Syria Digital Lab

Unlocking the potential
of the Syrian digital space

DIGITAL SPACE
AND PEACEBUILDING

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Table of Contents

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INTRODUCTION

As territorial control shifts in favour of government forces in Syria, an increasing number of Syrians are once again facing a return to authoritarian practices that will further diminish civil society space . This diminishing space means that an increasing number of Syrians will be forced to revert to digital spaces for communicating with one another as well as for information. With the political process moving at a pace outstripped by events on the ground, digital links – spanning across internal as well as external borders – provide a tenuous substitute social fabric and provide equality of access and approaches for some of the country's current and future complex problems. For peacebuilders, humanitarians, and civil society alike, the digital realm may prove to be the most fertile operational ground available.

This report will provide a brief overview of the role digital spaces have played in the run-up to, and over the course of, the Syrian conflict. It will discuss the inherent opportunities of online social media platforms for mobilisation, communication and engagement, as well as the dissemination of information and ideas. Taking a closer look at how and why Syrians use social media, it will discern best practices for content production and dissemination and develop practical recommendations to support peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts throughout the digital realm.

BACKGROUND:

SYRIA AND DIGITAL SPACE

The reign of Bashar Assad saw a state wary of change and particularly of channels of information it could not control, driven to modernize by new elites intent on modernising and profiting. This resulted in a decade-long slow and cautious expansion of internet access throughout the country. From 2000 to 2010, nominal internet penetration among Syrians expanded from 0.2 to 17.7 percent nationally[1] – low by regional comparison, yet transformative for public discourse in a country that for decades had only limited contact with the outside world, and whose government consistently ranked near the bottom of freedom of speech and press indices.

Progress was intentionally slow and uneven – as 3G became available in the main cities (advanced by Syria's largest provider – SyriaTel – and its owner Rami Makhlouf, President Assad's first cousin) most of the Syrian countryside continued to depend on 56K dial-up connections. The national telecommunications infrastructure remained comparatively underdeveloped but highly centralized and closely monitored by the country's omnipresent and paranoid security services.

According to Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF), two government agencies, the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE) and the Syrian Information Organisation (SIO – responsible for throttling bandwidth) were tasked with proactively filtering all Syrian web traffic, employing the privately software called "ThunderCache". According to its manufacturer, ThunderCache is capable of "monitoring and controlling a user's dynamic web-based activities as well as conducting deep packet inspection" based on key-word searches.[2] According to Bloomberg, the Syrian government also contracted the Italian company Area SpA from 2009 to set up a comprehensive system capable of tracking and mapping in near-real time all mobile and digital traffic in and out of the country[3]. This monitoring was overseen by special unit within the Military Intelligence Division of the security services, known as "Branch 225." On the eve of the uprising, RSF recorded 240 fully blocked websites featuring "political criticism, religious matters, sites deemed 'obscene,' sites discussing the Kurdish minority, and those based in Israel". Among the blocked websites was OneMideast – a peacebuilding initiative launched in early 2010 seeking reconciliation between Israelis and Syrians through online exchange and debate.

The government also directly pursued dissident digital publications under a wide array of repressive laws (such as the Penal Code, the 1962 State of Emergency Law, and the 2001 Press Code amended in 2005 to cover online publications[4]). Seeking to identify "offending" individuals (and intimidate prospective dissidents), purchase

1   Internet World Stats, Syri https://www.internetworldstats.com/me/sy.htm
2   Reporters Without Borders, Internet Enemies, March 2011
     https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/fileadmin/rte/docs/2011/110311_Internetbericht_engl.pdf
     and Reporters without Borders, World Day against cyber censorship, March 2010
     https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/fileadmin/rte/docs/2010/Feinde_des_Internets.pdf
3   Bloomberg, Syria Crackdown Gets Italy Firm's Aid With U.S.-Europe Spy Gear, Ben Elgin and Vernon Silver, November 4, 2011
     https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-11-03/syria-crackdown-gets-italy-firm-s-aid-with-u-s-europe-spy-gear
4   Reporters without Borders, World Day against cyber censorship, March 2010
     https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/fileadmin/rte/docs/2010/Feinde_des_Internets.pdf

of SIM cards in Syria required official identification. From 2007, Syrian online publications were required to retain the personal details of all their contributors as well as commenters. The following year, the Syrian Ministry of Communications began requiring internet café owners to record the identity and use times for all their customers for regular review by the security services. From the inception of the index, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) listed Syria as one of its "10 Worst Countries to be a Blogger"[5], pointing to the regular harassment and arrest of journalists or ordinary citizens who sharing information, or even third-party content, deemed "false" or "seditious." Social media networks were banned since their initial popularization in the mid-2000s for their mobilizing potential (e.g. YouTube was blocked in August 2007[6] to contain the spread of videos showing the violent suppression of Kurds in the northeast– the same year the government blocked access to Facebook[7] without comment).

