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Altering Courses in Unknown Waters: Interaction between Traditional and New Media during the First Months of the Syrian Uprising

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Abstract: This paper aims at investigating the relationship between traditional and social media during the first six months of the Syrian uprising. Thanks to direct testimony made available to the author by various cyber activists inside and outside Syria and through constant monitoring of the official propaganda and the coverage of the Syrian events by the two main pan-Arab satellite TVs, this article intends to investigate how both the regime and the activists attempt to represent the “real events on the ground”. In a country where the foreign and pan-Arab press have been mostly expelled since the beginning of the protests and the consequent repression, these two opposite poles heavily fight on the media level. On the one hand, the propaganda dominates traditional media and has sought to show familiarity with new methods, while maintaining the same content and rhetorical tone. On the other hand, the activists, masters of the new media, attempted to overcome the limitations of their tools, aiming at more traditional forms of communication. In both cases, the Internet has emerged as the main weapon of this media confrontation.

Keywords: Official propaganda, anti-regime activists, social networks, Syrian uprising, traditional media, new media, Arab spring

*“As it started...
so it continued...
...then the farce began,
but we are a State
we have an army on the ground
and an army on the Internet...
and this was the answer ”*

(from the video presentation of the Syrian Electronic Army)¹.

“Without Internet there is no life”
(Ahmad, pseudonym of a Syrian activist, July 2011)²

¹ The publicity trailer of the Syrian Electronic Army was broadcast starting in May 2011 by *al-Duniya* TV, close to the Syrian regime (http://youtu.be/iXt07_CvIAo).

² Quoted in Anthony Shadid, “Syria’s Sons of No One” in *The New York Times Magazine*, 31 August 2011 (www.nytimes.com/2011/09/04/magazine/syrias-sons-of-no-one.html).

Introduction

“The people want Bashar al-Assad” (al-sha‘b yurid Bashar al-Assad): this was the full-page headline in the March 30, 2011 edition of the Syrian daily *al-Ba‘th*, the official organ of the party of the same name, then in power for 48 years³. For the first time in decades, the propaganda of Damascus – known for its fossilized language and a rhetoric far removed from reality – resorted to copying one of the most famous slogans of the Arab revolt, started in December 2010: “the people/want /the fall of the regime” (al-sha‘b / yurid / isqat al-nizam).

The regime itself thus implicitly acknowledged the actual situation. It expressed what in those four fateful words which by March had already become a media refrain, after having been chanted by thousands of people first in Tunis, in Cairo and then in San‘a in Yemen and Manama in Bahrain. The refrain had by then penetrated into Syria through incessant coverage of the Arab revolts by the social networks and pan-Arab television – *al-Jazeera*, *al-Arabiya*, the *BBC*’s Arabic channel – and appeared in the form of graffiti scrawled by some youngster on the walls of some schools in the country⁴. No longer able to ignore the bold slogan, Syrian propaganda thus sought to annul it, to purge it, to blunt the sharpness of its sting: that “...isqat al-nizam!” (“the fall of the regime!”) that was not to be uttered in the Syria of the Ba‘th party and the al-Assads. *Al-Ba‘th*’s front-page headline was the first evident attempt by the Damascus regime to take up the same media weapons as its feared opponents, long skilled in using the different new media communication platforms.

This article aims to illustrate the dialectic between the regime’s propaganda machine, dominating traditional media and the anti-regime activists, masters of the new media. Since the beginning of the “crisis”, Syrian propaganda sought to show familiarity with new methods, while maintaining the same content and rhetorical tone. The activists, on the other hand, the bearers of new messages, attempted to overcome the limitations of their tools, aiming at more traditional forms of communication.

Concerning the relationship between traditional and new media the scholarly literature is relatively extensive⁵, but if we look at other Arab and Islamic countries the Syrian case appears the most ‘primitive’ one. At this stage the mediatic aspect of the uprising is not very deeply discussed by the contributors of the debate about the influence of the Internet and the social networks on the Arab revolts⁶. In fact, there are not so many scholars who can read the implicit and explicit messages

³ *Al-Ba‘th*, Damascus, 30 March 2011, p.1.

⁴ The arrest of about a dozen very young students in Dar‘a, in the south of the country, by the security services, has been described by several different sources as the cause sparking the huge protests which broke out on 18 March 2011, four days after the first demonstration against the regime in Damascus.

