

Introduction to Communication, Culture, and Technology (CCTP-505)

Fall 2011

Final Reflection Paper: Syria's Media Powered Revolution

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Media is a major factor that made the Arab Spring possible. That is, both social media and broadcast/journalism media. Their combination has allowed the flow of information in a way that empowered the uprising and created a new-founded power for media to reshape the world. In this paper, the example of Syria, one of the Arab Spring nations, will be looked at and reflected on the areas of mediology (Dr. Martin Irvine's lecture) and new broadcast/journalism (Dr. Kimberly Meltzer's lecture).

Furthermore, it will be explored how those forms of media worked simultaneously in supporting the revolution.

Problem

In the past, before internet became widespread in Syria, and before the emergence of social media, it was relatively easy for intelligence forces to spy on communications and spot any activity suggesting the slightest potential of revolt. Consequently, the dictatorship ruled with an iron fist for several decades. It is interesting to mention that Syria didn't allow the internet until year 2000, and even then it remained very limited, running at extremely low speeds and banning most popular websites and services. With the passing of time, connection quality and speed developed, and people became increasingly experienced with proxies and other methods to break access bans.

Social media, which was also banned, caught on very quickly in Syria as it had everywhere else. The ban was lifted in early 2011 in an effort by the government to create reforms, hoping it would stop a possible uprising. However, the use of such media was already strongly established within the Syrian society. After the success of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, Syrians were inspired to create their own revolution, also armed by social media. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube were used to plan and coordinate protests and other revolt activities in a way that overwhelmed intelligence forces unable to keep up with the immense speed and mass of information flow. Also, since Syria bans all forms of foreign media coverage and only allows biased government-owned networks to broadcast, people had to rely on

themselves in delivering the real picture of events to the world, including the government's deadly crackdown against them. Amateur footage, photographs, blog posts, and other forms of information filled the internet and social media websites. This is where professional journalism came in. Giant broadcast networks, Al-Jazeera being the most prominent example, took this information provided by normal people – amateur photographers, bloggers, and artists- not professional reporters - and regulated the flow and outreach of it to the world. Without social media, Al-Jazeera would have not been able to cover the Syrian Uprising as it has. With no reporters or cameramen allowed on Syrian soil, it was entirely dependent on information provided from social media. Such a method has been criticized by some. They claim that Al-Jazeera and similar networks lost their credibility and professionalism by depending on non-professional sources which are not verified and could be fabricated. However, Al-Jazeera has always been a trusted and revered news source in the Middle East and other places, and such criticism is obviously biased since it mainly comes from the regime supporters.

My hypothesis assumes that both social media and broadcast media have been major players dependant on one another. Had one of them been absent, the other would not have functioned properly in empowering and facilitating the Syrian uprising. Each added value to the other. Social media provided the information, while Al-Jazeera provided the professional expertise of organizing, regulating, and broadcasting such information to the masses.

Research Questions:

- How has social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube along with other technological and social factors empowered the people of Syria and allowed their revolution to take place and be reached to the world?
- How is journalism being reshaped and affected by social media? Why does the dependence of Al-Jazeera - a major news broadcaster - on those sources of information add value to them, rather than downgrade the professionalism of Al-Jazeera?

Method & Answers

To study this hypothesis, the best approach would be a subjective one, in which close observing of posts being made on social websites is done, helping to figure out trends in the nature of posts, images, and videos uploaded, as well as analyzing comments and how they have created a unified movement resulting in the uprising. Also, a close observation needs to be done on how Al-Jazeera selects which posts to broadcast, which to focus on, and which to ignore. This will help form an understanding on how Al-Jazeera determines credibility of information, and whether it is being biased or unbiased in its selections. In addition, a comparison study needs to be done, to compare both the posts made online, and the nature of news broadcasted on Al-Jazeera to figure out if they are consistent and complementary.

To understand the power given by social media to the Syrian uprising, we need to take a look at the mediology involved – which is the interdisciplinary approach that includes the technologies, media, history, and social build. The technological factors that gave social media its power include its ease of use, and how it allows communication across large masses. It has provided a means for millions of people to actively organize the uprising together, which is impossible for intelligence forces to track. Other technological factors include the rapid availability of cameras and camera cell phones, computers, and connections which people use to create footage and posts. Also, many Syrians from all ages and educational levels have formed technical skills and experiences over the years in improving connections and breaking internet bans, as well as using it for a freedom of expression they couldn't practice elsewhere.

Additionally, it can be understood that journalism in this age needs to embrace social media as a valuable source of information. Classical methods of reporting, such as interviews, although highly important, are no longer enough in delivering a complete picture of the intense world events of the present. However, selection of which information to portray and which not needs to be done carefully and within certain standards that aim at maximizing validity and professionalism. Not everything posted on a social media is viable, and therefore journalists need to be very selective and keen in using the correct kind of information.