Yet, while self-censorship remained prevalent, especially younger users quickly adapted to the restrictions and learned to circumvent Syrian government censors with the help of virtual private network (VPNs) and other tools masking "illicit" traffic. On the eve of the uprising in March 2011, many Syrian youth reportedly maintained active social media accounts despite a notional ban. Apparently, previous arrests of high-profile bloggers and online activists such as Tal Al-Mallohi or Habib Saleh, understood to have been intended as warnings to induce self-censorship[8], appear to have had little impact on a burgeoning and proliferate online community. Facebook proved an especially popular platform to organize small interest and pressure groups. According to RSF, on the eve of the uprising, individual Facebook groups organized around common interests counted thousands of members. An online campaign opposing an amendment to Syria's personal status law even succeeded at pushing the government to abandon the revision.[9]

5   Committee to Protect Journalists, 10 Worst Countries to be a Blogger, April 30, 2009
     https://cpj.org/reports/2009/04/10-worst-countries-to-be-a-blogger.php
6   Vice, A Brief History of YouTube Censorship, Jillian York, May 26, 2018
     https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/59jgka/a-brief-history-of-youtube-censorship
7   Reuters, Syria blocks Facebook in Internet crackdown, Khaled Yacoub Oweis, November 23, 2007
     https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-facebook/syria-blocks-facebook-in-internet-crackdown-idU-
     SOWE37285020071123
8   Reporters Without Borders, Internet Enemies, March 2011
     https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/fileadmin/rte/docs/2011/110311_Internetbericht_engl.pdf
9   Reporters without Borders, World Day against cyber censorship, March 2010
     https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/fileadmin/rte/docs/2010/Feinde_des_Internets.pdf

FROM UPRISING TO WAR

The mobilization dynamics of the March 2011 uprising – in Syria and around the region - are commonly understood as intrinsically connected to the spread and function of social media[10]. Interactive platforms such as Facebook had broken the state's decades-old de-facto broadcasting monopoly and facilitated political mobilization through pages, events and media sharing functions[11]. As governments across the region waivered, social media use expanded dramatically: In the first quarter of 2011 alone, the number of Facebook accounts across the Arab world grew by an estimated 30 percent according to the Arab Social Media Report – overwhelmingly younger demographics of 15 to 29-year-olds[12].

ARAB SOCIAL MEDIA REPORT REVOLUTION AND DIGITAL DEVELOPMENTS[13]

(1)   http://thenextweb.com/me/2011/01/10/facebook-twitter-blocked-in-algeria-amid-riots/

1/9/2011	1/26/2011	2/1/2011	2/6/2011	2/18/2011	2/18/2011	3/22/2011	3/28/2011	3/30/2011
Facebook and Twitter partially blocked in Algeria for one day (1)	Internet blackout in Egypt for 5 days (2)	Egypt Facebook usage skyrockets after internet's return (3)	Syria lifts ban on social media websites (4)	Libya shuts down Internet (5)	Egyptian Supreme Military Council engages with citizens on Facebook (6)	1/9/2 Sudan pro-government supporters use social media to stop protests (7)	Facebook takes down palestinian intifada page (with 350k supporters) (8)	New Facebook Intifada page is created with over 167k supporters within 2 weeks (9)

(2) http://gigaom.com/2011/01/28/how-egypt-switched-off-the-internet/
(3) http://www.huffngtonpost.com/2011/02/02/egypt-facebook-use-internet_n_817710.html/
(4) http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/02/08/syria-facebook-and-youtube-unblocked-among-others/
(5) http://www.gizmocrunch.com/web/5465-libya-internet-down-facebook-twitter-egypt
(6) http://bikyamasr.com/wordpress/?p=27802
(7) http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-12829808
(8) http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12902273
(9) https://www.facebook.com/Intifada.15May

