

Alternative Syrian media: A case study, the pacific weapon against bullets Sayedat Souria Journal as example

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Abstract:

Outside the boundaries imposed by the Syrian regime for more than four decades, and outside the black hole that some radical Islamist groups (Jabhat Al Nosra “Victory Front”; the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria “Daish”/ISIS; and Al Qaeda) are attempting to impose on Syria’s population today, there is a wider world in which women are gradually rising in the ranks. Women around the globe are independently demanding their equal rights and establishing themselves in the ruling class, as elected politicians and leaders in their fields. In Tunisia, female activists succeeded in forcing the parliament to approve Article 20, which recognizes that men and women are equal under the law, despite the fact that the country is ruled by a conservative, Islamist party.

For more than 40 years, the Syrian regime put women on the sidelines with regards to nation building, but this began to change in March of 2011. Masses of women took to the streets to participate in demonstrations and sit-ins against dictatorial rule. After the revolution took full force, women’s role increased even further. They joined humanitarian efforts in helping the wounded and have documented civil and intellectual human rights abuses. Many women have paid a high price for their involvement, some with their freedom or even their lives. Yet, they remain subject to the same limitations imposed by the regime. Likewise, the opposition is excluding women from taking on any significant leadership roles. At the time of writing, only 5% of Syrian National Coalition representatives are women. The Syrian opposition has failed to recognize the role played by women in the revolution and the value of the sacrifices which women have made for it.

The recent rise of Islamic extremists has led to a further limitation of women’s overall role in society and severely endangers their future. Attempts to empower women do exist, however their ineffectiveness to date demonstrates the severe difficulties in exposing the reality of Syrian women and the obstacles they face.

Because of this reality and the other factors mentioned previously, the creation of a feminist Syrian journal became a vital necessity. Syrian women today have the right to be informed and supported by a journal that could provide expanded horizons and a new vision for the future of women around the world. The creation of Sayedat Souria and its dissemination would have been much more difficult without the possibilities provided by the internet and digital technology. The author of this paper, who is one of three individuals who helped establish the publication—alongside a playwright/script writer and a young woman with a degree in Arabic language in Gaziantep in the south of Turkey.

Keywords: Alternative media, news media, digital technology, Syria, social media, Sayedat Souria Journal.

Introduction

From the outset of the popular revolution in Syria, in March of 2011, the Syrian government dominated the media landscape in the country and used this control to distort reality, while, at the same time, preventing the Syrian people from having their voices heard. The international media were also prevented from entering the country to document what was happening. Recognizing the importance of the media and the dire nature of their situation, Syrian activists learned from past experience and began to create a new, independent media to present an alternative to what was being presented by official Syrian media.

The aim of these new media created by the Syrian activists is to create a completely free and unfettered expression for the dreams of the Syrian people. In the 39 months between the outbreak of the revolution and the time of writing of this paper, literally hundreds of media outlets have begun to function, and in a variety of publication formats, including daily newspapers and journals, television and radio stations. Financial constraints in addition to the realities of operating in a war zone in the midst of a worsening situation have forced many of these to shut down.

Digital technology has been instrumental in news creation in Syria since the uprising began in March of 2011. The internet and, in particular, social media networks have allowed for the proliferation of more than 150 separate newspapers in electronic form. Most of these publications maintain a local focus, reporting on the situation in the areas in which they are produced, but others have expanded their news coverage to areas covering the expanse of Syria, making them representative of Syrians across wide swathes of the country.

The main aim of this paper will be to illustrate through examples how digital technology plays a key role in the creation, production and dissemination of news across Syria. Online newspapers make it possible for all Syrians to have access to the news affecting their country, including those who live inside the country where internet access is limited. This paper will also explore the situation of activists who, continue in their efforts despite all of the inherent risks which it presents.

In order to achieve the above, this paper will focus exclusively on the journal *Sayedat Souria* (“the Lady of Syria”) as a case study in alternative media from Syria. In terms of production and distribution, *Sayedat Souria* provides a very significant and important example, and it is argued here that it is one of the most representative examples of alternative media to come out of Syria. In addition, *Sayedat Souria* is the first journal in the history of Syria to address women’s issues, and to focus on the special case of Syrian women.

Launched in February of 2014, *Sayedat Souria* is a monthly journal made up of 60 pages of A4, which is planned for a growth to 90 pages by the end of this year. It is a female advocacy journal, created to advocate and support women in general and Syrian women in particular. In addition to the thematic aim, vision and goals of the journal's editors, the choice of *Sayedat Souria* as the publication to focus on is based on the role which digital technology played in the creation, production and distribution of this publication.

