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# Deciphering User-Generated Content in Transitional Societies: A Syria Coverage Case Study

Juliette Harkin

Kevin Anderson

Libby Morgan  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Briar Smith  
*University of Pennsylvania*

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# Deciphering User-Generated Content in Transitional Societies: A Syria Coverage Case Study

## **Abstract**

Social media and user-generated content (UGC) — photos and videos taken by members of the public — played an important role in coverage of the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, but, this was chiefly supplementary to traditional newsgathering for covering those revolutions. However in Syria with the tight control on foreign media denying access for foreign journalists, especially in the early months of the uprising, news organizations had to rely almost exclusively on this UGC via social media and their own UGC intake platforms. Much of the UGC used by news outlets is fielded by Syrian activists both inside Syria and based overseas who are in contact with Syrian demonstrators and planners. The objective of this study is to look at how two prominent Arab-language news organisations, BBC Arabic and Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA), have used social media and UGC — photos, videos and comments — to provide coverage of the uprising in Syria.

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Communication Technology and New Media | International and Area Studies

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# DECIPHERING USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN TRANSITIONAL SOCIETIES



## A Syria Coverage Case Study

March 2012

Report by the Center for Global Communication Studies  
Annenberg School for Communication  
University of Pennsylvania

Authors: Juliette Harkin, Kevin Anderson, Libby Morgan, Briar Smith

Project initiated by: Jamal Dajani, Internews Vice President for MENA

## THE AUTHORS AND RESEARCH TEAM

**Juliette Harkin** is an international media consultant reading for her PhD in Politics at the University of East Anglia, specializing in Arab media reform and radical media, with a focus on the Levant. Juliette has ten years experience at the BBC World Service during which she managed a major Arab media development project.

**Kevin Anderson** is the editor and a digital strategist for the Media Development Loan Fund's Knowledge Bridge project. The project helps independent news organisations that the fund works with make the digital transition. Kevin brings more than 15 years of digital journalism experience to the role, including pioneering positions with the BBC and The Guardian. In 1998, he became the first online journalist for the BBC outside of the US, based in the BBC's flagship Washington bureau. He joined The Guardian in 2006 as their first blogs editor, and two years later, he became digital research editor at the newspaper, helping identify and implement new technologies to support the newspaper's world-class journalism. From 2010 to 2012, he worked as an independent journalist and digital strategist. He helped journalists and news organizations around the world identify and achieve their digital goals, including Al Jazeera, India's Network18 and Reed Business Information.

**Libby Morgan** is the Associate Director at the Center for Global Communication Studies at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. Libby supports the development, planning and administration of all CGCS activities. She also works with CGCS Director Monroe E. Price on the Center's publication initiatives. She received an MA in International Relations, with a concentration in Media and Communications, from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. She received her BA from Dartmouth College.

**Briar Smith** is Research Project Manager at the Center for Global Communication Studies at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She manages CGCS's Iran Media Program and works across all CGCS research efforts, policy work, and conferences. Her research interests include international cultural communications with particular focus on China and the Middle East. She has a Master's degree in Communication from the University of Pennsylvania and a BA in Chinese Language and Literature and Psychology from Swarthmore College.

**Helena Nassif** is reading for her PhD in Media Studies at the University of Westminster, specializing in popular culture and politics in the Levant, with a focus on Syrian television drama. Helena has a background in both the development field and the media industry having worked extensively for leading Lebanese and regional broadcasters.

**Dalia Othman** is currently an adjunct professor at Birzeit University where she teaches online journalism and undertakes research on digital media. She obtained a Fulbright Scholarship to complete her MA at New York University's Media and Communication program.

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This study was commissioned by Internews Network, a global media development organization, and was jointly conducted and overseen by Internews' Center for Innovation and Learning and the Center for Global Communication Studies at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. The authors are grateful to Helena Nassif for her collaboration in writing this report, Dalia Othman for contributing to the annotated bibliography, and Florentina Dragulescu for her editorial assistance.

## CREDITS

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AP Photo. In this citizen journalism image provided by Shaam News Network, Syrian anti-government protestors hang a banner in Arabot that reads: “thank you Al-Jazeera and Shaam News Network,” during a rally on Friday in the central city of Hama, Syria.

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# GLOSSARY

**AFP** – Agence France Presse

**AJA** – Al Jazeera Arabic

**BBC** – British Broadcasting Corporation

**BGAN** – Broadband Global Area Network

**ICT** – Information and Communications Technology

**LCC** – Local Coordinators Committee

**MIT** – Massachusetts Institute of Technology

**NCA** – News and current affairs

**NPR** – National Public Radio

**SNN** – Shaam News Network

**UGC** – User-generated content

## NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

User-generated content (UGC). The term UGC has been used in the past to refer to all types of material from the audience, including, for example, comments on internet-based discussion strands; comments, images and video shared on social media platforms; and images and videos uploaded directly to platforms hosted by news organizations. Its meaning in this report is much narrower, and includes only information and content from social media and submitted via UGC platforms to be used in news reports and programs.

If a broadcaster uses amateur footage in the form of images recorded on a mobile phone or with a digital camera, for example, this material is commonly said to have come from an eyewitness source or as user-generated content. The person providing video or stills might be at the scene of a natural disaster, as was the case with much of the material for the Asian tsunami, or witnessing the London riots of 2011, and share this information with a news organization or another journalist.

In reporting the Syrian uprising, it now seems clear that distinctions need to be made between “activist” and “eyewitness” sources, at the very least. Much of the material coming out of Syria is through informal activist and protestor networks that

draw on known and anonymous sources that are then gathered and verified by other activists outside the country. Some of these activist groups are apolitical and some are not. For the purpose of this study, it is suggested that a new term—that of “activist material”—be employed.

Social Media. This study employs the term “social media” to refer generally to social networking sites and other computer-mediated sites for sharing, such as Facebook, blogs, Twitter and websites such as YouTube and Flickr, as these were the main forms that have been referred to or used by journalists during the duration of this study. Nic Newman notes, however, that social media “is an extraordinarily difficult term to pin down. Sometimes it refers to an activity (a journalist blogged); sometimes to a software tool (Blogger); sometimes to a platform (you can blog on Facebook). It incorporates the term user-generated content (UGC) and yet much of this content is not really social at all.” Given the difficulty of defining the term, the list here is not exhaustive and it must be noted that some academics and media practitioners might use the term in different ways or to include different things.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coverage of the uprising in Syria has posed unique challenges for journalists, with the Syrian government tightly controlling access by foreign journalists. Internally, the Syrian media is characterized by a state-controlled media sector and by nominally private media outlets that have mostly fallen in line with the regime during the uprising. However, the regime's narrative has been countered by an explosion of social media that focus on getting information out of Syria and sharing information within Syria. Social networking sites are also being used as a site of intellectual contestation and opposition to the government.

Social media and user-generated content (UGC) — photos and videos taken by members of the public — played an important role in coverage of the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, but, this was chiefly supplementary to traditional newsgathering for covering those revolutions. However in Syria with the tight control on foreign media denying access for foreign journalists, especially in the early months of the uprising, news organizations had to rely almost exclusively on this UGC via social media and their own UGC intake platforms. Much of the UGC used by news outlets is fielded by Syrian activists both inside Syria and based overseas who are in contact with Syrian demonstrators and planners.

The objective of this study is to look at how two prominent Arab-language news organisations, BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic* (AJA), have used social media and UGC — photos, videos and comments — to provide coverage of the uprising in Syria.

- Due to the unique pressures in covering Syria, especially in the early months of the uprising, how did these news organizations manage the heavy use of UGC and social media while being true to their editorial guidelines?
- How have the news organizations in this study verified this material?
- With activists playing a role in producing and distributing this material, how have the news organizations informed their audiences of the provenance of this material?

In terms of UGC management both BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic* publish information about their corporate-wide editorial guidelines that set out guidance for dealing with sources and



Demonstration against Assad regime in Ma'arat al-Nu'man, Idlib, Syria. Photo by Tiny.cc/Freedom Syria, Flickr.

assuring transparency for their audiences. In the case of the BBC generally, there is very detailed guidance about user-generated content for news. An investigation into the verification practices at BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic* indicates that detailed guidance is in place, which draws on journalistic practices for sourcing and, in the case of the BBC; there is a body of best practices that has been built up since the establishment of a dedicated hub to deal with UGC in 2005.

As for veracity, interviews for this research study strongly suggest that UGC content is verified off air, whether or not it is flagged or mentioned during broadcasts. However despite the



UGC policies in place, this study revealed instances when both *Al Jazeera Arabic* and BBC Arabic did not adequately inform the audience that content had or had not been verified. Indications from interviews and references to editorial guidance appear to illustrate a departure both from the guidance and from the practices observed on the respective English channels.

