing the programmatic activities, Saber and Turner lead the project's impact assessment, taking on the responsibility for training project partners on the design and delivery of quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods customised for the realities and particular challenges they face in their own contexts (R01).</p>		

Check is simultaneously a gateway to disseminate research-informed interventions and a vehicle for Saber and Turner to research digital literacy and its relationship to social impact in conflict and post-revolution settings, particularly in relation to the years following the 2011 Arab uprisings. The research findings engaged with how the NAWA region became increasingly shaken by conflict, government-sponsored propaganda, and controls over journalism and its practitioners, and revealed the complex tensions, ignored in the literature in the field, between the utopian discourses of 'the Arab Spring' that positioned social media as contributing positively to activism and protest while, in reality, many Arab countries struggle to achieve their democratic aspirations (R01 & R04).

These theoretical interventions underpinned the research teams' efforts to identify and contribute towards solutions that were produced by and through grassroots community partners. Dr Saber's deep-rooted connections within independent networks across the region put the research team in a unique position to:

- identify ways to develop and sustain that work through the provision of digital literacy training and open-access tools to inform approaches to the challenges faced by activists, journalists and civil rights advocates who work in high-risk environments (R01);
- preserve crowd-sourced documentations of human rights abuses in the context of the Syrian war by shaping narratives within academic, activist, legal and human rights circles regarding the historic and mnemonic value of archives (R02 & R03);
- document and explore civic engagement and a plurality of media through the development of new, dissenting journalistic voices (R04).

In 2019, SIDA funded an expansion of the team's work to include similar activity in a further ten countries beyond the NAWA region, in East Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America. Working alongside the BCU research team, the Check Global network now operates in 24 countries across the Global South and continues to address the challenge of enhancing digital literacy skills and citizen journalism practices in unstable, decentralised and constantly evolving media ecosystems.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

**R01:** Turner, J., & Saber, D. (2021). Understanding factors and barriers to alternative media development in emerging economies: Learning from the Check Global project. *First Monday*, 26(2). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i2.11370> - <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/11370>

**R02:** Saber, D. (2020) 'Transitional what?': Perspectives from Syrian videographers on the YouTube take-downs and the 'video-as-evidence' ecology' in Agostinho, D. et al. (eds), *(W)archives. Archival Imaginaries, War and Contemporary Art*, Sternberg Press, pp. 385-408.

**R03:** Saber, D. and Long, P. (2017), '*I will not leave, my freedom is more precious than my blood*' From affect to precarity: crowd-sourced citizen archives as memories of the Syrian war'. *Archives and Records*, 1: 38, pp. 80-99, doi: 10.1080/23257962.2016.s

**R04:** Saber, D. (2015), 'Checkdesk: Sorting, Developing & Disseminating Citizen Reporting in the MENA Region', *Humanitarianism 2.0. Global Policy Journal*, Special report, ISBN 978-0-9933536 In Bazerli, G., Bean, T., Crandall, A., Coutin, M., Kasindi, L., Procter, R. N., Rodger, S., Saber, D., Slachmuis, L. and Trewinnard, T. 2015 *Humanitarianism 2.0. Global Policy Journal* <http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/72973/>.

#### Grants:

- Check Global (2019 - 2021); Phase VI funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) USD4.5M; £250,000 value for BCU.
- Check: Developing Citizen Journalism in the Arab region (2014 – 2019); Phases I-V funded by the FCO & the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) total up to January 2019 (USD5M; £450,000 value for BCU).
- Resistance-by-Recording: The Visibility and Visuality of Contentious Political Action in Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Palestine (2018-2019) funded by the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences (£64,000).

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact demonstrated in this case study builds on research and public engagement activities which have been ongoing since 2014. Working in close collaboration with Check Global lead

partner Meedan, the research team succeeded in building a high-impact network of journalism students, activists, archivists, human rights advocates and community organisations across 24 countries in the NAWA region and across the Global South (S01). To date, a total of 7,407 people (S02) have been engaged and trained across the world. Our research has:

### 1. Improved media literacy skills in five countries across the NAWA region

Since 2014, 2,432 citizen and trainee journalists in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Yemen and the Western Sahara took part in a multimedia training programme designed and delivered by BCU researchers and their network of Check partners (S02). Participants received in-person and online training on digital literacy skills, including but not limited to: writing for the web; open-source investigative journalism; fact-checking tools; online advocacy; digital security and ethics. The context in which the training programme was delivered was particularly challenging as it engaged participants either based in conflict countries (Syria and Yemen), or in revolution and/or post-revolution countries (Egypt, Lebanon and the Western Sahara).

