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The State of Disarray of a Networked Revolution

The Syrian Uprising's Information Environment

by Enrico De Angelis

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Introduction

Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian blogger who created the page *We are all Khaled Said*, has defined the Egyptian revolution as a “revolution 2.0.” During a speech at a Ted meeting¹ in Cairo on March 2011, in the aftermath of Mubarak's demise, he said that in the revolution “no one was a hero, because everyone was a hero.”²

There is no doubt that the uprisings of the “Arab Spring,” from Egypt to Tunisia, from Syria to Bahrain, have been characterized by new social and cultural practices concerning the use of media as tools of political mobilization and knowledge production. These social and cultural practices seem to delineate the emergence of a new type of public sphere, based on networking rather than unidirectional communications, on heterarchy rather than hierarchy of information sources, on amateur rather than professional cultural production, on media convergence rather than media divergence, on over-abundance rather than scarcity of information, on active participation rather than passive consumption.

However, the relevance of this emerging new public sphere with respect to the “Arab Spring” is not yet clear. The internet penetration rate in the countries

¹ TED (Technology Entertainment and Design) is a set of conferences financed by the Sapling foundation with the aim of spreading ideas.

² The complete speech is visible at

http://www.ted.com/talks/wael_ghonim_inside_the_egyptian_revolution.html.

touched by the protests is still quite low: Bahrain 53,5%, Syria 19,8%, Yemen 9,7%, Egypt 24,5%, Libya 5,4%, Tunisia 33,9%.³ Many factors could have played a more relevant role in triggering the revolts. As media critic Jay Rosen [2011] has pointed out, new media have to be considered factors, and not causes, in relation to the revolts. New media change the environment where actors move, more than constituting the reasons that make the revolts possible. In this sense, the question that we should ask ourselves is not so much about “if” the revolts have being triggered by new media, but rather what kind of political and social practices have emerged as a consequence of new media’s diffusion. What is even more important, we should ask ourselves if the information environment created by these emerging practices is functional to end the current crisis and in relation to future democratic processes.

This article intends to offer some reflections on the nature of the networked information environment that characterizes the Syrian unrest, that is to say, the wave of protests against the regime of Bashar al-Asad that began in the middle of March 2011 and is still under way. In particular, the analysis will focus on the protocols behind the production and distribution of information about the Syrian unrest. In this analysis my use of the term “protocols” refers to the interpretation used by Jenkins [2006, 13-14], that is, as the social and cultural practices that grow up around a technology.

Reconstructing the protocols of communication means, first, considering how information is produced and distributed through internet platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Second, it means considering the relationships among these platforms, the wider media environment and the organizational level of the protests. Therefore, the analysis relies first of all on the observation of Facebook and Twitter activism in relation to the Syrian unrest since the beginning of the protests. The media coverage of some of the most relevant traditional outlets such as *al-Jazeera* has also been considered. Finally, protocols of communication have been reconstructed during reiterated conversations with bloggers, activists and journalists involved in the Syrian unrest both through the web and in face-to-face meetings in Damascus, Beirut, Tunis and Cairo during the last six months. However, this should be considered a work in progress: a more systematic media content analysis is still required. Moreover, because of the limited space, the article focuses on the general aspects of the information environment rather than providing specific details of media content. The work hypotheses that the present study will test can be summarized in the following main considerations: first, the nature of the communication protocols that characterize the Syrian unrest differs profoundly from that experienced in other con-

³ See Internet world stats on Middle East and Africa on <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm> and <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>.

texts of the “Arab Spring,” and in particular in the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolutions. Second, the information environment of the Syrian unrest is subject more than other contexts to “communication bias,” as Innis [1991] defines them, embedded in the internet technology. Third, specific conditions of the Syrian unrest, such as the above-mentioned vulnerability to communication bias as well as the prolonging of the conflict, result in some apparently negative effects on the dynamics of the information environment: over-abundance of information, polarization of the debate, formation of separated, non-deliberative virtual enclaves, lack of credibility, creation of a cultural production based on images and emotionality rather than on text and rational argumentation. Finally, in Syria the net-activism is more separated from the protests on the streets than it was in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. There are many reasons that explain this separation: from the difficulty to organize demonstrations through Facebook without alerting authorities, to the lack of coordination among net-activists, who for the most part live abroad, and the people going into the streets. Consequently, internet activism does not seem to be capable either to guide the protests or to offer a platform where the different souls of the opposition can negotiate a unified political line.

The present analysis is strictly dependent on the methodological choice to give to technology a relevant role in relation to social, cultural and political human practices. In this regard, I will adopt the conceptualization of technology proposed by Benkler [2006, 17], according to whom “neither deterministic nor wholly malleable, technology sets some parameters of individual and social action.” In other words, mass media still cannot merely be considered as simple tools whose use depends only on what we decide to do with them. Different technologies make some kinds of practices, actions, and interactions easier or harder to perform. Adopting this conceptualization implies also recognizing that each technology is endowed with specific “political properties” and “bias of communication,” facilitating some kinds of political relations more than others.⁴

Considering technology as a non-neutral factor is of fundamental importance for the thesis expressed in this paper. The internet was made accessible to the public only in 2000 and still now it reaches only a low percentage of the total population. Moreover, the internet was subject, like the other media, to strict control on the part of the authorities. The regime, for example, exercised great care in preventing the formation of communities based on the web, and has imprisoned several cyber-dissidents and bloggers in the past few years. Facebook and other social networks were

⁴ For a discussion about technology’s political properties see Winner 1999. For the definition of “bias of communication” see Innis 1991.

banned from November 2007 to February 2011 and, even if they were easily accessible through proxies, they were never used as active political tools before the “Arab Spring.” Finally, the lack of free political debate, opposition parties, movements and civil organizations has been a further obstacle for net-activism to develop in a substantial way.