In terms of explaining the provenance of material both the BBC and AJA, are vague in citing sources (when sources are even cited). Examples are: "from YouTube" or "from the internet" or "from an activist." Extending from the citation issue is the lack of signposting (i.e. providing additional details about material used in a package or information provided in an interview). When UGC was used, little information was provided either by the presenter on air, or in on screen captions. Thus viewers are not always made aware of when or where the footage was taken.

It should be noted that ad hoc monitoring following the content analysis period indicate that this process has been tightened up in recent months, but further research would be needed in order to establish this.

At the time of writing, news operations have been continuously using user generated content from Syria for nearly a year. While under conditions less restrictive than Syria, the use of UGC and material from social media has been "routinized"<sup>1</sup> as part of the newsroom process; research has not even begun to delve into the "abnormal" conditions in which broadcasters are reliant on UGC to cover a long-term and news-intense story like Syria for which access continues to be severely restricted.

The report concludes that given the heavy reliance on UGC, both from intake platforms and via social media, *Al Jazeera Arabic* and BBC Arabic were not initially fully transparent about the sourcing and context of the material that they used. As the conflict deepened, this sourcing and signposting was not just crucial to meet the editorial standards of both organizations, but also important in helping audiences understand the complexity of the conflict and the political agendas of the sources of the material being provided.

1 Wardle & Williams, 2008



# INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the increasing availability, uptake and use of social media has enabled and empowered news and information consumers, the now famously described ‘people formerly known as the audience’<sup>2</sup> by Professor Jay Rosen. This rise of citizen journalism has created an alternative and valuable source of information for the public, but it has also presented a number of new challenges and opportunities for the ‘traditional’ media.

In the absence of content from their own journalists—both as a result of decreased news budgets and because access to particular locations or events may not be permitted for reasons of government control—mainstream international media now have access to an inundation of content from tweeters, bloggers and other users of social media. Citizen journalists have played an active role in the Arab revolutions by collecting, curating and disseminating first-hand accounts of revolutionary activity, particularly in locations where on-the-ground access was not yet available or not permitted by the government. This

**In covering conflicts such as Syria, where the government limits press access, user-generated content becomes fundamental.**

involvement has certainly provided unprecedented coverage of revolutionary events, but at the same time has called into question the editorial policies and ethical codes used by the media with regards to their use of such sources; the effect that this has on reporting; and the ultimate impact on consumers of this information.

As access to and use of social media content has increased, mainstream media outlets have to varying extents developed, revised and adapted social media policies to guide their use of

new sources in their reporting. Using a case study approach, this research project investigates the impact of social media sources on the development, use, and evolution of verification policies and processes of two mainstream international media outlets — BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic* — covering events in Syria during the Arab Spring:

In particular the report focuses on the following three questions

- How did these news organizations manage the heavy use of UGC and social media while being true to their editorial guidelines?
- How have the news organizations in this study verified this material?
- How have these news organizations informed their audiences of the provenance of this material?

No discussion of the dramatic, historical shifts experienced over the past year in what is commonly referred to as the “Arab Spring” can escape references to the role that technology and social media have—or have not—played in initiating and furthering the revolutions. Even before the Syrian demonstrations started, the regional events of 2011, with its antecedents in the 2009 Iranian elections,<sup>3</sup> have precipitated an explosion of commentary and research on the role of social media and political change. While that debate continues, there is no doubt that social networking sites have played a crucial role in informing outsiders—and particularly the international news media—of ongoing developments during the Arab Spring. This has been

<sup>2</sup> [http://archive.prssthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://archive.prssthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html)

<sup>3</sup> For details on the election rallies, see Recknagel, 2009

especially true in Syria, because as the demonstrations grew into daily protests in towns and cities across the country, the regime shut out foreign and regional journalists, incarcerated Syrian bloggers and journalists, and waged an intense, multi-faceted propaganda campaign. Traditional newsgathering methods were extremely limited, especially in the early days of the uprising, forcing news organizations to rely heavily on user-generated content and information. This content (mostly video) was either smuggled out of the country or sourced from social media sites.

In addition the foreign media restrictions, combined with the rapidly-forming sectarian and opposing positions within Syria society, the active role of foreign powers in a geo-strategically important country, a severely restrained and coerced domestic media, and a society that is accustomed to relying on rumor mills for information all make the job of the journalist much more difficult.

The role of material obtained through social media and UGC in the news production process raises many questions. How have journalists and news outlets adapted to the challenges of covering a story like Syria? How has the increased production and availability of photos, videos and information via social media and user-generated content platforms affected the traditional practice of journalism? What adjustments or changes in strategy are being made at the editorial level that take into account the challenges posed by verifying user-generated content? How do journalists and news organizations balance the availability of such new information and images against the journalistic imperative to check sources and verify?

This Internews-funded study, implemented by Annenberg School for Communication, looks at the extent to which social media is being used as an information source in news content. Further, it looks at the ways in which the proliferation of user-generated content via social media, sources in the field, and platforms hosted by news organizations are being addressed at the organizational level. It seeks to widen the academic dialogue on social media and the changing nature of journalism by analyzing the ways in which two leading Arabic-language

television channels made use of user-generated content in the newsgathering processes, with a particular focus on Syria.

Syria stands apart from the other regional revolts in many ways, but particularly for the regime's efforts to impose a media blackout of the country. In addition the foreign media restrictions, combined with the rapidly-forming sectarian and opposing positions within Syria society, the active role of foreign powers in a geo-strategically important country, a severely restrained and coerced domestic media, and a society that is accustomed to relying on rumor mills for information all make the job of the journalist much more difficult. An award-winning veteran war journalist from Lebanon interviewed for this report indicated it was actually easier to cover a war in Iraq or civil war in Libya than it was to cover the Syria uprising. In other conflicts, journalists have had at least some level of access, and journalists did not have to rely on social media to such a large extent and over an extended timeframe as in Syria, the journalist said. Although some journalists have been allowed in at times, they have been closely monitored by the government and not allowed to report freely.<sup>4</sup> Even in Iraq, which presents some of the same challenges for media coverage, Arab journalists were on the ground; in Egypt and Libya, despite the crackdowns and harassment of foreign and domestic journalists, reporting was only interrupted for short periods of times.

Journalists always face difficulties in getting information out of war zones—a challenge only intensified when facing restrictions from a repressive regime.<sup>5</sup> The uprisings during the Arab Spring show how social media and digital media recorded using camera phones can circumvent these restrictions. However, getting news out in closed regimes intensifies the need for and reliance on “social (media) newsgathering.”<sup>6</sup> This has the potential to “disrupt (traditional) newsroom routines,” according to a media consultant and former journalist interviewed for this study. In the case of Syria, the sheer volume of content

<sup>4</sup> The Syrian government has never had a transparent policy in allowing journalists in or basing journalists in Syria. Since March 2011 selected journalists have obtained government permission to enter Syria, NPR's Deborah Amos was there in June 2011, Lyse Doucet for BBC World TV was in Damascus in September and Nir Rosen for *Al Jazeera English* travelled round Syria in the summer with government permission. In November 2011, as part of an Arab League initiative, selected media were allowed in under a government-sponsored visit, where their movements were restricted. Other journalists have been smuggled in to Syria to do undercover reporting from Homs and elsewhere, including Sue Lloyd-Robert's for BBC Newsnight and Paul Woods for BBC World TV.

<sup>5</sup> See the National Endowment for Democracy's Burma VJ project for how the Saffron Revolution of 2007 was covered from outside and within.

<sup>6</sup> Term used by senior BBC manager involved in the BBC UGC Hub, researcher interview.

from social media can cause intense editorial and resource pressures. In most other reporting environments, user-generated content is, while increasingly common, still supplemental. However, in covering conflicts such as Syria, where the government limits press access, user-generated content is no longer just supplemental to traditional forms of newsgathering—it is fundamental. From the beginning of the Syrian demonstrations in March 2011, access for the foreign media has been severely limited. As a result, media outlets have become heavily reliant on video images and stills uploaded by various individuals and groups onto YouTube, Facebook, and user-generated content platforms operated by major news organizations themselves. As the revolts progressed, both broadcasters covered in the study modified their operations to include citizen journalist accounts, daily activist updates posted on Facebook, live video streams from Syrian cities, and more sophisticated video footage of demonstrations and military incursions.

## As news organizations have become more reliant on a range of user-generated content in Syria, social media platforms have become just another front in the conflict.

