

Digital Revolution in Reverse: Syria's Media Diversifies Offline

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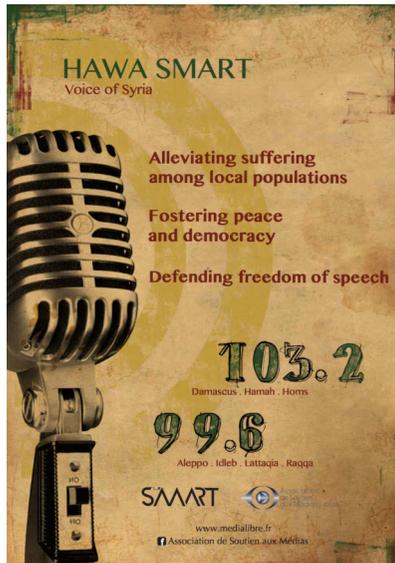
During the first year and half of the uprising in Syria, citizen media activists used digital platforms and tools to coordinate their actions remotely – setting up efficient organisations of people who had never physically met. Skype rooms were created where hundreds of people shared and verified information before passing it to international journalists. This “all-digital” model worked as long as the objective was to leak information out of Syria and to an international audience.

Today, citizen journalists are now making efforts to switch their audience from an international one to a domestic one. Media activists have developed autonomous Internet access through satellite modems to get around the regime's imposition of a complete Internet blackout on certain regions and widespread electricity cuts. The many citizen radio stations and magazines which have emerged since the uprising use these methods to make their content public to the world. But these methods are too costly and dangerous for the majority of Syrians – so these radios and magazines are only available to the population living abroad.

What gone nearly unnoticed in Syria is an increase in the traditional means of media dissemination: FM radio and print.

The Association de Soutien aux Médias Libres (ASML)¹ is working to help these emerging citizen media to remedy the situation. We have installed a wide network of FM broadcasting teams with a coverage of almost the entire country, called Hawa SMART.² The broadcasting equipment airs radio shows of citizen media radio stations (Radio al-Kul [ar]³, Capital Radio Huna Al-Sham) which otherwise would only be accessible online (functionally, abroad), but can

now be heard across the country. We are also printing hard copies of citizen-journalism-driven magazines, distributing the hard copies inside the country.



[Image 1] Poster for Hawa SMART Radio. Credit: Association de Soutien aux Médias, <http://www.medialibre.fr/>.

There are many difficulties associated with FM coverage, including physical risks to the on-location broadcasting teams by the regime's forces – calling for secrecy and tight security. But after this period of digital flourishing during the Arab Spring, radio has reemerged as the most efficient way to reach local audiences living inside Syria, requiring only a cheap receiver and a small battery. It is one of the most accessible ways for people to hear about what is going on in neighboring areas, and to hear what their fellow citizens around the country are thinking and doing.

Broadcasting team leader Amrou approves of the wide coverage:

Now Hawa SMART covers almost un-interruptedly an area which goes from Turkey to the very south of the country... [as well as] the coastal region. This [region] is very strategic because it is populated in majority with Allawite populations, the sect of President Bashar al-Assad, and which has been mostly supporting the regime since 2011. It was very important for us to reach this region because we are working for a united Syria. It is crucial to target all segments of society to avoid the collapse of the country.

These radio stations were started by amateur citizen media who are now producing several hours of radio per day. Shows are varied – both for

entertainment but also very serious issues. Radio Al-Kul, for example, features children's shows and sports, but also regional news programming focused on local concerns, and a call-in show where listeners can contribute to discuss their own worries and regional concerns.

The FM broadcasts now being heard across Syria can be streamed online through Hawa SMART, made accessible for Syrian expatriates and refugees, or anyone else wanting to hear about what is going on.⁴

To stay in touch, you can follow Radio AlKul on Facebook [arabic]⁵, and ASML on twitter @ASML_medialibre [arabic]⁶ – or get in touch with them info@medialibre.fr.