As a consequence, in Syria new media have been used intensively as political tools only after the “Arab Spring,” largely through an operation of emulation of net-activism practices in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. The sudden and inexperienced employment of new media as a fundamental instrument of political struggle has contributed to creating what I define as a vulnerability to the bias of communication of the technology. That is to say, for example, virtual architectures of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter play a more relevant role in shaping political discourses and the types of information exchange. As maintained by one Egyptian blogger, “in Egypt the activism was born on the streets, and then it started to use internet.”⁵ On the contrary, in Syria the activism was born at the same time both on the internet and on the streets, mostly in an uncoordinated way and in very difficult conditions.

The New “Networked Information Environment”

By new media I mean first of all digital tools used to produce and distribute information, such as mobile phones, smart phones, digital cameras and laptops, and, second, the internet platforms which are part of the “web 2.0,” such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and Youtube. The emergence of new media and their integration with old media is shaping, according to many authors, a new kind of information environment. New media means first of all a “mass amateurization” of the production of media content: everyone, with a keyboard to write on or a camera to shoot a movie with and a computer to upload it, can produce and distribute widely and very easily what she or he wants to say and what she or he wants to show [Shirky 2008]. Platforms such as Youtube, blogs and other social networks replace general-interest intermediaries and traditional gatekeepers such as newspapers and broadcast televisions and reinforce the control of individuals over the content [Sunstein 2007]. They spread the expressive capabilities of a society in a radical way, delineating an environment characterised by a de-professionalization of the production of culture, including political communication. As Lessig [2008] would put it, new media mark the passage from a Read Only culture, which identifies the spirit of cultural production in the 1900s, to a Read/Write culture. The production and exchange of knowl-

⁵ Speech given during a workshop at the Arab bloggers meeting held in Tunis, 3-6 October, 2011.

edge is characterized by perpetual experimentalism [Chadwick and Howard 2009, 6], since the public domain is constantly redefined by a continuous interaction between producers and consumers.

The rule of new media is not the “filter, then publish” of professional outlets, but “publish, then filter” [Carroll 2004]. As Shirky [2008] affirms, the future presented by the internet is the mass amateurization of publishing and a switch from ‘Why publish this?’ to ‘Why not?’ In this regard, the nature of new media is also blurring the borders between private and public domains, thus enabling a renegotiation of what is considered private and what is considered public in public life [Papacharissi 2009]. A second element concerns knowledge communities and collective intelligence: the ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members [Jenkins 2006, 27]. In so doing, a distributed network of amateurs can produce information goods that may outperform the traditional, concentrated sources. New media map out a type of production and exchange of knowledge that is based on heterarchy and not on hierarchy [Benkler 2006], or, as Castells [2010, 70] puts it, on a networking logic that emerges inevitably while using this technology.

In this regard, even if the image “everyone is a pamphleteer” cannot be fully put into practice, new media radically challenge the hierarchies of content production. The one-to-many forms of communication have given the way to many-to-many forms of communication. The material requirements for effective information production and communication are today not limited to a small group of wealthy organizations, but they are instead much more widely distributed in society. According to Benkler [2006], the relations between content producers are more horizontal and the differences in the levels of authority usually regulating the consumption of content are greatly reduced, sometimes almost disappearing. In the new information environment a tweet, a blog post, an opinion published on Facebook can therefore often enjoy more trust than professionally produced content in newspapers or on televisions.

In this regard Facebook and Twitter, even more than the blogosphere, put a definitive end to the “punditocracy” that for many years dominated political communication and other cultural domains in the Arab countries, Syria included [Lynch 2007]. Benkler conceptualises the new patterns of horizontal relations dominating the new media as a “networked information environment”: a new typology of public sphere that is rapidly replacing the old, mass-mediated public sphere. In the networked public sphere there are no longer unidirectional links with end points in the mass media, but rather “a distributed architecture with multi-directional connections among all nodes in the networked information environment” [Benkler 2006, 212]. As Jenkins [2006, 219] points out, the new media environment appears to be dominat-

ed by “access, participation, reciprocity, and peer-to-peer rather than one-to-many communication.”

Another element concerns the direct impact of new media on political organizations and on the organizing of collective movements or campaigns. In this regard, new media reduce the transaction costs that are necessary to set up collective actions: the possibility to exchange information very easily and create communities with weak bonds contributes to the creation of new forms of collective participation different from those of representative democracy. In addition, new media transform the modes of interaction and engagement within groups, communities and organizations, allowing, at least in theory, a levelling of hierarchies and the introduction of a more participatory culture.

Finally, a last element regards the sense of community. New media introduce the possibility to shape new forms of community “defined through voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments” [*ibidem*, 27]. In this regard, new media can be powerful tools in reinforcing communities of practice, that is to say “people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” [Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002]. All these aspects, from the amateurization of content to the shaping of knowledge communities, from the use of new media as tools of mobilization to the creation of new forms of communities, emerged as relevant dynamics in the Egyptian and Tunisian revolution. But in Syria things went quite differently.