10   The Washington Post, Syria revolution: A revolt brews against Bashar al- Assad's regime, Elizabeth Flock, March 15, 2011
      https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/syria-revolution-revolt-against-bashar-al--assads-re-
      gime/2011/03/15/ABrwNEX_blog.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.2c87f80b7a4b
11   The Christian Monitor, On Facebook and Twitter, spreading revolution in Syria, Nicholas Blanford, April 8, 2011
      https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0408/On-Facebook-and-Twitter-spreading-revolution-in-Syria
      and Dubai School of Government, Arab Social Media Report, Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter, May 2011
12   Dubai School of Government, Arab Social Media Report, Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter, May 2011
      http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/dsg/unpan050860.pdf
13   Dubai School of Government, Arab Social Media Report, Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter, May 2011 (Page 4)
      http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/dsg/unpan050860.pdf

By 15 March 2011 – the "Day of Rage" commonly seen as the beginning of the Syrian uprising proper - the Facebook group entitled "The Syrian Revolution 2011" had accumulated 41,000 members and was becoming a digital focal point for the burgeoning anti-government protest movement[14]. Social media's facilitation of instant communication and closed groups allowed disparate organizing networks to call for spontaneous actions and street protests in secret or at the last minute – and stay one step ahead of security forces.[15]

Five weeks earlier, on 9 February, the Syrian government unblocked a number of major social networks, including Facebook and YouTube, as part of a wider package of supposedly conciliatory decisions[16]. The ease of restrictions accelerated the proliferation of social media use among young Syrians, but at the same time, local civil society activists expressed skepticism about the government's intention, worrying that security services may use open source records as well as hacking attempts to collect information on opposition activists[17]. As thousands joined dissident social media groups, few continued to bother with obscuring their traffic.

Indeed, despite its formal unblocking of major social networks, the Syrian government began to heavily invest in its ability to intercept, track, and exploit online activity. In 2011, it became known that Syrian intelligence had succeeded at procuring at least 13 Blue Coat Systems devices used for web blocking[18]. Subsequent tests conducted by local Wall Street Journal affiliates identified "tens of thousands" of blocked opposition websites. Out of 2,500 attempts to access Facebook pages, Blue Coat systems blocked 60 percent and permitted but logged the remainder.[19] Until today, activists as well as regular civilians would regularly come into the crosshairs of Syrian security services based on online activity collected from open social media sources as well as intercepted communications.

Indeed, in addition to passive filtering and registering, the Syrian government began going on the offensive in its cyber war. According to Freedom House, activists and bloggers arrested by security services were pressured to provide passwords to social media and email accounts, giving intelligence agents access to private conversations. The Syrian government also employed more advanced digital tools, such as a number of remote access tools (RATs) that allow intelligence agents full control over an infected machine. From 2012, online activists recorded dozens of

14   The Washington Post, Syria revolution: A revolt brews against Bashar al- Assad's regime, Elizabeth Flock, March 15, 2011
      https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/syria-revolution-revolt-against-bashar-al--assads-re-
      gime/2011/03/15/ABrwNEX_blog.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.637c5b5d8870
15   Reuters, Social Media: a double-edged sword in Syria, July 13, 2011 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-social-media/
      social-media-a-double-edged-sword-in-syria-idUSTRE76C3DB20110713
16   New York Times, Syria Restores Access to Facebook and YouTube, Jennifer Preston, February 9, 2011
      https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/10/world/middleeast/10syria.html
17   Reuters, Social Media: a double-edged sword in Syria, July 13, 2011 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-social-media/
      social-media-a-double-edged-sword-in-syria-idUSTRE76C3DB20110713
18   Reuters, Dubai firm fined $2.8 million for shipping Blue Coat monitoring gear to Syria, Steve Stecklow, April 25, 2013
      https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-sanctions-fine/update-1-dubai-firm-fined-2-8-million-for-shipping-blue-coat-moni-
      toring-gear-to-syria-idUSL6N0DC4W120130425
19   Wall Street Journal, U.S. Firm Acknowledges Syria Uses Its Gear to Block Web, Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Paul Sonne and Nour
      Malas, October 29, 2011 https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203687504577001911398596328

types[20] of malware targeting Syrian opposition activists as well as journalists[21]. According to a 2014 Kaspersky Lab report, at least 10,000 machines in and outside of the country had been infected with Syrian malware.[22]

At the same time, the legalization of social media allowed loyalist communities the opportunity to mobilize in response to what they perceived as a destabilizing political upheaval. Quickly, the government began to channel loyalist online mobs into an attritional battle with opposition and civil society activists over social media representation. Loyalist online activists would mass-report thousands of opposition groups, channels and pages, leading to the deletion of hundreds of thousands of hours of conflict documentation[23], wiping Syria's collective memory and forever undermining the possibility of eventual justice and prosecution.[24]

