

Mapping the Information-Sharing Ecosystem of Syria

BY LARA SETRAKIAN AND ALEX ZERDEN

The duration and danger of covering the Syrian civil war has forced journalists to innovate how they capture, curate, and transmit news from the ground. Activists and Syrian citizens, equipped with mobile phone devices and internet connectivity, have uploaded reams of user-generated content to YouTube and social media channels. In response to an ever more complex information environment, a team of journalists and technologists came together to create Syria Deeply, a single subject news outlet that generates focused coverage of the crisis. Still in its early days as an independent media platform, Syria Deeply employs a modular, dashboard design to capture traditional reporting, social media insight, and data visualization. In doing so, it brings together disparate streams of open source information. The end result is coverage with greater depth and context around an unfolding crisis. This article sketches out how the platform works and the value it provides in monitoring conflicts and complex issues.

The Syrian crisis represents a news and information challenge that foreshadows future global conflicts. The lack of Western journalists deployed to cover the country, due to the physical dangers and financial constraints of the conflict, has resulted in a paucity of facts sourced by professional media. This information gap has been filled by citizen journalists and media activists, creating reams of user-generated content on media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Skype and YouTube. The result is a detailed but flawed picture of events in theater.

The complexity of global events and the hyper-connectivity of an online world pose challenges and opportunities for professional newsgatherers. The proliferation of locally sourced content overwhelms traditional newsrooms. There are substantial new data streams to track – more voices that need to be listened to, accounted for, fact-checked, and understood. More detailed focus and specialized knowledge becomes a pre-requisite to effectively and accurately cover today's complex stories. Whether we examine conflicts such as Syria's, or global trends like food and energy security, global issues require consistent attention and a capacity for greater sense-making. One must make better use of all the information available.

Lara Setrakian is the Co-Founder and Managing Editor of Syria Deeply.

Alex Zerden is an Advisor to Syria Deeply.

Syria Deeply arose to meet that challenge. Though barely one year old (founded in December 2012), the platform grew out of a recognized need for more consistent reporting on the Syrian conflict than was available in mainstream media outlets. The platform functions as a specialized, issue-specific news source, benefiting from deep knowledge and earned insight on Syria. The dedication of Syria Deeply's experienced editorial leadership to covering one story in depth has combined the benefits of deep domain expertise and focused attention to Syria's dynamic information ecosystem.

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Syria Deeply benefits from the technological innovations of social media and digital storytelling, but is firmly rooted in the belief that the future of news lies in its past. In the spirit of traditional journalism, it pursues newsgathering as a public service and a means to provide the best and most complete information. That approach has yielded positive feedback not only from readers, but from storytellers, all of whom appreciate an unwavering commitment to producing high-quality, fact-checked content from carefully vetted and curated sources.

The Rise of a New Media Middle East

Syria Deeply's founding mirrors the rise of new media in the Middle East. Arab millennials, classically defined as those under the age of 30, comprise more than half the population

of the Middle East. Their use of the internet, specifically social media tools like Facebook and web broadcasting platforms like YouTube and Bambuser, has fundamentally reshaped political life in the Arab world. The internet is a parallel press, dominated by young voices and inclusive of content and conversations heretofore shunned by an often state-controlled mainstream media.

The Middle East's transition to the internet introduced unfamiliar paradigms in capturing and conveying regional events to the outside world. The "Green Movement" of protests against former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2009 re-election challenged the Islamic Republic and ushered in the tools of revolt we recognize today. During that uprising, one of the authors worked with sources inside Iran who used YouTube, Facebook, and email to convey what was happening around the country – far from the reach of any foreign news outlet. Confidential sources would provide digital dispatches, which could be synthesized and shared on Twitter, and occasionally included in television and radio reports for ABC News.