The battle for public opinion is nothing new to conflicts. The new features in this battle are the easy availability of mobile phones that can take high-quality pictures and video and digital platforms that allow for global distribution of this media. As news organizations have become more reliant on a range of user-generated content in Syria, social media platforms have become just another front in the conflict. Activists in the country have taken advantage of the available platforms to get their story out, but some over-zealous members of opposition groups have propagated misinformation or filtered out information that runs counter to their aims in the battle to challenge the regime's narrative. The regime's own effort to control the information environment has been manifest in state-controlled media but has also extended to digital media and social media



Protest against Assad regime in Binnish, Idlib.  
Photo by Tiny.cc/Syria Freedom, Flickr.

platforms. Pro-regime (but not necessarily state-sponsored) groups have bolstered these efforts to control the flow of digital information. The Syrian Electronic Army has hacked the websites of activist and opposition groups as well as attacked perceived anti-Assad western websites.<sup>7</sup> For example in September 2011 the Harvard website was attacked.<sup>8</sup> In addition to clamping down on foreign media coverage, Syria's "media war" has included persistent accusations in the state-owned media outlets that *Al Jazeera Arabic* and Western media organizations are waging a propaganda war against the Syrian state.

The complex information landscape in the Syrian conflict suggests many possible strands of analysis. However, this project focuses on how user-generated content via social media, sources on the ground, and platforms hosted by news organizations are used in news programs. It also focuses on how newsrooms, and the journalists working in them, are using this content and adapting their editorial policies and practices to cover major news stories from closed societies, especially ones in open conflict such as Syria.

<sup>7</sup> York, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> See the BBC News website - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-15061377>

# 3

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Outline

This study, conducted over a 12-week period between November 2011 and January 2012, employs a qualitative, mixed method approach. This method was selected in order to more fully illustrate the extent to which broadcasters have incorporated user-generated content (UGC) and content from social media into their news and current affairs output. This study consisted of the following research elements:

- A brief literature review drawing on academic studies and practitioner research of social media and Arab journalism, together with the compilation of an annotated bibliography highlighting pertinent literature
- In-depth interviews with media practitioners, academics, activists and commentators regarding the existing policies and structures for drawing on UGC in news stories, and a discussion of the terminology and the uses of UGC by BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic* (AJA) (see 'Research Approach' below).
- A content analysis of the news and current affairs output of BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic*, focusing on three major events at different stages of the Syrian revolt.

### Research Approach

The research findings are taken from interviews with 19 media practitioners, which included two journalists and one bureau chief with *Al Jazeera Arabic*, two social media staffers with the Al Jazeera Network and an editor with the *Al Jazeera English* website, as well as one manager with the BBC, one editor with the BBC World Service, one bureau chief, two journalists and one editors with BBC Arabic, two journalists from other outlets, four academics and one Syrian activist (see appendix 1 for list of interviews conducted).

The process of gaining formal access for more extensive and longer-term research studies via *Al Jazeera Arabic's* public relations department can be very lengthy (taking months) and not necessarily very fruitful. Given time limitations and the need to conduct the study while Syria remained at the top of the news headlines, researchers drew on their own personal contacts in the media outlets. This allowed the team to initiate a snowballing interview process of being recommended and referred to other contacts, and to some extent overcoming issues of trust and formal permissions that can slow down research.

Another challenge encountered in this study was that some *Al Jazeera Arabic* staff were reluctant to talk to researchers without the express permission of senior management in Doha, which was not possible given the short time frame of the study. There was a similar sense of caution from BBC Arabic staff, and some of those interviewed asked not to be quoted by name and agreed to meet only for background or off-the-record interviews. As a number of interviewees expressed the desire to remain anonymous, all interviews have been made anonymous in this report and individuals are identified only by their general job titles. The difficulties in attributing sources for research in this study likely reflect the difficulties the channels themselves are facing in covering and sourcing a politically sensitive story.<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted that, given these limitations, the interviewees are not a representative sample from the organizations included in this report. It also has not been possible to completely match interviewee profiles for both organizations, for example, to interview a news editor, a reporter, a social media journalist, editor and bureau chief from both BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic*, although we have tried where possible to match for balance.

<sup>9</sup> Due to time-constraints, and to the aforementioned sensitivities, it was not possible for the researchers to seek a response from the BBC or from *Al Jazeera* on the subject of their handling of UGC, before going to press.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Journalism in the Age of Social Media

Recent debates about the field of journalism have been characterized, in extremis, as a battle between traditional and new media.<sup>10</sup> The revolution in Web 2.0 user interactivity and computer-mediated-communications<sup>11</sup> through blogs, comment strands, and social networking sites continues to challenge newsroom and organizational culture.<sup>12</sup> This review draws on academic and media practitioner publications to highlight some of the issues relating to the media and the Arab world, social media and journalism.

### The Complexities of Defining User-generated Content

An extensive academic study conducted by Cardiff University in 2008, focusing on the BBC and the field of UGC, found that there were differences in the way BBC staff were using the term and that they might use the term UGC to refer to six broad categories:<sup>13</sup>

1. Finding news sources (i.e. case studies);
2. Generating news stories (for example, video footage of breaking news stories);
3. Creating space for public debate and discussion (audience comment strands and contributions);
4. Improving the relationship with the audience (more interactivity with webcam, mobile phones, Skype);
5. Contributing to non-news (i.e. local social issues);
6. Audience empowerment and skill development (i.e. collaborative journalism with the public becoming part of the story, such as history or storytelling).

The Cardiff study consisted of focus groups, content analysis and on-the-job observations as well as interviews with BBC staff in selected newsrooms in the UK. While interviewing journalists, it was noted that they may talk about processes for sourcing and using UGC but they will not necessarily think or be conscious of all the day-to-day practices in the newsroom. Extensive on-site observations allowed researchers to note how the news teams dealt with and actively sought out UGC.

The way that media outlets are developing their social media policies and practices is influenced by the extent to which the “people formerly known as the audience”<sup>14</sup> are increasingly accessing and sharing news and information via social media platforms. A study titled *Understanding the Participatory News Consumer* by the Pew Center for the Internet and American Life, released in March 2010, found that “75% of online news consumers get news forwarded through email or posts on social networking sites and 52% say they share links to news with others via those means.” The study also highlighted the increasing role that internet users were playing in the news process. The study found that “news consumption is a socially-engaging and socially-driven activity, especially online.” The study of U.S. internet users found that 37% “have contributed to the creation of news, commentary about it, or dissemination of news via social media.” Of these contributors, 25% had commented on a news story, 17% had posted a link on a social networking site, 11% had tagged content, 9% had created their own news or opinion piece, and 3% had posted an update on Twitter about news.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Bardoel & Deuze, 2001; Beckett & Mansell, 2008; and Sawers, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Discussed in Hine 2005, p. 4-5.

<sup>12</sup> See Miller, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> See Wardle & Williams, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> See Rosen, 2006

<sup>15</sup> See Purcell et al, 2010

## Social Media: A Tool and Source for Journalists

News organizations have responded to the shift in information dissemination by incorporating social media into their output, both as a tool for newsgathering and as a news source. An academic study conducted in the UK by Neil Thurman and Alfred Hermida, entitled *The Future of Newspapers: A Clash of Cultures*, examined the extent to which media outlets have integrated UGC in their news websites. The research indicated that there has been a dramatic increase in the use of UGC in British newspapers, despite residual editorial concerns. It also noted that journalists can incorporate UGC in the reporting by putting it through the usual journalistic processes, thus ensuring quality and relevance:

The gate-keeping approach may offer a model for the integration of UGC, with professional news organizations providing editorial structures to bring different voices into their news reporting, filtering and aggregating UGC in ways they believe to be useful and valuable to their audience.<sup>16</sup>

## News Organizations Grapple with Ground Rules

How these “legacy outlets” set their policies in relation to social media is tackled by Nicola Bruno, whose report, *Tweet First, Verify Later?*, examined the extent to which CNN, the BBC and The Guardian drew on social media sources to cover the first 24 hours after the 2010 Haiti earthquake.<sup>17</sup> Bruno concludes that “the BBC, *The Guardian* and CNN all decided to access and use social media as reliable sources...but their technology platforms and editorial structures were developed on diverse models...[t]his had different consequences on the quantity, quality and reliability of UGC employed.”<sup>18</sup>

For example, *The Guardian* published unverifiable content with a kind of disclosure, saying, “we have heard reports” or “we cannot verify this now;” CNN’s iReport platform hosted both vetted and non-vetted material, with disclaimers and clear information about what was checked and what wasn’t; and the BBC worked with a more traditional approach, using less UGC in its reporting.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Thurman and Hermida, 2008, p. 9-10

<sup>17</sup> Bruno, 2011

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, section 3.1.

<sup>19</sup> For details on iReport’s verification processes, see Silverman, C. 2012

Nic Newman’s working paper, *The Rise of Social Media and its Impact on Mainstream Journalism*, also examines differences in how big media players like *The Guardian*, CNN and the *New York Times* have embraced social media.<sup>20</sup> Newman concludes that mainstream media outlets have worked to “marry the culture of the web with their own organizational norms,” ensuring that the journalistic processes are applied to UGC used in news. The editorial process includes verification and discussion of content; appropriate caveats and labeling; and a final decision to include the UGC based on the editorial values of the organization. Newman’s research highlighted the ways in which the traditional media are responding to a wave of participatory social media and a historic shift in control towards individual consumers.

