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THE POLITICAL POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA – CASE STUDY SYRIA

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Lecturer Ivar Hendla

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I declare I have written the bachelor's thesis independently.

All works and major viewpoints of other authors, data from other sources of literature and elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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ABSTRACT

The Arab-spring raised the phenomenon of social media. Social media is used to spread information, organize events and to connect with likeminded people. In Syria, social media has been widely used to share information between participants in the conflict. All sides of the conflict use social media platforms for various purposes, from recruiting people to spreading propaganda. Internet is heavily censored and blocked in Syria, which creates a problem with connectivity, but anti-Assad forces have found workarounds to by pass these blockades. This thesis paper discusses and shows methods and cases how each side of the conflict embrace social media in to their own use and use it as a tool. The problems of verifying informations are also put on to light and discussed. This paper concludes and explains social media only as a tool, not as a cause for direct action and impact.

Keywords: Social Media, Syria, Internet Censorship, Social Media Platforms, Social Media Tool, Social Movements, Propaganda, Mobile Technology

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INTRODUCTION

The 'Arab Spring' which started in 2011 in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, showed a vast number of new ways of how social media is being used as a tool to organize protests. Since then social media has enabled the spread of information through Middle-East and through these countries, Syria has been reported as being the most socially mediated country. All participating sides of the conflict of Syria has adopted the social media and it often results in either side trying to frame the other party of being harmful and bad for the country. Social media is also used for participating in and engaging in social movements within Syria. This thesis paper argues that individuals, groups and instances can use social media to engage in micro and macro-level political actions.

The Syrian government has also reacted to the phenomenon and has actively restricted the access to the internet in Syria. Less than a quarter of the domestic population holds a normal access to the internet through broadband internet connections. The population left out of the normal means of connecting to the internet has then found several ways to connect to the internet. Syria is also known for being very harsh regarding online political activism that is against the Assad regime. Internet users in Syria, especially the rebels, have found and adopted several ways to over come the surveillance and restrictions implemented on the use of internet.

Social media platforms have proven to be very useful organization and demonstrating tools for all of the sides participating in the conflict. Graphic videos of the conflict have been uploaded into YouTube to demonstrate the atrocities done by the pro-Assad regime, by the rebels in Syria. ISIS uses Twitter for recruiting new members and pushing their ideology and political agenda for the whole world. Rebels are using Twitter and Facebook to report ongoing situations in towns and cities across Syria, hoping to organize social movements and most of all to warn and guide like minded people. These platforms have also proved to be useful for the fleeing refugees as the instant messaging services have provided the means to stay connected to family members and relatives even though normal phone services are unavailable.

1. POLITICAL SOCIAL MEDIA THEORY

Before analyzing the social media use in Syria, it is essential to take a look into the theoretical backgrounds of using social media as a political tool. In the work "The Strength of Weak Ties" by Mark S. Ganovetter, the effects of micro-level actions between macro-level patterns are discussed. In this context, micro-level actions would be posting a tweet or publishing a Facebook post to a peer audience. The macro-level patterns on the other hand would in this situation represent a case, for example, where a Facebook post gathers enough attention so that it makes it to mainstream media, news and radio.

The relations between individuals are defined by how much time do they share with each other. Time shared does not only include the physical presence but communications through other means as well. Ganovetter also describes how social circles work. In short, if person A is a friend with person B and C, but persons B and C have never met, there is still a high probability that B and C have similar interests as person A. The reason for this is that people often link with people they share similar world views with. (Ganovetter 1973) In other words, people with same political interests are often within the same peer and they relate with each other. In Finland for example, people who vote for Basic Finns, they are very separate from the views of other parties and their voters, but they share strong similarity in ideas and views within the party.

Ganovetter also describes the changes in informations as it travels through social bridges. Social bridges in definition are social relations between individuals. Bridges can either be strong or weak, depending on the the levels of relations between persons. For example, if person A has an intimate connection with person B, the bridge is strong. On the other hand, if person A has an intimate connection with person B, but only B has a strong connection with person C, then the bridge between person A and person C is weak, but still existing. (Ganovetter 1973)

The information flow between these individuals are dependent of these bridges, but as said, a change in information can occur due to the type of the bridge. For example, person A starts a rumor, it is very like that person B, with whom person A has a strong bridge, will receive the information as it is. Now modifying the example in a way where person C hears the rumor from B, who has a strong bridge with B, will most likely receive the information

correctly as well. Taking a fourth person, person D, who shares a weak bridge with C, but a shares a bridge to other people, will most likely hear the rumor but differently than person A said it originally. This is due to the weak bridge between social links of persons involved in spreading the rumor.(Ganovetter 1973)

This example highly relates in to the theory of social diffusion. The social diffusion can be defined as who will adopt the given information and who will not. For example, person A who is related to the given information, finds a particular sample of information to be relative to his or her interests, will most likely adapt the given information. Now as person A has adopted this sample of information, the persons close peer of individuals, best friends for example, will also accept the sample of information as it has been introduced to them by a best friend. In this example, person A has found this information from a source he or she finds relevant, therefore the person A has channeled information through social bridges in a way how diffusion works.

As the information flows through social bridges, some might adopt them and some might not. There are number of reasons for why a person does not adapt a given sample of information. Age, occupation, personal economy and political views for example. In a case where information flows more freely, for example if the information is spread within the political party by an intranet system, the members of the party are more likely to adopt the information. But in the case the information provided by a certain political party flows into the peers of another political party, adopting the information is not as likely as they do not share the same characteristics and political views. In another words, even though there are established bridges between peers, matters such as age, political views and agendas dictate if the given information is seen as "own" or not. In short, social media provides a tremendous amount of bridges between individuals and enables social diffusion, but it is still up to people themselves and their previous experiences and habits if they adopt the ideas and information.

