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STUDY of
JOURNALISM

**Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper
University of Oxford**

**Good media, bad politics? New media and
the Syrian conflict**
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Michaelmas Term 2013
Sponsor: Thomson Reuters

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go to Thomson Reuters and everyone at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism for allowing me the space and the company to think at greater length about new media's role in the Syria conflict. Particular thanks go to Nic Newman, my supervisor, for his thoughts and advice – and to James Painter, John Lloyd and David Levy for their comments. Thanks also to the Airey Neave Trust for their support for my writing on Syria, and to The Guardian, Vanity Fair, The Atlantic Monthly, The Nation, The New Republic, The London Review of Books and Newsweek for commissioning me to write about the conflict.

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1. Introduction

In the spring of 2011 a 23-year-old Damascene called Amjad Siofy found his political voice. This was the Arab Spring and the news from Egypt and Tunisia, beamed into Syrian households on Al-Jazeera and on YouTube, started an earthquake in the dusty, neglected southern city of Dara'a which rumbled throughout the whole country. Almost everywhere in the Arab world people were demanding the fall of sclerotic security states and Syria, after fifty years in the headlock of Ba'athist hegemony, seemed certain to be next.

Like many thousands of young Syrians, Amjad Siofy threw himself into the protest movement. When the secret police and regime's paramilitaries moved to intimidate and crush it, he found a clever way to fight back. Siofy was in his final year of an engineering degree at Damascus University; perhaps it was even his engineering degree which gave him the idea. He began turning up at demonstrations with a mobile camera phone skilfully secreted under his T-shirt and pointed at the outside world. Then he'd simply loiter, less of a demonstrator than a Clueso-like bystander, hunting out footage which he could later upload to YouTube. His big break behind the camera came on the same day as his first appearance in front of it - on Syrian State TV. Amjad had been ambling around the fringes of a pro-government demonstration in central Damascus outside a conference of the moderate opposition, where a female reporter was looking for suitable voices for the evening news. Traitors, said one man. But the reporter still wasn't happy, and began asking for English speakers - presumably to impress the international audience. With his serviceable English, Amjad weighed straight in and switched his camera on. "What should I say?" he asked. "Just that the opposition have every right to hold a conference, that Syria is a free country but

that you support the President.” “OK”, said Amjad, recording her every word.

This was clever and subversive stuff, and Siofy was good at it. So were many others. In Damascus young activists even began to produce little videos offering advice on how to stitch up T-shirts to conceal mobile phones inside them. But Siofy’s combination of pranks and daring undercover reportage made his work stand out; at their best his video uploads had all the wit and creativity of a TV prankster like Sacha Baron Cohen married to the urgency of a revolutionary intervention, which made them funnier still. There was his clip of young men and women doing no more than singing the Syrian national anthem, and being hurled into the back of a van and beaten for doing so. Then there was Amjad, speaking straight to camera and holding up his ID card, announcing a student strike at the University of Damascus; one of the complaints of Syria’s early revolutionaries was that the ruling Ba’ath party had corrupted even the education system, flattering the grades of loyalists and penalising political trouble-makers. In another clip Amjad, a Sunni Muslim, walks with a casually dressed female friend of his from the minority Alawi sect which is usually loyal to the regime; the two are affecting to be lovers on an afternoon stroll in order to get close to the pro-government paramilitaries known as *shabiha*. The sequence was smart, sexy even; and for the first time these enforcers, much-feared and sometimes mythologised, look fully human. Another is more unnerving still – two *shabiha* taking Amjad aside on the edge of anti-government, frisking him and then asking to see his mobile phone. He hands over the spare mobile phone he keeps in his pocket, leaving the one beneath his T-shirt undetected, at which point the viewer sees the tattooed fingers of the paramilitary scrolling through his phone looking for videos. The sequence seems to last for ever and in the video you can see Amjad’s hands trembling. “I was scared stiff,” he told me.

I know this because I watched all these videos with Amjad on his laptop, near the Turkish Syrian border in the summer of 2012. By the time I got to know him, this impishly thoughtful young man, like many other young Syrians in the political opposition, was living a peripatetic, perilous existence along Syria's borders. When his girlfriend had been interrogated by secret police looking for information about his work, he'd fled Damascus for Jordan and wound up in Turkey. I liked him because, unlike some of the media activists I've met in Syria, he could be scrupulously honest about the failures of his own side. He also had plenty to talk about. The American Embassy in Damascus had given him and his friends proxy software and satellite phones to help them evade the regime's systems for internet surveillance. They'd sent it through something called the Damascus Revolutionary Council, he said, but that "was just window-dressing"; they didn't want to be seen helping to arm Syria's revolution directly.

