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Keeping Our Voices Loud: The Evolution of CrowdVoice.org

Esra'a Al Shafei

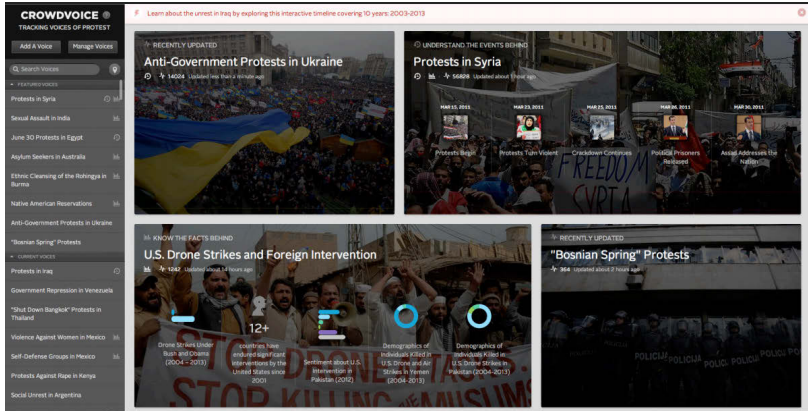
The importance of information has always been at the engine of all the operations of Mideast Youth.¹ The nature of information is that it evolves as the situation on the ground changes, and in addition to that, the means through which that information is shared has changed just as rapidly. The history of CrowdVoice² has been a reflection of that change, and of its dedication to providing not just the information, but the story that lies at the heart of social movements and current events.

From its earliest days between 2005 and 2009, Mideast Youth was running various human rights campaigns online. We shared information with our team of supporters and volunteers constantly as it was the only way we could follow issues closely enough to write about them in an engaging way, in a way that raised awareness about abuses that were typically ignored by the mainstream. This information was shared exclusively through e-mail updates, which was not only time consuming, but it was also ineffective and non-transparent. By its nature it was a single-sided information sharing mechanism, where we controlled the flow of information in a way that limited engagement. Articles, images and videos that provided evidence of human rights abuses or simply tracked news coverage were important, but the delivery was weakening the message.

Mideast Youth set out to develop a system that aggregated information collectively, in an environment that invited public engagement through crowd-sourcing while at the same time making it easier for us to share information.

Our aim was to create a visually dynamic interface that gave users an overall idea of what they were clicking on.

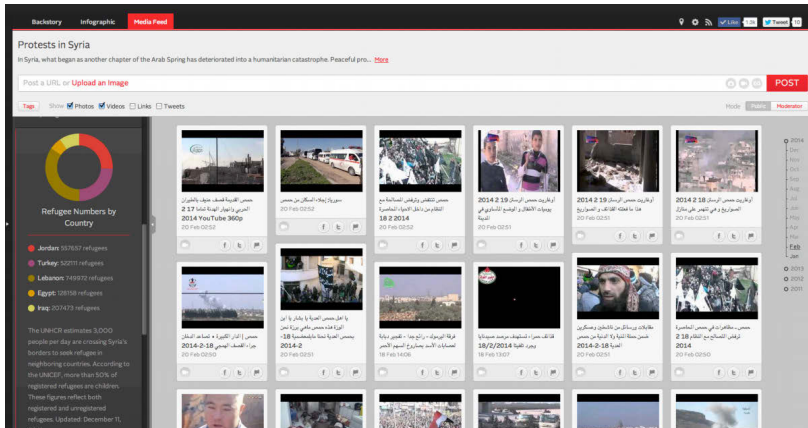
CrowdVoice was launched in 2010 as an internal experiment within our team, and within a matter of a few years, it grew to accommodate thousands of users around the world with topics from sexual violence in India, to forced labor in China, to police brutality in the United States.



[Image 1] CrowdVoice homepage: <https://crowdvoice.org/>.

Between 2010 and 2013, the presence of social media in general multiplied exponentially. CrowdVoice had global access and unprecedented engagement, but we realized that it wasn't enough for us to just curate information. We were faced with a different problem; giving people links to curated media feeds was useful to current issues and recent protests and movements, but it fell flat as a way of conveying a long term, useful narrative.

By 2013, we realized the new challenge wasn't just in providing media, but in placing that media into an understandable and accessible context. At this stage of social media and information aggregation, users faced the opposite problem that they had faced a few years before – being so overly inundated with information that they couldn't focus on what was going on. The next phase of CrowdVoice began, and we began to build infographics for major or ongoing issues that helped people understand what was happening generally. Infographics that explained history, casualty rates, and other key general information reminded users that the thousands of videos that they have access to are still connected to a central struggle. The voices of the people involved in these movements stayed relevant and human, rather than disappearing into an unconnected web of videos and articles.



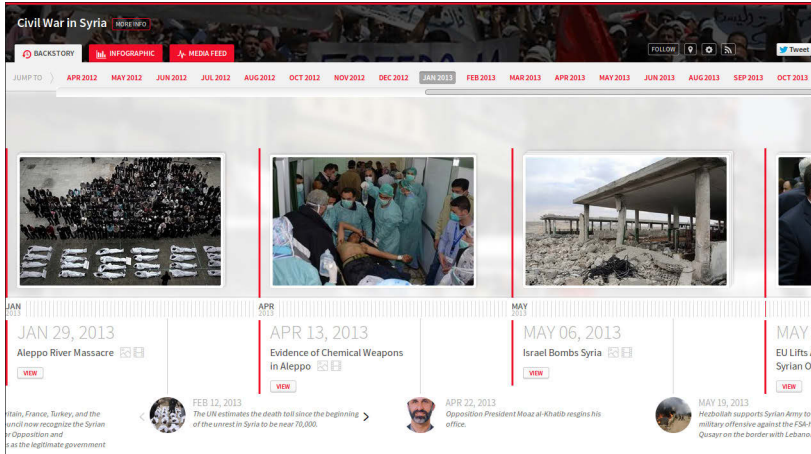
[Image 2] Protests in Syria. Credit: CrowdVoice, <https://crowdvoice.org/>.

