

## NEW MEDIA USED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

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***Abstract:** This paper is meant to provide insight into the usage of new media in the context of the conflict in Syria, tracing back to transformations previously entailed by the anti-authoritarian social movements generally known as “the Arab Spring”. It also explores how media usage transformations in times of civil war turned simple users into media activists, and ultimately into war combatants.*

***Keywords:** new media, media activists, Syrian conflict, Arab Spring*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The new media and the emergence of social networks have definitively transformed and continue to shape the communication process. They enable, more than traditional mass media, an increasing communication range and a new participation structure. Hereby a transition takes place: the sender-receiver model of the previously unilateral information transfer through a medium is replaced by a multilateral, network-like communication structure. The recipients and transmitters have now an almost equal opportunity to use the medium and thus actively contribute to the construction of the message. The new participatory structure, the extended communication range, and the acceleration of the communication process, apart from the lack of supervisory mechanisms and the emergence of fake news, are just a few changes that have occurred with the new media.

Shaping the political communication, the new media and the social networks lead also to a shift in the power relations. Just as the development of the modern mass media at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the concomitant transformation of communication structures have favored, yet not determined the emergence of totalitarian systems, the power relations have been changed with the emergence of the new media in an opposite direction, towards a democratization of media usage and of the political sphere. However, this growing public participation does not remain without any response from political actors. Authoritarian regimes, in particular, reacted to this by improving their own appearance in the new media, but also by restricting communication options through nationalization and polarization of the traditional mass media. Nonetheless, by changing the participation structure of the (political) communication process, protest cultures and social movements can evolve more easily.

Going a step further to the civil war-like conflicts, one can assume that media is being used as a weapon by all sides. This is not a novelty considering that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, media – be it newspapers, war painting or war photography, and then newsreels or cinematography – had been used in fact more as an instrument in order to legitimize the war.

The important change occurring in the present is the network-like, interactive participation in the construction of media messages as well as the widespread access of civilians to social networks. What is also new, are the social movements that use media as mobilization and combat tools.

Considering these media transformations, the present paper deals with the changing nature of conflicts, focusing on the Syrian conflict region. Without paying particular attention to the use of media by the state apparatus or political rulers, who continue to adapt to the new conditions and instrumentalize new and old media in order to achieve their own interests, special attention is paid rather to the participation of the civilian population in the war, which actually represents the novelty of the conflict unfolding. This raises the question: what role do the new media play in the Syrian conflict and how do civil media users become war combatants?

In order to provide a better understanding of the civilian war involvement through media, the first section of the paper emphasizes the importance of media already for the emergence and proliferation of social movements during the Arab Spring. The second section of the paper thus focuses on various media usage practices in Syria including those of the activists group called “Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently”, whose origins and impact have been made more visible to the Western or international public by the acclaimed American documentary “City of Ghosts” (Matthew Heineman, 2017) [11]. Based on this, the paper finally explores the changes and challenges of new media usage by civil journalists during the wartime in Syria.

## **2. THE NEW MEDIA AND THE PROLIFERATION OF THE ARAB SPRING**

The term “Arab Spring” represents mainly the Western perspective upon the anti-authoritarian uprisings in the Middle East, as this social movement which started 2011 in several countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Syria was attributed a touch of hope for a possible democratization. Promising in this context were also the new media which changed political communication towards a critical public. Despite or even because the repressive political systems, this critical public sphere slowly developed and culminated in street demonstrations. Considering the limited freedom of expression, the restrictive media policies and the systematic persecution of dissident media activists prior to the revolutionary movement in these countries [7], the upheavals represented a turning point in which new media have been extensively used as instruments of disagreement with the own political regimes. Nevertheless, transformation toward a critical public occurred earlier.

The scientific landscape is also divided over the importance of social media during the Arab Spring. While some scholars extrapolate the role of the new media for anti-authoritarian movements [2, 3, 7, 10], others try to take a more nuanced view, discouraging media determinism [1, 5, 8]. These uprisings neither have occurred due to increasing media consumption, nor have been influenced primarily by social media, but emerged mainly because of the enduring unfavorable social and economic conditions and the serious violations of human rights. However, there is agreement that social media has been used rather to inform the international community about the course of the movement. Individual studies draw attention to the role of new media during the Arab Spring, which should be considered in terms of temporal and spatial progress of social movements, in relation to other, traditional media and also in the cultural context of the Arab society [8].

The studies of Rinke and Röder [8] and Sean Aday [1] are particularly noteworthy firstly, because it provides a broaden communication analysis model of social movements, and secondly, because special emphasis is placed rather on consuming than producing media messages.

Both studies relativize, however, the role of social networks during the Arab Spring, pointing to their interaction with traditional media, mainly with the regional television broadcaster Al Jazeera.