By the time I met him Amjad's days as a media activist were over. Videos alone, he'd concluded, weren't going to bring about the end of the Syrian regime; like many other media activists his enthusiasm for the virtual weapon of new media had given way to a thirst for the real thing. Now he was a gunrunner and a logistics expert for the Free Syrian Army. He'd even begun to suspect that the Syrian regime actually preferred all this Facebooking and Youtubing: a young man carrying a laptop or mobile phone can't also be aiming a gun. In any case, as rebel brigades took to producing glossy videos of their attacks to impress potential backers in the Gulf States, the two kinds of weapon were often indistinguishable from one another. One of the leading brigades in Homs, Siofy told me, seemed to have lost interest in mounting its own attacks in favour of stealing videos of other brigades' operations and passing them off as its own. He and I went our separate ways into rebel-held territory

but kept in touch on Facebook and Skype, and it wasn't long before he was back in the rebel-held outskirts of Damascus. He was distributing medicine and money, but he was also, with his engineering skills, building home made rockets to fire at the Syrian army. On the morning of 18th January, just two weeks shy of his 25th birthday, he was blown up and killed.

No one talks about "Facebook revolution" anymore – not in Syria or anywhere else in the Arab World. In Syria, what started out as a demand for reform or revolutionary change spiralled into street fighting between military defectors and the Syrian regime, and from there into a brutal, internationally stoked civil war which now threatens to tear the very idea of Syria apart. After three years and hundreds of thousands of deaths it's easy to forget that the Spring of 2011 promised to usher in a whole new wave of democracies – that Syria was one of the most powerful surges of that wave, and that the flair of many of its opposition activists for new media seemed to adding considerable impetus to their cause. Given that new media was supposed to be such an accessory to Syria's early rebellion, is it possible that it contributed to its undoing?

2 A revolutionary tool

The expertise of Syria's young people with new media is thrilling to watch. On many visits to the country over the last three years I've been astonished at how quickly conversations with oppositionists turn to new communications technology – and how much more advanced these young men and women are than me. Borrowed SIM cards from Europe or the Gulf States, proxy servers, the relative safety of talking on Skype or tapping out text on Facebook – many young Syrians became wary internet experts almost overnight. Sometimes new media is how these young people were radicalised in the first place; one young Syrian woman I'm in touch with got involved with the Syrian Revolution General Commission because of things she'd read on Twitter. A Syrian who's spent most of her life outside the country, she began working for a rebel organisation called The Syrian Revolution General Commission two years ago, at the age of sixteen: now she works almost full-time translating videos from her home in Amman. "I barely knew anything about Syrian place names before the revolution", she told me. "Now I can memorise everything."¹

The guardians of State Security, by contrast, were not always very subtle. One activist I met in Damascus told me that in the early days of the uprising, some Syrian border guards were so blindly paranoid they were looking through people's belongings on buses, hunting down copies of the dreaded face book. Before he assumed the top job in June 2000, one of President Bashar Al-Assad's only political offices had been as Chairman of the Syrian Computer

¹ Skype interview, June 2013.

Society. In the early days of his Presidency, many had high hopes for a President who thought of himself as a forward-thinking computer geek; according to the official biography submitted to the United Nations, President Assad “undertook extensive projects to introduce and spread the use of computer technology and the internet in Syria.”² Despite all the hype however, internet access remained limited and carefully monitored; as Alan George points out in his book *Neither Bread nor Freedom*, Syrians could only get unfettered access by dialing into service providers in Lebanon or Jordan – and risked steep fines for doing so.³ A ban on the use of Facebook had been instituted in 2007 and was only lifted in February 2011, amid the winds of revolutionary change blowing in from Tunisia and Egypt. These belated attempts at liberalisation had little effect. Even before the revolt, young Syrians were taking advantage of cheap pirated software available in Damascus to teach themselves IT; many, according to a prominent media activist in Aleppo, were using proxies to get around the ban on Facebook.⁴

When the uprising came along, however, pointing camera phones or going equipped with new media became a more dangerous proposition. Working as an undercover journalist in Homs in November 2011, I was told how, after the demonstrators were gunned down in the huge demonstration at the clock tower in April that year, Syria’s official news agency SANA brought crowds armed with camera phones to the main square to show that life was returning to normal. It was premature – a sniper saw the camera phone snappers and instinctively opened fire. The

² See <http://www.un.int/syria/president.htm>.

³ Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom*, London, Zed Books, 2003

⁴ The importance of piracy was pointed out in a face-to-face interview with regime-supporting businessman in Damascus, September 2013. The use of Facebook proxies was pointed out in a Skype interview with an activist who tweets under the pseudonym Edward Dark, August 2013.

same interviewee, a Sunni whose political sympathies were largely with the regime, was convinced that Al-Jazeera were paying poor Syrians huge sums of money to use their footage – grounds, according to him, not to believe anything he saw on the channel. By the time I returned to Damascus and Homs at the end of February 2012, demonstrations were still taking place daily. But they were also giving way to street fights between groups of defectors who'd formed the fledgling Free Syrian Army and the regular Syrian army and its paramilitary allies. Many of the activists I spent time with took the trouble to nurture online *alter egos*. One, a sassy, fast-talking 21 year-old student at Damascus University who turned up to meet me wearing a glamorous hijab and a plastic mac, went under the *nom-de-guerre* of Robin Hood. Like many of the young Syrians I met, Nadia had only gotten involved in activist circles a few months before, and her involvement wasn't limited to new media; the week before I arrived, she'd been present at a famous demonstration in the district of Mezzeh which ended in a hail of bullets from the *shabiha*.

Over the next two weeks Nadia fired me the occasional text inviting me to demos that she and her group had a hand in putting together. It would be too dangerous for her to accompany me, she pointed out, but she'd be happy for me to go along on my own. The pervasive security presence in Damascus meant that demonstrations were frequently organised on the hoof via social media; participants descended on an area as if from nowhere and then, to avoid being set upon by plain-clothes police, disappeared back into thin air. Cancellations were at short notice, too. On one occasion I'd taken a taxi ride to the other end of the city only to find that one of Nadia's demos, by medical students outside a hospital to protest against human rights abuses, had been scrapped only eight minutes before it was about to begin.

A few days later Nadia got in touch again. This time her directions were for a funeral, and it was likely to be a sizeable event: “two of the five martyrs are children”, she said, “and funeral processions for children are always big.” With only half an hour’s notice I jumped in a taxi as far as the large Rifa’i mosque in Kafr Sousa; after that the route became complicated and involved walking for about another twenty minutes until I arrived at a smaller mosque. Presently I fell in behind a ten-year-old boy who darted up the middle of a road behind me and, after another roundabout and several long lines of gun-toting *shabiha*, there it was; a non-descript mosque with a crowd of several thousand yelling, ululating mourners huddled outside it. The day before I’d attended a pro-regime rally in central Damascus’s Sabah Baharat Square. Beneath a giant cloth likeness of President Bashar Al-Assad, a crowd of about five thousand people had turned out to hear patriotic speeches from a tannoy. It was an insight into the regime’s flagging support base; a good many municipal workers, plenty of army fatigues, and a suspicious numbers of pretty, well-dressed women who seemed like they might be involved on the organisational side. A camera on the crane, presumably belonging to state television, was caught in a repetitive sweep of the middle of the audience in an effort to show depth and multitude. The atmosphere was amiable but a little flat; as if, somewhere off-stage, a schoolteacher was clapping her hands to show everyone how to have fun.

The funeral demo was strikingly different, and one of the most inspiring demonstrations of people power I’d ever witnessed. Everyone was between the ages of ten and twenty-five; an old man hovering on the fringes told me that they let young people do the work of demonstrating “because they have more strength”. Instead of a machine propped TV camera, a crew of locals carrying iPads or mobile devices had clambered on the back of a disused lorry to cover the events. The division of labour between

demonstrators and impromptu reporters was pointed; when I took out my iPhone to take a picture, a masked man in charge of security suggested that I either put it away or join the other journalists. One of the leaders, a young man in his early twenties from Dara'a, spent most of his time policing youngsters who wanted to rattle the iron grilles of shop owners who worked with the *mukhabarat*. "We can't give the government the slightest excuse", he told me. "If we so much as light a fire, they will come for us." A few minutes later, they did. As the demonstrators inched their way back through the side streets of Kafr Souseh, punching the air and shouting slogans against the regime, the *shabiha* charged and the demonstration collapsed from the front. Everyone dashed for cover down a series of dusty alleyways. When I went for coffee with him afterwards, the leader told me that footage from the demo would be on YouTube within a few hours. But he was sceptical of the power of new media. "This movement likes to talk big", he said. "There are three people being buried today, but by the time the news reaches Al-Jazeera and YouTube it will be hundreds. It doesn't help."