One example of a successful pathway intervention that helped to improve skills and enhance journalistic practice is with the Faculty of Media and Documentation at the Lebanese University. In 2016, the research team provided digital literacy skills training to the teaching staff before identifying that a similar intervention in more focused journalism training would be beneficial to their students. The students' involvement in covering the first 'CheckCon' conference, in Beirut in April 2017, developed into a more established Check Media Newsroom, which to date remains active (S03). The students involved in the newsroom were drawn from the East and West Beirut campuses – a division which is a legacy of the Lebanese civil war. The students met and collaborated on a project for the very first time. This represented a significant landmark in their journalism training, as explained by one of the Lebanese Newsroom students: *"Sharing experience and practicing journalistic skills together with my colleagues from another campus was, and still is, a learning process, and an empowering one [...] especially that we're all struggling with the same issues in Lebanon, but never got to work with each other, or listen to each other's problems. I have learned a lot from the newsroom, it took me with a tight fist to the field of journalism"* (S04).

From 2019, the effectiveness of the Check Media Newsroom was enhanced through its expansion and strengthened expertise. A total of 35 students from 5 Arab countries, including Syria, Yemen, Egypt and Tunis, are currently engaged in the training program, offering them the opportunity to collaborate, for the first time, on pan-Arab projects and investigations. The students receive bi-weekly training support in digital literacy, open-source investigations, digital advocacy and digital security skills, delivered by the BCU team and the project's network of practicing journalists and civil society activists across the world. This has ensured their journalism training better prepares them for a competitive job market. The success of these interventions is highlighted by a professor at the American University of Cairo, whose students are involved in the newsroom: *"Working with the NAWA newsroom has been an enriching experience for them. Our students work mostly with other Egyptians or on occasion with students from Western nations. On this project they were able to collaborate with like-minded students from across the region which has been a good opportunity for transborder cooperation and a learning opportunity for them. I have no doubt that the select group working on this project will become the journalists of the future in a region that is in much need of high calibre professionals"* (S04).

### 2. Created a replicable framework to successfully expand Check in 24 countries across the Global South

The Check project's three main interventions around journalism training, responding to shared concerns about the effectiveness of citizen journalism and the development of an open-access verification tool, have been expanded into Sub-Saharan Africa, South America and Asia. In 2019, and in response to the rising threats of misinformation and discourses around 'fake news', BCU and its partner, Meedan, succeeded in securing further funding to expand their work to include new partners in East Africa (Zimbabwe, Kenya and Tanzania), Latin America (Mexico, Colombia,

Brazil, Costa Rica and Venezuela) and Southeast Asia (Philippines) (S01). The Check Global project (2019-2021) collaborates with over 20 organisations across the Global South and supports emerging practices in online journalism, digital literacy skills, disinformation monitoring, and verification of digital media.

Key to Saber and Turner's knowledge exchange work has been the development of a Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit (S08). This kit is now used by partners in 24 countries as the main evaluation framework for their training and public engagement activities. Many of the partners are small grassroots organisations and this is the first time they have had access to tools to help them systematically collect and analyse their progress. The CEO of Meedan acknowledges that BCU's contribution has been essential to the project's expansion: *"Dr Saber's strategic oversight of Check Global's programmatic activities, and her team's work on our monitoring and evaluation frameworks have largely contributed to Meedan's growth, and to our partners' ability to properly evaluate their systems and workflows, sustain their organisations and thrive"* (S09).

### **3. Preserved the work of citizen photographers and videographers in Syria and ensured this archive is utilised in citizen journalism training to empower the next generation of journalists in the region.**

Syrian Archive is a collective of human rights activists and archivists dedicated to curating visual documentations of human rights violations and other crimes committed during the conflict in Syria, with the goal of creating an evidence-based database for reporting, advocacy and accountability purposes.

Interviews with citizen archivists (based inside Syria and the Syrian diaspora) and the collection of hundreds of testimonials record the contributions of the Syrian archivists for their mnemonic, legal and historical value. Without the intervention of the BCU's team's research and engagement it is unlikely that this material would have been archived, utilised in the training of new journalists, or preserved as an effective historical document. The Program Director of Syrian Archive has stated that: *"2021 marks the tenth anniversary of the revolution in Syria. We have gathered so many images and recordings which attest to what has been happening since 2011. Working with Dr Dima Saber, we have gained valuable expertise in processing and preserving archives so they could be used as legal evidence. We have tried over the years to get the voice of activists and archivists to international institutions, but we have always been ignored. This is the first time that a project enables us to get our voice heard, through making sure archives are preserved, in our own names, so we are recognised as the true witnesses of what is happening in our country"* (S06).