Endnotes

- 1 Association de Soutien aux Médias Libres. <http://medialibre.fr/en/>.
- 2 Hawa SMART. <http://hawa-smart.fm/>.
- 3 Radio al-Kul. <http://radioalkul.com/#/Home>.
- 4 "Hawa SMART." Tuneln. Accessed June 09, 2015. <http://tunein.com/radio/Hawa-SMART-1032-5204859/>.
- 5 "Radio al-Kul." Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/Radio.Alkul>.
- 6 "@ASML_Medialibre." Twitter. https://twitter.com/ASML_medialibre.

Annotation

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The Arab Spring has become a milestone in contemporary history not just for the manner in which it has unsettled complex equations of power and democracy in the world, but also for rethinking the way in which activism and political protest has been imagined for years before it. A key aspect of this uprising was the spotlight it shone on the role of the Internet and digital technologies, particularly social media such as Twitter and Facebook, in the mobilization of people for change. In the way that the protests were discussed and spread, both online and off-line, they seemed to challenge the notion that the 'revolution cannot be tweeted'. While the jury may

still be out on whether technology spurred the revolution, or whether it was the other way around, the crucial role played by the Internet and media, in all its diverse forms, cannot be ignored. This article, which is part of 'Rising Voices', an outreach project by Global Voices, illustrates the efforts taken by citizen media activists to make information available to people across Syria through a network of FM broadcasting teams and print, thus dispelling the myth of widespread Internet and mobile phone access across this part of the world. The quality of access to new communication technologies is restricted due to heavy censorship by the current regime which controls all public broadcasting services and also polices Internet and telecommunication networks. Media censorship has been strict

under the Assad regime; particularly post the Arab Spring and the subsequent Syrian Civil War. According to Reporters without Borders, Syria is ranked 177 out of 180 countries in the 2015 World Press Freedom Index, with a score of 77.29. It has also featured in the Enemy of the Internet report 2014. In 2013, for the third time in a row, the Committee to Protect Journalists named Syria the deadliest country in the world for the press. Journalists have been frequently abducted, imprisoned and subjected to torture to extract passwords of social media accounts. Over 82 journalists have been killed since 1992 despite their non-combatant status; Internet censorship also puts bloggers and citizen journalists in grave peril with threats of imprisonment and torture. A pro-Government online group, the Syrian Electronic Army, hacks websites to upload pro-regime material, while the Government has been suspected of malware attacks used to curb the spread of information.

In such conditions of extreme duress and violence, citizen media, particularly in its traditional forms, has flourished, as it seems to have strangely escaped the eye of the regime. Local citizen journalists reporting for mainstream media on the unrest have been doing so with several risks, especially as foreign correspondents have been stopped from entering the country since the unrest in 2011. While it may be puzzling that the Government heavily monitors the Internet and mainstream press, but has seemingly not

made any effort to muzzle the press or censor radio, this could also be an indication of censorship being applicable only to content being circulated outside of the country, and not so much within. The conflict between the local and global aspects of activism is interestingly played out in this project as seen by the selective censoring of media, and more crucially in the manner in which language forms a critical pillar of the protests. The use of the local language is important, as the target audience is domestic, and to a large extent the Syrian diaspora. It also goes against the notion of digital media being monolithic and universally accessible in some sense. Instead, it is shown to have different layers segregated in form and use. Here digital media actually works sequentially and simultaneously with traditional media, therefore also questioning these easy binaries of old and new, traditional and modern media, which segregates them into silos. As illustrated here, the technological landscape exists in many layers, and is also in transition, so information often travels through different kinds of media. This also speaks of larger questions around the choices made within activism about choosing one form over another, or addressing a particular demographic versus the rest of the world.

The intersectionality of the digital – in terms of form, language and mode – is an important aspect of understanding digital activism, as it defines the space within which it functions.

The aspect of physical space is also interesting in this discourse, as the lack of some form of materiality and 'action in the real world' has been the constant criticism of digital and specifically online activism. Here the airwaves are treated as physical space, therefore imposing some kind of materiality and limits to them. Control over the airwaves is regarded as

control over an imagined community of listeners and citizens, thus here also defining a boundary at large. The manner of activists using digital technologies, and their imagination of the role played by such technology in shaping activism, is therefore a crucial point to contend with in conversations on digital activism.

References and Further Readings

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