Before focusing specifically on *Sayedat Souria*, this paper will present a brief description of the state of digital publication throughout the Arab world and in particular in Syria, including a primary statistical overview, below.

1. Digital Technology and News Emerging

In *Castells and the Media*, Philip Howard talks about the new type of popular authority imposed by communication technologies:

“The power to control information no longer resides exclusively with the institutions of the state; it resides in media networks; and media networks are constituted by social relations and communication technologies.”¹

The power and influence of social media networks were thoroughly explicated by Castells who writes (2009), “one message from one messenger can reach out to thousands, and potentially hundreds of thousands”. For Castells, the receiver identifies the information as coming from a known and trusted source and this, according to his statement, transforms the wireless communication network into a network of trust, in which the receiver is expected to show greater faith in the information².

The impact of digital technology could be clearly linked to the volume of smartphones, social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, Skype and YouTube) and broader Internet usage. These tools served to help activists hold online discussions and establish a very wide virtual network spread fast across Arab countries. The Arab revolutions proved in a different ways, the power of digital technology, and the crucial role played by the new alternative media.

As described above, digital technology was able, during the Arab Spring, to create an alternative new media and play a key role in the emergence of information and news. While popular movements and conflicts between the regime and the rebels are ongoing in many countries of the Arab World, the Internet played an important informational and organizational role. In addition, it has become the main source of information and news for people in Syria.

1.1. Statistical overview: Arab World Social Media

The Arab Social Media Report (ASMR) Series provides an overview of Internet and social media users in the Arab World. As such, the number of Facebook users in all 22 Arab countries. Through this report, published by the Dubai School of Government's Governance and Innovation Program³, we can see how the continued proliferation of Internet connectivity and large-scale adoption of mobile technologies in the Arab region have created new horizons in a region suffering from immense political, economic and developmental challenges. According to the results of the latest report, 35% take the Internet as main source

¹ Howard, P. N. (2011). *Castells and the media: Theory and media* Cambridge: Polity Press. P.20.

² Castells, M. (2009). *Communication Power* Oxford: Oxford University Press. PP.302-348.

³ 2014 report is available at <http://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/ff70c2c5-0fce-405d-b23f-93c198d4ca44/The-Arab-World-Online-2014-Trends-in-Internet-and.aspx> (accessed June 2014).

of information and for 91% of them are Facebook users against 69.93% Google +, 59.56 YouTube and 57.35 Twitter users.

The report showed also the annual and considered progress in the number of Internet and Facebook users. There had been 78 percent growth from 11.97 million in January 2010 to 21.36 million in December 2010 and by June 2011 there were nearly 30 million Facebook users in the Middle East.

The total number of estimated Facebook users in the Arab world at the end of May 2013 is almost 55 million, up from 45 million in June 2012. By May 2013 the country average for Facebook penetration in the Arab region was over 19% up from 12% in June of the previous year⁴. The report shows also that the percentage of youth users has decreased slightly due to slow and steady uptake amongst users aged 30 and above. As of May 2013, the percentage of users below the age of 30 was 68%. As of end of May 2014, the total number of Internet users reached 135 million; 71 million of them are active users of social media⁵.

However, the Arab Opinion Index, conducted annually by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS)⁶, also reported on internet use by the Arab public (2012/2013): 55% of respondents indicated that 42% reported that they used the Internet infrequently. Of those respondents who do use the internet, 62% had accounts on Facebook and 23% had accounts on the micro-blogging site Twitter. A clear majority of those who use these social media channels do so to take part in political affairs⁷.

1.2. Statistical overview: Syria

Between 2010 and 2013, the ASMR shows a substantial increase in the percentage of Internet usage and Facebook penetration in Syria. In 2010, the percentage of Facebook penetration was 0.63%, rising to 2.14% by 2011, which means 1.51% of growth in Internet and Facebook usage. By April 2012 the country average for Facebook penetration was 13.11% and by April 2013, this percentage increased to reach 17.08%.

A rapid growth of 16.45% over three years is an extraordinary growth in the number of Internet and Facebook users in Syria. However, after February 2011, an additional 14.94% of the Syrian population became active social media users. In fact, in spite of the cruelty and oppression of the Syrian regime and in spite of regular media shutdown, Syrians were able to innovate their own ways to harness the usage of social media for their benefit and in the service of the popular revolution.