20 http://syrianmalware.com/ for list
21 CNN, Computer spyware is newest weapon in Syrian conflict, by Ben Brumfield, February 17, 2012
      https://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/17/tech/web/computer-virus-syria
22 Kaspersky, Kaspersky Lab warns users of the dangers posed by Syrian malware, August 18, 2014
      https://www.kaspersky.com/about/press-releases/2014_kaspersky-lab-warns-users-of-the-dangers-posed-by-syrian-malware
23 The Atlantic, The Syrian Opposition Is Disappearing From Facebook, Michael Pizzi, February 4, 2014
      https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/02/the-syrian-opposition-is-disappearing-from-facebook/283562/
24 Fast Company, Erasing History: YouTube's Deletion of Syria War Videos Concerns Human Rights Groups, Armin Rosen, July 3, 2018
      https://www.fastcompany.com/40540411/erasing-history-youtubes-deletion-of-syria-war-videos-concerns-human-rights-groups

SHRINKING DIGITAL SPACES

Indeed, the development of organic loyalist social media communities over the course of the war is most instructive for the real prospects of even marginal independent digital spaces under a resurgent Assad. Given relative leeway at the height of the conflict, loyalist pages have recently begun diverging from official government-backed narratives of normalcy to give voice to citizens' frustrations over corruption[25], lack of services and unpopular legislative decisions[26].

But as the Syrian government, supported by its Russian and Iranian allies, strives to reestablish itself across "every inch" of Syrian territory, it has also returned to clamping down on what little open spaces – both opposition and loyalist – had emerged over the course of the conflict.

Indeed, in a rare address to an assembly of Local Council members in February 2019, Bashar Assad described the Syrian government's view of online media in stark and uncompromising terms:

> "We are currently facing the fourth generation of internet wars which is based on spreading misinformation via pages or sites that assume national identities or claim to represent a local village or city or neighborhood, while the ones writing on them are actually abroad. […] And they start to spread misinformation about the security situation, like rumors of abduction and assault, or they falsify exchange rates and spread stories about the economy that affect citizens' trust in their country."

The references in the speech appear primarily directed at increasingly unruly loyalist networks which in recent months had begun multiple campaigns against fuel shortages, conscription laws, as well as amendments to the role of the country's religious endowment ministry.[27] Indeed, earlier in January, Syrian security forces arrested Wissam Al-Tayir and four additional administrators of the popular loyalist Facebook page "Damascus Alaan" ('Damascus Now'), as well as a number of other loyalist media personalities who had voiced criticism of the Syrian government's handling of economic and social affairs.[28] It has been more than six months since his arrest and nothing is known of Al-Tayir's fate.

25   Wikileaks Hama https://www.facebook.com/wikileks.hama1/

26   Al-Jumhurya, Syria's new loyal opposition: Demanding participation in exclusion, Salam al-Saadi, March 28, 2019
     https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/syria%E2%80%99s-new-loyal-opposition-demanding-participation-exclusion

27   The Washington Post, Assad loyalists are turning on Syria's government as living standards deteriorate, Liz Sly, March 25, 2019
     https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/assad-loyalists-are-turning-on-syrias-government-as-living-
     standards-deteriorate/2019/03/25/080b1562-44d7-11e9-94ab-d2dda3c0df52_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.
     a4ced9a49d81

28   Syrian Observer, The Regime Punishes Prominent Assad Supporting Journalists, March 7, 2019
     https://syrianobserver.com/EN/features/48993/the-regime-punishes-prominent-assad-supporting-journalists.html

Meanwhile, civil society and opposition activists are struggling to cope with the impact of a series of armed-opposition military defeats on the ground. Defeat and depression fuel a renewed spiral of self-censorship and political disengagement. As the Syrian government re-establishes control over newly recaptured areas, a veil of silence comes over the communities left behind[29] and previously open communities all but fall off the map, terrified of government security services monitoring of calls and online activity which is reported to be occurring both digitally and through the searching of devices at checkpoints. Those who departed to Syria's opposition-held northwest now face the increasingly heavy hand of radical Islamist groups in charge of the area as well as estrangement from family and friends that remained in situ who are fearful of any association with them. In the digital realm, death and displacement, combined with a withdrawal of civil society funding from outside donors and aggressive counter-messaging campaigns from loyalists, have led to the collapse or abandonment of a number of civic projects and online pages.

It is becoming apparent that as the Syrian government begins its process of reconsolidation following what it considers a military victory over the opposition, it sees no reason to further compromise on political or social liberties. After all, any control over the central narrative of the conflict that had been relinquished to social media and any leeway that had been granted to Syrian citizens over the course of the war was granted in the service of the war effort and will eventually be rescinded.