In Damascus in February 2012, it was clear to everyone that their facility with new media was an enormous fillip for Syria's opposition in helping to communicate with each other and get their message out. But it also seemed to me that there were two kinds of activism; using new media as a tool with which to spark political dissent, and deploying it in an open-ended media campaign against the Syrian regime. Organising political opposition, of course, was easier said than done. Many young opposition activists I met were doing their best to stage protests, but more of their time was spent ferrying medical aid to the wounded and liaising with the Free Syrian Army. Via a media activist in one of the opposition Local Co-ordinating Committees which had mushroomed all over the country, I was able to interview rebel defectors from the regular army in a safe house in the centre of Damascus. These ruddy-cheeked men from

farming families told me that they had left the regular army to protect demonstrations from regime brutality. Other than that, they seemed to have no strategy at all. With the media activist as an interlocutor, however, they asked - or were instructed to ask - for weapons for the Free Syrian Army.

There's also no doubt that the phenomenon of new media activism has been a huge boon for foreign journalists like me. In the last few years, in between trips to the region, I've conducted many hundreds of interviews with Syrian contacts, sources and activists via Facebook and Skype and other platforms for new media communication. In a feature for *The Guardian* magazine, for example, I was able to use Skype and phone calls to record the experience of an 18 year-old man who'd helped me in Homs in November 2011 and whose family had lived through the worst of the subsequent army shelling. All the same, the effect of all this on traditional journalism is deeply ambiguous. At least in the early stages of the Arab Spring, the vogue for social media often served as a 21st surrogate for the traditional bias of the foreign correspondent - to draw flimsy conclusions about the country by talking to people who look exactly like him. After all the hype about Facebook's role in the Egyptian revolt, for example, it came as a surprise to many commentators when Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood and a more militant Salafi Islamist party won three-fifths of the votes in the country's first, post-Mubarak parliamentary elections.⁵ Given the obvious dangers of reporting Syria - over fifty professional journalists have been killed thus far in the conflict, and many more remain kidnapped - there were

⁵ For voting figures in the November 2011 elections in Egypt, see <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/03/world/africa/egypt-elections>. At the time of the Egyptian revolt, Facebook penetration in the country was about 5.6%; see, for example, "How social media led U.S. astray in Egypt", by Frank Viviano, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 August 2013. <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/How-social-media-led-U-S-astray-in-Egypt-4739736.php>

good reasons to pay attention to the activist media making its way out of the country.

Rely too heavily on it, however, and it was easy to come unstuck. When the Syrian Army launched a ferocious assault on rebel-held areas of Homs on the evening of 3 February 2012, for example, I worked from London with Marie Colvin to get through to my opposition contacts in Homs about what was going on and how many had been killed. Colvin, deeply sceptical, fought with the news desk of *The Sunday Times* and everyone else to get estimates of fatalities reduced from the rebel claims of several hundred for the following day's paper; in retrospect she was probably right. (A few weeks later, having entered the country illegally to find out what was going on in a rebel area of Homs, she was killed by Syrian army shells.) On a visit to a refugee camp in 2012 two different groups of young children showed me an execution video in which two unshaven and bare-chested men sit with their backs against the wall while a chainsaw-wielding militiaman taunts them to "Say Bashar if your God!" before slowly decapitating the one on the right. It was one of the most awful things I've seen, but it also wasn't quite true. A little research on my part revealed it as a fake, a dubbed import from Mexico showing the gruesome execution of two members of the Sinaloa drug cartel by their rivals. It hadn't stopped some newspapers reporting it as fact.⁶ On a trip into rebel-held Idlib around the same time a media activist accompanying me refused to translate some testimony from a local man. It was, he claimed, "not helpful to our revolution."