Whereas some of the elements mentioned above are widely accepted as relevant aspects of the new information environment introduced by new media, others are more controversial. What is more important, the positive impact of the ongoing transformations for democratic processes and the functioning of the public sphere remain a debated matter. In this regard, although some authors tend to consider the networked public sphere as more democratic and pluralistic, others tend to stress some dangers linked to the modalities of producing and exchanging information enabled by new media.

Benkler [2006, 212] maintains that a networked public sphere will enable a “better democratic participation” and a “more critical and reflective culture.” Jenkins [2006, 2] sees in digital democracy a “greater sense of participation,” “less dependence on official expertise,” and “a greater trust in collaborative problem solving.” Other authors have countered this optimistic view by raising a “Babel objection,” which discards some aspects, such as the knowledge communities, and considers others, such as the amateurization of content production, as potentially detrimental to democratic processes and the functioning of the public sphere: over-abundance

of information, absence of the hierarchies in information production, which are necessary for citizens to find their bearings within media content, an individualization of consumption, increasing possibilities to filter in advance what they will read and watch on the basis of personal preferences, with the effect of rendering more improbable the encounter with different views. Sunstein emphasizes that democratic processes also need widely shared experiences such as those offered by broadcasting media in order to function correctly. But new media are pushing us towards a world dominated by a logic of filtering where everyone can choose what he will read and watch, and when. In so doing, new media would nudge like-minded people to gather in “information cocoons” and “echo-chambers” where their convictions are strengthened rather than challenged and extremist views end up prevailing, making public discussion more difficult to attain [Sunstein 2001; Sunstein 2007]. Shapiro [1999] warns against the “total filtering” enabled by the net, which can give individuals the possibility to avoid situations of cognitive dissonances. Barber [2004, 38] goes even further, stressing some key negative attributes of new media such as “their speed,” “their reductive simplicity,” “the solitariness of their user interface,” “their bias toward images over text,” “their point-to-point, lateral immediacy and consequent resistance to hierarchical mediation,” “their partiality to raw data rather than informed knowledge,” and “their inclination toward audience segmentation rather than toward a single, integrated community of users and viewers.”

The Social System Behind the Networked Public Sphere

In answer to the “Babel objection,” Benkler, Jenkins and other authors point out that the networked information environment has spontaneously developed some antidotes against these problems. In their views, the new digital public sphere is far from being disorganised, anarchic, and made up of isolated niches.

The first antidote goes under the name of “convergence” [Jenkins 2001]: new media do not constitute an isolated environment, but they coexist in a complementary way with traditional, professional media. We are immersed in an environment where televisions and newspapers in all likelihood will continue to play a significant role. In the words of Lasica [2003], we could speak of a “new media ecosystem” where bloggers work with journalists, user-generated content is hosted by professional media, and articles by mainstream media are re-published in Facebook profiles. Therefore, shared experiences continue to be guaranteed and people will always be exposed to information that they do not select in advance.

An effective collaboration between old and new media was evident in both the Egypt and Tunisia revolutions, where both national media and foreign televisions such as *al-Jazeera* gave visibility to bloggers and net-activists in a way that they could not have attained alone. *Al-Jazeera* in particular made an extensive use of networks of trusted citizen journalists both in Tunisia and Egypt [Hijawi 2011]. As Radsch has pointed out, the synergy between bloggers and traditional media in Egypt has a long history, dating back, at least, to 2004 [Radsch 2008]. Behind the success of the 6th April movement in 2008, for example, there have been newspapers such as *al-Badeel*, *al-Dustur* and *al-Masri al-Youm* that were important points of reference for bloggers and activists in order to reach visibility [Reese 2009]. New media and old media are “awkward bed-fellows” who increasingly need each other in order to reach their objectives.

As the Tunisian blogger Sami Ben Gharbia illustrated during the recent Arab bloggers meeting in Tunis (3-6 October 2011), a virtuous cycle of information flow has been set up among different types of media during the Tunisian uprisings: Facebook was used by activists in order to upload videos and written reports; then collective blogs such as *Nawaat* and *Global Voices* would re-publish the content after collecting, organizing and translating it into English; finally, international mainstream media were alerted through Twitter so that they could use the refined information, giving it much more visibility, especially in the West [Cottle 2011]. In other words, Tunisian bloggers and activists set up a sort of cyber-cascades governance, exploiting different types of media to attain their objectives. As Nora Younis, the website editor of *al-Masri al-Youm*, has said: “a lot of times, the way we plan our daily operations is just by checking what is happening now and listening to all the tweets, the Facebook updates, and following up on what is happening in Egypt through the social networks. And then we can verify the news, send in our reporters, and many times we contact the online blogger and the citizen journalists to verify something or get more information” [in: Valdre 2011].

A second array of considerations against the Babel objection revolves around the acknowledgement of the networked public sphere as a space that is far from being unregulated but appears rather as a system endowed with its specific forms of order. McNair [2007] stresses that the blogosphere tends to develop its own hierarchies, albeit of different scale and nature from those characterizing old media: there is a limited number of websites collecting thousands of visitors, and many of them are internet versions of traditional outlets such as *The New York Times* or *Le Monde*. Many of the most famous bloggers, for example, are journalists, and they prosper because of their credibility and visibility. In other words, also in the web a pyramidal structure emerges, rewarding credibility and the quality of content production and creating an

orientation map for consumption. Benkler [2006] emphasizes the fact that the topology of networks is a multi-leveled environment, with clusters of interest-based and less visited websites linked, through some of their more powerful nodes, to more popular websites where information is shared by a wider range of people. In this way, a process of deliberation is guaranteed on multiple levels: information is processed in interest-based clusters of websites, and then the most valuable outputs of this information are made available to a larger public sphere where they are further shared and discussed.