Indeed, a mere two months after Assad's speech, Syria's Deputy Communications and Technology Minister Ghassan Saba outlined in an interview government's plans to create a "Syrian version" of Facebook, purportedly to protect citizens' personal data and "prevent it being published and manipulated outside Syria" – similar language to what Assad had used weeks earlier.[30]

Finding a way to facilitate safe and unhindered access to digital spaces is critical to maintaining social and community links in the now-dozens of former armed-opposition controlled pockets of the country, as well as to ensure two-way information flow allowing those remaining under government control to report on security violations, threats, and humanitarian needs, and for those outside their areas or origin or the country to understand the conditions for return. For both groups, accessing independent and reliable information about critical issues like housing land and property law, the peace process, and even basic services and needs, necessitates access to digital spaces and to each other.

29 Syria Direct, Silence, paranoia in decimated East Ghouta suburbs one year after government recapture, Ammar Hamou and Madeline Edwards, April 11, 2019
https://syriadirect.org/news/silence-paranoia-in-decimated-east-ghouta-suburbs-one-year-after-government-recapture/

30 The New Arab, Syria Regime to Launch Facebook Rival to Protect Citizens' Privacy, April 26, 2019 https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/4/26/syrian-regime-to-launch-facaebook-rival-to-protect-privacy?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=sf

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USAGE PATTERNS

Despite constraints, Syrians across throughout the country, as well as the refugee community and diaspora, continue to rely heavily on the internet and social media as their primary means of communication and their most trusted source of information. Field research suggests that after basic survival needs, internet access is seen as a high-priority demand for all Syrians across the country.[31]

An audience survey conducted in five government-held provinces in early 2019 found 91 percent of Syrians aged 20-50 access the internet for on average 2 hours and 43 minutes every day (beating out television for the most popular medium).[32]

PHONE NETWORKS AVAILABLE IN SYRIA (DECEMBER 2016)

Government-controlled phone/ data networks SyriaTel and MTN are available to almost all areas of Syria, apart from Daeshcontrolled areas. Border areas with Turkey and Jordan have access to phone networks provided by operators in those countries (n = 48)

UKAID/MOBILE OPERATORS ACROSS COUNTRY[33]

	Phone networks reported to be available in Syria over the past six months							
	Assad Government networks			Daesh network	Turkish networks			Jordanian network
	Landline	SyriaTel	MTN	Landline	Turkcell	Avea	Vodaphone	Zain
Amuda	√	√	√		√			
Idleb		High areas	High areas					
Azaz		High areas	High areas		High areas	√	√	
Dar'a		√	√					√
Duma		√	√					
Aleppo	√	√	√					
Damascus	√	√	√					
Deir Ez Zor Ar Raqqa			Limited	√				
(No. of mentions)	(8)	(21)	(12)	(5)	(3)	(1)	(1)	(2)

31 UKAID, The use of Mobile Technology for humanitarian Programming in Syria, March 2017 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/58e273b040f0b606e70000a1/Research_Report_-_Mobile_Technology_in_Syria__Potential_and_Constraints___March_2017.pdf

32 Ipsos, Media Consumption Survey, January 2019

33 UKAID, The use of Mobile Technology for humanitarian Programming in Syria, March 2017 page 29 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/58e273b040f0b606e70000a1/Research_Report_-_Mobile_Technology_in_Syria__Potential_and_Constraints___March_2017.pdf

INTERNET CONNECTION METHODS

Overall, the most-often reported internet connection method was satellite connection, followed by local Wi-Fi services and 2G/3G cellular phone network data connections (n = 88 connection methods)

	Kurdish-cont'd areas	Opposition-controlled areas			Beseiged areas		Gov't-cont'd areas	Daesh-cont'd areas	
	Amuda	Idleb	Azaz	Dar'a	Duma	Aleppo	Damascus	Deir Ez Zor	Total
Satellite	24%	20%	9%	19%	38%	25%	17%	100%	26%
Wi-Fi service	12%	33%	36%	24%	38%		17%		23%
2G / 3G network	29%	20%	9%	24%		50%	33%		20%
Mobile broadband	18%	13%		19%			33%		13%
Microwave links	18%		27%	10%	13%				10%
Fixed ADSL / net		13%	18%	5%	13%	25%			8%

UKAID/MOBILE ACCESS TYPE ACROSS COUNTRY[34]