Despite overwhelming evidence that suggests a new era of information consumption, it is worth noting that the impact of technology on news coverage is not universally accepted as game-changing. Evgeny Morozov, for example, has argued that social media can cut both ways: it enables activists but at the same time leaves them vulnerable and exposed to authority. Malcolm Gladwell has sparred with others over the true impact of technology on political change in the Arab world, arguing that the impact of Facebook and Twitter has been overplayed and cannot replace personal contact. As journalists who have witnessed the impact of social media in accelerating Arab

political movements, Syria Deeply aligns with those who claim that internet technology has revolutionized society and its interaction with news. As Clay Shirky, a professor at New York University, wrote in the March/April 2011 edition of *Foreign Affairs*:

Do social media allow insurgents to adopt new strategies? And have those strategies ever been crucial? Here, the historical record of the last decade is unambiguous: yes, and yes.

The Arab Spring has demonstrated that whole political systems can be changed or overturned by the disruptive actions of less than 10 percent of their population. This 10 percent of the population was mobilized online, spurred to protest offline, and then returned online to self-report their protests in amateur videos and voices from the ground. From open protests in Tehran to Cairo, to more subtle forms of dissent in Riyadh and Rabat, connectivity has unquestionably been the catalyst.

In the Syrian context, the tools are similar to Iran's Green Movement, with some new developments. The ground war in Syria leans heavily on an information network built over Skype, whose voice over internet protocol (VOIP) technology serves as the frontline of Syria's information war. As an alternate to government-monitored telephone and mobile phone connections, Skype allows activists and rebel groups to use private chat rooms for sharing information and posting real time battle updates. Many of these updates are posted to activist accounts on Facebook, which often sparks heated debate among Syrian users. Some of the information posted on Facebook is shared on Twitter to reach a wider,

international audience. By starting at the root of the information chain, in Skype chat rooms, savvy newsgatherers can access information hours or sometimes days before it emerges in the mainstream press.

With hundreds of thousands of citizen journalists in Syria, the challenge is to identify, vet, validate, and convey a carefully cultivated stream of information that provides a clear picture of the complex conflict. Syria Deeply works to mix digital tools with the human element to build an online situational awareness capacity whereby the most relevant information can rapidly be woven into a narrative about the conflict at large. With the growing influence of "data journalism," we may soon find a greater realm of tools available to automate and curate these information streams. At the moment, we believe the best results are achieved by a dedicated team that covers the story consistently and applies focus and rigor to information that emerges from traditional sources and from users on the ground.

Filling the "Information Gap"

With unprecedented information-sharing vectors, the Syrian conflict represents the growing divide between accessible news and what gets reported. The information gap can be bridged by accommodating new forms of news while remaining true to time-tested journalistic standards, maintaining rigorously vetted and fact-checked sources. We see three challenges – or gaps – for news coverage of the Syria crisis:

First, the Syria crisis is a complex global issue in an under-resourced news environment. Similar past conflicts would have seen more reporters dedicated to covering the latest developments. In Lebanon's Civil War, major networks and newspapers had full-time crews

and fully staffed bureaus continuously covering the conflict. Today, a patchwork of occasional pieces from the theater provides only limited snapshots into what is happening on the ground. Exceptions exist, such as Nour Malas of the Wall Street Journal and Rania Abuzeid, a regular contributor to the New Yorker and Al Jazeera America. Their consistent reporting spans the life of the conflict, but their coverage is the exception and no longer the rule.

Second, the security situation for journalists, both foreign and local, remains especially concerning. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the 2012 death toll in Syria for journalists was on par with Iraq in 2006 and 2007. Nearly thirty journalists were killed. The toll on journalists continues with the death of French photographer Olivier

Voisin in early 2013. CPJ's latest report in August 2013 suggests at least 14 journalists have gone missing in Syria, though they expect that number to be a significant underestimate.

Local knowledge, when well-utilized, offers a crucial perspective and mitigates the operational risk of deploying foreign journalists. To this end, we have developed reporters who are based on the ground in Syria and are supported by a senior editor who rotates into opposition-held territory. We supplement this physical presence with assistance from Syrians located elsewhere throughout the country. While we temper our on-the-ground reporting to protect our team and our sources, local knowledge offers an important perspective to our audience.