The new media system also produces its own rules and procedures that help organize the content. Lessig states that the Read/Write culture develops “an ecology of content and an economy of reputation”: a system that “makes an extraordinary range of initially unfiltered content understandable, and that helps the reader recognize what he should trust, and what he should question” [Lessig 2008, 57]. This system works through what Thomas Vander Wal calls a “folksonomy”: mechanisms to tag, label, and rank the content of the web, which help consumers navigating through it. On a day-to-day basis, net content is therefore processed and organized, creating hierarchies of authority, rendering the chaos controllable and the over-abundance of information governable.⁶

In this way, a “communal ethos,” as Carroll [2004] names it, of the use of new media is developed. This ethos is different from that of professional media, being based on values such as immediacy, transparency, interconnectivity, and proximity to the events. But it offers, all the same, an order to what otherwise would be a chaotic environment, and ultimately it allows the overflow of information to be transformed into accessible knowledge. Finally, the idea of individualization of consumption is also contested. According to Jenkins [2006], new consumers are more socially connected. It is possible, via the web, to create communities of knowledge and practice that further contribute to orienting consumption in the sea of new media content.

In this regard, the Egyptian case is a formidable example. The communities of bloggers started on the internet as tech-savvy individuals, but they have gradually built up communities of users across different ideological positions. Many of these bloggers had the possibility to get to know each other better through street-activism and face-to-face meetings such as workshops, demonstrations and Bar Camps: participatory workshops where the topics of discussion are proposed by the participants on the spot. They strengthened their bonds with solidarity actions when, for example, one of them was arrested. What is more important, they managed to enjoy credibility with professional media as well as with organizations such as Kifaya! and the Muslim Brotherhood. Many of them practice journalism as a parallel activity together with

⁶ For the definition of folksonomy see <http://vanderwal.net/random/category.php?cat=153>.

blogging. When the uprising against Mubarak reached its peak in the end of January 2011, the bloggers network, now using Facebook and Twitter extensively, was a consolidated reality on the Egyptian political scene. They were a recognized actor, their well-rooted communities were endowed with some highly visible “big names”,⁷ and they could count on relationships based on mutual trust reinforced over years of collaboration and shared activities. This organizational background is another, irreplaceable instrument of self-orientation within the networked public sphere.

These elements (convergence, forms of hierarchies, folksonomy, new forms of community) could function as valid antidotes against the over-abundance of information, the absence of rigid and pre-established hierarchies, and the tendency towards the formation of separated information cocoons. The topology of networks and the communities operating within its space create a system suitable for filtering, accrediting, synthesizing and giving salience to the huge mass of information flowing in the web. In other words, new media platforms are embedded in what I will refer to as a “social environment” for collecting, discussing, filtering and commenting on politically salient contents and for making possible the functioning of a networked public sphere. This “social environment” is based on rules that are different from those regulating the traditional mass-mediated public sphere and its organizations, professional media included. It is a more fluid, more open, and more participatory space characterized by the convergence of different means of communication and a space in which the actors negotiate protocols of interaction and behavioral norms, develop new and specific forms of authority and credibility, and build up communities endowed with their own values and social relationships.

New Media in the Syrian Upheaval: Technology Without a “Social Environment”

The central idea of this article is that within the Syrian unrest the social environment delineated above as a solution for some potential problems inherent in new media forms of communication does not exist, or, at least, is very weak. The fact that this element is missing has many causes, but two of the most relevant are certainly on the one hand the poverty of the Syrian political environment, that is to say, characterized by a weak civil society and the absence of an open political debate, and on the other hand the delay in internet development, which is still experiencing an immature phase.

⁷ See the essays by [Onodera](#) and [Valeriani](#) in this symposium.

In Syria the World Wide Web became publicly accessible only in 2000, as part of the timid plan of national opening and development started under the rule of Bashar al-Asad. Although the penetration rate increased at a fast pace, reaching today almost 20% of the population, the use of the internet has always been subjected, like the other media, to strict measures of censorship and restriction. The regime has opted for a strategy of controlled development of the internet, encouraging the diffusion of a multitude of news websites while at the same time exercising more pressure over other spheres [De Angelis 2011]. Therefore, social networks such as Youtube and Facebook were forbidden from November 2007 to January 2011. What is more important, the regime never allowed the formation of net-activists's communities, moving against bloggers with particular decisiveness. Dozens of cyber-dissidents, such as Karim Arbaji and Taa al-Mallouhi, just to name two of them, were sentenced to up to five years of prison for their online activities. As a consequence, the bloggers were prevented from becoming a point of reference in the Syrian internet sphere as happened elsewhere: those operating in Syria usually are not able to use their real names while many others decided to leave the country, continuing their activities abroad.