Ultimately, I was pushed to keep working on CrowdVoice by this drive to maintain connections. A recent article about news coverage of conflict zones asked:

As builders of these online networked spaces, how do we make sure we optimize not only for traffic and engagement, but also for an informed public?³

At CrowdVoice, we came to the realization early on that information alone didn't make for an informed public, and thus we pushed for the third layer to CrowdVoice that provided an even more engaging story to the public. The "backstory" that we developed is essentially a timeline that explained the roots of a conflict or movement, whether it was 3 months, 3 years or 30 years ago or more. The timelines drew from the information on the pages and from our own curated information to give a thorough understand of the issue to users before they are met with a media feed that contains evidence of those events and issues – videos, eyewitness reports, news coverage, and anything else people help curate into one place.

Today, CrowdVoice balances these multifaceted functionalities to give one of the most comprehensive explanations of social movements available online. The complexities of current and past issues have proven that news reports are not enough, and neither is mere curation. To truly do justice to struggles around the world, people need to be presented with the story, then the numerical facts and their relevant sources, then they need to be able to engage with the media feed and have the ability to add more information so that more primary sources and raw videos can be taken into account.



[Image 3] Civil War in Syria Timeline on CrowdVoice. Credit: CrowdVoice, <https://crowdvoice.org/>.

CrowdVoice is a work in progress – it has to be, because our world is as well. As social movements redefine our societies and tech innovations redefine how we relate to our societies, CrowdVoice is important because it fits right in the intersection between these two dynamics. Whatever the future holds, CrowdVoice will be prepared for it – informing the public, building information into stories, and making sure people’s voices are heard.

Endnotes

- 1 Mideast Youth. <http://www.mideastyouth.com/>
- 2 CrowdVoice. <http://crowdvoice.org/>
- 3 Lotan, Gilad. 2014. “Israel, Gaza, War and Data: Social Networks and the Art of Personalising Propaganda.” Medium. August 4. Accessed June 18, 2015. <https://medium.com/i-data/israel-gaza-war-data-a54969aeb23e>

Annotation

Puthiya Purayil Sneha

In the last couple of decades, the use of the Internet and other digital tools and platforms for activism has increased greatly, owing to better access to and diversity in the use of the Internet, among other reasons. The online space has also seemingly

become one where voices of dissent can be freely heard, although there have been several efforts to curb this freedom. CrowdVoice.org was started in 2010 by Bahraini civil rights activist Esra’a Al Shafei as part of her non-profit organization Mideast Youth, which actively campaigns for freedom of expression through the use of open source software and development of various digital

and online tools and platforms. Apart from CrowdVoice.org, Mideast Youth has several initiatives such as Mideast Tunes, which connects underground musicians, and Ahwaa, a discussion tool for Arab LGBT youth. In addition to this, it has also launched several apps for smartphones, and focuses on 'amplifying voices of change' through these diverse platforms. CrowdVoice rose to prominence during the Arab Spring, when it documented the widespread protests by crowdsourcing material from different parts of the world in the form of news feeds, blogs, comments, images, videos and tweets, among others. Due to the sensitive and very political nature of the content, and the heavy censorship on media in several countries in the Middle East, CrowdVoice.org was banned in Bahrain, Yemen and Iran during the Arab Spring; it continues to be banned in Bahrain even today. Indeed, with the Bahraini uprising that began in 2011, post the Arab Spring protests, media censorship by the present regime has been high, and violence and torture against media persons and citizen activists is rampant. This is the case with many other parts of the MENA region as well, thus making the exercise of building and sustaining such an initiative fraught with very real dangers of persecution.

The growth of Internet and digital technologies in the last decade has also meant an unprecedented increase in information – its production and modes of dissemination. While the advent of the

digital brought with it the problem of the digital divide and the need to examine levels of access to information, tools and resources across geographical and social barriers, the issue of access becomes contoured differently also due to the problem of 'excess' – the availability of too much information, and the absence of ways to curate and utilize it well. CrowdVoice.org essentially performs this function, of aggregating material in a single place and facilitating collaborative annotations around a particular topic, so that it is presented from multiple perspectives. As the write-up mentions, the platform is an effort to respond to situations on the ground, and make media flexible and more accessible to different groups of people. While information has always been a key aspect of social movements, never before has its curation been more imperative, given the sheer volume of its availability, and the ways in which it travels and evolves online, which become all the more important in this context. Curation by a larger public comes with its own challenges and problems, but the notion of voice itself is important, in whatever fragmented, diverse forms it is made available through this platform. CrowdVoice.org also functions as an archive of material generated around issues, thus creating a backstory as such to current events, and making this content available to the public at large. The use of open source software and platforms is also part of its activism, in terms of making technology openly available

to encourage its use in different ways and promote innovation. The understanding and methods of digital activism also therefore

changes through the use of these technologies and the Internet in diverse and innovative ways.

References and Further Readings

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