In the context of conflict of Syria, the social bridges established is usually first the community within the city or village. Families have established bridges first within the family, then with neighbors, close-by shop owners and co-workers. This can be considered as strong bridges as they are within the same circumstances as the country is largely divided by areas which are under control of a certain faction, pro-Assad, the Islamic State or the rebels. From these circumstances, bridges are then established to other cities through relatives and

other connection, like trade for example.

These connections can either be considered as strong or weak ties, depending on the previous social interactions between the peers. In the case of diffusion, information shared between the peers are under the notion of adopted political views and pressure put on by governing faction. Diffusion can work in either way, people who are under the surveillance of the Islamic State can either accept their views or ignore them depending how they are being treated, for example, or how their views of Islam compare with the Islamic State.

1.1 Social Movement Theories

In order to understand the social media activeness in Syria, it is necessary to inspect the related social movement theories. Sociology scholars have been trying to study and observe which are the fundamental causes for the mobilization of people in the context of social movements. In other words, what are the causes and instances which makes an individual to participate in social movements. Reason for such actions usually includes living conditions, economic situations and political atmosphere within the given country.(Lopes 2014) These grievances can boost up the need for an individual to take part in social movements as having a say into these matters is usually impossible alone.

Social movement theorists such as Charles Tilly defines social movements being "a series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns by which ordinary people make collective claims on others."(Lopes 2014) Like states, social movements are important as the agenda and ideas are collective and therefore much louder than just an individuals voice in the matter. In the case of Syria, modernization and relative deprivation theories are the closest ones which can explain the ongoing situation within the country. Modernization theory indicates that institution are not able to meet the needs of the citizens as the economical and social landscapes are changing. In other words, governments and/or other institutions can not keep up with the progress.(Lopes 2014) Therefore as the population are not satisfied with the current conditions, they will demand a change and this happens through social movements.

Relative deprivation theory on the other hand implies that individuals sees their position, economically, politically or socially, different than others. In other words, they feel

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the situation is unequal compared to other people.

> "Relative deprivation argues that people are motivated to organize out of a sense of deprivation or inequality brought forth by a comparison to others, or in relation to their own expectations. In this case, people will join social movements because their expectations will have outgrown their actual situation"(Lopes 2014)

Syria's shift to more neoliberal direction has also played a part in social movements. People are more and more interested in the outside world and international connections than ever. The study of foreign languages, especially english, has changed the receiving of information tremendously. Even the rise in internet connectivity can be seen as a neoliberal attribute. (Terc 2011) As globalism is an ongoing trend, in case of Syria the neoliberal shift, and the appearing of neoliberal elites in Syria (Terc 2011), can been seen as one of the causes for relative deprivation. Also the availability of internet connections and rising knowledge in english has made it possible for people to monitor the situation and development of the uprisings. These instances have then turned into social movements as people have seen their position within given region to be unequal to other regions.

Social media plays a part in these theories as a source for information. It can also act as a social mobilizer. The theory of social mobilization states that the need for mobilizations comes from the urge to include individuals and groups in social movements. Social mobilization occurs when the needs and causes unite within a given group and they take collective action towards a common goal.(Dunu 2015)

> "There are different parts to social mobilization such as: the motivation and organization of different groups that results in the successful transformation of development goals into societal action; involving the people in taking part actively and freely in discussions and decisions affecting their general welfare; a process that engages and motivates a wide range of partners and allies at national and local levels to raise awareness of and demand for a particular development objective through face-to-face dialogue."(Dunu 2015)

Social media serves as a unifier and information giving tool for social movements. The main social media social movements have been the #BringBackOurGirls, which aired out the voice against the Boko Haram terrorist group which kidnapped Nigerian school girls. The

hashtag gathered more than 2 million tweets. (Fillion 2014) #OccupyCentral hashtag was used in Hong-Kong in order to mobilize over 100,000 people to gather in the center of Hong Kong. The protest were done to voice out pro-democratic opinions.

> "Protesters used Facebook groups, Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter to communicate and share photos of the demonstrations. Organizers also used FireChat, a messaging app that relies on Bluetooth rather than Internet connectivity. The app was downloaded hundreds of thousands of times in Hong Kong. It became critical when thousands of people gathered in the city's business districts and the networks couldn't handle the data load."(Fillion 2014)

2. MAIN SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

It is essential to describe the statistical matters of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter , Youtube, Periscope, Skype and WhatsApp as these platforms and applications are essential tools being used in order to share information through social bridges. Facebook was founded on 2004 and it has grown to be the largest internet social media platform in the world. In september 2015, it was reported that over a billion people use Facebook daily. (Newsroom.fb.com 2015) and over 1,5 billion people use Facebook monthly. (Smith 2015) Facebook is used to connect with friends and sharing daily informations through related peers. This paper will later discuss the functions of Facebook and the use of it in Syria with more detail.

Twitter was founded in 2006 and it has around billion registered users and over 320 million user daily. (Smith 2015). In contrast to Facebook, Twitter works in more subtle ways as people can only post 140-letters within one "tweet". In Twitter, people can follow other people and see their tweets. People can also use hashtags "#" in order to pos their tweet to relevant channels.

YouTube is an open video sharing platform founded in 2005. YouTube is currently owned by Google. YouTube is used by a billion people and it gathers 4 billion video views per day. Anyone can set up a user account and upload videos of their own. It is also reported that over 300 hours of new video material is uploaded to YouTube every minute.