Third, freelance foreign journalists have attempted to fill the void left within this fluid



SYRIAN OFFICIAL NEWS AGENCY SANA

Syrians standing at the scene after a blast occurred in the Mazzeh al-Jabal district of the Syrian capital Damascus – no place for timid journalists

media environment. This development creates security and reporting accuracy concerns, especially as freelancer reporters often cover their own expenses until a media outlet decides to publish their content. Such an arrangement often rewards less experienced journalists willing to take greater risks to develop a reputable byline. This arrangement endangers lives and degrades the quality of coverage in Syria and elsewhere. While we may be seeing a change in this trend - as several British outlets began refusing freelance submissions, including the Sunday Times, The Guardian, Observer and Independent - however, the perceived rewards will still likely outweigh the risks for many freelancers interested in covering the Syria conflict.

These three challenges are naturally inter-related: the greater the strain on traditional news outlets, the less they can steadily fund reporters to consistently cover key issues. Often, freelance reporters fill this void, with consequences in terms of content and, in conflict zones like Syria, enormous risk.

Syria Deeply's position is to mitigate these challenges by developing relationships across networks in the digital and physical domains. We cultivate information exchange with activists and Syrian citizen journalists, who reach out to us to share their perspectives. This combination of focused reporting using carefully developed sources through traditional and new media methods is not only the core of Syria Deeply's effort, but increasingly resembles the key for translating information into reporting in the new media environment.

The human element of our coverage improves our ground knowledge. For instance, during January 2013, one of our senior editors covered fighters with the Tawhid Brigade, a large FSA-affiliated militant group, at an

opposition captured infantry school near Aleppo. Having native Arabic fluency and familiarity with the area, he was able to provide striking insights into the composition and sensibilities of the fighters.

In another example, a group of fighters were escorting journalists through the school grounds by attempting to maneuver some cars through a narrow corridor. A young fighter, an auto-mechanic before the conflict, had an uncanny confidence in judging the width needed to maneuver the vehicles without damaging them on the compound walls. As our editor observed, blue-collar workers like this auto mechanic were increasingly forming the core of the Syrian rebels. Middle-class professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, had mostly left Syria. This level of insight helps interested followers see the bigger picture of the conflict's trajectory while understanding the human elements that drive it.

This human element guides our focus on amplifying civilian voices, often underreported in a war zone where more concentrated attention is usually paid to powerful stakeholders like Islamist rebel groups and their rivals in the Syrian government. Yet the day-to-day dynamics of survival will shape the future of Syrian society. We summarized our findings in a Foreign Policy article in January 2013:

"Chaos is tearing apart Syria's social fabric. We've written about how Syria's young women face forced marriage for the sake of the bride price, their families desperate to live off their dowry. Funerals, a solemn but sacred tradition in Aleppo, have devolved into a stock dumping of bodies, devoid of religious ritual. Profiteering has left citizens disgusted and distrustful of each other as they witness price gauging of food and basic necessities the haves ripping off the havenots."

Accounting for the civilian story, the impact of the conflict on everyday Syrian life, is an essential storyline. It provides us a sense of the Syria that will emerge from the rubble, and it helps us build relationships - not only predicated on the activities of fighters but also the sentiments of civilians.

Information Sharing Dynamics Inside Syria

Like most Arab countries before the 2011 revolutions, Syria's information sharing dynamics were limited and opaque as a function of the reality of life under Ba'ath Party rule. A lack of economic development and heavy censorship slowed the spread and penetration of communications technology in Syria.

Until the early 1990's, there were only two television channels widely available, Syria 1 and Syria 2, both of which were state owned and operated. By 1993, satellite dishes were available on the black market for the high price of roughly \$600-700 USD, but they were technically illegal. According to our senior editor, who grew up in Aleppo, intelligence officers ran extortion rackets whereby they would routinely go house to house removing receivers and fining residents, only to resell the receivers for profit.

In addition to satellite television, Syria was late to embrace cell phones and the internet. A year after inheriting Syria from his father in 2000, Bashar Assad reigned over a country with one percent cell phone penetration rates and only one third of one percent with internet access. By the end of 2011, according to Freedom House, cell phone penetration had reached 63 percent of the population and internet use increased to 20 percent.