2. *Saydat Souria Journal*: an introduction

Outside the boundaries imposed by the Syrian regime for more than four decades, and outside the black hole that some radical Islamist groups (Jabhat Al Nosra “Victory Front”; the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria “Daish”/ISIS; and Al Qaeda) are attempting to impose on Syria’s population today, there is a wider world in which women are gradually rising in the ranks. Women around the globe are independently demanding their equal rights and establishing themselves in the ruling class, as elected politicians and leaders in their fields. In

⁴ The Arab Social Media Report. Facebook in the Arab Region. Available at : <http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Facebook/LineChart.aspx?&PriMenuID=18&CatID=24&mnu=C>
at

⁵ All Arab Social Media Reports are available at: <http://www.ArabSocialMediaReport.com/>

⁶ The ACRPS Arab Opinion Index (2012/2013) Doha, June 10, 2013. Available at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/content/af5000b3-46c7-45bb-b431-28b2de8b33c7>

⁷ The 2014 ACRPS Arab Opinion Index will be done in the conference as it is not announced officially.

Tunisia, female activists succeeded in forcing the parliament to approve Article 20, which recognizes that men and women are equal under the law, despite the fact that the country is ruled by a conservative, Islamist party.

For more than 40 years, the Syrian regime put women on the sidelines with regards to nation building, but this began to change in March of 2011. Masses of women took to the streets to participate in demonstrations and sit-ins against dictatorial rule. After the revolution took full force, women's role increased even further. They joined humanitarian efforts in helping the wounded and have documented civil and intellectual human rights abuses. Many women have paid a high price for their involvement, some with their freedom or even their lives. Yet, they remain subject to the same limitations imposed by the regime. Likewise, the opposition is excluding women from taking on any significant leadership roles. At the time of writing, only 5% of Syrian National Coalition representatives are women. The Syrian opposition has failed to recognize the role played by women in the revolution and the value of the sacrifices which women have made for it.

The recent rise of Islamic extremists has led to a further limitation of women's overall role in society and severely endangers their future. Attempts to empower women do exist, however their ineffectiveness to date demonstrates the severe difficulties in exposing the reality of Syrian women and the obstacles they face.

Because of this reality and the other factors mentioned previously, the creation of a feminist Syrian journal became a vital necessity. Syrian women today have the right to be informed and supported by a journal that could provide expanded horizons and a new vision for the future of women around the world. The creation of *Sayedat Souria* and its dissemination would have been much more difficult without the possibilities provided by the internet and digital technology. The author of this paper, who is one of three individuals who helped establish the publication—alongside a playwright/script writer and a young woman with a degree in Arabic language in Gaziantep in the south of Turkey. The author and the other founders of *Sayedat Souria* wish to acknowledge their debt to the Syrian Media Action Revolution Team (SMART) and the France-based Association de Soutien aux Medias Libres (ASML).

2.1. Digital technology and Sayedat Souria creation

It has become obvious that digital technology not allows users to be productive and creative but that for Syrians, it has the additional benefit of giving them access to various types of information and the freedom to express their opinions. These same digital technologies also played a role in the establishment of *Sayedat Souria*.

Some groups of activists utilized social media to disseminate images, documentary evidence and drawings evocative of revolutionary actions: with time, these changed from pictures of peaceful revolutions to documentation of violence and massacres against the revolutionaries. Other groups used social media as an outlet to help spread electronic periodicals to be downloaded, printed and then distributed by activists they knew inside and outside the country.

As the revolution was transformed from a peaceful rebellion into a military conflict, there was a proliferation of websites, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds as each of the armed groups sought to cement its own social media profile. These groups invested heavily in digital tools to cover the news of their battles and also to document events unfolding on the ground. Finally, social media channels allowed these groups to broadcast their opinions to wider sections of the Arab and global media.

In summary, the role which digital technology played in the creation of our publication was manifold, and can be summarized in the following points:

- The internet allowed the founders of *Sayedat Souria* to discover, review and evaluate a wide range of publications, with a wide diversity of thematic coverage, which would not normally have been available to Syrians. Having a wide variety of publications available made the founders' vision clearer to appreciate, and helped in defining the type of coverage which the publication would eventually carry.
- One of the main objectives of the founders of *Sayedat Souria* was to make the publication available to the widest possible audience. The internet and social media facilitate this accessibility, at a time during which the distribution of regular printed matter would have been very difficult. Without the internet, the creation of a Syria-centered publication within the borders of the country would have been impossible.
- Today, with the growth in the number of Syrian refugees and immigrants, social media plays a key role in providing help and support to the Syrian population in general, but particularly for activists. Social media is particularly important for the creation of communication channels which bring Syrians living under regime control within the borders of the country into contact with refugees and exiles.
- Obviously, the founders of *Sayedat Souria* would not have been able to carry out the work of establishing the journal without the availability of digital technology hardware.