Newman draws on William Dutton’s notion of the “Fifth Estate,” with social networks providing a basis for “highly networked individuals” and journalists who now seek to invite individuals or the “former audience” to take part in the news production process, while acting themselves as “curators.” However, not everyone agrees with the idea that journalists in a social media age might shift to being curators.<sup>21</sup>

## Journalists Struggle with their Role in the Age of Social Media

As an academic, media trainer, and consultant stated in an interview for this study, the rise of social media for news has led to a “crisis in journalism; journalists need to be clear about what their role is. The craft of journalism has become more important not less and social media does not replace journalism.”<sup>22</sup> More than a decade ago, Jay Rosen asked, “What are journalists for?”<sup>23</sup> Today, a BBC senior staffer asks something similar: “What value can we uniquely add to the content that is now freely available in real time to the public?”<sup>24</sup> This defines the tension between traditional media relying on the “craft of journalism” to mediate information and distribute it to audiences, and unmediated (social media) content that is not subject to the constraints of traditional news processes.<sup>25</sup>

The case studies in our research show how these different stances are reflected in the different ways the two broadcast organizations seek out and use UGC. These debates remain very

<sup>20</sup> Newman 2009

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5-6

<sup>22</sup> Researcher interview

<sup>23</sup> Rosen, 2001

<sup>24</sup> Researcher interview with leading BBC social media manager

<sup>25</sup> LSE seminar and researcher discussion with Roger Hardy, Research Fellow, LSE

relevant as journalists develop the skills to evaluate UGC and social media sources and to incorporate these non-traditional sources into their daily practices.

## News Organizations Engage with the 'Dark Side' of Verification

To help explain the challenges of the process of evaluating these non-traditional sources for journalists, the BBC's Matthew Eltringham coined the term "line of verification," which Charlie Beckett, the director of the POLIS media and politics think tank at the London School of Economics, has explored further.<sup>26</sup> In the past, Beckett says that the BBC would only broadcast what was clearly on the "Light Side" of the line of verification, information that carried the "full authority of something that the BBC has decided is 'true.'" The internet and social media have forced the BBC to engage with information on the "Dark Side" of the line of verification – information circulating widely in the public sphere but which the BBC could not confirm. Beckett says:

You, the public or the audience, already know about the stuff on the dark side of the line of verification because it exists all over the places online that you (sic) spend so much time: Twitter, Facebook, Mumsnet etc. That's often where you will get or connect to your news. It is valid to report — or at the very least engage with — this non-validated stuff because it is already a part of the communications around a story. It is more than just a rumor. It is informal narrative of the story: online images and conversations produced by the public. But you have to be clear in your journalism that it is not validated. So you must put it in context. Secondly, you must make it clear when you communicate it that it's unvalidated.<sup>27</sup>

The question for the BBC and other news organizations is how to engage with this publicly available but unsubstantiated material on the "Dark Side" of the line of verification while maintaining their journalistic standards.

"When I saw a clip from YouTube of demonstrations in a Tunisian town that I had visited, it was clear to me that the whole population of the town was on the street and that Tunisia would be a major story."

*Brian Whitaker, Guardian*

The question for the BBC and other news organizations is how to engage with this publicly available but unsubstantiated material on the "Dark Side" of the line of verification while maintaining their journalistic standards. The situation is further complicated because, as Beckett points out, the Line of Verification is not unambiguous and information moves from one side to another in a rapidly developing story: "Of course, the line is not always so clear. In practice, it's probably a Fuzzy Grey Zone of Verification, or perhaps a Wobbly Line of Verification that moves back and forth."<sup>28</sup>

To illustrate an example of how news organizations are engaging with information on the Dark Side of the line of verification to move it to the Light Side, Beckett highlighted a case in the coverage of the uprising in Tunisia. The case involved the BBC and Andy Carvin, a social media strategist for NPR who has been described as a "one-man Twitter news bureau."<sup>29</sup> Carvin represents a new breed of social newsgathering that draws on crowdsourcing and other social media tools.<sup>30</sup> Crowdsourcing is a technique that Carvin and other news organizations employ in which they either gather information from their audiences or tap into the expertise or experience of their audiences to verify information. An article highlighting Carvin's achievements explains how he is "Grabbing bits and pieces from Facebook, YouTube and the wider Internet and mixing them with a stunning array of eyewitness sources."<sup>31</sup> If Carvin believes that he needs more information or stronger verification for a report, he will ask his more than 65,000 followers on Twitter to help confirm the information. In the example concerning Tunisia, Carvin posted a rumor online that a television station had been seized by its employees and was broadcasting "an anti-government line." The BBC's Matthew Eltringham saw the tweet and contacted BBC Monitoring, which monitors media around the world in multiple languages, to check the rumor, as the television

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> See Farhi, 2011

<sup>30</sup> Beckett, 2011

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Beckett, 2011

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

station had continued to toe the government line. Eltringham tweeted Carvin saying that the rumor was incorrect, which Carvin passed along to his substantial following, demonstrating what Beckett described as "Social media and conventional media working in harness."<sup>32</sup>

However, one key difference between the BBC and Carvin's techniques is that the BBC verifies information first before publishing it to its news website or to its Twitter streams, while Carvin will post things that require additional confirmation to Twitter and ask for help in verifying them. Sky News' digital news editor Neal Mann highlights the tension among even social media savvy journalists and their differing views on publishing and verification. Mann has said that what Carvin does is essentially retweet rumors and add "fuel to the fire."<sup>33</sup> When to publish material on the Dark Side of the Line of Verification and how to bring it to the Light Side is still very much a point of debate among journalists and editors.

## Amplifying Social Media in the Arab Spring

As has been indicated with the Pew and Newman studies above, audience use of social media is influencing mainstream media's news gathering and reporting. While most of the literature reviewed looks at the use of social media in the United States and Europe, it is important to note that there has been a major increase in the usage of social networking sites in the Arab world.<sup>34</sup> A series of reports by the Dubai School of Government indicated that between January 2010 and April 2011 there was a 131% increase in Facebook users across the Arab world, from 12 million to nearly 28 million.<sup>35</sup>

The explosion of social media as a platform for organizing and as a relatively safe environment for discussion developed a symbiotic relationship with traditional media in the Middle East, according to Mohamed Abdel Dayem in a report, *Attacks in the Press* in 2011, for the Committee to Protect Journalists.<sup>36</sup> Dayem explained that the traditional media required information supplied via social media to cover the stories and social media communications may not have had the impact they did

"Where these ideas really go big, when suddenly everybody in Tunisia is paying attention to the same protest, it's because one of those people in that group of some is an amplifier..."

*Ethan Zuckerman, director of the MIT Center for Civic Media*

if the traditional media had not amplified them. Dayem cites *Al Jazeera Arabic's* former Yemen bureau chief, Mourad Hashim, who believed that "broadcasters simply would not have adequately been able to cover the uprisings without the daily contribution of citizen journalists."<sup>37</sup>

Brian Whitaker of *The Guardian* is a good example of how veteran journalists are making use of social media for news, using it as a source of information, but also amplifying that information. Whitaker told an audience at a London School of Economics seminar that social media was critical to reporting the Arab Spring and to understanding the enormity of the events that unfolded in Tunisia: "When I saw a clip from YouTube of demonstrations in a Tunisian town that I had visited, it was clear to me that the whole population of the town was on the street and that Tunisia would be a major story." Whitaker went on to predict the revolution in Tunisia on his personal blog.<sup>38</sup>

Ethan Zuckerman, the director of the MIT Center for Civic Media, speaking at the Knight Foundation Media Learning Seminar in February 2012, expanded on this symbiotic relationship between social and traditional media using Tunisia as an example. He said that social media doesn't reach everyone, and probably never will, and described social media not as a one-to-many medium but rather as a one-to-some medium: "Where these ideas really go big, when suddenly everybody in Tunisia is paying attention to the same protest, it's because one of those people in that group of some is an amplifier ... someone who has the capability to reach a much broader audience."<sup>39</sup> The video of the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi<sup>40</sup> and the protests that followed, often viewed as the events that triggered the revolution in Tunisia, was first posted to Facebook.

<sup>32</sup> Beckett, 2011

<sup>33</sup> Miller, 2011b

<sup>34</sup> Dubai School of Government, 2011a and 2011b

<sup>35</sup> From January 2010 to December 2010, the number of Facebook users in the region increased from 11,978,300 to 21,361,863 (2001a, p. 4). By April 2011, the number of Facebook users in the region had increased to 27,711,503 (2001b, p. 9).