WhatsApp is a mobile applications which is used for instant messaging between application owners. WhatsApp can be downloaded on to smartphones that supports the application. WhatsApp was founded in 2009 and it has over 900 million daily users and over 30 billion messages are sent through it daily. (Smith 2015)

Skype was launched in 2003 and it is currently owned by Microsoft. Skype is used for instant messaging and streaming live video between its users. For example, a person from the United States can "skype" to a person in Syria and they can interact and see each other in realtime through Skype. Skype has 300 million users.A new addition to live streaming applications is Periscope. People can set up a Periscope account and start live streaming their activities to other Periscope users. For example, a person can live stream their every day living and random people over the world can see the actions of the live streaming Periscope

user. Periscope currently hold 2 million users (Smith 2015) and it is currently owned by Twitter. (Weil 2015)

3. INTERNET IN SYRIA

The ongoing events in the Arab revolutions have shown the potential of social media as a tool to show us the current status within each country under the situation. In the past four years, since 2011, the people outside of these countries under revolts have been able to monitor the events rather closely due to social media. People within each country have been able to use Social Media sites to report their own experiences right from the center of the conflict. This is also the case with Syria, where the conflict is very much still ongoing and more on spotlight than ever.

Syria is an interesting case when it comes to the use of social media as the access to internet is problematic but still people get their way through. It is essential to demonstrate how the Syrian population can access the internet or connect with each other before discussing the usage. Freedom House, "an independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world", states in their quick facts considering Syria's internet penetration that 28% of the total population, which is around 22 million, has an access to internet. (Freedom House 2015) Also the statistics show that number of sites, including Social Media sites, have been blocked and even some of the people who have been posting on these sites have been taken into custody. The ultimatum is that the state is far from free considering the freedom of internet usage.

Conflicts also constitutes other problems than just government interference in internet usage. The use of internet requires viable infrastructure and technology. As the bombings destroy buildings, they also destroy telecommunication devices and lines along with everything else. Freedom House reports within a year, from June 2014 until May 2015, a large portion of the Syrian internet service providers have been disconnected completely and "as a result, internet access has become highly decentralized". (Freedom House 2015) In addition, many of the cities suffer from complete internet blackouts due to the completely destroyed infrastructure.

For the people living in these cities, satellite connections are the only means to get connected to the internet. Even though the use of satellite phones are restricted, many still use them to connect to the internet. The two main organs regulating the use of internet in Syria is the government and the Islamic State. The Syrian government has implied many different

tactics to either reduce, control or completely block the use of internet within the country. The main targets for censorship are the sites that habit info about political, social and religious matters.

The use of internet has costs as well. In the year 2015, the use of a broadband internet connection, with the speed of 1 megabyte per second, had the monthly cost of 1400 Syrian Pounds which is around 7 euros.(Moct.gov.sy 2015) In IS controlled areas, Freedom House states the following,

> "Based on Skype interviews with Syrians living under IS-controlled areas, the cost of buying a Wi-Fi access point is around SYP 5,000 (US$17), granting 64Kbps speeds and data at SYP 400 ($1.25) per 100 MB." (Freedom House 2015)

As mentioned before, satellite connections are viable for the population who falls under the larger percent of population who has no access to internet through common measures. These connections are established through satellite phones which can be purchased within the country or they have been smuggled into the country. Amongst other connections, satellite connections can also be monitored but not as directly as the more "ordinary" connections.

As it is impossible to precisely demonstrate the exact demographics of the internet users in Syria, it is safe to assume that there is three main parties of internet user groups and their affiliates: Pro-government, IS and rebels. The latter mentioned consists of many different groups but fall into the same category as they oppose either the government or the IS. These three groups and the population under their control are the main users of internet. Mainly because of the fact that these groups and their affiliates have the possibility to connect to the internet due the resources they posses. In this context, resources mean the equipment, infrastructure and technology. In contrast, people have to take sides within the country and those who do not, are often disconnected from everything or are forced to flee the country and therefore are unable to contribute to the "netnography".

The internet usage is harshly monitored and surveilled in Syria. The two official bodies monitoring the use of internet are the Syrian Computer Society (SCS) and the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE). Both of these are governed by the president Al-Assad. The reason why there is two governing bodies is that SCS governs and operates the

country's 3G systems and STE controls the fixed broadband or dial-up connections. STE operates under the Telecommunications and Technology Ministry. This means that STE has all of the "normal" connections under their grasp in the country. (Surveillance.rsf.org 2012) The STE holds many methods considering internet surveillance and censorship. These methods include government implemented malware and phishing methods into users computers. Shortly, these computer programs gather the information about which sites and services the user has used during the visit in internet.

3.1 Internet Censorship in Syria

The main sites under heavy surveillance in Syria are the sites publishing political matters that are against the government agenda. Only the state ran media outlets are free of censorship, although these instances are heavily governed and always post news in favor of the government. Several Facebook pages, blogs and non-government media sites are completely blocked by the government. The reason for this is simple as the government does not want agenda setting from an opposing instance, a familiar phenomenon from totalitarian or communist countries, like North-Korea or China for example. This brings out the question of what is the government afraid of when it comes to its people using the internet.