⁵ Downing (2001), Atton (2001), Gibbs & Hamilton (2001), Bennet (2003, 2004), Castells (2005), Shirky (2008), Howard (2010), Morozov (2012).

⁶ See the well-documented synthesis offered by Jay Rosen over the credit social tools should receive in the revolutions, successful, abortive, and emerging, in Egypt, Tunisia, Iran, and elsewhere in the Middle East: Jay Rosen, The “Twitter Can’t Topple Dictators” Article in *Press Think*, 13 February 2011 (<http://pressthink.org/2011/02/the-twitter-cant-topple-dictators-article>).

sent by both the rival actors involved in the quest: the sources are mainly in Arabic and the keys to interpret them are tightly linked to Islam and its representations. So far the Syrian uprising has not been enough under the lens of media studies also because it is an ongoing phenomenon whose aspects are not defined yet. Still, I believe that even at this very early stage researchers may find the Syrian case as a source of inputs and inspirations useful to confirm or contradict pre-existent theories and models. At the same time, in my modest attempt to set my analysis in a broader theoretical frame, I have found extremely fitting what Castells (2007) offered as a paradigm regarding the interaction between the mainstream and the alternative media in light of the emergence of mass self-communication that “offers an extraordinary medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects”⁷. Similarly, the Syrian regime has been forced to link its own media instruments – the mainstream – to the horizontal network of communication – the alternative media – and their users⁸.

At the time of writing, the revolt was in its seventh month and there was no sign of an end to the dramatic stalemate between the demonstrations and repression. The period of time examined here goes from mid-March to the end of August 2011: a time span that is at once wide and quite limited so as to be able to give an account of a fluid constantly changing phenomenon.

Sources include mainly: direct, oral, written, audio and visual testimony made available to the author by numerous Syrian cyber activists reached by *Skype* in Syria or interviewed personally in Beirut; a reading of the communiqués and appeals published on social networks; news transmitted through the website of the official agency Sana; daily monitoring of State television and the two pan-Arab television stations *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya*.

In the beginning there was *Facebook*: trial runs between the regime and activists.

“On Facebook, the 4th of February was announced as the ‘Day of Syrian Rage’. I waited but nothing happened. Afterwards I no longer paid any attention to the appeals on the Internet, so that when the revolt broke out (the following March 15, *editor’s note*) I was really surprised”.⁹ This is how Ghalia Seifo, an employee at the *British Council* in Damascus recalls the day in which Syrian cyber activists called on the people to rally following the wave of Tunisian and Egyptian revolts.

The underground digital protest movement had already been in progress for about a month: at the beginning of January the first appeals for sit-ins in front of the Egyptian embassy were sent out on the social networks, Shahin, one of the more active young Syrians in Damascus at the time, recalls. “It was an attempt to protest

⁷ Castells, 2007, p. 249.

⁸ Castells, 2007, p. 252.

⁹ Alfarah Carole, “Syrie, un révolte si loin, si proche” in *Le Monde*, 17 August 2011 (www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2011/08/17/syrie-une-revolte-si-loin-si-proche_1560399_3218.html).

against the regime in an indirect way. The security forces dispersed us almost immediately, there were a few dozen of us, but it was a success all the same. The call on *Facebook* had worked”, Shahin says¹⁰.

To the young people experimenting with the power of the new media, the regime responded in the usual way: on 26 January, the authorities rendered two types of software inaccessible – *Nimbuz* and *eBuddy* which permit access to *Facebook* chat services from mobile phones. The days passed and the fateful date – 4 February – arrived: the appeal on *Facebook* was successful, but the mobilization in the streets was not. The regime had monitored the online activities of the activists and intensified the presence of its forces in the places indicated on the Web for the rallies.

In Damascus, however, the authorities decided to adopt new tactics to deal with the situation, and for the first time in decades, there was a change of strategy. Instead of continuing to suppress access to social networks without success (for years activists and common users had been utilizing software that made it possible to get around the barriers) on 9 February 2011 the pages of *Facebook*, *Youtube* and other social media sites suddenly became accessible.