Beside the fact that social media networks have increasingly become digital tools used in the measurement of the success of modern social-change protests, we found through it a channel to let our opinion known at domestic, regional and international level.

2.2. Production and distribution

With the support of SMART and ASML team, 5,000 copies of the journal are currently printed in the south of Gaziantep in the south of Turkey, and distributed monthly in Syria, inside liberated territories (i.e., those controlled by the opposition). A further 2,000 copies are printed by the journal's team and distributed in Syrian refugee camps within Turkey. It is also published online through *Issuu*, a digital publishing platform⁸. *Sayedat Souria* also has over 15,000 on Facebook⁹ and Twitter¹⁰ (June, 2014).

The *Sayedat Souria* editorial team also organize a monthly forum "Knowledge and Freedom of Expression", which host prominent Syrian cultural, intellectual and political figures, including Yasin Al-Haj Saleh, Samar Yazbec, Burhan Ghalioun, and many others. This regular forum focuses on full participation of women in the political and social discussion.

Finally, *Sayedat Souria* produces brochures to raise awareness of topics with special relevance for Syrian women, some of them very sensitive, including: forced marriage of minors; child care during illness; constraints on environmental and food conditions; and the lack of hygiene in refugee camps and population centers. These brochures are printed alongside the journal and distributed inside and outside Syria and are used to provide psychological support for mothers and their children.

⁸ <http://issuu.com/sayedat>

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/saiedetsouria?ref=hl>

¹⁰ [@saiedetsuria](#)

3. Thematic coverage, vision and goals

Sayedat Souria concerns itself with women's causes in general, particularly those affecting Syrian women. It focuses on the pressing issues that Syrian women face today. The vision and mission of the founders can be contained in one sentence: to raise Syrian women's awareness about their human rights across many facets, including the social, economic, political and cultural aspects. In addition, our work is based on a necessity to clarify and inform Syrian women on some important concepts connected to women's human rights issues, like Women's Empowerment, Gender analysis and Development, Discrimination, Equality and Equity, Needs, Planning, Violence, Sex and Gender, and Social Justice. (Table.1). In addition to these core subjects and issues, *Sayedat Souria* contains medical, cultural, creative, literature and entertainment columns.



Figure 1. Covers of the first five issues of Sayedat Souria.

Core Subject	Subject Sub-Headings	Type of articles/reports
Women's human rights	Dealing with all issues commonly associated with notions of women's rights, and that includes, though are not limited to: the right to bodily integrity and autonomy; the right to vote; to work; to fair wages or equal pay; to own property; to education; to enter into legal contracts; and to have marital or parental rights. Besides, we are going to deal with women's legal status under current Syrian laws, including but not limited to inheritance, divorce, marriage and children custody.	<p>News Reports: by following the latest news and activities of regional and International women's organizations and associations and all defending women's rights institutions.</p> <p>Reportages: by gathering information about women's advocacy campaigns, events, conferences, meetings, etc. and present it in a written news stories, feature articles or documentaries.</p> <p>Interviews: with lawyers and specialists in women's human rights and advocacy issues.</p> <p>Studies and articles: about women's rights and all connected issues. These studies could be in Arabic language or translated from other languages.</p> <p>Photographs: by using photographs to tell the news about an event or advocacy campaigns. It could be used also to tell a story.</p>
Women's Empowerment	We will try to provide guidance on how to empower Syrian women in the workplace, marketplace and community. This is connected, though are not limited to many subheadings subject core, such as leadership and gender equality, equal opportunity, health, safety and freedom of violence, community leadership and engagement, education and training, etc.	<p>Feature news: writing stories which usually give background to a successful known female political personality or social figure.</p> <p>Studies and articles: about methods and mechanisms, plans and strategies, statistics and all connected themes to women's empowerment. These studies could be in Arabic language or translated from other languages.</p> <p>Interviews: with a successful known women</p>
Gender and Social Justice Issues	<p>Treat all women and men fairly at work - respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination. Our goal is to raise Syrian women and men awareness about work-life policies that enable them to put their gender values into practice.</p> <p>In sum, our concern is to keep Syrian women and men opened to the idea of equal opportunity, inclusion and nondiscrimination.</p>	<p>Feature news: writing stories about successful experiences in gender and social justice issues.</p> <p>Studies and articles: about the importance of such issue, advantages and benefits for both, woman and man. These studies could be in Arabic language or translated from other languages.</p> <p>Interviews and survey: women and men at work place, tell us about their experiences, suffering, inclusion, exclusion, harassment, violence, etc.</p>