In case of Syria, the censorship is not as straightforwards as it is in China for example, where Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are completely blocked. (Furio 2015) In Syria Facebook was only partially blocked in such way that finding pages related to the uprisings and protests could not been found at all. The very detailed report, "Censorship in the Wild: Analyzing Web Filtering in Syria", where a number of researchers took a look into the matter of censorship within the country, stated that as there was not a certain pattern in the censorship, it was problematic to conclude what actually is censored and what is not in Syria. (Chaabane 2014)

There is a reason for this. In case of internet surveillance in a conflict situation, the state wants to see what their populations is doing within the internet. If the internet and sites are completely shutdown, it is impossible for the government to collect data from its users. In short, completely shutting down Twitter for example, would make it harder for the

government to see what people are tweeting from the conflict area. It can be said that the use of internet is a double edged sword for its users in Syria. (Daneezis 2014)

The report also stated the following:

> "Censored traffic encompasses a large variety of content, mostly aiming to prevent users from using Instant Messaging software (e.g., Skype), video sharing websites (e.g., metacafe.com, upload.YouTube.com), Wikipedia, as well as sites related to news and opposition parties e.g.,islammemo.cc,alquds.co.uk)." (Chaabane 2014)

In addition to these services, Facebook is not completely censored. The reason for this is that the Syrian government benefits more from the flow of information in Facebook than shutting it down completely. (Danezis 2014)

3.2 Bypassing the Censorship in Syria

This paper now has explained how the cyberspace works in Syria and what is controlled by the government. It is also necessary to demonstrate how the population over come these obstacles to further increase their presence within the internet. Luckily, for the population who wants to voice their opinions and ideas in the Social Media, there is a lot of workarounds to bypass the government set blacklist. Without going too much into terms related to computing, there are several programs and services dedicated to anonymous use of internet. These services ables the users to workaround their way into services that are blocked by the government.

Even thought the word "proxy" is censored and few services that offer proxy possibility are monitored by the Syrian government, some of the services are still available. This is mainly due to the large amount of different proxy services and less used web browsers. These proxy services gives the opportunity for the user to roam around the internet without the fear of being traced, as the proxy virtually sets the user into another place.(Chabaane 2014) For example, person from Syria can connect to a proxy that resides in Finland and therefore it seems like the person is using internet in Finland. (Lambert 2012) Another much

used service is called "Tor". Shortly, Tor "offers a technology that bounces internet users' and websites' traffic through "relays" run by thousands of volunteers around the world, making it extremely hard for anyone to identify the source of the information or the location of the user."(Dredge 2015)

Other workarounds includes Google Cache which can shortly described as a function that takes a "photo" of a certain page and therefore it can be viewed even thought the url to the actual site might be blocked. The url is changed by the google cache. (Google.com 2015) Peer-to-peer programs are also used to download programs that are not otherwise possible to own due to censorship. The "P2P" programs are a key feature for the internet users as they enable the downloading for such programs as Skype, which is heavily used to share information within the users. Without these P2P programs it would be impossible to download Skype and other instant messaging services as they are in the government blacklist. (Chaabane 2014)

Internet possesses a lot of different bypass solutions for its users. As explained, even though the Syrian government is actively censoring and blocking websites, keywords and programs, a way has been found to get around these blockades. These bypass methods apply in all of internet, not just in Syrian netscape.

4. THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SYRIA

4.1 Online Political Activism through Social Media

Albeit the use of internet and Social Media is problematic in Syria, people are still able to do it. The use of Social Media, in a context where an individual wants to monitor current situation within the country un-biased, has become a rather big phenomenon in Arab states under conflict and Syria is no exception. The point of using social media is the fact that it can also be used as a tool to promote ones own agenda. Social media sites works in a way that individuals can express their ideas into close peer of people through different groups or into a larger audience through hashtags "#" for example. Even though the functions of Facebook, Twitter and Skype are different, they still work under the same idea, getting ones voice seen and heard.

First we take a closer look how Facebook works. Facebook is an open Social Media site which is completely free of charge for individuals. In Facebook, one searches for his or her friends and acquaintances through a search feature and then adds them as friends. It is also possible to create events, groupings and pages and name them in any way. Individual can then invite his or her friends to these events, groups and pages and therefore he or she can share their ideas and opinions to others. People can also post status updates, pictures and links which are shown to everyone within their accepted peer. Facebook holds other utilities as well but this paper only focuses on these mentioned purely for the reason as they are the main functions used in the context of this paper considering Syrian people and their political engagement through Social Media. In other words, people can engage in micro-level political actions through Facebook.

The "like" and "share" features are the key features considering the reach of an individuals post. When one makes a status update about a certain idea, other users can share the post to his or her peers within Facebook. This enables a bigger exposure for the given status update or post and it extends the reach to other groups, not only to the original poster's peers. The "like" function works in a bit of a same way. Although liking a post does not directly share a status update or post them the same way as the share function, the "like" is

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still shown in a separate feed. For example, person A makes a status update, person B likes the update, person C, who is friends with person B but not with A, sees the like in his or her like feed. With share function, only the friends or subscribers of person A will see the post. The like function has been censored by the Syrian government but share function works normally. (Chaabane 2014)

A great example of Twitter use is the user @LeShaque who describes himself as a "Syrian. Activist." in his Twitter account. He has over 10.000 followers and has shared over 38.500 tweets since he joined Twitter on December 2009. In his Twitter account, he shares tweets mostly regarding the situation in Syria and trying to share his thoughts and ideas regarding the matter. Tweets such as "Latest idiotic plan for Syria: Early elections, while war rages and 51-52% of country by area is under Islamic State control." and "Of biggest mistakes we made in Syria was flooding new users w/ internet tools, without training, allowing them to expose themselves. #SIF15" shows the current mood against the ongoing situation. Tweets like these are common amongst the more active and public social media content contributors.

In the interview "Syria Interview: Activist "LeShaque" on Social Media and the Syrian Revolution", LeShaque states the following regarding the situation in Syria.