<sup>36</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, *Attacks on the Press in 2011: a worldwide survey*, 2012

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 2012, p. 233-4

<sup>38</sup> Comment from Whitaker at a London School of Economics public lecture on November 24, 2011, "Covering the Arab Spring: Are the Media Getting it Wrong?" See Whitaker's personal website at [www.al-bab.com](http://www.al-bab.com)

<sup>39</sup> Zuckerman, E., Speech at the Media Learning Seminar, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> See Mheni, Lina, 2010



The video was then posted to Nawaat.org, a group blog written by the Tunisian diaspora. From there, the video was picked up and amplified by Al Jazeera, Zuckerman explained. Many Tunisians found out about these videos not from social media but from Al Jazeera.<sup>41</sup> This helped protests spread across the country despite great repression, and these protests toppled Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled Tunisia since 1987.

## Syria's Changing Information Ecology

Like Tunisia under Ben Ali, Syria controls information and the internet as part of a broader strategy of state control. However, elements of Syria's information ecology make reliable coverage of the uprising there more difficult than the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.<sup>42</sup> There is a dearth of academic literature on Syria's media, not to mention its social media environment. As a result, this section draws on practitioner interviews and reports, as well as the limited number of academic papers available.<sup>43</sup>

Before the revolution, the Syrian media was primarily characterized by a high level of state control, which operated alongside a "hybrid" private media established under President Bashar al-Assad.<sup>44</sup> Media owners and elites are tied to the political structures and obtain economic and political benefits due to their connections to prominent members of the government or security forces, including licenses to operate and distribute their publications, favorable advertising deals, and more freedoms.<sup>45</sup> Higher standards of journalism emerged during the last decade as journalists made an effort to end reliance on government press releases and conferences, to get closer to the audience and cover local issues, and increase consideration about accuracy and objectivity. However, during the conflict, much of the media has reverted to form, serving to support the regime against "terrorists" and foreign interference. There have been some brave exceptions to the state propaganda model, but Syrian journalists who do not toe the line face imprisonment and possible death. At the same time, new forms of underground media have taken shape, including newspapers, news agencies and intellectual forums that rely on social network platforms for dissemination.<sup>46</sup>

Considering the security situation in Syria, there were challenges in getting specific information about the sources news organizations were using in their coverage. Some of the journalists spoken to were very guarded about specific names and details of sources. This is perfectly understandable, as most journalists see it as their professional duty to protect the safety of their sources.

## Activist Networks Broadcast Revolution

One of the most visible sources for activist material has been the Shaam News Network (SNN), which set up a dedicated YouTube channel and Facebook page at the beginning of the revolution.<sup>47</sup> Based very closely on the format of the Egyptian RNN news site run by expatriate Egyptians, SNN's Facebook page states that it is not politically affiliated and that it is a network of mainly anonymous activists and demonstrators around Syria that is managed by Syrian expatriates (the main contact number is in California). SNN has been a major source of content from Syria for Arab satellite channels (its logo can be seen regularly on air) and many other international media outlets, and it uploads and reposts video footage throughout the day on its YouTube channel. Some journalists, including some interviewed from BBC Arabic, see SNN as a generally reliable source.

**All the main media outlets have established sources connected to activist networks in Syria who not only pass along but also help verify activist material coming out of the country.**

One of the interviewees for this study was a Syrian activist in touch with SNN and based in Beirut who received contact details for activists inside Syria who provide the group with video footage. He is very active on Twitter and is followed by many mainstream journalists, and he explained that he and other activists act as conduit between the demonstrators and the media. In other words, activists like him are not necessarily the ones who are going to demonstrations, but they are behind the scenes, often out of the country for relative safety. All the main

<sup>41</sup> Zuckerman, E., 2011

<sup>42</sup> For more information, see Yazbeck, 2011

<sup>43</sup> Harkin, 2012

<sup>44</sup> Harkin, 2009

<sup>45</sup> Kawakibi, 2010

<sup>46</sup> Harkin, 2012

<sup>47</sup> See the site at <https://www.facebook.com/ShaaamNews>

**ALJAZEERA**

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### Shaan News Network Live Blog

Tweet 0 | Like

11 weeks 8 days ago - Syria: This video, uploaded by the Shaan News Network (an anti-government activist group), shows a demonstration against Bashar al-Assad's rule that took place this evening in Hama, just outside Damascus.

شام - ويف دمشق - حريستا مسانية 2011-12-28 ح 2  
by SHAMSNN

Live Blogs

- Syria
- Egypt
- Yemen
- Bahrain
- Afghanistan

Al Jazeera Live

Live video

Tags

Libyan rebels NATO Local coordination committees Elections syria citizen video Libya in images violence Leading image NTC Syria Tripoli EgyElections Beni Walid Hamas oslo bombing SCAF Bas Amr Muammar Gaddafi Manama David Cameron UN Security Council United States London Arab League prisoner swiss Russia Libya UN Zina Khodr China Latakia Muslim Brotherhood Al Jazeera idlib Afghanistan SRIIB Saudi Arabia Palestine

20 weeks 3 days ago - Syria: The Shaan News Network, a group run by anti-government activists in Syria, has just uploaded this video purporting to show an anti-government demonstration in Hama this

media outlets now have their established sources on Syria, mainly people like him. He not only passes along content to the media but also verifies some of the activist material coming out of Syria, helping to verify UGC for the Washington Post, NPR and BBC Arabic and English.

He, along with other activists, work to verify UGC by making contact with the person or organization that has uploaded it on the internet as well as with the many local committees of activists in Syria. He explained that verification was split between the content that, with knowledge of Syria, was easy to verify (for example demonstrations) and footage that was more difficult to verify, such as the videos that "claim that Homs is being targeted by military jets."<sup>48</sup> According to the activist, the main

<sup>48</sup> Researcher interview

challenges were the life-threatening risk for activists recording demonstrations and other events, the difficulty in contacting disparate activists, and the fact that, at the scene of demonstrations, it is often not possible for demonstrators to confirm from where and from whom shots came. It is difficult to find "indisputable evidence" in order to verify the content because the "footage available is shot at night and shows a dot of light accompanied by sounds." He noted that some activists were less rigorous than others in terms of confirming information sources, and said that the SNN was not always objective as he found that they censored content that was coming out of the Syrian town of Jisr al-Shagour showing armed civilians who claimed they had killed Syrian soldiers.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

The main challenges were the life-threatening risk for activists recording demonstrations and other events, the difficulty in contacting disparate activists, and the fact that, at the scene of demonstrations, it is often not possible for demonstrators to confirm from where and from whom shots came.

With regard to the technology used to get UGC out of Syria, activists, bloggers and journalists frequenting internet cafes have been rounded up and detained, thus necessitating alternative methods for uploading and sending video. Syrian exiles, like U.S.-based Ammar Abdulhamid, have helped organize the delivery of satellite phones and laptops to Syria.<sup>50</sup> Yet, some satellite phones like Thuraya have proved problematic as the Syrian government has been able to track Syrian activists, an issue confirmed by Al Jazeera sources.<sup>51</sup> This has proven yet another challenge of verification, as journalists do not want to imperil sources on the ground by contacting them directly using satellite phones that can compromise their security. To address these security issues, a regionally-based BBC journalist and an Arab journalist who did not want his organization or location to be identified mentioned that Broadband Global Area Network (BGAN) satellite phones were being used by *Al Jazeera Arabic*, and that there were claims they have been distributed to Syrian activists. A London-based BBC Arabic journalist said that most of his activist contacts send audio and video via file transfers using the internet communication software Skype because they view it as more secure. Author meetings with humanitarian agencies and Syrians in the UK confirm the same—that Skype is widely used by activists to communicate, organize and send information, including video.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to SNN, the Syrian Local Coordinators Committee activist network (LCC) launched a humanitarian fund in December 2011.<sup>53</sup> This group has a dedicated Facebook page and posts daily YouTube videos of demonstrations from around

Syria, information on demonstrations and numbers of people killed, injured, kidnapped, tortured or arrested across Syria. All the major towns that have been the most active in the revolt, including Hama, Idlib, Homs and Dera'a, have LCC committee and media groups on Facebook. During interviews for this research, it emerged that the LCC continues to be widely used by United Nations agencies, journalists, and human rights groups to gather data from inside Syria. These activist networks, and others like them, have established direct links with international media.



SNN and the NYTimes  
<http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/15/videos-show-bloody-crackdown-in-syria/>

<sup>50</sup> Bazzle, 2011

<sup>51</sup> Researcher interview in the region with Al Jazeera journalist

<sup>52</sup> Watson, 2011

<sup>53</sup> See the Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/LCCSy>



Syria Damascus Douma Protests. Photo by syriana2011, Flickr.

“If you compare BBC World’s undercover report from Syria, where it can be seen some civilians have taken up arms, with the activist sources and content coming out of Syria, it is clear that some of the activists censor images where it can be seen that civilians are taking up arms.”