Yet phones and internet connections were widely believed to be monitored by the government, a perception bolstered by Bashar al-Assad's well-publicized former position as head of the Syrian Computer Society. Furthermore, Rami Maklouf, Assad's cousin tightly controls Syria's telecommunications market; he is the largest single shareholder of SyriaTel and also has an interest in its only competitor, MTN-Syria.¹

This historical relationship to communications technology is quite different from many parts of the Arab world. According to Freedom House, Syria had one of the least developed telecommunications infrastructure in the Middle East at the outset of the 2011 revolution. When social media debuted in Syria, even to a small audience, it bridged a major connectivity gap, creating affinity groups of like-minded activists who had never before realized they had allies around the country. It also connected Syrians at home to those in the diaspora, catalyzing what would become a key pipeline of support for the Syrian rebels.

Today's Information-Sharing Ecosystem

Social media has been a key tool for activists in all countries involved in the Arab Spring,² as a means to circumvent authorities and organize and mobilize dissent. Social movements coalesced online, becoming the connective tissue that allowed protesters to organize and publicize their demonstrations. Given the significant restrictions on freedom of the press, the freedom of the digital domain was a quantum step in terms of greater organizational capacity. Social media was used to circumvent authority, serving as an enabler in countries with a previously weak capacity to organize. It brought down the transaction cost

for protest – one that had been prohibitively high for activists in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya.

In the case of Syria, the cost of dissent and political association was even more extreme, and the impact of connective technologies even more marked. Facebook and YouTube had been blocked for years before the March 2011 uprising, but the Syrian regime suddenly lifted this restriction in the heat of the Egyptian revolution. In what some see as a tactical ploy, the move gave Syria's *Mukhabarat* – the government intelligence service – greater freedom to monitor and penalize online activists on government networks. This temporarily exposed activists, who now access Facebook through a proxy server, which circumvents the government block and masks their digital movements.

It is worth noting that Facebook penetration rates at the start of Syria's uprising were not high. In Syria, they represented roughly one percent of the population according to a 2010 Dubai School of Government report. This fact may explain three things: one, that Facebook alone was not the source of widespread influence; two, that a small number of well-networked activists can start a monumental information movement using Facebook and other digital tools; and three, that Facebook use has evolved and grown significantly over the course of the conflict. Now it is a forum for civic discourse, through popular discussion pages and threads that tear down or transcend long-standing taboos on political dissent.

The Syrian uprising did not begin online, but it was accelerated through online platforms. The spark of the revolution was lit in Deraa on March 18, 2011, when mothers protested the detention of their teenage sons for writing anti-Assad graffiti. Protests continued,

and videos of those protests soon surfaced on YouTube. The organizers of what would become Shaam News Network, an anti-regime outlet, began collecting videos of protests in Syria and organized a countrywide network of photographers designed to give the world a view from inside Syria. It was dramatically different from the Syrian government narrative, represented by news outlets such as al-Dounia News and the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). In addition to presenting its own narrative of the crisis, the government severely restricted foreign journalists from entering the country. But once they did, news media technology allowed these reporters greater freedom than ever before. For instance, an American journalist working for Reuters, Suleiman El-Khalidi, went to jail and reported about his incarceration. The narrative/counter-narrative information war continues in Syria today and poses a significant challenge to ground-truthing news.

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Our experience is that the dominant information dynamic within Syria is decidedly low-tech. Word of mouth is a primary vehicle, especially in more remote parts of the country and areas where violence occurs frequently. We have repeatedly encountered “fog of war” challenges while reporting in Syria, cases in which some interviewees do not know with clarity what is going on three or four towns away. To combat this, rebel groups collect equipment to



Photo by James Gordon

Word of mouth remains a primary method of transmitting news in Syria; in mosques, souks, and street bazaars

communicate via radio, but even they may not know what is going on 15 to 20 kilometers away from their location.

Despite this low-tech environment, satellite stations have popped up to beam stories into pro-opposition communities, such as Syria al-Ghad and Aleppo News. National Public Radio's Deborah Amos, a senior advisor to Syria Deeply, covered the use of Aleppo News. This satellite channel broadcasts YouTube videos and includes social network updates as a ticker at the bottom of the screen. While the approach appears rudimentary, for people without a computer or internet, it is their only way to get real time news about events unfolding inside Syria.