The regime thus hoped to control the flow of hostile information more closely and force anti-regime activities to come out into the open. At the same time, the authorities launched an electronic campaign in support of president Bashar al-Assad: over a few days, numerous profiles were created on the social networks extolling the virtues of the president¹¹.

Less than a week later, the first protest rally took place in the heart of Damascus: it was 17 February and the Egyptian president Muhammad Hosni Mubarak had been deposed only six days earlier. Dozens of people in the *al-Hariqa* quarter marched through the streets of the ancient neighbourhood shouting a neutral but explosive slogan: “The Syrian people must not be humiliated” (*al-sha'b al-suri ma bi-yendhall*). The demonstrators held up their mobile phones and filmed the scene. A few hours later *Youtube* was inundated with films of the “rally in *al-Hariqa* square”¹².

The revolt still seemed far off, if not impossible. But that day the future “revolutionaries” had carried out a dress rehearsal, above all from the media point of view. “They went out into the streets. There were probably about a hundred of them. They marched virtually undisturbed for about twenty minutes. Who could have imagined?”, recounts Rateb, pseudonym of a Damascus activist. “They filmed everything and posted the videos on the Internet, making it possible for many other Syrians in other areas of Damascus and other cities to realize that it was all real”¹³, he says.

¹⁰ Conversation with the author, Beirut, August 2011.

¹¹ Ribal, owner of an Internet café in Damascus, states: “Military security services agents often came into my shop to ask me and my partners to open profiles on *Facebook* extolling the virtues of president Bashar. Then they would come back and ask if they could check the slogans and the photos published on those pages”. Conversation with the author via *Skype*, June 2011.

¹² www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrRBELWYFhU

¹³ Conversation with the author via *Skype*, Beirut, June 2011.

In the days following, other unprecedented popular assemblies occurred in front of government offices in the capital. Summoned through the social networks to make demands of a social and not explicitly political nature (cost of living, subsidies for large families), the rallies were dispersed by local government employees and the few police officers on site who encountered no resistance of any kind.

The regime's reaction to these entirely new but still timid forms of dissent was the usual one: the official media (*Sana*, the three government dailies *Tishrin*, *al-Ba'th* and *al-Thawra*, and the State-owned TV) ignored what had taken place in the capital, while the two main "independent" information organs (the *al-Watan* newspaper, the private TV station *al-Duniya*) gave an account of the assemblies but accused vaguely defined "external agents of inciting the citizens to create disorder"¹⁴. The hidden world of Syrian online activism was nevertheless in a state of ferment: on 26 February, two weeks after the outbreak of the revolt, a group of cyber activists opened the *ShamNN* channel on *Youtube*, which was to become the main platform for the diffusion of amateur videos of the "Syrian revolution".¹⁵

The new media of the regime

The attitude of the official propaganda machine however remained unchanged for only a brief time. On 15 March, the first demonstration of the revolt took place and was dispersed by security forces. The forces again went into action the following day to break up a sit-in organized by the families of political prisoners in front of the Ministry of Interior. Just two days later, the protest flared up heavily in Dar'a, the distant capital of the southern region of Hawran bordering on Jordan. The regime did not hesitate to show the strong fist of repression and the first civilian victims were counted in the streets¹⁶.

It was not mere coincidence then when on 21 March 2011 *al-Ikhbariya al-suriya*, the Syrian state news TV, opened a channel on *Youtube*¹⁷, imitating what the activists had done a month earlier with *ShamNN*. The aim was to thwart the increasing number of amateur videos showing the 'real nature' of the protests on the Internet. In one of the first television reports broadcast by State television, some activist film clips had been edited so as to induce the viewer to doubt their authenticity and alternated with phrases and graphic elements pointing the finger at "The Foreign Plot"¹⁸.

¹⁴In a statement reported on 28 February by *Sana* and another published by *Syria-News* (http://syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=129349), a pro-government portal, the regime resorted to a worn-out propaganda refrain, denouncing the sending of text messages by Israel to unsuspecting Syrian citizens, in an attempt to incite the population to gather in public places and provoke rioting. The *Sana* text was also quoted in an article appearing in the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat* on 2 March 2011.

¹⁵www.youtube.com/user/SHAMSNN. Another channel of the Syrian revolt, *Ugarit News*, opened on Youtube on 2 April: www.youtube.com/user/UgaritNews.