### Activists Fight Propaganda with Propaganda

Journalists also need to be aware of possible misinformation from alleged eyewitnesses who later turn out to be giving false information; this happened to a veteran Arab journalist, interviewed for this study, who filed a story with eyewitness testimony from a “newly arrived” Syrian refugee in Lebanon covered in blood. When the journalist returned the next day, the same man was retelling his story to another journalist, covered once more in “fresh” blood having just escaped Syria. With this kind of misinformation being spread in face-to-face interviews, it is reasonable to assume similar efforts are being carried out on social media platforms.

<sup>54</sup> Marrouch, 2011

<sup>55</sup> Researcher interview

Some activist groups want to frame the conflict in a specific way and downplay any instances of sectarian-fueled deaths, incidences of civilians taking up arms, and calls by some protesters for foreign intervention. For example, Omar Edelbi, a Syrian from Homs who fled to Beirut and is a major force in the LCC, has admitted on the record that he censors images and only reposts those that align with what fits the narrative of a “peaceful revolution.” This has not gone unnoticed by foreign journalists. As noted by a BBC Arabic journalist interviewed for this report:<sup>54</sup>

If you compare BBC World’s undercover report from Syria, where it can be seen some civilians have taken up arms, with the activist sources and content coming out of Syria, it is clear that some of the activists censor images where it can be seen that civilians are taking up arms.<sup>55</sup>

In addition, this network of activists inside and outside of Syria, whose role is to get the information to the international community and to the media, might also seek to reflect the different political positions of the two main Syrian opposition groups. The Syrian National Council, currently headed by the Paris-based Syrian academic Burhan Ghalioun, has called for foreign intervention (in the form of a no-fly zone). The National Coordinating Committee (often referred to, misleadingly, as the “internal” opposition), supported by Syria-based dissidents such as Michel Kilo, calls for an end to the violence and urgent reform but not regime change.

# A CASE STUDY OF AL JAZEERA ARABIC AND BBC ARABIC

*Al Jazeera Arabic* and BBC Arabic television channels were selected as the focus for research for this study, given their popularity and reach in the Arabic-speaking world. In an interview for this study, a senior BBC Arabic editor said the service was a “gold standard” for impartial and independent broadcasting, providing an international news service available in Arabic.<sup>56</sup> *Al Jazeera* launched as a service for the Arab world but has expanded its offerings, in multiple languages, for a global market. Like the BBC, the *Al Jazeera* Network positions itself as a “global broadcaster” working to universally held journalistic standards.<sup>57</sup>

The *Al Jazeera* Network includes:

- Its two flagship television channels, *Al Jazeera Arabic* and *Al Jazeera English*;
- The network’s online operations which publish text-focused news websites and have added live streaming of their TV content in both Arabic and English on TV, computer and mobile platforms;
- Its *Mubasher* (“Live”)TV channel which broadcasts live and unedited footage from major events around the world;
- A multitude of other non-news and information channels focusing on sports, children’s programs, etc.

The focus of this study is on the 24-hour television channel *Al Jazeera Arabic* and the news and current affairs output produced for television, which are also used for the online news site *Aljazeera.net*. It is outside of the scope of this study to understand the extent to which the Arabic newsroom integrates and works with the Arabic online news operation. However, an Arab media expert who conducted research in the newsrooms of Arab satellite channels noted when interviewed for this study:

“Online is seen as a threat to journalism. Could it replace them in the convergence process? The very definition of and understanding of what a journalist is does not extend to someone doing online work. *Al*

*Jazeera Arabic* has placed its online operations in a different building to the newsroom.” She felt this reservation extended to social media.<sup>58</sup>

The BBC refers to all radio, television and online content that is produced and managed by various parts of the BBC, including its domestic channels and its international TV channel BBC World, as well as the BBC World Service, which houses the global-facing English language radio service and non-English language radio, television and online services. An important part of the BBC’s work, in relation to this study, is the establishment of the BBC User-Generated-Content Hub (“the hub”) in 2005.<sup>29</sup> The hub is a dedicated center for dealing with UGC from multiple sources including via social media, and it showcases the BBC’s best practice for UGC. It is important to note that the BBC is in the middle of a major restructuring which will have significant implications for the way different newsgathering operations work together and the changes are expected to further unify practice. BBC Arabic, one of the BBC foreign language services, is the focus of this study. Although it operates on multiple platforms (radio, television and online), and there is some overlap, the focus for this study is on the content produced for television news.

For both these channels it is instructive to look at the parent networks to understand how social media content was used before the Arab revolutions and to highlight differences and precedents relating to how the Arabic channels have then developed policies and practices for social media content for their newsgathering operation.

<sup>56</sup> The phrase “gold standard” was used by a senior BBC editor during an interview for this study

<sup>57</sup> Wadah Khanfar cited in Zayani and Sahraoui, 163

<sup>58</sup> Researcher interview with UK-based academic with Arab media expertise

<sup>59</sup> Stray, 2010

## The Al Jazeera Network

While its coverage of the Arab Spring increased Al Jazeera's standing in the West, the network underwent major management changes in 2011, most prominently with the resignation of the long-time director-general of the Al Jazeera network, Wadah Khanfar, in September 2011. Also, the network's Lebanon Bureau Chief, Ghassan Bin Jeddo, stepped down in April after condemning *Al Jazeera Arabic's* partial coverage of the Arab revolutions.<sup>60</sup> There has been much speculation about these two resignations. Some claim that Khanfar's departure was the result of increasing politicization of the channel and interference by the Qatari government, keen to align the channel with its foreign policy during the revolutions.<sup>61</sup> However, he has gone on to launch major initiatives in the region so it is quite plausible that he just wanted a change as well.

Following Khanfar's resignation, Al Jazeera is now headed by a member of the Qatari royal family. The change and management and Qatar's assertive foreign policy in support of the revolution in Libya and calls for Arab League military intervention in Syria have renewed long-standing questions about the channel's editorial independence and professionalism. A 2007 study into the network's organizational culture articulated those questions, finding:

Rather than a clear cut editorial policy . . . what prevails in Al Jazeera are poles of power which often translate in the work environment into bonding and groupings based on a common school of thought, an ideological affinity or a religious rapprochement.<sup>62</sup>

Regarding its coverage of the Syrian uprising, a London-based academic as well as the director of a U.S.-based media network who acted as a "connecting hub between Syrian activists and Al Jazeera" said that the Al Jazeera network seemed disorganized and seemed to lack a systematic editorial policy for *Al Jazeera Arabic*.<sup>63</sup> The director of the US-based media network also said Al Jazeera lacked coordination and cooperation between its Arabic and English channels, emphasizing that one cannot assume that general journalistic practice and UGC practice is the same between the two channels. Although the former director general of the Al Jazeera Network has stated that "daily editorial meetings are held in the newsroom for all the network staff to discuss events and plan,"<sup>64</sup> the impact of these high-level

"generally the coverage is dependent on the mood...the politics of the journalist can affect the coverage. The politics of the senior editor on duty plays the main role on what makes it to be aired on TV."

meetings on day-to-day operations needs more investigation. Marwan Bishara, a political commentator for the Al Jazeera Network, has conceded that there were diverse views among journalists in the Arabic newsroom about what their role was—some felt they were campaigning for the revolutions; some were pro-Islamist, nationalists, pan-Arabists and so on.<sup>65</sup> Discussing UGC used in news reports at *Al Jazeera Arabic* and how specific UGC clips are chosen, an Arab journalist said, "generally the coverage is dependent on the mood and second guess. There is no clear terminology and internal politics as well as the politics of the journalist can affect the coverage. The politics of the senior editor on duty plays the main role on what makes it to be aired on TV," according to one source interviewed for this study.<sup>66</sup>

These management changes and issues with editorial structures and controls might reasonably be expected to have an impact on how the network covers Syria, including how UGC is chosen and used. In October 2011, Ibrahim Helal, former *Al Jazeera Arabic* editor-in-chief who also has worked for the BBC, was appointed as the News Director of the Al Jazeera network. Helal has introduced new policies with respect to the use of UGC and sources from Syria, which will be described in greater detail later in the report.