⁶ I was the first mainstream journalist to discredit this video, to the best of my knowledge. See my Kindle Single e-book, *War Against All: The Struggle for Northern Syria*, published 1 November 2012, and "Syria's Spray Can Revolution", by James Harkin, *The Atlantic*, 20 November 2012. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/syrias-spray-can-revolution/265470>

Neither was the power of new media lost on the Syrian regime. At the end of February 2012, six days after Marie Colvin was killed, I travelled to Homs myself with a trusted taxi driver: within twenty miles of the city our mobile phones had gone dead. For the next month, according to one of my sources in the city, mobile phones remained mostly shut down; only when President Bashar Al-Assad visited the city at the end of March did normal service resume.⁷ New media was also deeply attractive to foreign governments, which is why America, Europe and the Gulf states began funnelling vast amounts of computer and internet equipment to young Syrians like Amjad Siofy. In the summer of 2012 I was in rebel-held Northern Syria shortly after the State Department had announced a series of plans to send communications equipment to the Free Syrian Army, but none of the armed rebel groups I met had seen any of it. Many assumed that the Americans were simply lying. Others grumbled that it wasn't enough – what they needed was heavy weaponry and not walkie-talkies. But everyone saw the advantage of new media. On 19th July, the same day that the rebels launched their assault on the city of Aleppo, I interviewed the then head of Aleppo's Free Syrian Army in a village in Northern Syria. He was now co-ordinating on a daily basis with all the other military councils around the country, he told me – and doing it via Skype.⁸

⁷ Interview with source in Homs in June 2012, a student at al-Ba'ath University in the city.

⁸ For more on this interview with Abdul Jabbar Ekaidi, see this comment piece in The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/nov/20/syrians-better-off-without-cheerleaders> or *War Against All: The Struggle for Northern Syria*, Kindle Singles US e-book, Amazon, November 1, 2012. See also "Syria's Spray-Can Revolution, by James Harkin, *The Atlantic*, November 20 2012

3 A weapon of war

The idea of championing “internet freedom” was forged in the dying embers of George W. Bush’s administration in the United States. It signified a retreat from the rhetoric of exporting freedom and democracy *per se*, after the ignominy of Operation Iraqi Freedom, in favour of the more limited objective of securing free access to the internet under authoritarian regimes.

To the incoming administration of Barack Obama, hitching American foreign policy to Facebook seemed cheap and risk-free. In an interview with *The Guardian* Alec Ross, the State Department’s Senior advisor on Innovation during Hillary Clinton’s tenure, put it thus: “I think the fight over an open internet is today’s version of a battle between open and closed that has been raging now for 2,300 years...What distinguishes the Bush ‘freedom agenda’ from Clinton’s internet freedom agenda is that [Clinton’s] is less politically deterministic. It’s rooted in individual rights, not a presumed political outcome.” The new approach drew on the theory of internet evangelists like Clay Shirky, who argued that blogging and online social networking were becoming not only central to securing civil and political liberties but the mainspring for a new kind of shiftless, leaderless social movement.⁹ “To speak online is to publish, and to publish online is to connect with others”, claimed Shirky in his book *Here Comes Everybody*. “With the arrival of globally accessible publishing, freedom of speech is now freedom of the press, and freedom of the press is freedom of assembly.” Then there was the practice of protest movements in Moldova and Iran, where activists had used

⁹ *Here Comes Everybody*, by Clay Shirky. Penguin, London, 2009.

media in fresh and inventive ways. Pouring scorn on all this enthusiasm, critics like Evgeny Morozov pointed out that the authorities were learning from new media too. Anyone relying too heavily on the new media as a means of bringing about a revolution, he suggested, was likely to find the secret police knocking at their door.¹⁰

The State Department's priority on securing internet freedom was buttressed by early reporting of the Arab Spring, and seemed perfectly suited to the developing crisis in Syria. Here, after all, was a way of providing training and *materiel* to the Syrian opposition without having to break arms embargoes or answer thorny questions about the consequences of arming one side of a civil war. The result is that since the very beginning of the uprising in Syria opposition activists have been quietly gifted millions of dollars' worth of new media equipment and training by a wide range of Western governments and the Gulf States. Much of it has come in the form of satellite phones, transmitters, high-tech walkie-talkies and proxy software designed to help activists talk to each other outside of the government.¹¹ In many cases it was channelled via think tanks or NGO's like the Office for Syrian Opposition Support (OSOS) to the political institutions of the Syrian opposition, either within the country or in Turkey. When American or European officials refer to "non-lethal" aid deliveries to the Syrian opposition, this is usually what they mean. In August 2012, during a visit to Istanbul, Hillary Clinton said: "we are providing US\$25 million in nonlethal aid, mostly communications, to civil society and activists."¹² As the revolution become increasingly militarised, the boundary between assistance for media activism and assistance for

¹⁰ *The Net Delusion: How not to liberate the world*, London, Penguin, 2012.