¹⁶Five deaths were verified as occurring between 18 and 19 March 2011 at Dar'a.

¹⁷www.youtube.com/user/alikhbariasyria.

¹⁸ www.youtube.com/user/alikhbariasyria?ob=5#p/u/16/TWPoaINb4hA.

In mid-April, the pan-Arab television channels entered the fray, having remained silent in the first month, when they were apparently busy covering the events in Libya, Bahrain and Yemen¹⁹. Suddenly around 10 April, *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya* started to broadcast activist videos from the *ShamNN* channel. The BBC's Arabic channel joined in with a great deal of news relating to the Syrian protests.

The regime's propaganda response became more structured and diversified. A special section was opened on the *Sana* site: "The true nature of the events" (*al-ahdath 'ala haqiqati-ha*). In addition to broadcasting debates and in-depth reports reaffirming the foreign plot theory, the TV channel *al-Duniya* – owned by a group of pro-regime businessmen – began to broadcast amateur videos supposedly showing "how news is fabricated"²⁰. In early April, on the occasion of the revolt in Dar'a, state television for the first time resorted to an "amateur video" that showed "terrorists" shooting civilians²¹. Two days later, on 10 April, when news had spread of the killing of some soldiers by vaguely defined 'armed men' in the coastal city of Baniyas, *al-Duniya* broadcast a film clip showing a "sniper on top of a building in Baniyas" who "along with other militants is firing against a military convoy"²². Subsequently, these and other 'amateur videos' were collected in a new section on the *Sana* website under the title of "Video Fragments" (*Maqati' fidiyu*).

In the same period, state television intensified transmission of urgent news, which appeared under the tag "important" (*hamm*), in imitation of *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya*. In this regard, on 29 May 2011 an overprint appeared on state television reporting statements made the day before by the Ba'th party's vice-secretary, the 'comrade' Muhammad Bukhaytan, in Damascus. In the morning, the statement was reported by the pro-government daily *al-Watan* but ignored by state television. In the afternoon, *Agence France Presse* reported Bukhaytan's statements. Just a few minutes later, the government channel broadcast "important news" using the words of the Ba'th leader with the addition of a comment. The impression was that the criteria for news selection was based principally on the need to impede information disseminated by non-aligned media. It is therefore possible to suppose that just as the activists closely follow the daily operations of official propaganda, so in the editorial rooms of state television there are employees charged exclusively with the task of monitoring pan-Arab broadcasters in order to develop different or contrasting versions of news reported by foreign media.

In the meantime, on *Facebook* and other platforms profiles against president al-Assad were multiplying and pages with explicitly anti-regime content seemed to greatly overwhelm the Internet pages opened by the government's loyal followers

¹⁹ Michael Young, a well-known Lebanese editorial writer, had on 7 April denounced the "shameful silence" of the Arab world in the media and on the political level: "The Shameful Arab Silence on Syria" in *The Daily Star*, Beirut, 7 April 2011 (www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/Apr/07/The-shameful-Arab-silence-on-Syria.ashx#axzz1YOhC41fx).

²⁰ Numerous videos were broadcast by *al-Duniya* for this purpose. One of these can be viewed on *Youtube* at the following address: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGsfOOcAvOo.

²¹ The video was uploaded on 8 April 2011: <http://youtu.be/WuUVCffokwY>.

²² www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ip73ByUhAA&feature=player_embedded#at=57.

both in terms of number and slogan effectiveness. In order to fight the activist front, at the end of April the regime marshalled its Electronic Army (*al-Jaysh al-suri al-iliktruni*) to conduct pirate attacks on sites against the al-Assads and on *Facebook* profiles of foreign organizations or political leaders supporting the Syrian revolt²³.

Activists attracted by traditional media

The outbreak of the revolt conferred on electronic activism the undisputed force of propagation. Thanks to the Internet, demonstrators were able to exchange experiences and information, get to know one another and seek to unite local efforts at national level. The social networks offered platforms that made it possible to bring what was happening on the streets online, thus creating a tight electronic network of *tansiqiyyat* (coordination groups) carrying out a dual function on the Web. On the one hand, they coordinated actions on the ground and, on the other, they acted as the press office for the protests, providing daily bulletins of the regime's victims and violations and sending out appeals and political manifestos.