Addressing the use of various media during the events in Egypt, while also considering the cultural context of the Arab region, Rinke and Röder conclude that new media, despite of being generally accessed by younger population segments, were used, in particular, after journalists were barred from accessing Tahrir Square [8]. The only way to continue the movement was to keep public attention to the street demonstrations by sending videos to the regional traditional media. But the most important reason why the movement has not stopped even after the continuing interdiction measures of the Egyptian authorities was, according to the authors, due to the oral Arabic culture, which still relied on rather personal contacts and more direct information practices than media-based communication. This ultimately allowed the movement to be maintained even with lesser support from social media [8].

A slightly different approach, which also emphasizes the intermedial convergence, has been provided by Sean Aday [1]. Comparing more countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain, the study examines the links accessed on Twitter during the first months of the social movement. It has been shown that not only the number of clicks have varied considerably from one country to another, but also that the majority of clicks originated from non-Arab regions. Moreover, much of the links posted on Twitter were related to traditional media articles [1].

Therefore, it can be seen that media convergence was much deeper than expected, and that the sole extrapolation of social media during the Arab Spring would somewhat distort the reality. Because it was not just the rebroadcast of social network messages in the classical, mostly regional or Western media in order to impart unreachable information, but rather the reverse was also the case, and that social media networks had circulated links referring to reports in the classical media in order to create credibility or make transnational events tangible.

Social media were consequently not a trigger, but an instrument of anti-authoritarian demonstrations. They have been used in the uprising along with traditional media and other social practices. Nonetheless, one could conclude that new media did not represent a singular tool for mass mobilization, but they were rather a singular option for the smaller circle of active dissidents or civil journalists both before and during the uprisings. It was the only relative free communication space in which regime criticism could be practiced nationally, distributed regionally and, in particular, could be communicated transnationally to the Western or international community.

### **3. THE SYRIAN CONFLICT AS A MEDIATIC BATTLEFIELD**

The consequences of this social and medial development during the Arab Spring proved to be crucial for the conflict unfolding in Syria. The anti-authoritarian protests in Syria followed the movements during the Arab Spring. Already in March 2011, street demonstrations of the Syrian population against the Bashar al Assad regime were recorded. As in the other countries before, new media has been used for mobilization on the ground but also for informing the general public [2, 9, 10]. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, the political demonstrations in Syria proved unsuccessful. Instead, there has been a radicalization of political conditions especially after parts of the country have been occupied by rebel groups and by the expanding Islamic State. The repression of the civilian population by both the Assad regime and the Islamic State has plunged the country into a protracted civil war in which the social media usage for the purpose of political protest has acquired a completely clandestine role.

Consequently, one can now speak less of media as a mobilization tool, but in fact – as Mareike Meis [6] rightly noticed – as a weapon in the struggle for interpretation of the violent events in Syria. In this struggle, each part has adapted and perfected its communication methods and techniques, exposing media usage to an ongoing change.

Since journalists were forbidden access in this region due to the war conditions, the only actors in this media conflict remained the Assad regime having control over the traditional media and the different dissident or anti-regime factions using primarily social media. Lorenzo Trombetta [10] investigates this cyber warfare in the first months of the Syrian revolt, hinting at perfecting “fighting methods” from both sides, which were resorting to combined media usage. While at the beginning of the movement the Syrian authorities blocked access to the online media, a paradigm shift took place in February 2011: all media were admitted, new platforms were created, people were mobilized for street demonstrations and finally the revolt broke out in several cities, which was again brutally crushed by the police. In addition to the propagandistic content in the state-dominated traditional media, Syrian authorities also opened an Internet platform on which the “false reporting” of media activists has been denounced [10]. Trombetta points out that the Assad regime has adapted its methods to the extent that media activists themselves have been counteracted by cyberattacks [10], while the activists in turn sent videos to foreign traditional media, distributed newspapers and pamphlets, so they finally resorted to classical communication methods [10].

Another study carried out later by field research on Syrian border areas and narrative interviews with activists and refugees shows a more grim picture of the conflict and media landscape in Syria. The authors Rohde *et al.* [9] critically address the assumption that social media have played a primary role in Syria, stressing the importance of a deeper contextualization of war conditions in which the media landscape is constantly changing. They also emphasize a turning point in the Syrian media usage: while the initial demonstrations could still be organized on Facebook, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or even Skype have been completely banned, especially in the rebel controlled regions, or they were used for the persecution of the political opponents [9, p. 529].

*“While in case of the shorter Arab uprisings single users were banned from using Internet sources and social media, during the longer-lasting wartime in Syria government, secret services and telecom providers cut off Internet infrastructure for whole cities and regions.”* [9].