Despite an underdeveloped pre-war infrastructure and excessive conflict-related damage and power shortages, access to internet has grown dramatically through-out the war[35]. Surprisingly, locals across the country report sufficient signal to meet their digital needs. In areas where the government no longer provides services, local residents have found efficient solutions: In border areas, Syrians generally rely on Turkish, Jordanian, Lebanese or Iraqi providers. Further inland, opposition authorities have installed private internet-capable satellite receivers connected to local internet cafes or public wifi services. Local residents not only judge the speed of these setups sufficient, but also report less fear of Syrian government interception (though reports from Rastan in Homs province suggest Syrian government agents may have tapped satellite equipment in opposition-held areas). Receivers, especially Samsung smartphones, are ubiquitous in all parts of Syria (in 2015, 81 percent of Syrians reported owning mobile phones)[36]

34 UKAID, The use of Mobile Technology for humanitarian Programming in Syria, March 2017 page 17 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/58e273b040f0b606e70000a1/Research_Report_-_Mobile_Technology_in_Syria__Potential_and_Constraints___March_2017.pdf

35 UKAID, The use of Mobile Technology for humanitarian Programming in Syria, March 2017 page 12 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/58e273b040f0b606e70000a1/Research_Report_-_Mobile_Technology_in_Syria__Potential_and_Constraints___March_2017.pdf

36 UKAID, The use of Mobile Technology for humanitarian Programming in Syria, March 2017 page 6 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/58e273b040f0b606e70000a1/Research_Report_-_Mobile_Technology_in_Syria__Potential_and_Constraints___March_2017.pdf

INTERNET BLOCKS/CENSORSHIP

The most extensive regulation, filtering and censorship of internet use/ content is reportedly in Government-controlled areas

Internet blocks / censorship		
Kurdish -controlled areas	Amuda	Turkish internet content filters and occasional WhatsApp blocks (on SyriaTel, MTN and Turkish phone internet networks)
Opposition -controlled areas	Idleb	No blocks or filtering reported
	Azaz	Turkish internet content filters
	Dar'a	Jordanian internet content filters and WhatsApp video calls not supported by the network
Beseiged areas	Duma	No blocks or filtering reported
	Aleppo	No blocks or filtering reported
Government -controlled areas	Damascus	Extensive monitoring and censorship of internet and blocks of encryption and VPN services as well as WhatsApp periodically
Daesh -controlled areas	Deir Ez Zor	No blocks or filtering reported – but users must declare their use and who they are communicating with to Daesh agents

CHART: FILTERING RESTRICTIONS BY ACCESS TYPE[37]

Importantly, surveys and qualitative assessments consistently underscore the importance of digital spaces – especially via mobile devices – for women. Multiple studies show comparably high rates of internet participation for men and women and near-identical use of social media platforms. Notably, women are reported to be more reliant on access via mobile devices as internet cafés remain male dominated domains (only 2 percent of women but 10 percent of men report accessing the internet via internet cafes)[38], suggesting engagement via mobile-optimized platforms may be helpful in overcoming social and cultural barriers in communication.

37 UKAID, The use of Mobile Technology for humanitarian Programming in Syria, March 2017 page 21 https://assets.publishing. service.gov.uk/media/58e273b040f0b606e70000a1/Research_Report_-_Mobile_Technology_in_Syria__Potential_and_Constraints___March_2017.pdf
38 Ipsos, Media Consumption Survey, January 2019, Page 5

FACEBOOK AND WHATSAPP

For Syrians, digital spaces are less about passive "scrolling" consumption of posts and information, but about communication with friends and family as well as active engagement on platforms. About three-quarters of Syrians report using the internet every day to communicate with friends and family in and outside of Syria via messenger, chat, digital voice call or to access social media posts.

For this purpose, no application can rival the importance of Facebook and WhatsApp. According to surveys, 82 percent of Syrians (and 80 percent of women) use Facebook regularly with more than 90% of users logging onto the social network on a daily basis. For comparison, only 33 percent of Syrians use Instagram and only 11 percent access Twitter. Only WhatsApp, the free cross-platform messenger owned by Facebook boasts comparable user rates.

IPSOS SOCIAL MEDIA USE[39]

Recency of Accessing Social Media   ■ Daily   ■ Weekly   ■ Monthly   ■ More than one month   ■ Don't use

Platform			
Facebook	74,4	7,1	18
Instagram	20,3	8,4	67,4
Twitter			88,6
Snapchat		93	
Other	99,4		

Facebook is the most accessed social media platform among Syrians, where 74% tend to access it on daily basis. The latter is followed by Instagram to a lesser extent. As for Twitter and Snapchat, they are less commonly consumed.