Net-activism in Syria was almost inexistent before the upheaval: with few exceptions, the use of social networks as mobilization tools was not really tested until the unrest, and the collaboration between online activism and other forms of organizations and movements on the ground could not find the necessary space to develop in a substantial way. In her brilliant description of the development of the Egyptian blogosphere, Courtney Radsch [2008] identifies three main periods: an experimentation phase, an activist phase and a fragmentation phase. She reconstructs how Egyptian bloggers passed from being individualized users of software and web applications to being first a homogeneous and politically engaged community and then a rich network of activists in which a wide spectrum of political and ideological postures were represented. Syrian online activism, on the contrary, had neither the conditions nor the time to advance to the second phase. The activism on the internet started in a more intense and capillary way only in the wake of the protests. In other words, Syrian online activism is still now going through its phase of experimentation. As a consequence, the internet activism networks which operate within the Syrian unrest are for the most part uncoordinated, inexperienced and incapable of constituting a valid point of reference either for ordinary people or for professional media. Net-activism is amorphous and individualized, in the sense that it is not carried out through communities of people with a prolonged experience of interaction and collaboration.

The absence of an advanced internet sphere within Syria leaves much space to new, disconnected actors, mainly operating from abroad. The most evident example is the Facebook group *The Syrian Revolution 2011*, which was created by a

member of the Swedish branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and managed to gather more than 300,000 adhesions.⁸ Much of the online content on the Syrian unrest is produced and distributed by activists from abroad who were practically unknown before the protests. Rami Nakhle, the most visible Syrian blogger, lives in Beirut and acquired his reputation by giving interviews to the most important mainstream outlets such as *al-Jazeera*, *BBC* and *The Guardian*. He became an important hub in giving international visibility to the protests, but his role is not comparable to that of Egyptian bloggers such as Wael Ghonim, Alaa Abd el-Fattah and Wael Abbas, or of Sami Ben Gharbia and Malek Khadhrawi in Tunisia. He was practically unknown before the protests, and his small network of dissidents based in Beirut and within Syria it is not enough to provide him with credibility either among the activists or among ordinary citizens. Another typical case is Alexander Page, a blogger based in Damascus, who, despite his relevant role in online activities, managed to conceal his identity from everyone, including the other dissidents of the network, until he revealed his true identity at the end of October 2011 [Amos 2011]. And he did it because he was forced to flee to Cairo after security services were finally able to track him down.⁹

The individualization of online activism has dramatic consequences for the credibility of the movement, not only because of the exaggerations and unchecked information spread by single activists on a daily basis, but also because sources without names and faces cannot be trusted by public opinion. A dramatic example is the case of the “Gay Girl in Damascus”: a mass media-courted Syrian lesbian blogger who was later revealed to be a middle-aged (and married) male American living in Scotland [Addley 2011].

Within Syria, the situation is not much different. Online dissidents operate in small cells in order to better escape the controls of the security services, and they are forced to act as separated entities because of restrictions of mobility from one province to another. Thus, just as the protests are fragmented, so are the activists in charge of giving them visibility. Some of these cells consist of geeks and Linux techies, similar to the first generation of bloggers in Egypt. Others are improvised activists armed with a camera and a laptop. In both cases, they have no political experience and they generally have no voice in how protests should be carried out. Moreover, the improvisation and the hurry in setting up these small networks prevented them from developing the mutual trust characterizing communities where the members

⁸ <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=9340&cp=all>.

⁹ I met Rami Jarrah, alias Alexander Page, in Cairo during a conference in the middle of October. To my knowledge, no one of the other prominent Syrian online activists knew his real name before the above-mentioned article published in NPR [Amos 2011].

had the time to get acquainted with each other. One of the effects is that sometimes members are discovered to be spies of the regime (or simply accused of being spies), and generally it is not possible to check out the content contributed by all the activists, generating, once again, issues of credibility.

There is no effort to create a collective blog like the Tunisian *Nawaat* in Syria. Although many members of *Nawaat* were living in Europe when the uprising against Ben Ali erupted, they were already an established and recognizable community, with strong connections and credibility inside Tunisia. Their experience provided the network with the power to play a crucial role in producing and distributing news, especially at the international level. Instead, Syrian activists rely mostly on “web showcases,” that is to say, mere containers of videos and raw news, as *Sham News Network*, which do not represent communities, but virtual places where dissent content is simply accumulated, without any effort to organize and refine it. Other times, they are organized to send the content they contribute directly to international media outlets through independent and individual contacts.

The lack of communities is also evidenced by the low use of Twitter when compared to Egypt, especially at the beginning of the uprising. In this regard, all the net activists I interviewed maintained that Twitter is not as relevant as Facebook. In the period between the 1st and the 30th of September, for example, the number of tweets in Syria has been 450,000 and in Egypt 6 millions.¹⁰ Twitter is a less user-friendly social network than Facebook, and it is mainly used both to maintain relationships between tech-savvy activists and, in a second phase, to send information to professional media. On the contrary, Syrian online activism shows a disproportionate use of Facebook, not as a mobilization tool, but in order to collect and distribute the huge amount of information produced by a scattered network of activists. So, whereas Twitter needs more organization to be used, Facebook is the symbol of the atomization and the improvisation characterizing the protocols of communication used in the Syrian unrest to produce and exchange knowledge.

The fragmentation of the use of the internet, the absence of real communities, the lack of experience in political activism, the lack of ability in setting up effective ways to filter information, and the weakness of forms of hierarchy among the activists delineate in Syria a networked environment without the mediation of the social environment described above as an antidote to potential problems of new media forms of communication.

¹⁰ See Arab Social Media Resource (on line: http://www.dsg.ae/en/ASMR3/ASMR_TweetVolume3.aspx).