Those with internet, such as the rebels and activists, access information satellite internet cards. U.S. distributed communications

equipment has limited bandwidth. Instead of using such equipment, those inside Syria who receive enough money from other foreign governments and foreign activists buy more expensive and capable devices, with a wider reach inside the country. Diesel generators are the preferred means for generating the electricity to power such devices.

One private satellite internet provider used in Syria is Tooway, a European company. The receiver can download data at up to 20 megabytes per second, a speed comparable to high-speed service in the U.S. The service is expensive, costing approximately \$2,000 (U.S. dollars) for the initial set-up, plus \$200 per month for a 50 gigabyte usage fee. This 50 gigabyte allotment is often insufficient for uploading High-Definition (HD) video, so some users purchase two or more packages.

One Syria Deeply reporter noted a recent rise in Tooway satellites in early 2013, with five devices seen in three villages near Idlib. These devices were likely brought through Turkey, though it is unclear who paid for such expensive equipment.

The Syrian Information Ecosystem: Getting Ahead of the News Cycle

By understanding the Syrian information ecosystem, Syria Deeply has been able to more effectively monitor and package information coming out of the country. Our reporting is founded on traditional methods: reaching trusted sources quickly with the right questions. But translating this process to the digital domain requires fluency in social media communication and the ability to regularly pulse trusted online news sources.

In the fall of 2012, Syria Deeply had been hearing multiple reports in social media about a breakthrough among the Syrian opposition groups – primarily through Skype chat rooms, but also on Twitter and Facebook. Combing Arabic-language social media using vetted, trustworthy contacts means that stories can be captured 24-48 hours before they appear in international news reports. The chatter we were hearing in social media quickly crystalized around the emergence of Riad Seif, a respected Damascus businessman, whose plan to reorganize the Syrian opposition was embraced by the U.S. in October 2012. News of his plan was being discussed in Arabic language Facebook groups at least 48 hours before Josh Rogin broke the story in his blog on Foreign Policy.

As this incident illustrates, much of the information now coming out of Syria originates on Facebook and Skype through activists on the ground. In the typical supply chain,

activists will record a bombing or another incident on video. They will then take it to Skype and disseminate it to a select group of other activists. Subsequently, they will upload it and share with a Facebook community group. Occasionally it will be shared on Twitter.

We have found these activist groups to be well-organized to serve larger strategic organizational goals. They often try to build relationships with Arabic-language satellite channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, which both have high viewership across the Arab world. In this respect, the methods employed resemble very traditional mechanisms used to gain visibility among large audiences.

A profit motive may exist for some activists and local journalists to cooperate with pan-Arab and international media outlets. Fixers in places like Antakya, Turkey, have exclusive contracts with specific media organizations. Such non-competition agreements have made it increasingly difficult for freelancers and incoming news organizations to find sources in northern Syria.

On February 22, 2013, Syria Deeply profiled Mohamed Masalmeh, a reporter from Deraa who was killed on January 18, 2013. Mohamed originally reported for Sham News Network before taking a contract with Al-Jazeera. Other local journalists have received offers but want to remain independent. These journalists create and sell video packages, but are not beholden to any one specific media outlet.

Paradoxically, the evolution of information dissemination occurs in a relatively egalitarian manner. Everybody gets the information at almost the same time. People who are actually in the Skype chat rooms get it first, but even something as simple as signing up for an activist Facebook page provides access to

information that often precedes by two days what is reported on television and print. For journalists, this provides a helpful service, generating information hours before wire services like Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP), and the Associated Press (AP) are on the story. Even the New York Times now runs a curated YouTube video feed with analysis.

Accuracy and Reliability In The New Environment

Syria Deeply navigates an information-rich but analytically poor environment to report its stories. We employ tried and true methods of traditional journalism: building contacts, nurturing relationships, and developing trust with our sources. However, unlike in other contexts, we rarely, if ever, have a chance to meet those sources in person. As we advance digital newsgathering, new methods to vet sources and fact check reports must be used to ensure the accuracy of our reporting: Who introduced us to this contact? Do they have any other digital footprints we can verify for their identity? How accurate was their previous reporting? Over time, we have been able to answer these questions through a large network of personal contacts and the ability to quickly review digital signatures of new contacts. This vetting process allows us to build reliable sources.