With the support of the Check project, Mnemonic (which runs Syrian Archive and Yemeni Archive) have trained 1,005 citizen journalists and media activists since 2018 on open-source verification tools, enhancing skills in the documentation of war crimes and human rights violations in both Yemen and Syria. These interventions have expanded the organisation's base of volunteers and contributors, alongside improving trainees' media literacy and archiving skills, so they are better equipped to collect, verify and preserve digital documentations of human rights abuses in their countries. A lead researcher of the Syrian Archive team explains: *"For human rights defenders to be able to effectively use the ever-larger amounts of content which documents human rights violations, best practices must scale beyond a select few experts within the open-source investigative community...Our partnership with Meedan and BCU on the Check project has allowed more individuals and organisations from historically excluded communities to feel equipped and empowered to use archival and open-source investigative best practices in a way that reflects their own contexts, building the connections needed to share, adapt and improve them"* (S05).

By enabling the production and preservation of crowd-sourced content from Syria, Dr Saber's ongoing collaboration with Syrian Archive on their Digital Memory project (S07) has ensured the voices of citizen photographers and videographers from the region are available to a global

audience. This provides counter-evidence to the claims of despotic regimes, and limited Western media perspective, that dominates media coverage of the Syrian uprising-war. Recent Western mainstream media, academic and civil society circles has focussed on the misuse of social media data, distracting attention from the value of corporate social media platforms such as YouTube to citizen journalists and activist. The archiving of the important work produced, and sharing of this material with the next generation of activist and journalists, creates a new sense of empowerment and agency for citizen journalism. This counters the over emphasis on the role of technologies in understanding how social media are used in political discourse.

In summary, this case study has demonstrated how Saber and Turner's research-led activities have delivered high-impact interventions across numerous countries in the NAWA region, often in conflict zones. The efficacy of the digital literacy training, verification tools and evaluation techniques developed in close collaboration with a growing network of partners coalescing around their work, has extended that impact to other areas of the Global South throughout the current census period, creating the foundation for legacy and continued impact beyond 2021.

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

**S01:** Check Global report and Meedan website

Screenshot of Check Global page on the Meedan website showing BCU as partner <https://meedan.com/projects/check-global/>; Extract of Check Global report showing Check Global partners in the NAWA region, in Latin America, East Africa and the Philippines.

**S02:** Quantitative reports on trainees and engagement metrics

Full reports with quantitative data on trainees and engagement metrics in different countries of focus as evidenced in a compilation of impact assessment reports submitted to SIDA since 2014 to date (dropdown: NAWA Phases III-VI (Check Global Y1 & Y2) = 2,432; Global South Phases III-VI (Check Global Y1 & Y2) = 4,975; Total = 7,407 beneficiaries.

**S03:** NAWA website demonstrating training outputs and activity

Screenshots from NAWA media website, including the newsroom page <https://nawamedia.org/newsroom/>; and the training resources page <https://nawamedia.org/courses/> with 10 online courses in Arabic and English for project users and the wider public.

**S04:** Testimonials from those involved in student training

Check newsroom testimonial letters from a Lebanese University student involved in the newsroom since 2017, and the Associate Professor of Journalism & Associate Dean for Graduate Studies & Research, American University of Cairo. **[Named Corroborators 1 and 2]**

**S05:** Testimonial regarding collaboration on the documentation of human rights abuses in Syria

Testimonial from the lead researcher at Mnemonic, Syrian Archive. **[Named Corroborator 3]**

**S06:** Testimonial regarding collaboration on the Digital Memory Project

Testimonial from the Programs Director of Syrian Archive.

**S07:** The Syrian Archive Digital Memory Project <https://syrianarchive.org/en/memory>

Screenshot from the Syrian Archive Digital Memory Project website <https://syrianarchive.org/en/memory>

**S08:** Check Global M&E Toolkit <https://nawamedia.org/monitoring-and-evaluation-toolkit/>

Screenshot of the online Toolkit.

**S09:** Testimonial from the CEO of Meedan. **[Named Corroborator 4]**