Table.1. Sayedat Souria: Thematic coverage and vision

3.1. Contributors (Freelancers)

Contributors to *Sayedat Souria* come from a variety of backgrounds: writers, university academics, researchers, artists and journalists. *Sayedat Souria*, in fulfillment of its mission, actively encourages submissions from both men and women, including both Syrians and those from other parts of the Arab region. Most of these are well-known, highly respected and trusted public figures in Syrian society. *Sayedat Souria* depends on these contributors to achieve its goals and carry out its informational and educational mission.

3.2. Editorial Team: curriculum vita and background

As mentioned previously, the team behind *Sayedat Souria* is very diverse, only a limited number of them being trained journalists. Other members of the team, however, had gained experience and understanding of journalism and publication through the use of blogging and social media like facebook and Twitter. Faced with the regime's relentless

oppression, the Syrian people have adopted the mantra of “every citizen a journalist”. A description of the editorial team behind *Sayedat Souria*, with brief descriptions of their qualifications and locations, is given in Table 2, below.

Name	Title	Background
Mohammad Mallak	Editor-in-Chief	<p>A scriptwriter and playwright. Mallak was awarded the Souad Al-Sabah Award for best stage play in 2000. In the beginning of the revolution, he founded a number of media projects (e.g. Swaida Khabar media center, which covers the southern region of Syria and publishes in Arabic, English and French); and Dawdaa Newspaper (24 pages), launched in April 2013.</p> <p>At present, Mallak works as the Director of the SMART news agency; Head of Media Development Team at ASML; and the Key Trainer in the “Citizen Journalist project”.</p>
Yasmine Merei	Managing Editor	<p>A Syrian activist from Homs, Merei holds a degree in Arabic Language. A participant in the revolution since its outset, Merei has been a contributor to a number of publications aligned with the revolution, including: <i>Damascus Bureau</i>, <i>Enab Baladi</i>, <i>Dawdaa’</i>, <i>Hinta</i> and <i>Soar</i>. She headed the Syrian delegation to the Conference of activating the social role of women in Paris 2013, and participated in the preparatory conference for the Network of Syrian Women in Stockholm, in February 2013.</p>
Inaam Charaf	Public Relation and Translation Team Manager	<p>Holds a Ph.D. in Information and Communication Sciences from Claud Bernard University in France. She worked as a professor at Damascus University in addition to heading the Customer Services Department at the British Council in Damascus. Dr. Charaf translates from French into Arabic.</p>
Ola Al-Jari	Editorial Secretary	<p>Has a degree in Media from Damascus University. She contributes to project development at Syrian Media Action Revolution Team (SMART), as well as the head of supervision team in SMART News Agency.</p> <p>She is also the Managing Editor of Dawdaa’ Newspaper. Since 2012 she has attended several gender-journalism training workshops organized by IWPR, Basmat-Syria and the CCSDS and represented Syria at the (Global Editors Network), held in Paris in June 2013.</p>
Branch offices inside Syria	Journalists, photographs and reporters	<p>Daraa in the south of Syria; Damascus office, Central Region office; Aleppo and Al-Hasaka offices in the north east of Syria.</p> <p>Administrative staff are mainly young women and come from a variety of backgrounds.</p>

Table.2. Sayedat Souria Editorial Team

Conclusion

Today, it seems clear that digital technology has played a significant role in news creation, diffusion and production for almost two decades. There is no doubt that in the Arab World, and especially since the Arab Spring, that digital technology was a crucial element for groups who had previously felt immobilized against cruel and dictatorial regimes. Social media networks, photos, videos, text messaging, emails, and all other tools provided by modern technology, were effectively used by protestors and activists as the most powerful peaceful tool at their disposal.

The employment of digital technology in media and news creation, production and distribution, allows Syrian activists, as well as protestors and any other ordinary citizen to contribute to the empowerment of civil society and also to the consolidation of a critical mass of active social media users in the world.

Finally, we have faith that the situation which our country is presently living through will pass, and that Syria will survive at the end of it. The founders of *Sayedat Souria* seek to

achieve a restoration of moderation and reason in the midst of this confusion, and to bring killing and vengeance to an end.

Acknowledgments

The author and the other founders of *Sayedat Souria* wish to acknowledge their debt to the Syrian Media Action Revolution Team (SMART) and the France-based Association de Soutien aux Medias Libres (ASML).

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