## Al Jazeera Arabic Editorial Policy

*Al Jazeera Arabic* was the first Arabic satellite network to publish a code of ethics and publishes them on its website, in Arabic. The editorial guidelines for *Al Jazeera Arabic* are more broad guidelines when compared with the BBC's (discussed below) and focus on general ethics, with some discussion of best practices that could also be applied to UGC for news. Some of the

<sup>60</sup> Naggar, 2011

<sup>61</sup> Seib, 2011

<sup>62</sup> Zayani & Sahraoui, 2007, p. 60

<sup>63</sup> Researcher notes from interview with the director

<sup>64</sup> Event at Chatham House, London, January 18th 2012, available at: <http://www.chathamhouse.org/events/view/180657>

<sup>65</sup> See Mellor 2011; Zayani & Sahreoui, 2007, for a detailed exposition of these dynamics

<sup>66</sup> Researcher Interview

الجزيرة نت | الجزيرة مباشر | البحث الحي

الرئيسية

شارك

اسم المستخدم

اسم المستخدم:

كلمة السر:

أنتسب حساباً جديداً

أطلب كلمة سر جديدة

موضوع الساعة

شارك بالصور والفيديو حول تصاعد الأحداث بسوريا



اعتبرت منظمات حقوق الإنسان أن يوم الخامس من فبراير ٢٠١٢ هو الأعتف بالنسبة لمدينة حمص منذ اندلاع الثورة قبل ١١ شهرا. وقال العميد الركن في الجيش السوري الحر مصطفى الشبيخ إن للحرقة التي يخوضها الجيش السوري النظامي ضد الشعب محكوم عليها بالفشل. شارك برأيك بالصور والفيديو حول تصاعد الأحداث بسوريا بإمكانك للمشاركة

من كوير

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relevant parts are set out below (translated loosely from Arabic by the researchers):

- Ensure the reporting is transparent when covering a story, which also involves verifying the story;
- Investigate the accuracy and validity of the information received from various sources and avoid mistakes due to neglect;
- Attribute each news item/story/opinion to a known and trusted source. The only exception to this rule is for privacy reasons. When a source refuses to reveal his identity: Though the person's motives and justifications should be verified, if free from suspicion you must respect their wish, with a note confirming the confidence in them;
- Do not trust a source that is unapproved and unaccepted, especially one that requests financial compensation for the information.

It is worth noting that the organizational and editorial system at *Al Jazeera English* appears to be distinct from that of *Al Jazeera Arabic*. This has been the subject of much discussion since the launch of the English channel. When the (former) *Al Jazeera English* reporter Ayman Mohyeldin was asked, live on air, by the Qatar-based news anchor to confirm stories from its "sister channel" that Mubarak had fled the country, he stuck to his journalistic line that there were many rumors to this effect

but that he could not confirm it and cautioned against jumping to conclusions.<sup>67</sup> In fact, Mubarak had not left the country, so he was right to be cautious. This example suggests differing editorial approaches of the two channels and more exploration beyond the scope of this study would be required to determine the extent to which the two channels work to the same guidelines in the use of UGC for news.

## The Al Jazeera Network and Social Media

To understand the use of UGC in reporting at both *Al Jazeera English* and Arabic, it is important to look at the broader uses of social media services at both channels and how that relates to the increased use of UGC in their news output.

The Network's social media operations are managed by Riyaad Minty in Doha, working across online, television, and several social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.<sup>68</sup> Al Jazeera has been effective in using social media to build its profile across the Middle East and globally, and Al

<sup>67</sup> Monitored by the author during the Egypt revolution coverage

<sup>68</sup> In a keynote speech at the 2011 Media Evolution Conference, Minty talks about 'news ecosystems' and how social media is based on trust and referrals, and the role that AJN plays. See Minty, 2011.

## FIGURE 1

This content contains blood/murder, do you want to continue? (Translated from Arabic)

هذا الموقع يعتمد على مشاركات مستخدمين لا يتم التأكد من هويتهم ويعتمد بالكامل على مبدأ صحافة المواطن، المحتوى المنشور لا يعبر عن رأي شبكة الجزيرة ولا العاملين فيها، تقوم إدارة الموقع من التأكد من نوعية المواد للنشورة وليس من صحتها

## FIGURE 2

Please do not endanger yourself or put others at risk or take any unnecessary risks or violate any laws. (Translated from Arabic)

5- يرجى ألا تعرض نفسك أو الآخرين للخطر وألا تتخذ مخاطر لا داعي لها وألا تخالف أي قوانين وأنت تُعد مضمونا قد تساهم به في الجزيرة .

Jazeera's social media team celebrated its milestone of having one million fans of the Arabic channel on Facebook in May 2011.<sup>69</sup> By March 1, 2012, less than a year later, *Al Jazeera Arabic* had added almost another million fans.

In addition to using social media to promote its journalism, *Al Jazeera English* has also used social media and UGC extensively in its newsgathering. Correspondents used Twitter to report the events of the Arab Spring. In Egypt, as the government started to apply pressure to the Al Jazeera Network, the English channel sent web journalists to bolster their reporting efforts because their on air television staff were easily recognized and faced harassment or arrest by the police. The web journalists used several social media and multimedia tools in their reporting including Twitter, the photo-sharing site Flickr, and smartphone audio recording and uploading application Audioboo to file reports, in addition to traditional text reporting.<sup>70</sup>

For *Al Jazeera Arabic*, a major part of its UGC strategy is the Arabic language site, *Sharek*<sup>71</sup> ("participate"), which was established in 2008 and invites audiences to submit video content directly to the website. Users go through an online registration process giving their name, e-mail address, and the town and country they live in. While the *Sharek* website publishes general guidance about being a citizen journalist, this mainly relates to the rights of material posted and technical advice for uploading.<sup>72</sup> The users on this website publish extensive raw audience video footage and stills, which administrators organize around "the topic of the day" or into a topic strand set by the site administrators, for example: "Do you think the protests in Syria will calm down after the general amnesty (was announced)?"

The social media unit in Qatar sets up discussion topics and themes and checks the technical quality of images uploaded,

to see if the quality is good enough for people to view clearly and if necessary, to add a simple warning for potentially disturbing content. (See Figure 1)

A quick survey of material posted shows anything from bloated dead bodies to funeral processions and mass demonstrations in Syrian towns. The impression given by staff interviewed is that anyone can post whatever they like, but that the Al Jazeera social media team may take it down if the images are not clear enough for viewers to see. All content uploaded onto the *Sharek* site seems to be automatically branded with the Al Jazeera logo and there is a disclaimer posted at the foot of the webpage:

This site relies on users posts and their identity cannot be confirmed and (the site) is dependent on the principles of citizen journalism. Content published does not reflect the views of Al Jazeera or the administrators who manage the site. (Translated from Arabic)

In the above quote it can be seen that there is a reference to principles but these are not elaborated on in the website. There is, however, one pertinent note of guidance on the site. (See Figure 2)

In addition to *Sharek*, the Al Jazeera Network logo and brand is used for a non-profit independent youth forum, [www.aljazeeraatalk.net](http://www.aljazeeraatalk.net), which targets young Arabs wanting to work in the media.<sup>73</sup> Users can sign up on the site, post citizen journalist material, join in discussions, and read about topics relating to the broad aims of the site, such as encouraging dialogue, mentoring young journalists, and shaping public opinion. The content is more sophisticated than the basic user uploads of the *Sharek* site; the pages are populated with stories, interviews and chat, reflecting a user base that is more youth-focused and not necessarily news-seeking. This web forum also has an Al Jazeera disclaimer at the foot of the pages, again confirming that opinions do not represent the organization.

<sup>73</sup> The site can be viewed here: <http://www.aljazeeraatalk.net/>

<sup>69</sup> Al Bawaba, 2011

<sup>70</sup> Ulbricht, 2011

<sup>71</sup> See <http://sharek.aljazeera.net/>

<sup>72</sup> Information about 'citizen journalism' for AL JAZEERA ARABIC is here: <http://sharek.aljazeera.net/node/401>





## Al Jazeera Arabic and UGC for News

Interviews with staff and academics for this research project have suggested that the social media operations and the Arab newsroom are not well integrated, and it is not clear what the hierarchy and level of interaction is. This would need further exploration but, as pointed out in the editorial section, there are indications in the Arab media literature that the *Al Jazeera Arabic* television newsroom harbors some resistance to internet-based journalism. Given this traditional resistance it cannot be assumed that the championing of social media by senior management at the network has necessarily permeated down into all areas, especially newsrooms. However, interviews revealed increased cooperation between the social media team and the *Al Jazeera Arabic* newsroom for the news coverage of the Arab revolutions and that the social media operation has served as a useful source for the growing inclusion of UGC in the newsgathering process.

Interviews with *Al Jazeera Arabic* staff in the region and with social media staff based in Doha confirmed that there are two key sources for user generated content in the Arab newsroom:

- Content provided by the social media team, who preselect videos (for example from the *Sharek* site or from YouTube) and pass them on to the newsroom for verification
- Reliable sources on-the-ground in Syria with whom the Ara-

Interviews revealed increased cooperation between the social media team and the *Al Jazeera Arabic* newsroom for the news coverage of the Arab revolutions.

bic newsroom has built a direct relationship and who seem to have become the main source for UGC in the later part of 2011<sup>74</sup>

Interviews established that rather than being driven by staff closer to Syria, all of the *Al Jazeera Arabic* channel's coverage of the conflict in the country was managed centrally from Doha<sup>75</sup> and the staff in the region had no role in shaping coverage of the story, including those based in Lebanon.