Standing out among the numerous *tansiqiyyat* was the group of Local Coordinating Committees in Syria (LCCSY), which in the early weeks of protest managed to catalyze the various activist groups in the country's main cities and speak for national instances expressed at local level. The LCCSYs are on *Facebook* and *Twitter* and send out news and updates via email to a list of subscribers that is growing day by day.²⁴ Since the end of May, many other groups of *tansiqiyyat* have been formed in the social media by groups of activists in middle and small rural centres or even single neighbourhoods.²⁵

The Internet also made it possible for activists to communicate with the outside world and the main foreign media, expelled from Syria since the beginning of the first demonstrations. Connected by means of mobile phones and satellite lines or *Skype*, eyewitnesses speaking from the places of repression and *tansiqiyyat* representatives have since mid-April been appearing regularly on *al-Arabiya* and *al-Jazeera* news reports and have become the privileged interlocutors in many other media.

Internet was also used by activists to learn to use the technologies needed to get around the communication black-outs imposed by the regime. "I had no idea how a satellite telephone was used, nor did I imagine that the call could be traced", recalls Nagi, pseudonym of an activist leader in Homs. "I spent quite a lot of hours

²³ The Electronic Army's Internet site is the following: <http://syrian-es.com/>. Its channel on *Youtube* is at the following address: www.youtube.com/user/syrianes. On this phenomenon, see, among others, Reza Refati, "Syrian Electronic Army Sites" in *Cyberwarzone*, 19 May 2011 (www.cyberwarzone.com/cyberwarfare/syrian-electronic-army-sites).

²⁴The site of the Local Coordination Committees is the following: www.lccsyria.org.

²⁵Such is the case of the Union of the Homs Neighbourhoods (*Ittihad ahliya' Hims*, <http://ar-ar.facebook.com/Revolution.of.Homs.Union>).

studying on the Internet in order to understand what models to buy and how to use them safely. When the opportunity arose, I came to Lebanon and bought seven sets. Then I went back to Homs secretly. I distributed the telephones in different areas of the city and I taught each person in charge how to use them and what measures to take to avoid being traced”.²⁶

The pan-Arab satellite television stations then began to broadcast amateur videos with the greatest visual impact repeatedly and with regularity. “I posted the video on *Facebook* and it was picked up by many Arab channels. It was then that I understood that we could speak to the world about our revolution”, recalls Ruti Othman, a 23-year old student.²⁷ “Many people go into the streets hoping to see their own demonstration afterwards, and perhaps even themselves, on TV”, acknowledges Amer Abdessalam, a freelance journalist. “They go and demonstrate, film the video, go home, upload it and wait for *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya* to broadcast it”, Amer confided to me before disappearing into the Syrian prisons at the end of August.²⁸ Usually this is the standard procedure: at first the activists upload their amateur videos on *Youtube* and send via email or via *Skype* the exact URLs to the pan-Arab TVs producers desks. Before broadcasting the videos, *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya* select the most interesting material through a complex process of triple checks²⁹ aimed to verify the genuineness of the videos. The relationship between the new media and the traditional one is not institutionalized but is rather based on the implicit acknowledgement by *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya* of the authenticity of the activists’ work on the ground. Thus, these young Syrian citizen journalists receive an unprecedented legitimation by the two giants of the pan-Arab media scene.

Despite being masters of the new media, most activists are not familiar with the basic rules of journalism. “We know that journalists are not activists and that you have to be impartial”, says the cyber activist Shahin, fully aware of this initial handicap. “We know that you are not looking just for opinions, but above all facts. And that the latter must be supported by concrete evidence”.³⁰

Moreover, after official propaganda accused pan-Arab television stations of broadcasting amateur videos filmed years earlier in Iraq or Lebanon, since April 2011 in almost all activist film clips showing an anti-regime demonstration the improvised film-maker has been careful to show some kind of extemporaneous clapper board: a sheet with the protest location written on it, the slogan of the day (agreed with the other *tansiqiyyat*) and the date. In some videos, activists show the front page of a newspaper on the newsstands to certify the date of the demonstration.

Equally aware of the need to be credible is Alexander Page, pseudonym of one of

²⁶Conversation with the author, Beirut, August 2011.

²⁷Quoted in Carole Alfarah, *ibid*, 23 August 2011.