> "In Syria, we are unbelievably dependent on social media. For organizing, you create a Facebook group. For calling a protest, you create a Facebook page. For reporting news, you create a Twitter account. For communicating with other activists, you use Skype. For showing the protest to the world, you use YouTube. There are signs in Syria that say, "Thank you, YouTube."(Lucas 2012)

LeShaque also explains the methods how they validate informations that is reaching him and his peers. As the information reaches LeShaque, through a Facebook group for example, he contacts people within that area where the current happening is according the post made within the group. By that method, he can make sure that the information is correct and not biased by the original poster who made the post into the given Facebook group. "Mainly it's getting the full news report and verifying it" (Lucas 2012)

It is clear that Facebook and Twitter can be considered as powerful tools in organizing events and providing information regarding the events. In the paper "The Role of Social Media in the 'Syrian Uprising', Facebook is given a notion in the matter of being a vital part of organizing the revolution in Syria.(Ahmad 2014) As the page in Facebook called "Syrian

Revolution 2011" gathered over 120,000 followers, it contracted a lot of attention from the international media and the media used the information provided on that page for their own publishings.(Ahmad:2014) The paper even links the page directly with the actual uprising, not only on internet landscape, but to 'real-world' as well.

> Leigh states that "Two years after a Facebook page appeared calling for revolution; the uprising in Syria has developed into a full-blown civil war, a humanitarian crisis, and a tangled diplomatic impasse. To understand the full extent of the situation requires constant attention to – and knowledge of– t h e region." (Ahmad 2014)

In this light, social media provides information on a broader scale and without filter. It is possible to monitor the situation in different regions, cities, towns and areas through Twitter and Facebook simultaneously. Therefore a bigger picture can established. The keyword here is 'spreading'. As the word of a situation is shared through social media channels, people can adjust their actions more accordingly as they are more aware of the situation. The current situation in Syria makes it rather impossible for people to have say within the sphere of traditional media. As TV and radio are both controlled by the state, free media without government set agenda is nonexistent. (Taki 2012)

The history itself in Syria has shown that even before the uprising in country, the overall probable criticism towards the state has been regulated and censored. More precisely, the civil society has been monitored and their, so to say, voices have been modified through economical factors. For example, movie makers have been funded by the state in order to make sure the outcome of the film is to be positive towards the state.(Taki 2012) The situation is same with the Non-Governmental Organizations. Pre-crisis times showed that the trust between the civil society and the government was poor. "Meanwhile civil society sees the role of the Government as totally controlling and not flexible enough and not allowing NGOs to take on their true roles in the developmental sphere" (Taki 2012)

In this case, social media creates the transparency needed to overcome the government regulations. As authenticating and confirming the social media post is a few step procedure as explained in this paper earlier, it is good to explain transparency a bit more thoroughly. As mentioned, posts done in social media is always done by an individual or a group that is either on some side. Side in this case is either rebel, pro-government or IS. This is why transparency is important. By reviewing tweets done by each side for example, it is possible to create a

medium from the information given. In this situation, social media gives both the platform for expression and at the same time, the same information can be reviewed by the peer audience. Social media also creates transparency for government controlled media. It has been seen in other instances, which will be explained in this paper later, that ordinary news have been proven wrong by the social media as the people have showed the reality through YouTube videos and Instagram pictures.(Voakes 2012)

In the article "Syria, The Importance of Social Media and Transparency", Greg Voakes states the following:

> "Overall, the Syrian regime knows how important the global media is and has illustrated this amply by treating it as much the enemy as the insurgents themselves, who risk and lose their lives protecting the journalists because of that very same importance." (Voakes 2012)

Transparency is important for the most truthful outcome of information given in any source of media.

5. UNDERSTANDING THE SYRIAN CONFLICT THROUGH YOUTUBE

For an individual who is not directly affected by the conflict in Syria, social media creates the channel where one can see the information flow from each side within the conflict. To be more precise, for a person who is genuinely interested of the situation, social media plus traditional media combined is a very rich resource for truthful information as the available media can either fight with each other or say the same thing. The difference is that social media does not only rely on one reporter, but on to many. For international media, social media has been one of the key information contributor in the case of Syria. (Harkin 2013)

In contrast to social media that are concentrated in post that are written by users, YouTube offers a different kind of possibility through video uploading. YouTube, both in good and in bad, has become on of the most visible source of media in the past few years. Anyone can records a video clip with their equipment, which can be a camera recorder or just a smartphone equipped with a camera, and upload it to YouTube. Zeynep Tufekci, an assistant professor, writer and a blogger, describes a video of a 17 year old Kurish girl being killed in 2007, and the whole incident being filmed. After the video was uploaded and later discovered by international media "a series of bombings shook Yazidi villages near Mosul, resulting in about 800 deaths and more than 1,500 injured—making it the single biggest episode of mass killing in an act of political violence since September 11, 2001." (Tufekci 2012)

Even though these videos are usually explicitly violent and disturbing, they still offer valuable information in the bigger picture. Videos are much harder to manipulate and the information with in them are in true form. Of course videos poses problems as well since they can suffer from framing, meaning that the camera is focused only on one certain thing and therefore leaving matters happening outside the reach of the lens completely undocumented. Also recognizing the situation is much easier through video material. It instantly shows the whole situation and its functions.

> "First and foremost, watching violent footage is an academically legitimate form of doing research. Only by studying this kind of footage can we register evidence, record witness accounts, chart how

individual perpetrators operate, and understand how a process of mass violence functions and unfolds in practice." (Üngör 2015)

The article "Mass murder on YouTube: How should we look at Syrian video clips?" introduces another interesting fact about the authenticity of YouTube videos and most of all, how they are being modified. The article states that as the pro-government forces and affiliates have an access to larger resources than the opposing side, they tend to "sow doubt and confusion" through manipulating YouTube videos. This ends up in a situation where it is hard to determine which side is good and which side is bad. One of these methods includes false commenting regarding the ethnic attributes seen in the video so, that a person could interpret them being totally someone else who they really are. (Üngör 2015) The article also highlights that "it must be emphasized here that only states posses the capacity and resources to coordinate these kinds of large-scale manipulations."(Üngör 2015)

The article also briefly demonstrates and analyzes an incident that eventually turned into a massacre in Syria on 2nd and 3rd of May in 2013 where Syrian pro-government forces killed over 450 civilians. As the massacre was videotaped, it was analyzed that the attacks where systematic and pre-planned.(Üngör 2015) Videoclips like these does not only show the exact situation of the conflict but they also have an effect on a global scale. These videos shape the agenda of social media users, more vulgar the video is, more reaction they cause. Even though it is unfortunate for many that these videos surface, they are still valuable material when it comes to finding eyewitnesses, identifying perpetrators and confirming the area where the incident happens.(Üngör 2015)

New York Times hosts a project site dedicated for the YouTube videoclips exclusively shot in Syria. The project is calculating the lives lost in the conflict and "The primary source is the online video that has allowed a widening war to be documented like no other, and posts try to put the video into context."(Stack 2015) A project like this enables a wide audience to engage in and view the conflict situation directly. Same type of a video collection is also established at the site Mashable.com. The site also stated that.