A Short-circuit Between Old and New Media: A Streamed Revolution Without Citizen Journalists

The absence of a social system sustaining the internet sphere inevitably affects also the relationship with professional media. Satellite televisions, especially, have a crucial role in Arab countries, where internet penetration is still very low. In addition, they generally have the credibility and the authority to frame and filter information. Indeed, both in Egypt and Tunisia professional media have played a crucial role, establishing with citizen journalists in the field and net-activists posting on Twitter a strong and complementary relationship.

In Syria, on the contrary, the dynamics characterizing the relationship between professional media and new media have developed in a different way. Instead of providing credibility and visibility to the content generated by the activists, professional media have been absorbed by the same types of logic governing the internet sphere, becoming incapable of playing their usual role. As one journalist from *al-Jazeera* has said referring to the Egyptian revolution and paraphrasing the title of a famous song by Gil Scott Heron: “The revolution is not being televised: it’s being streamed” [Gustin 2011]. But in Syria this truth is charged with a different meaning. Mainstream media are forced to chase the rapid flows of user-generated content distributed through internet platforms, and, given the chaotic nature of the online sphere, they are inevitably caught up in some of the same dynamics: lack of credibility, difficulty in creating a clear narration of the events as well as in effectively filtering newsworthy information.

The main reason of course lies in the ban against journalists imposed by the regime in the wake of the protests, which proved to be in the long run an effective strategy against anti-regime propaganda. Journalists are forced to rely on reports of activists and ordinary citizens, without the possibility to verify them. Expressions such as “some activists said” and “we cannot confirm the events due to restrictions on reporting” have hence become a leitmotiv in all the television and newspaper accounts of the protests. However, the inability to check information did not prevent professional media from using it: user-generated content has a disproportionate presence in the news, even when compared to the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions.

To be sure, some journalists were finally granted access to the country after several months. In June 2011, Jeremy Thompson of *Sky News* and Arwan Damon of *CNN* visited Syria for a short period, although always accompanied by government minders. The decision came in an effort on the part of the regime to handle the propaganda war in a better way, after the army managed to get rid of the “armed gangs,” as the regime describes them, in many areas, including Hama, Idlib and Jisr

al-Shaghour. More recently, some reporters, such as Nir Rosen of *al-Jazeera* and Sofia Amara of *Arte*, managed to sneak into Syria without a journalistic visa. But these few reports are only drops in the ocean, the great majority of reports on the Syrian unrest continuing to rely only on second-hand content. Still, the amount of user-generated content does not explain the flaws which affect the professional media. Rather, the problem originates, once again, from the lack of a proper “social environment” behind the activists’s networks. *Al-Jazeera*, for example, did not cultivate a network of citizen journalists in Syria as it did in other Arab countries. Relying on untrustworthy and inexperienced sources on the ground has rapidly eroded the credibility of international media, which were swiftly accused of being affected by anti-regime bias and being part of a conspiracy against Syria.¹¹

Two cases can be presented as valid examples of the problems that professional media are facing in covering the Syrian unrest. The first is the soldiers’s massacre in Banyas on Sunday April 10, 2011. *AFP* and *The Guardian* reported that soldiers in the Syrian army had been killed by their superiors after refusing to fire on unarmed demonstrators. *The Guardian*’s website published a video with a soldier who was alleged to confess that security services ordered him to fire on civilians. But *The Guardian* had been misled by its informants: in the video the soldier actually denies that he was ordered to fire on civilians, while the interviewer seems to put pressure on him to confess that version of the story.¹² A second example is the killing of Zeinab al-Hosni, a young woman from Homs seized by Syrian security services in July. The video of her mutilated corpse returned to her parents circulated in the media all over the world, causing even Amnesty International to officially condemn her murder. However, Zeinab appeared in good health on Syrian national television on the 4th of October, showing her identity card and saying that she fled from her family because her brothers were abusing her [Bakri 2011].

In general, many videos and reports on the protests produced by the activists have been revealed to be exaggerations or fabrications. Other times, they are simply too difficult to decipher, since they are shot with small cameras, by inexperienced people, and in dangerous conditions.¹³ The huge number of these videos as well as the

¹¹ In this regard, the regime is exploiting with great skill the several errors made by international media. An example is when they waited more than a week to reveal that Zeinab al-Hosni, a supposed victim of security services, was alive. In so doing, the regime allowed the scandal to grow in many international media, by presenting itself one more time as the victim of a biased coverage.

¹² For a more accurate reconstruction of the “Banyas massacre” see the report by Joshua Landis (on-line: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=9115&cp=all>).

¹³ In the videos, for example, it is almost always impossible to see who is shooting at demonstrators. I heard from many Syrians who have said: “We can’t know: maybe it is armed terrorists and not security services. You can’t see them.”

difficulty of filtering them and the lack of a network of trusted “citizen journalists” made the media just spectators, like the consumers, of what is happening. In this sense, the “paradox of the total spectator,” as theorized by Antonio Scurati [2003] in relation to the first Gulf of War of 1991, is replicated, albeit in different ways, within the Syrian unrest. Professional media fail in their duty to reconstruct reality in order to make it comprehensible for their audience. What is worse, while becoming spectators, they are easily discarded as biased actors who choose what to cover on the basis of their convictions, more than on the basis of values such as impartiality and transparency. Thus, the polarization of consumption that is present in the online sphere is therefore transferred to traditional media: *al-Jazeera* and other international media on the one hand, *al-Manar*, Syrian national media and other outlets on the other.