²⁸ Conversation with the author, Beirut, August 2011.

²⁹ Osama (pseudonym), Syrian blogger and activists from Baniyas. Conversation with the author, Tripoli, July 2011.

³⁰ Conversation with the author. Beirut, August 2011.

the leaders of the Coalition of Free Damascus Citizens for Peaceful Change³¹: “We need for you (journalists, editor’s note) to trust us. We check a news item many times before releasing it because we know that if we are not reliable once, then we will no longer be your interlocutors”.³² This pledge reflects the desire of many Syrians to avoid being labelled “anti-regime demonstrators prepared to invent anything in order to be listened to”, and to make themselves known as the spokespeople for a situation covered up by the official media and reported in a fragmentary and disrupted manner by the big information networks who no longer have correspondents in Syria.

Thanks to webcams focused on the sit-ins during the crowded Fridays of protest and connected to the editorial rooms of *al-Jazeera* (at times by means of satellite modems in case of interruption of the local network), the demonstrators are able to show live what is happening in those particular locations precisely at the same time when state television broadcasts images of “quiet life” in that or other cities. And proof that the regime is constantly monitoring pan-Arab stations lies in the fact that a live connection usually lasts for only a few minutes, until Syrian authorities cut off the electricity in the place of origin of the pirate images. Towards the end of August, the activists refined their technique and, thanks once again to Internet and the social networks, they began to broadcast directly and autonomously, without going through the Doha-based TV.³³

Interesting experiments have been carried out by activists to fight against the Damascus regime’s monopoly of the print media as well. The weekly *al-Hurriyat* (The Freedoms) and, subsequently, the periodical *al-Badil* (The Alternative) have attempted to “arrive where Internet does not”.³⁴ Starting in late August, *al-Hurriyat* is being distributed in some areas of Damascus and Homs. Its issues are also being distributed in PDF format through the Internet (the newspaper has a *Facebook* and *Twitter* profile, as well as its own website). According to Karim Layla, the 30-year-old editor-in-chief of the twelve-page “first revolution weekly”, dozens of collaborators in all regions of Syria are working for *al-Hurriyat*, but the editorial core consists of a handful of young activists. “We are pioneers in journalism, we have no journalistic training”, admits Layla who comes from Damascus but resides in Germany and has a degree in science³⁵. Self-financed, the weekly is seeking support through collections to be organized abroad and in nearby Lebanon. Albeit with some differences, the experience of *al-Badil*, whose first issue appeared in early September, is similar. Consisting of only four pages, the paper is the result of the efforts of professional journalists who have “joined the revolution”

³¹Their pages, one of which is in Italian, can be found at the following address: www.facebook.com/CFDPC.

³²Conversation with the author via *Skype*, Beirut, August 2011.

³³The demonstrators in Rastan, located north of Homs, had indicated the following *Twitter* address for those who wished to follow their 9 September 2011 sit-in live: <http://bambuser.com/channel/rastan2011/broadcast/1957401>.

³⁴*Al-Badil*, 6 September 2011, First PDF issue (downloaded from *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=161412303942097), 6 September 2011.

³⁵Conversation with the author via *Skype*, Beirut, September 2011.

to fight against the “lying media of the regime”.³⁶ Its aim is to “follow the events of the revolution, to report on the different opinions in the street in the respect of pluralism”³⁷.

Conclusion

“Without Internet there is no life”, declared Ahmad, pseudonym of the above quoted Syrian cyber activist who referred to the Web as the fundamental tool of the “Syrian revolution” in August 2011.³⁸ According to recent statistics, however, less than a fifth of the Syrian population is connected to the Internet³⁹. Moreover, during the suppression of the revolt the authorities completely isolate urban centres where military operations are underway, depriving residents of Internet connection, communication by means of land lines and mobile phones, electricity and running water, not only as a form of collective punishment inspired by the medieval siege, but also to prevent activists from transmitting information to the outside world. In the temporary or absolute absence of the Web, traditional relationships – family, clan, tribal, professional and school ties – prove crucial to ensuring the continuous flow of news of the “revolution”. This becomes evident both in rural areas and the outskirts of big cities, the real epicentres of the revolt where social ties have not been weakened by increasing urban isolation. Who lives and operates in this peripheral contexts can more readily resist repression, thus ensuring tenaciousness and constancy to the protest movement⁴⁰. “To arrive where Internet does not”, declares Karim Layla of the clandestine *al-Hurriyat*. “We need to re-discover the traditional means of information and rely on social ties”, he says.⁴¹

The regime has had to improvise a strategy to bring its propaganda methods up to date, by opening up to the unknown world of the social media and amateur videos, real or claiming to be such. While the activists had to become extemporaneous ‘professionals’ of the traditional media, seeking to make their sources reliable and their news credible.