> "YouTube footage alone won't confirm which side of the conflict was responsible for Thursday's violence, especially given the alignment of many of the uploaders. However, it can potentially spur to action Syria's neighbors and the international community at large to get more directly involved — television broadcasts during the Vietnam War have been in part credited with reducing support for that conflict among Americans."(Fitzpatrick 2012)

Along with other social media sites, YouTube is also available for public and it is completely free of charge. These videos enables a greater understanding of the conflict as the content is visual and not only written. Social media makes it easy to share these videos. All of the sites have a function where one can instantly, with a single click, post the wanted YouTube clip directly into their feed. YouTube is effectively being by all sides of the conflict. Even though war has been closely reported through television and radio all the way from second world war and especially in the Vietnam war, YouTube is used by the actual people participating in the war.

6. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SYRIA

This paper has now shown the methods and ways how social media is used in the context of Syrian conflict. All of the sides within the conflict use or diminishes the use of social media along with their own agenda. Also the use of social media does not only locate within Syria, but all over the world. International media and individuals abroad take part of the conflict by contributing their own opinions and ideas regarding the matter.

For better understanding the use of social media in Syria and getting a deeper analysis, it is necessary to take a more analytical view into the data gathered from the internet. The very detailed publishing "Online Social Media in the Syria Conflict: Encompassing the Extremes and the In-Betweens" gives a thorough methodological and analytical background for the matter. The paper gathered data from Twitter accounts that were linked to the Syrian conflict by the content within the tweets.

Two particular ways of data gathering were introduced. Firstly the Twitter accounts of familiar Syrian users that were verified by popular journalist was put up into a list, secondly, the Twitter accounts of more visible Syrian units from each side were put into a list as well. After this procedure, the researchers behind the paper analyzed all of these accounts one by one and took out the Twitter accounts that were irrelevant for the topic, accounts which did not directly reside in Syria.(Carthy 2014)

Through this method, a great number of tweets, YouTube videos and Facebook posts were taken into consideration and a unified graph approach was implemented. (Carthy 2014)

> "we employ the unified graph approach to combine views of Twitter accounts related to the Syria conflict, based on information derived from both Twitter and YouTube. This is a combination of explicit network relations, and implicit network representations that are derived from tweet content and Twitter lists. Specifically, we use seven Twitter based views constructed from the data described previously to generate the required neighbor rankings."(Carthy 2014)

These seven views included the basic functions of Twitter, from follows to retweets. Same approach was used with YouTube as well. A list of relevant YouTube users and channels were gathered into a list and then analyzed. Through the given analyzing methods, it was shown that all of the participating sides were actively using social media for their own

use through posts, pictures and videos.(Carthy 2014)

7. THE INTERNATIONAL ASPECT OF THE USE OF SOCIALl MEDIA IN SYRIA

It is evident as the Syrian conflict is domestically heavily socially mediated, international participation is also tremendous. As Syria's civil war has been declared as "the most socially mediated civil conflict in history"(Lynch 2014) it is certain that the conflict is monitored by various peers and it has connections all over the world. This part of the research paper takes a look how the phenomenon of social media has captured the issues of the Syrian conflict.

In 2013, a google hangout was presented and Syrian activists from within Syria and outside Syria were invited to be involved. The main notion was that the activists had been using internet for the purpose of forwarding the revolution. In the google hangout, one of the activists,   explained that social media was a key for the revolution as practicing traditional journalism was no longer possible as the journalist were unable to enter the country (Dheere 2013) It was also stated that even though the crisis were already heavily socially mediated for two years, the international response was close to nothing. This points out the problematic aspect of social media, it can only be used as a tool when engaging in political actions, but it does not guarantee a direct action.

Internationally, social media is mostly used for monitoring the conflict. In the article "How Researchers Use Social Media To Map The Conflict In Syria", writer Federico Guerrini explains how social media used in favor for the neutral peers of the conflict, how helps in ways to end the conflict. The Syria Conflict Mapping Project works accordingly to the posts made by all of the sides in Syrian conflict. For example,

> "Posts on social media, among other things, help to details the growth of opposition armed groups in each governorate within Syria; show the current geographic delineation of pro and anti-government forces and provides up-to-date analysis on the current state of the conflict."(Guerrini 2014)

It was also stated that due to this particular project, it was possible to provide helping organizations, such as humanitarian organizations, with relevant information of the conflict and its progression. It had proven very helpful as the helping organizations can now "query the Center's database to learn which armed groups are operating in the area, how they relate

to one another, what conflict events have taken place recently (on a near real-time basis), and more."(Guerrini 2014) This shows that social media is used also by international organizations and projects in order to have a effective participation even though they are not directly working in Syrian ground. Guerrini also details the problematic aspect of data gathering as the information they gather is solely for the purpose of helping, also the non-helping sides of the conflict are interested in the data, examples of this are later explained in this paper. (Guerrini 2014)