Our commitment to the Syria story improves the quality of our network of like-minded mission-driven individuals. This differentiates Syria Deeply from other media outlets. We can better serve our users by staying with the story over time and using the best of technology in concert with traditional journalism that educates and informs its audience to evaluate complex issues. The fact is that with more content, there is an opportunity for

deeper and better knowledge. To harness this capability, the Syria Deeply team has reviewed many web outlets and met with many activists. Some activists will lie to bolster their own narrative, as they may be desperate to advance their cause or receive funding. Syria Deeply takes this into account as we cultivate sources and consider their input.

Moreover, acknowledging and reporting the Syrian government view allows us to provide our readers a more complete rendering of the conflict to make their own conclusions about a given issue. We incorporate Syrian government narratives through state-owned media outlets, state press conferences, along with allied narratives from Russia and Iran. Throughout the course of our reporting, we have to do an extremely diligent job of getting this perspective. This approach also allows us to remain outcome neutral as to the events unfolding in Syria.

Many start-up news outlets focusing on the Syrian crisis pursue agendas to influence user opinions and attitudes. In contrast, Syria Deeply aspires to be a platform that rests on an objective goal to increase understanding of the conflict, in a collaborative and intellectually honest approximation of the truth. Our readers recognize and appreciate our multi-leveled focus – from militant groups to civilian stories.

Covering the entire story is a central aspect of traditional journalism that provides our readers with the necessary information to make conclusions based on our reporting. It also fits into our model to be outcome neutral. Other online and new media sources often shed this objectivity, endangering their reporting and reporters. Syria Deeply is committed to being an information platform, not an advocacy organization.

Conclusion: How “Deeply” Platforms Can Advance Conflict Monitoring

Syria Deeply was founded to provide content with context on the unfolding humanitarian and political crisis in Syria and its spillover effect in neighboring countries. We leverage digital tools, like real time Twitter feeds, Google Hangout chats, and innovative data visualization techniques, with the time-tested skills of traditional journalism. We then incorporate a rigorous editorial review process with curated content, blending original reporting from the ground with the best of the web to create a new user experience for complex foreign news issues and crises like Syria.

This experiment has not only become an important source for understanding the Syrian conflict, but also represents a methodology for understanding complex issues using 21st century tools. It is meant to evolve with user feedback and technological innovations. Rather than a traditional newspaper online, the Syria Deeply platform is a dashboard for a range of users to immerse themselves in the issues of the conflict to leave with a fuller and more accurate view of the facts. Rather than a blog, Syria Deeply is a platform focused on growing as a trusted destination, fusing the ease and accessibility of digital media with the rigor of traditional news reporting. We remain committed to the story, to cover the evolution of Syria’s conflict and eventual recovery.

Syria Deeply is an innovative, replicable model for conflict monitoring and reporting, with myriad applications in the modern digital information environment. The model that Syria Deeply refines and iterates can be expanded to cover a range of global issues – imagine an Iran Deeply, Pakistan Deeply, Egypt Deeply, or Mali Deeply. Such an

expansion is already under consideration. Platforms on transnational issues such as Climate Change Deeply, Drug War Deeply, or Malaria Deeply, are also under consideration.

Whatever the topic, the methodology and the value proposition remain the same. The combination of news, knowledge, and insight, delivered in an accessible format, can deliver a significant edge to the user – an open-source opportunity to grasp and track what is going on. Those who navigate issues through a “Deeply” design can emerge with a more robust picture and more complete understanding, for an enhanced ability to operate in an ever more complex world. **PRISM**

NOTES

¹ For additional information on Syria’s cell phone penetration, see <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/502a0c520.pdf> along with the 2012 Freedom House “Freedom on the Net” report, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2012/syria>

² It is worth noting that many voices in the region prefer the expression “Arab Awakening” over the term “Arab Spring,” considering the latter to be a sanguine misnomer.