A “Wikipedia Revolution” Without the Community of Wikipedia

Another expression used by Wael Ghonim to label the Egyptian revolution has been “Wikipedia revolution”: a revolution where anyone can contribute through her or his competences, without hierarchical barriers.¹⁴ But Wikipedia has a community of people entrusted to constantly check the content uploaded by the users, so guaranteeing the credibility and especially the accessibility of the content. What would happen without this staff? It is probable that there would be chaos and an eternal battle over the meaning of every contested word.

What it is happening within the Syrian unrest is very close to a Wikipedia revolution without the staff of Wikipedia: an information environment dominated by chaos and a lack of credibility and deliberation. There are many reasons behind this, but new media’s bias of communication is one of the most important factors. The weakness of a social environment incapable of managing the huge amount of information produced and disseminated by new technologies has created an environment where it is very difficult for citizens to find their bearings and to reconstruct reality.

The information environment of the Syrian unrest is characterized by a fragmentation and over-abundance of information, the absence of credible sources, the emergence of information cocoons almost impermeable to different views, a polarization of the debate, and in the final analysis a discursive environment based on images and emotional content rather than text and rational arguments. In other words,

¹⁴ The definition was given during an interview on CBS “60 Minutes” on 13th February 2011 (on line: <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7346812n&tag=contentMain;cbsCarousel>).

the information environment of the Syrian unrest seems to present all the elements referred to by the “Babel objection”: a flawed networked public sphere where deliberation becomes very difficult to attain.

The dissemination of videos, articles, tweets, comments, and images about the uprising is something that would have been utterly unimaginable before the advent of internet and the mass amateurization of content production. By using hand-held cameras, mobile phones and laptops everyone can produce content, while Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts have become fundamental sources of expression, with thousands of Syrians, activists or not, debating the crisis on a daily basis. The overabundance is not felt as such if there are effective mechanisms to filter information. But as we have seen, the production of content within the Syrian unrest suffers from an excess of heterarchy that translates into lack of credibility. In this regard, the central role played by Facebook within the Syrian unrest if compared with other Arab revolutions is illuminating.

Facebook in Tunisia was used as the first step in collecting information produced by activists, before publishing it on blogs such as *Nawaat* and on Twitter. In Egypt it was an important tool of mobilization, which blogger communities used to reach larger segments of society. In both the cases, Facebook was exploited strategically along with a variegated array of other instruments and platforms in order to achieve specific objectives. Conversely, within the Syrian crisis Facebook is not integrated into a broader cyber-cascades management, but it is the main platform where information is published *and* discussed. Through groups such as *Sham News Network* information coming from the dispersed activists’s networks is collected and made available to the public. But there is no operation of refining of this information: it is simply accumulated for anyone to pick up what she or he wants.

Therefore, hundreds of these web showcases have flourished, representing all the range of actors and viewpoints on the unrest: there is no group such as *We are all Khaled Said* in Syria, but a fragmented and countless galaxy of smaller groups, both pro- and anti-regime, acting with the aim of collecting information. These groups do not represent communities, but pages where people with the same opinions can exchange similar content and discuss it. Some of them are opened to give voice to specific organizations, for example “Syrian revolution coordinators,” “The Syrian electronic army” or “Local coordination committees,” while Syrian national media also have their own pages where they upload content against the upheaval. In the absence of credible and transparent sources, these preferences can depend only on the political choice of being anti-regime or pro-regime, with the result of encouraging a sharp polarization of the debate. People are pushed by the very structure of the social networks to enclose themselves in echo-chambers where they are exposed only

to content confirming their pre-existing convictions.¹⁵ Since professional media also have the tendency to pick up the content with similar criteria, this logic appears to be extended well beyond Facebook, to the entire communication environment. Therefore, “information cocoons” replace “knowledge communities” as the modality for debating issues: people reinforce their convictions more and more, without the chance to be exposed to situations of cognitive dissonance. On the rare occasions when people with different opinions meet and discuss issues, the dialogue is made more difficult because of the polarized background. Moreover, new media were soon used to identify and attack specific people: groups such as “the list of shame” and “the list of pride” emerged in the first months of the protests, exposing names of well-known personalities accused of being pro-regime or celebrated as supporters of the revolution. Other groups were created with the aim of identifying spies and informants of the regime, and it seems that sometimes they are used in order to inflict personal vendettas [Flamand and MacLeod 2011]. Even among the dissidents, many people began to be scared by the “witch hunt” atmosphere that new media are contributing to and nourishing.

The speech of Bashar al-Asad at the People’s Council on March 30, 2011 was a turning point in pushing forward such dynamics. Dismissing the protests as a foreign plot against Syria, the president gave a clear message, with immediate repercussions on the debate that was active in the Syrian internet sphere during the first days of the unrest. Until that moment, it was still possible to discuss reforming the country and finding a compromise between different positions, while on the streets the slogans chanted by demonstrators were not yet calling for the deposing of Bashar al-Asad, but just for the end of corruption and more freedom.