Constant media monitoring by both sides is a clear example of this game of mirrors, in which the two blocks observe, study and even learn from each other in an unceasing long-distance dialogue. The shift from one type of media to the other has until now been more visible in the field of official propaganda. The regime

³⁶ *Al-Badil*, 6 September 2011.

³⁷ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, London, 9 September 2011 (www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=639526&issueno=11973).

³⁸ Anthony Shadid, “Syria’s Sons of No One” in *The New York Times Magazine*, 31 August 2011.

³⁹ According to the Internet World Stats website (www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm), there are 4,469,000 Syrian users over a total population of 22,517,750 (19,8%). The Middle East average is 33,5%. Statistics were updated as of June 30, 2011.

⁴⁰ There are numerous examples: Rastan and Talbisa in the region of Homs; the villages around Dar’a in the south; the villages on the plain of Oronte northwest of Hama; the suburbs of Damascus and the villages on hills west of the capital; the region of Jabal Zawiya, between Hama and Idlib.

⁴¹ Conversation with the author via *Skype*, Beirut, August 2011.

undoubtedly started out at a disadvantage in the contest, mainly because of its obsolete information apparatus. Thus it had no choice but to play the new media card within the shortest possible time. The activists, already masters of the more rapid and effective communication tools before the protests, instead had taken months to understand the need to adapt to the requirements of foreign journalism. While the interesting debate about the role of the *alternative media* in the Arab revolts goes on, it seems that in nowadays Syria the boundary between the *new* and *traditional media* has become less distinct and more penetrable. Interaction between the two types of tool is still at its beginnings, but in the convulsive first six months of the Syrian revolt the clash on the ground has been supported by the constant interaction between the media in the hands of the activists and those monopolized by the authorities in power. Regarding the Syrian uprising, until now it is not possible to answer clearly to the core question: *how does the Internet affect the balance of forces in a contest between the state and people fed up with the state?*⁴². But with no doubt it is thanks mostly to the Internet and its media tools that today the Syrian activists have more means than in the past to expose the crimes committed by the regime. This is true not just concerning the relationship between the Syrian human rights researchers and the foreign public opinion, but mainly regarding the horizontal flows of *alternative* information among different geographical regions of the country. This *new* media contagion has contributed to strengthen the pan-Syrian solidarity among activists in the urban and rural contexts, and obstructed somehow any enduring success of the military repression. In this regard I agree with Howard (2010) when he remarks that while neither the Internet nor cell phones have caused democratic transitions on their own “today, no democratic transition is possible without information technology”⁴³. According to Castells (2007),

“technology is not simply a tool, it is a medium, it is a social construction, with its own implications. (...) the development of the technology of self-communication is also the product of our culture, a culture that emphasizes individual autonomy, and the self-construction of the project of the social actor. (...) The more an individual has a project of autonomy (personal, professional, socio-political, communicative), the more she uses the Internet. And in a time sequence, the more he/she uses the Internet, the more autonomous she becomes vis-à-vis societal rules and institutions”⁴⁴.

The bloody clash is rending the country, and yet the inevitable contest between those who support radical change and those who defend the established order seems to point to signs of growth in the entire society. The media dialogue into which anti-regime activists and the directors of official propaganda have been forced, seems to have matured both parties not only from the merely technological point of view but on the cultural level as well. “Syrian society at this time is growing a great deal”, states Karim M., pseudonym of a cyber activist from

⁴² Rosen, 2012.

⁴³ Howard, 2010, p.34.

⁴⁴ Castells, 2007, p. 249.

Damascus. “We are witnessing the growth of the Syrian community – in all its components. It has been concealed for decades within an empty shell. Now we are coming out of it. And we are doing so thanks also to the Internet”⁴⁵.

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