Facebook offers Syrians an integrated means of contacting friends and relatives in and outside of Syria via its integrated messenger function while also sharing and consuming news and media. In a 2016 REACH assessment, 82-85 percent of key informants reported using the social network for communications while 69-73% of reported regularly sharing posting information about the overall situation in Syria.

Syrian use of social media suggests a number of best practices for actors looking to maximize their reach across Facebook and WhatsApp:
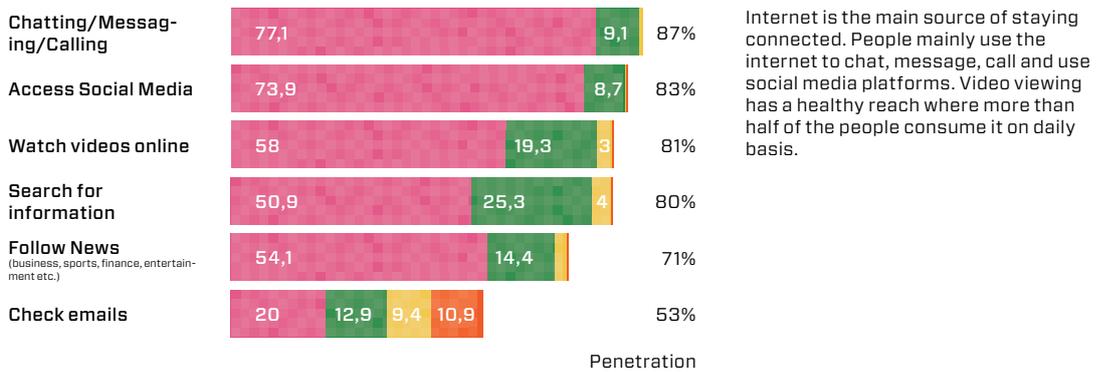
- Syrians primarily access the internet via **mobile devices**. According to audience surveys, upwards of 84 percent of Syrians rely on their phones rather than desktop computers or laptops to read the news or surf the web. Landing pages and content should be optimized accordingly.

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IPSOS/DEVICES TO ACCESS[40]

**Recency of Performing Activities
On the Internet**

■ Daily ■ Weekly ■ Monthly ■ More than one month

Activity	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	More than one month	Penetration
Chatting/Messaging/Calling	77,1	9,1			87%
Access Social Media	73,9	8,7			83%
Watch videos online	58	19,3	3		81%
Search for information	50,9	25,3	4		80%
Follow News (business, sports, finance, entertainment etc.)	54,1	14,4			71%
Check emails	20	12,9	9,4	10,9	53%

Penetration

Internet is the main source of staying connected. People mainly use the internet to chat, message, call and use social media platforms. Video viewing has a healthy reach where more than half of the people consume it on daily basis.

- Content should be **self-contained and easily shareable**. Syrian social media users tend to not follow links to third-party websites, but may download materials – especially images and infographics - curated by Facebook for sharing via other media, primarily WhatsApp groups.

- Relatedly, while 3G coverage has expanded across the country, many Syrians still suffer from slow connection speeds. Pages as well as **shareable media files should be kept small** using common file formats with high compression rates.

- Most Syrians strictly prefer content in **simple Arabic**. Content using straightforward and accessible language, when possible and appropriate local Syrian dialects, engages low attention thresholds and helps bridge education divides. Written materials should accordingly be kept brief and avoid difficult vocabulary and complex grammatical structures.

Finally, Syrians express comparatively high levels of trust in social media in general and Facebook in particular. According to REACH, 79 percent of respondents reported trusting the social network giant to protect user privacy. In comparison, Syrians are significantly more skeptical of both YouTube and Twitter (mentioned by only 4 percent of respondents). Despite global concerns, Syrian Facebook users say they appreciate the relative freedom of managing their own privacy settings, the possibility of using false identities to share information anonymously and the opportunity to engage in largely unmoderated discussions. According to respondents, the ability to call or leave voice messages and establishes trust between interlocutors.

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EFFECTIVE CONTENT STRATEGIES:

RELEVANCE KEY

As the above clearly shows, social networking is a function of social trust. Its effectiveness depends on transparency, dependability and (social) proximity of interlocutors. Most internationally-funded "peace-tech" projects to date have either drawn on or contributed to target communities, but not prioritized building social capital and relationships of trust.