¹¹ Based on interviews with Amjad Siofy in July 2012, and on a dozen telephone interviews with Syrian activists in November 2013.

¹² "Syrian rebels say pledges of U.S. communications aid are largely unfulfilled", by Greg Miller, *The Washington Post*, 20 August 2012.

armed insurgency blurred into insignificance. By April 2013, the State Department's "non-lethal" aid to the Syrian opposition had leapt to US\$123 million, much of which went to the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army.¹³

What the arguments of both internet boosters and internet naysayers in the West have in common is their tendency to ignore the messy cut and thrust of social conflict and reduce everything to the allegedly all-powerful liberating or enslaving machine called the internet. New media is a tool, and only one among many. Most striking from the Syrian experience has been way it's been fought over - the dynamic push and pull that happens when activists try to outwit the authorities and monitors try to catch up and outflank the activists with activism of their own. Contrary to the new media evangelists it was the uprising itself which spurred innovation in new media - much of the expertise of the activists was honed in the heat of the revolt - rather than the other way around. Syria's young opposition activists are hardly in love with new media gadgetry; they are smart enough to know that their government is looking for ways to stare over their shoulder. The activists I speak to use it anyway. The Syrian security state might well have invested in sophisticated internet monitoring equipment from Europe and Iran, they reason, but it doesn't have the time or resources to commit to deciphering every last text and status update.

Just in case, some take precautions. Perhaps the most puzzling thing about all the foreign money for new media training and equipment is that young Syrians are already very good at new media security, so have little need for help from anyone else. When they want to talk privately to other Syrians, oppositionists often deploy a variety of simple,

¹³ "U.S. doubles its non-lethal aid for Syria", by Roula Khalaf and Daniel Dombey, *The Financial Times*, 21 April 2013.

sometimes playful internet-enabled instant messaging and voice applications which they can use on their mobile phones and which they take to be more secure even than Skype – apps like Viber, Mig33 and Tango. The State Department’s flourishes about openness and the benign free flow of information was thoroughly derailed in Syria; if Egypt could crudely be characterised as an open, Facebook-inspired revolution, the pressing need for greater communications security among Syrian oppositionists soon called for something different.

On a visit to a refugee camp on Syria’s Turkish border a 13 year-old boy called Saleh informed me that he and his friends still inside Syria had resorted to code. A ‘rainy day’ meant that things were going well, whereas a ‘sunny day’ suggested just the opposite. A ‘party’ stood in for a demo. A ‘balloon bursting’ signified a bomb explosion. Football conversations, Saleh told me, were of particular use. “Barcelona are the *shabiha* and Real Madrid are our team. When we say that some Barcelona players were fouled, that means that some *shabiha* have been killed.” Like the children in the refugee camp Syria’s armed rebels often resort to code because they know that Syrian army monitors are listening in.¹⁴ After the Syrian regime shut down the use of the internet for several days in Syria in November 2012, many activists and armed rebels - including some who I was talking to at the time - were able to continue to use Skype using smuggled satellite phones and dial-up modems.¹⁵ Some of that technology, we can assume, might have been sent via Western governments. “How the government used

¹⁴ “Walkie-talkies as lifeline in wartime Syria”, by Basma Atassi. *Al-Jazeera*, 23 January 2013.

¹⁵ “For Syria’s Rebel Movement, Skype is a useful and increasingly dangerous tool”, by Amy Chozick, *New York Times*, 30 November 2012.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/01/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-turn-to-skype-for-communications.html? r=0>

its weapons against the revolution”, a 27 year-old activist told *The New York Times*, “that is how activists use Skype.”