Bashar al-Asad’s speech and the consequent escalation of violence on the streets gave the final blow to the dynamics of discussion, which were already heading towards polarization and radicalization. In this regard, the type of discursive environment played a decisive role, with the incessant flow of videos and images becoming rapidly more significant than texts. The intensification of the crackdown on protests and the first armed responses by scattered groups of the opposition provided an increasing quantity of raw content made up of mutilated bodies, families mourning desperately next to the corpses of the loved ones, funerals, dramatic scenes of shooting and destruction, and, of course, demonstrations both in favor of and against the regime. In fact, the Syrian environment has been transformed into a war of videos, with some contents so strong and moving that they amount to actual declarations of war.

¹⁵ For an analytical account of the dynamics of group polarization see Sunstein 2007, 60.

Two Networked Revolutions and Cultural Chaos

The dynamics concerning the information environment of new media within the Syrian unrest cast some shadows on the beneficial effects of new media on social and political processes. These effects have to be evaluated not on the basis of the potential for mobilization that new technologies have exhibited within the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolution, but rather on the type of social relations and political deliberation that they contribute to shaping. In Syria new media are not used as mobilization tools. At the beginning of March, the calls to go into the streets by foreign groups such as *The Syrian revolution 2011* turned out to be a failure. Also later, when protests began to be held regularly, Facebook could not be used and today still cannot be used to organize protests, since security services monitor it and they have the time to prepare effective reactions.

As a Syrian net-activist told me, “the internet does not affect the Syrian street.”¹⁶ Internet coverage is important to keep up an atmosphere of mobilization, maybe succeeding in restraining some of the government’s violent retaliations, but it is not the main instrument for organizing and guiding the protests. To a certain degree, the virtual revolution and the revolution on the ground are separated and carried on by different actors. Nevertheless, the information environment described above presents many similarities with the dynamics of the uprising on the ground, suggesting that, as emphasized in the introduction, we have to focus on the “how” more than on the “if.”

In Syria the upheaval has been characterized from the beginning by an array of circumscribed events and separated actors, which, especially at the beginning, were moved by different aims. Still today, the groups of protesters are disjointed and develop their initiatives without coordination in provinces cut off one from the other. The protests started in Damascus with groups of young people working in the cultural field who organized gatherings (and the first Facebook groups) in solidarity with the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan people. These small circles were joined by groups of activists and intellectuals, such as, for example, those who were protagonists of the Damascus Spring in 2001 and the Damascus Declaration in 2005. But since the events in Deraa on March 18, the revolt has shifted away from the capital and taken on a different, more localized and lower-class nature, which today is the most powerful driving force of the revolts. Since that moment the protests have assumed a quite common topological pattern: a village begins to take to the streets, causing a violent response by security services. Funerals become further demonstrations, broadening them to relatives, friends and colleagues of the victims. When the repression

¹⁶ Personal conversation, Tunis, October 2011.

continues, people from neighboring villages come to give support. In other words, the Syrian unrest appears as a fragmented array of isolated protests unified by the disproportionate use of violence on the part of the regime.

Fragmentation therefore remains one of the most important elements identifying the Syrian crisis: although the Regional Coordination Committees constitute a valid effort to coordinate the protests, they continue to remain quite independent from one another, with each committee dominated by different actors depending on the province where they operate: youth and secular activists, religious men, leaders of the local communities, political activists. In addition, the heterogeneity is reflected also by the contrast between, on the one hand, the Syrian National Council, which unifies parts of the opposition within and outside Syria, as well as new young activists and other actors, and on the other hand, the Regional Coordination Committees.¹⁷ In the end, the networked nature of online activism is reflected also in the field, shaping an environment that is extremely difficult to interpret, both in its nature and, especially, in the possible outcomes.

In this regard, the dynamics of the information environment delineated above appears to have some effects on the Syrian unrest. The first is that it can contribute to the fragmentation and the polarization of reality on the ground, instead of offering platforms to discuss a way out or to unify the different segments of the opposition. The second is that it can contribute to frightening those Syrians who have not yet made their choice, delineating in front of their eyes the specter of a civil war before it actually takes place. In other words, a networked and dispersed information environment can have the effect of encouraging differences and of generating confusion and fear and it is perhaps not by chance that the regime has generally allowed the internet to work unhindered during the unrest. Finally, the combination of the heterarchical nature of the uprising with the heterarchical nature of new media has resulted in the perception of a pervasive cultural chaos where it is no longer possible to reconstruct reality. In Foucault's terms, we could say that no actor is by now capable of re-establishing any regime of truth (Gonzalez-Quijano, 2011). The alleged positive aspects of new media as participation and lack of hierarchies can thus become, under some conditions, obstacles both to a broader mobilization and, especially, to rational deliberation.

¹⁷ It is impossible here to provide an exhaustive description of the dynamics of the protests, given the heterogeneity of the different Syrian provinces and actors participating in the upheaval. For a more detailed account see Abbas 2011 and the reports published by International Crisis group (on line: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria.aspx>).

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The State of Disarray of a Networked Revolution

The Syrian Uprising's Information Environment

Abstract: This study explores the Syrian uprising's information environment and the way it is plagued by the absence of credible sources, a fragmentation and overabundance of information, the emergence of information cocoons almost impermeable to different views, a polarization of the debate, and a discursive environment kept hostage by images and emotional content rather than texts and rational arguments. The author argues that one of the main causes for the state of disarray of what was supposed to be, even more than in Tunisia and Egypt, a "networked revolution," has to be found in specific new media's political properties combined with the absence of an experienced community network capable of filtering, accrediting and synthesizing the content circulating on the web and among professional media.

Keywords: Internet, public sphere, Middle East, political communication, social media.

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