Indeed, most projects remain single-directional in their design, either as strategic communications ("broadcasting") campaigns or as attempts at data collection in support of third-party strategic or aid efforts. Neither model encourages meaningful two-way engagement allowing Syrians to respond and articulate their own needs and priorities, let alone intra-Syrian dialogue. Lack of engaging formats also compounds existing difficulties in evaluating the real impact of communications and outreach campaigns beyond the most basic engagement statistics.

In addition to practical choices about effective and appropriate social media platforms and formats, digital peacebuilding initiatives looking to produce more engaging output will have to consider the pitfalls of crafting audience-centric content strategies that can at the same time generate wider public interest and responses but still be considered appropriate for a highly sensitive (and thoroughly securitized) information space.

Towards that end, outside actors in the Syrian digital space need to evaluate their activities not just in terms of absolute metrics but also in the wider context of the ever-changing political, social and security environment.

(+) EXAMPLE: "SYRIAN RESEARCHERS"
2.3M Followers

Active since 2012, the "Syrian Researchers" have a shared informational content focusing on scientific and academic knowledge relying heavily on visual content ranging from simple image-macros (featuring no more than two of three lines of text) to more advanced infographics and explanatory videos.

The "Syrian Researchers" offer especially young curious Syrians a platform to learn about and discuss subjects of universal human interest, transcending current politics and everyday suffering.

To some degree, this will necessarily involve trade-offs. In a phenomenon not exclusive to Syria, the inherent dynamics of social media and curating algorithms of platforms such as Facebook regularly produce dangerous information or filter bubbles, deepening and hardening societal cleavages. In the context of Syria, an all but broken society, fractured and brutalized by years of vicious internecine strife, repression and displacement, such content echo chambers put additional strain of tenuous social relations.

(-) EXAMPLE: "U.S. EMBASSY DAMASCUS"

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91.2K Followers

The United States goverment principal Arabic-language social media platform communicating the American position on the Syrian conflict, the page now uses a wider range of types of posts, including audio-visual media and hashtags, but remains a largely one-sided affair. Given the wight of the U.S. role over the course of the conflict, the page fails to provoke active reader engagement – or find a commensurately large audience at all.

At the same time, outside actors can and should draw on lessons learned by existing local Syrian platforms. Indeed, audience research suggest that outside national news pages, many of the popular social media pages within the Syrian digital space have succeeded at building and maintaining a cross-partisan follower base by producing content built around shared interests and experiences that transcend factional politics (reinforced through proactive moderation of contents and comments). Indeed, re-establishing shared societal foundations and references is an essential task of peacebuilding. Outside of the ongoing conflict, Syrians continue to share a common interest in science (see Example[41]), food, fashion, sports and entertainment.

Other high-engagement but not explicitly partisan pages draw on Syrian civilians' shared experience of suffering in wartime, offering information and commentary on everyday concerns such as market prices (including currency exchange rates, foods and fuel products), local governance or even corruption. Simple photos or image-macros illustrating contentious subjects such as shortages, conscription or government abuses regularly go viral across the Syrian digital space as they resonate deeply with everyday Syrian's lived experiences, triggering serious discussions of contentious issues. In a recent case of a photo of a row of apparently forcibly conscripted young men shackled by the wrists being led into a Syrian military truck – first posted by a loyalist Facebook page – caused such widespread outrage on social media that the Syrian government felt it necessary to issue a statement on the incident[42].

41   Syrian Researchers https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.researchers/
42   https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181204-photo-of-shackled-syria-men-forced-to-serve-in-military-goes-viral/

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Peace-builders, humanitarians, and stabilization actors should develop and invest in projects that facilitate safe and unhindered access to digital spaces. Maintaining social and community links, as well as ensuring two-way information flow within communities themselves as well as between Syrians and external actors is critical, as is enabling Syrians in all areas of territorial control to access independent and reliable information about critical issues like housing land and property law, the peace process, and even basic services and needs.

- Ongoing monitoring and research into the diminishing digital space and the protection concerns raised by renewed monitoring and policing of online activities by the government of Syria is essential to understanding the full suite of risks presently faced by Syrians residing in the country or considering returning.

- Peace-builders and other external actors should employ best practices for online engagement, including mobile optimization, self-contained and easily shareable content, small files, and using simple Arabic language.

- Outside actors in the Syrian digital space should evaluate their activities not just in terms of absolute metrics but also in the wider context of the ever-changing political, social and security environment. Building and maintaining a cross-partisan follower base by producing content built around shared interests and experiences that transcend factional politics (reinforced through proactive moderation of contents and comments) and re-establish shared societal foundations and references will both drive engagement and form an essential task of peacebuilding.

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