Social media is used as tool to witness the current circumstances in Syria. In this context, it is a lot easier for humanitarian aid to monitor and direct the aid for the ones in need. It also protects the humanitarian aid groups of putting their boots on the ground in the wrong place, meaning they do not risk their lives by aiming accidentally straight into the the battlefield for example. (Koettl 2013) It is also used to preventing and correcting misleading information. Specialists who are educated and skillful enough to spot possible acts of fraud or falsified information, can use the social media to compare posts and videos with other sources in order to come up with the final conclusion of the situation.(Koettl 2013)

Christoph Koettl, a worker for Amnesty international also states that by any means, Social media can not be held as the only source for information in humanitarian aid matters. Humanitarian aid requires a wider spectrum of participation than social media monitoring as it can result in "underreporting of human rights violations".(Koettl 2013) Koettl also states that there is a need for improving the technology and most of all methods how to implement social media as a part of a court-proof evidence for prosecutors. Shortly viable data collecting through social media sources is the key aspect of humanitarian aid in the internet landscape.

Also, like mentioned before, social media posts are always behind an agenda. Whether it is to help or to organize, for a neutral party it is essential to research the cause before acting.

> "First, there is an urgent need for guidelines on the reliability and admissibility rules of social media and video evidence. Second, we need to develop tools and apps that record metadata—such as exact location, time and date—in order to increase the value to human rights investigators and prosecutors."(Koettl 2013)

Social media is also used to gather resources and funding for humanitarian aid. A number of hashtags have been established in order to channel humanitarian aid to Syria, for example "#childrenofsyria. Even though the best possible way to contribute aid to Syria is

through identified aid programs, social media can also be used to spread the awareness of the situation and by that further helping the cause. (Henshaw 2015)

The hashtag #LetUsThrough and #WithSyria were established in order voice out the need for an wider humanitarian aid to Syria. Behind this hashtag was 130 different humanitarian aid groups around the world. "Thunderclap" social media campaign was established in order to reach 23 million people with humanitarian interests towards Syria. (Unrwa.org 2015)

> The "Thunderclap" itself will be at noon Yarmouk time on 18th March, when a tweet with our campaign hashtag will be released to millions of people who will have signed up for the c a m p a i g n . Anyone can join the campaign, individuals and organizations. Once we reach 23 million, the iconic campaign image of thousands of civilians waiting for food in Yarmouk Camp will appear on the world famous electronic billboard in New York's Times Square, sending a powerful signal to the global d iplomatic community in UN Headquarters nearby." (Unrwa.org 2015)

8. PROBLEMS OF THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SYRIA

8.1 Social Media Used by ISIS

As social media can be used for the good causes in Syria, it can also be used for recruiting new members for the Islamic State troops for example. As the Islamic State conquers new areas in Syria, the need for personnel also expands. In this sense, Islamic State has proven to be very proactive in the field of social media in order to spread propaganda, post videos of executions and further extent their image of success. Through these social media posts, Islamic State has been able to spread the terror they practice into mass media outlets.

The point of using social media as a platform for recruiting new members is simple. Islamic state can easily broadcast their ideology and boost their agenda to a wider audience. In the article "How ISIS Is Waging a 'War of Ideas' Through Social Media, it is explained social media has been a key tool of recruiting thousands of new members from nearby and far-away countries from Syria.(Johnson 2015) The article also states The Islamic State being much more active and organized in social media than other counterparts with the same agenda, like Al-Qaeda for example. It is also stated that the use of social media can backlash for its user, in this case The Islamic State. As the violent videos of extreme jihadism are uploaded to YouTube and then further posted to Twitter and Facebook, it causes feelings in both sides, with the ones who are more likely to be enlisted for recruitment, but also with the ones who are sharply against the Islamic State, like foreign governments for example. (Johnson 2015)

The United States has also voiced their opinion regarding the use of social media by The Islamic State. As the IS is pushing propaganda through social media, counter measures are needed to minimize the effect of these tweets, YouTube videos and Facebook posts. The U.S have adopted a method by posting contents of the IS doing harm to other muslims through their social media channels, in order to prove the IS is against Islam rather than spreading it. Another aspect, in contrast to boots on the ground type of counter action, is to

diminish the IS practiced ideology in social media. (Johnson 2015)

> "Military, intelligence and law enforcement efforts will always be key elements of counterterrorism campaigns," he said. "But in the long run, the war of ideas is crucial to destroying the appeal of Islamist totalitarian ideology and reducing the flow of new recruits into terrorist organizations."(Johnson2015)

J.M Berger and Jonathon Morgan made a detailed research paper of "The ISIS Twitter Census" which takes a detailed look into who is supporting ISIS on Twitter. The paper describes the demographics of relevant Twitter accounts of people who are likely to either support the ISIS or fall under their propaganda and recruitment. These accounts included over 20000 ISIS supporters. In the research it is stated that around 46000 were established by ISIS supporters between September and December 2014.(Berger 2015) Even though it was also estimated that there is around 70000 accounts but the lower number used in order to diminish the number of inactive accounts. Another interesting fact was pointed out that most of the users were located within Syria or in the neighboring countries. Also some amount of the tweets were able to be traced due to the meta-data included in the tweets.(Berger 2015)

Interesting points were also the findings of a large amount of people who speaks English as their primary language. This points out that individuals living abroad, not only in Syria, are interested in Islamic State's cause. Also it was stated that Twitter accounts had significantly larger follower base than a normal Twitter user.(Berger 2015) It was also noticed that from this larger number of over 40000 twitter accounts, around 500 to 2000 accounts were "hyperactive users" and tweeted at a much faster pace than other similar accounts. (Berger 2015)

In addition to most appealing ISIS and ISIS supporters accounts, three sub-categories were established to make a more detailed analysis of the whole user group:

> "Covert supporters of ISIS: Users who took medium to strong steps to conceal their support due to fear of prosecution or suspension by Twitter. Users who took only casual steps to disguise their support were generally detectable. Pro-ISIS intelligence operatives: Some users who follow accounts related to the enemies of ISIS, such as rival jihadists, would be coded as non-supporters under the conservative criteria we employed. Anti-ISIS intelligence operatives: These are accounts created to appear as ISIS supporters in order to allow ISIS's enemies to monitor its activities, which would be coded as supporters (if done effectively).(Berger 2015)

The research also took part in the issue if Twitter should shut down these accounts or

not. This raised the question if it is more beneficial to leave the accounts untouched in order to keep monitoring the ISIS social media activity and their methods of social media use. A three points conclusion was derived and the main points was if closing down the accounts would be harmful for data gathering. Also a factor of freedom of speech was put into light, "Is it ethical to suppress political speech, even when such speech is repugnant?"(Berger 2015)

9. REFUGEES AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA

The current conflict in Syria also has a lot of effects on the domestic population in the country. A larger number on Syrian inhabitants have had to leave the country in order to stay alive. As the number of refugees is in hundreds of thousands, it creates a lot of pressure in the countries who are taking in refugees. Social media poses a lot of opportunities for these refugees as they are finding for an appropriate shelter, and even the appropriate country for their future lives. Social media is also used for finding missing family members and relatives who have had been separated during the escape from Syria. Social media is also heavily used to air out the frustration that derives from the arriving refugees. The domestic population of refugee receiving country often voice out their opinions, for and against the refugees, in social media.

Smartphones have proven to be one of the main tools for the refugees in the means of connecting with other refugees and families. They are used for learning about the target country and possible future living conditions. Also smartphones are used to show the newly acquired homeland to other people seeking for a country where to reside after the escape from Syria.(Byrne 2015) Social media, through smartphones, is also used to share travel advice to other refugees. In a situation where one refugee family successfully makes their way into a destination country, it is easy to share exact details how other can achieve the same result. (Byrne 2015) Also social media was used to warn other refugees of dangers that might occur during their travels. Most of all, social media is used to reach out for an extensive network of peer support. As an individual or a family has to leave everything behind, it is easy to look likeminded comfort from other people who are in the same situation. Social media is also used to highlight the situation of refugees to a larger audience.(Byrne 2015)

Facebook group called "Migration Aid" was set up and organized from Hungary. The purpose of the group was to assemble volunteers to provide help, food, shelter and advice for the incoming refugees.(Hermann 2015) Another example of aid channeling through is the #Buypens hashtag phenomenon. A photo surfaced on social media where a Syrian man is wondering the streets of Beirut, holding his daughter on his other hand and a stack of pencils on the other hand. After the photo became viral through social media platforms, originally posted by Gissur Simonarson, Simonarson set up the hashtag #Buypens in order to find the

man in the picture. Shortly after, an Indiegogo crowdfunding was established in order to raise money for the family. The campaign raised over 125000 dollars. (Osborne 2015)

The domestic population in Finland have actively aired out their opinions towards the policies regarding the incoming refugees. Finnish population have divided into two sides, those who fear the consequences of accepting refugees into the country and those, who are willing to accept the refugees. In this scenario, social media has played a big role of separating the population in half. In another words, social media has been used as a tool to amplify the displease of refugee acceptance in general. The case is similar in the United States as well, people openly air out their opinions through social media. The presidential candidate, Donald Trump, shared his opinion by saying "We don't even know who they are, they could be ISIS, they could be anybody." and later went on commenting "What is our President doing? Is he insane" on his personal Instagram video.(Wallace 2015)

Another interesting new addition in the field of social media platforms is the Periscope smartphone application. Anyone who owns a smartphone can set up Periscope account and start live streaming video live from where ever they are. In contrast to Skype, anyone can see these Periscope live streams. In the case of Syria, the refugees fleeing the country have adopted the application and started live streaming their journey and daily lives as they travel from country to country. In the Guardian article "How live video on Periscope helped 'get inside' the Syrian refugees story" by Stuart Dredge, it was explained that the use of Periscope have turned the feeling towards refugees into more favorable direction.(Dredge 2015)

As the live streams through Periscope is done by individuals, in this case the refugees, the material is unbiased by the mainstream media. Another function is that anyone can comment and ask questions on Periscope live streams. For example, refugees have been asked why do they have smartphones as people implicate refugees being poor and unable to afford such device. The refugees could then give out an answer directly through their Periscope feed. (Dredge 2015).

CONCLUSION

It is clear that social media is heavily used in Syria. But like stated, it is an organizational and demonstrative tool. Social media is the modern day version of the leaflets, posters and flyers that were used to organize political and social movements before and are still used to some extent. It enables a lot faster way of spreading the information and it can be directed with much better precision. As internet is already starting to be seen as a almost a basic human right, people who are determined and willing to use it will find a way to over come the restrictions.

Social media on the other hand only acts as a tool, not as the mean for a direct result. Posts on the social media netscape do not guarantee or implement any direct 'boots on the ground' action for example. This is why ordinary means are necessary to be used as well, public demonstrations and gatherings for the given cause. Social media is also problematic as the information in any of the platforms needs to be verified. It can be used to push distorted and biased political agenda and ideas.

In conclusion, social media provides an effective platform for its users to shape the political atmosphere in the internet landscape and thus effecting the later outcome of the domestic situation and political direction in Syria. In the context of related theories explained in this paper earlier, social media is proved to be used in a case where inequalities are between communities and cities in order to inform and mobilize like minded individuals. Social mobilization needs means for effective communications. Social media provides, if correctly used, a safe and effective alternative to traditional means of communications.

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