The activist had a point. Rather than an essentially democratising medium or a Trojan horse in which to smuggle democracy and freedom, the best way to understand new media in the Syrian conflict is as a weapon: one which the Syrian opposition got very good at very quickly and made as much of as it could. Most media activists I’ve met in Syria, like Amjad Siofy, had little interest in forging a career as filmmakers or photojournalists: what they were doing looked less like traditional journalism than using media as a weapon in their struggle. Like the other weapons being smuggled into Syria the delivery of internet equipment and the sending of YouTube videos connected Syrian oppositionists to their supporters overseas. Making a weapon of new media, however, has had its paybacks and its drawbacks. As their protest movement slid into a messy, bloody civil war, more and more media activists were pressed into service as fund-raisers and intelligence gatherers, often working with armed rebel units who badly needed support from Western governments or the Gulf States. The bigger rebel militias like Ahrar ash-Sham now have dedicated media teams, and the packages they produce are every bit as professional and much more bracing than anything shown on Syrian State TV; given the imperative to raise funds and support from abroad, it’s very likely that some attacks on regime outposts are carried out solely for the benefit of the man holding the camera.

Then there’s the effect on the audience. As the fight has become increasingly savage and sectarian, many Syrians seem to have taken refuge in an ‘echo chamber’ of their own side’s propaganda – a feedback loop of dead babies and tales of indecipherable evil perpetrated by the other side, which only has the effect of driving Syrians further apart. In an interview in the autumn of 2013, one young female activist

who was with the uprising from the beginning and who still lives in Damascus blamed it for soaking up time and energy. “We started out trying to help people and spread the word, but later it became a goal in itself. The point was to become famous and have more followers, and we lost sight of what we wanted to achieve.” Documenting massacres and human rights abuses was very important work, she told me, “but some of these videos may not have helped. People need to know this stuff, but the way it’s being published is making people even crazier, making them lose their senses.”¹⁶ The daily drumbeat of death and dismemberment available on activist media, according to another oppositionist I met in Damascus, might have depressed and terrified many Syrians away from politics rather than galvanised them to action.¹⁷ The proliferation of propaganda on YouTube and Al-Jazeera, too, may also have dangerously deluded some activists about the strength of their own side and the weakness of their enemies, leading to more deaths.

The freedom to upload video and type things into the internet was always too clumsy a vehicle in which to smuggle ideas like freedom and democracy. Part of its promise, said the boosters, was that it could rescue young people from illicit Islamist ideologies and set them on a path towards modernisation and the West. But if anything the enemies of freedom and democracy have found it more useful. It’s the extreme Islamist groups like Nusra and the Al-Qaeda affiliated ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) who, together with careful outreach work on the ground, have done most to propagate their message online and send out footage of their attacks. ISIS alone has two official media outlets, al-Furqan and al-Itisam, and many other unofficial ones; according to the analyst Aymenn al-Tamimi, its new

¹⁶ Telephone interview with 22 year-old student at the University of Damascus, September 2013.

¹⁷ Interviews with Syrian-Iraqi oppositionist, Damascus, February 2012.

media output is slicker even than that of Ahrar ash-Sham.¹⁸ New media productions like this find an avid global audience on the “jihadi web” - one good reason why thousands of foreigners have travelled to Syria to wage war on the Syrian regime.

¹⁸ Interviews with Aymenn J. al-Tamimi, Shillman-Ginsburg Fellow at The Middle East Forum, October and December 2013.

4 The hazards of light weaponry

If new media was an early weapon in the hands of Syria's opposition, it wasn't a very effective one. At the time of writing the Syrian regime is winning this conflict. Not because it's winning the war – no one is winning the war – but because of its more careful attention to politics. In the early days of the Syrian revolution, it was taken for granted that Syria's tech-savvy young oppositionists were winning the propaganda war using brand new tools, and that the whacked out old security men of the Syrian regime were playing a risible game of catch up.