The restriction of Internet access and telephone lines had a significant impact on the unfolding events, as it not only affected and disabled media activists, but also isolated large parts of the Syrian society. Also the Internet cafes, which are very popular in Syria due to the already low Internet penetration, have been put under increased scrutiny, making the dissemination of dissident messages on social networks almost impossible. Facebook was still considered important, but remained for the least an option. While some activists developed different strategies such as using multiple user profiles, including pro-regime profiles, in order to confuse possible controls, others shared a single account or even shared the tasks of video recording, editing, and uploading on Internet platforms [9]. The authors conclude that from all media, the amateur video footage – taken by both perpetrators and witnesses of the atrocities, and distributed among themselves or uploaded to Youtube - was the most widespread instrument of struggle for “documentation, mobilization, and propaganda” in Syria [9].

Therefore, an important aspect of media use as a weapon in the Syrian conflict is that, because of war conditions and limited access to online media, the importance of professional media activists has grown. Another improvement in their work, which in turn points to the continuing shift in media usage during conflict situations, relies on transnational cooperation not only between activists working within Syria and regional or international traditional media, but also between media activists operating inside and outside Syria.

War narratives are thus not only visually created through amateur video footage on Youtube, - to which Mareike Meis [6] already points out -, but also through narrations transmitted to media activists outside Syria and spread further by them.

In this regard, “Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently” is probably the most notorious media activist group from Syria, precisely due to its transnational reach, but also because of its appearances in the Western traditional media. Moreover, it has become even more famous with the documentary “City of Ghosts” (2017) produced by the American director Matthew Heineman, considering that the film has been awarded several times and it is still being distributed online by amazon. The film appearance of the activist group can once again be seen as an act of media conflict and a change in the media usage at the same time. Tracing the origins and the activity of this group, one can draw conclusions about media usage practices before and during the Syrian civil war, comparing them with the results of other studies.

During the later stage of the uprising against the Assad regime in March 2012, “Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently” (RBSS) initially formed as a small group of activists, led primarily by politically inexperienced students. Professionalization of their media campaigns as a result of internal journalism training and a tightening of their political activities on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as the transmission of video footage to Arab media, emerged only in summer 2014, after the city of Raqqa has been occupied by the Islamic State. Persecutions, torture and street executions of possible opponents, training of child soldiers, or the abolition of any communication possibilities with the outside world became part of everyday life in Raqqa and made further political activity of the group impossible. Consequently, the political activity has been transnationalized: whereas some group members moved at the Turkish-Syrian border, and others in Germany, a few of these activists remained in Raqqa. A periodic relocation helped these groups not being identified.

Moreover, technical professionalization increased on both sides. While the IS published professionally filmed recruitment campaigns and other threatening video footages on Internet platforms, the RBSS media activists decided to gain more international public attention both online and offline by participating to street demonstrations or information campaigns (in Germany).

Comparing the activities and the media usage of the RBSS activist group with civilian journalists described in previous studies, it can be stated that during the conflict in Syria, the media use has changed several times, and also that the media war, at least in case of RBSS, has been finally transnationalized.

Regarding these transformations, one could draw the following conclusions: firstly, the changes in the social media usage, as well as the alternation of new and old media eventually excludes the widespread assumption that anti-authoritarian movements in the Middle East have been guided primarily by social media. Secondly, the technical improvement permitted the circulation not only of amateur video footages on Internet platforms, but also of professional filmed videos and information campaigns, which finally shaped visual representations and perceptions of the Syrian war. Furthermore, the change of social practices related to the activists’ media usage in conflict periods included among others the distribution of tasks, different online dissimulation strategies as well as periodic relocations.

The fragmentation and transnationalization of media activist groups turned out to be another changing strategy, considering the restricted action on the ground under worsening war conditions. Last but not least, one should also consider the psychological implications of those civilians becoming civil journalists and ultimately war combatants.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The present paper attempted to address the role of new media in the Syrian conflict, raising the question of how simple civilian media users become war combatants.

War and media have always been interrelated, old or new media being primarily used by state actors for propagandistic purposes. The new media introduces a turning point in which the changing communication structure allows each user to create and disseminate messages in the public sphere.

This has profound consequences when it comes to the question of political communication, considering also the increasing potential involvement of civilians.

Taking this media change into account, the paper has shown that new media, far from being similarly used in the Arab countries, have permitted the emergence of a critical public and have had a mobilization and information function during the Arab Spring. However, it has been also emphasized that it was not just the new media that facilitated the emergence of these social movements, but rather a convergence of new and old media.

With the Syrian conflict, the new media reached a new dimension. Under war conditions, restrictive measures prevented widespread Internet usage by civilians and the new media have thus lost their potential mobilization function on the ground. The importance of professional media activists has instead increased, leading eventually to an internationalization of the political struggle. The accelerated transformation of media usage in times of conflict has turned these activists into war combatants, as they have been involved in a “new war” [4] which still continues to prove its chameleonic features.

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