No one says that anymore, and not just because of the killing. What the media activists sometimes forgot and the regime seemed to know is that new media was not the only game in town. At the beginning of their uprising Syria's democracy made a strong and vibrant case that the regime needed toppling, but they had some work to do separate the people from the regime – to convince a majority of Syrians that this wouldn't end like the previous bloody insurgency in the 1980's, or the balkanised carcass of Iraq next door. It's scarcely an exaggeration to say that masses of young Syrians, by learning how to write and shoot video on the hoof, have changed both the art and the meaning of conflict reporting. But the weak ties made possible by new media might also have distracted a clever, promising young opposition movement from the hard work of forging alliances across Syria's complex ethnic and sectarian mosaic and building their organisation. From the West came the offer of "internet freedom", but it was close to useless; by complicating relationships among the Syrian opposition the

delivery of laptops and proxy software might well have done more harm than good. Certainly we can say that when things began to turn bad, new media was powerless to do anything but fan the flames of hate and despair. The crutch of media activism might have diminished activism itself, crowding out a space for political discussion and replacing it with a fuzzy, hysterical hall of mirrors.

Over the last two years I've kept in touch with many young media activists in Syria. Just like Siofy many fled regime territory as the conflict turned into an armed struggle. Some are now dead.¹⁹ At least ninety-three new media activists, according to Reporters Without Borders, have now been killed – but since it's impossible to keep count of anyone going armed with a camera phone, that figure is very likely certainly a huge underestimate.²⁰ Those still alive often find that the Syrian army is the least of their worries. In a systematic campaign beginning in the summer of 2013, scores of media activists in Northern Syria have been rounded up or systematically hounded out of Syria by extreme Islamist groups. Some are accused of spying; others are simply intimidated or warned off working with Western journalists. One media activist told me that he has a list of sixty Syrian media activists who've been arrested by these groups.²¹ Every week another goes missing or is hauled away for interrogation, including a few I've been in touch with. Many are assumed to be dead: in Aleppo in October 2013, for example, Mohammed Saeed, a popular Syrian

¹⁹ Fidaa al-Baali, another prominent young media activist from Damascus, died in regime shelling in July 2013 in rebel-held Qaboun, only a short distance from where Siofy was killed in Saqba. In the obituary written by *The New York Times* journalists who'd used him as a source, they remembered how he'd become increasingly militant towards the end of his life, and bitterly regretful about his days as a peaceful media activist. Just like Siofy, he'd concluded that the only way to bring about the idea of the Syrian regime was via "bullets and Kalashnikovs." "Activist who documented Syrian War's Toll became its victim", by Hania Mourtada, Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad. *The New York Times*, 6 July 2013.

²⁰ See <http://en.rsf.org/syria.html>

²¹ Telephone interview with activist source in Aleppo, December 2013.

activist and reporter for Al-Arabiya, was executed by the Al-Qaeda affiliate ISIS.²² Most of those who are still alive have fled Syria for Turkey, with no plans to go back. Many are cowed from writing anything about Islamic extremism; understandably, they don't want to say anything that might put them or their families at risk. In January 2014, when rivalries between different rebel groups broke out into full-scale conflict, the bodies of Syrian journalists and media activists were discovered in a former ISIS prison in Aleppo city.²³

Even now new media is extraordinarily useful in war zone Syria. With the unravelling of their institutions, for example, community groups on Facebook have become the best way for residents of Aleppo to share tips on electricity outages, bread queues and no-go areas.²⁴ Amid the ruins of Syrian society, however, it's no longer about politics but how to stay alive. Even though they still rely on it, many of the media activists I talk to are disenchanted with the world of new media. Like the other light weapons afforded young Syrians by interested outsiders, it wasn't enough to finish their revolution - just enough to distract them, compromise them or get them killed. One popular sub-genre of activist video on YouTube has a rebel armed with camera phones or little video cameras pointing it at a Syrian army tank. The footage, often shot from no more than a few yards away from a rumbling, advancing army, is shockingly vivid, and makes the traditional straight-to-camera bravado of the war zone reporter look quaint and ridiculous. But it's a dangerous business. On the most popular clips the tank, after swinging its barrel around aimlessly in search of a

²² "Iraqi journalist executed by ISIS in Syria", *Al-Akhbar*, 5 December 2013. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/iraqi-journalist-executed-isis-rebels-syria>

²³ "Syrian activists freed from ISIS dungeons breathe new life", AFP, 12 January 2014. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyrialatestnews/529882-syria-activists-freed-from-isis-dungeons-breathe-new-life>

²⁴ Phone interview with activist who tweets under the pseudonym Edward Dark, August 2013.

target, fixes its gaze directly at the camera. Sometimes you can even see the shell as it's being fired. A fraction of a second later the screen usually goes black - or the camera keeps rolling, twisted limply into the air and attached to a dead body.

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