As the Syria story developed and *Al Jazeera Arabic* became a major source of news for Syrians inside the country, the local *Al Jazeera Arabic* office in Damascus came under threat and pro-regime demonstrations against the station were held outside

<sup>74</sup> There may be other sources but these were not identified during the research. This information is from interviews with a regionally based AJA journalist and two members of the Social Media team based in Doha

<sup>75</sup> As confirmed to a researcher during informal interview with member of the network's Social Media team

the offices.<sup>76</sup> On April 29, the office was closed. It has not been possible to assess whether this made the channel more reliant on UGC; their journalists in Damascus may have already been severely restricted in where they could film and report before the office was closed.

The final step in the evolution of coverage of the conflict was the establishment of the Syria Desk. While it is common practice to have a dedicated desk for a major news story, this study's interviewees suggested that this development was as a result of efforts to centralize UGC processes for Syria and framed it in efforts to improve standards. It was difficult to get access to the Arabic newsroom staff in Qatar but according to conversations with a key member of the *Sharek* team in terms of Syria coverage, the social media team was liaising closely with the newsroom on the Syria story.

One staffer said the *Sharek* website became more active with the start of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Initially, the quality of the images was poor, making it difficult for the newsroom to verify the material. The member of the *Sharek* team, based in Qatar, explained that in the first three months of the Syrian uprising, *Sharek* received audience material from Syria at the rate of more than 200 videos per day and up to 1,000 videos on Fridays.<sup>77</sup> Due to the sheer volume of content coming in via the *Sharek* website, the staff member said she and her team reviewed videos submitted to the site on the basis of quality and also an initial assessment of their veracity. The team then compiled a list of videos that were of sufficient quality and had passed the initial verification checks for both the English and Arabic newsrooms, according to another Al Jazeera editor. In the Arabic newsroom, senior producers, such as the executive producer or output producer, would then check the list to decide what material was newsworthy and suitable for broadcast. Material chosen would then go through another level of verification before being broadcast. When the volume of videos received was particularly high, for example on Fridays, the member of the *Sharek* team said she also would work directly in the newsroom.

An Al Jazeera Arabic bureau chief said he had concerns at the beginning of the revolt about the veracity of the UGC being used. For example, in some of the UGC broadcast it was claimed that the Syrian military was shooting at demonstrators, but the images did not actually show who was shooting. He wondered how this could be verified. However, he said that the situation had improved with new guidelines issued after Ibrahim Helal took over as news director of the Al Jazeera network. Another

<sup>76</sup> We were not able, during the course of this research, to confirm the reports that journalists were threatened.

<sup>77</sup> Minty, 2011

Arab journalist with knowledge of the coverage and newsroom stated that "generally the coverage has been accurate but the problem is when one individual journalist might overlook the verification process because of a political agenda; Al Jazeera Arabic is still in process of setting up standards and is not as organized as BBC Arabic."<sup>78</sup>

## Verification of UGC at Al Jazeera Arabic

With its increasing use of UGC, the Al Jazeera Arabic newsroom has been able to benefit from existing sources like *Sharek* to provide content for news. The newsroom has also built up reliable contacts and sources on the ground who provide content directly to the news room. The creation of the Syria Desk has introduced group emails shared between editors, journalists and members of the social media team and has helped bring together various elements of the source verification process. The verification of the UGC is only part of the process in confirming the information that goes into news reports. A bureau chief for Al Jazeera Arabic stated that normal verification for any story is based on three sources of confirmation. In the case of UGC, this could be one "authoritative source"<sup>79</sup> and one eyewitness as well as the video material itself.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to the creation of the Syria desk, interviewees indicated that the usage policy on UGC from Syria was tightened significantly after the appointment of Ibrahim Helal as News Director for the Network in October 2011. A journalist with detailed knowledge of UGC and Syria said that internal memos had mentioned "the necessity to verify footage."

A memo issued shortly after Helal's appointment also tackled issues about the selection of video footage for airing and set out new instructions for sourcing that included:<sup>81</sup>

- Favoring wide angle footage rather than footage from small interior spaces;
- Checking footage with someone familiar with the country/area (though it was not possible to ascertain if this was a dedicated Syria expert in-house or just journalists on shift who know Syria);
- Avoiding footage that includes insulting language against any person or group.

<sup>78</sup> Researcher interview

<sup>79</sup> This term is commonly used to refer to reliable and independent sources on the ground—for example, a hospital official, doctor, member of the family to confirm a death, respected international human rights organization

<sup>80</sup> Researcher interview with AJA Bureau Chief based in the Middle East region

<sup>81</sup> Researcher interview with AJA journalist

Beyond this memo, it has not been possible during this study to confirm if there is a written policy or document about best practice that is used specifically in the Arab newsroom by staff. The researchers did not interview anyone from the online team, although they did ask a member of the social media team if there were any written guidelines for choosing UGC, and she said there were not. This might indicate that not all members of the team are aware of policies in place. Obtaining more information on this would require onsite research and more extensive interviews with the social media team. Rather, the discussions during interviews seem to suggest that they are still in the process of defining their UGC policy for news.

The lack of a written UGC policy for news might explain the complaints that the researchers heard from interviewees about *Al Jazeera Arabic's* coverage. A Lebanese academic interviewed for this report said that "*Al Jazeera Arabic* (online) leads many days with stories from Syria, many times they do not tell you their source of information...which is mostly dependent on activists."<sup>82</sup>

## The BBC and User-generated Content

The BBC seems to be continually improving its newsroom practices to deal with UGC for news, building on expertise first developed in its online newsroom. In terms of UGC for news, one of the most important developments for the BBC was the establishment of the BBC UGC Hub in London in 2005, in response to major stories like the 2004 Asian tsunami and the July 2005 London bombings. Both events were early examples of how UGC in the form of photos and video using new inexpensive digital video cameras and increasingly capable camera phones would become a standard source of information for news.<sup>83</sup> The UGC Hub at the BBC was developed to help collect this material, either directly or from sources online, and evaluate it for accuracy. The Hub was also developed to help distribute the material as quickly and efficiently as possible to the BBC's numerous TV, radio and online news teams. The BBC's detailed written policies relating to UGC have evolved to take into account experience in tackling major news events, such as the Iran demonstrations in 2009, and both the Hub and the BBC's College of Journalism provide support and training, respectively, to staff in the UK and those based overseas. The Hub has also led the way inside the BBC in introducing new software and technology to

"It is good editorial practice, particularly when material has come from countries with reporting restrictions, to tell the audience clearly what the BBC knows and does not know about the content, what it purports to show and its provenance."

*BBC editorial guidelines*

help verification processes, formulating definitions and improving best practice as new challenges emerge.<sup>84</sup>

However, there are indications that disparities exist in different parts of the corporation with regard to the extent to which UGC best practice is operationalized. A BBC news producer interviewed for this study said that "all UGC content is supposed to be shared with the BBC's UGC Hub so it is a central point of contact, but BBC Arabic does not do this." This interviewee also remarked how "insular" the Arabic service was.<sup>85</sup> However, plans to house all major news and language services in the same building and increasing incorporation of BBC Arabic into the BBC Global News stable will likely continue to fine tune the management of UGC for news.

## BBC Editorial Policy

The BBC's published policies on the use of UGC are much more explicit and detailed than that of *Al Jazeera Arabic*. The BBC's working definition of UGC for newsgathering is "content supplied to the BBC via mobile devices as well as content submitted online, through social media sites or through the post e.g. video cassettes."<sup>86</sup> The BBC's UGC hub narrows the definition of UGC for news: "Factual content from the audience; exclusively stills and video ... *some* kinds of eyewitness material but *NOT* audience comments, message boards and opinion."<sup>87</sup> The guidelines give ample proof that social media is a well-established practice at the BBC and give specific guidance on UGC for news in the section on transparency:

We should ensure that user contributions are clearly identified as such, with material from members of the public clearly labeled, so that our audiences know it

<sup>84</sup> Interview with former manager involved in setting up the Hub in London

<sup>85</sup> Researcher interview with a BBC news producer

<sup>86</sup> See general guidance relating to UGC at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/page/guidance-user-contributions-summary>

<sup>87</sup> Emphasis here as per interview with BBC staff member

<sup>82</sup> Researcher interview with Lebanon-based academic

<sup>83</sup> Wardle & Williams, 2008, p. 3

المزيد من بي بي سي - بحث

نسخة الهاتف المحمول BBC

عربي

الرئيسية الشرق الأوسط العالم شارك برأيك اقتصاد وأعمال ثقافة وفنون علوم وتكنولوجيا رياضة راديو وتلفزيون

جدول التلفزيون | جدول الراديو | استقبال البث

قراصنة صوماليون يطلقون سراح رهينة بريطانية

معلومات عن البرنامج

وصف البرنامج

منتدى تفاعلي مباشر متعدد الوسائط يسر أغوار قضية واحدة كل حلقة.

مقدمو البرنامج

سمير فرح ، نور الدين زورلي ، رضا قنديل

جدول البث

يبث البرنامج عبر قناة بي بي سي التلفزيونية والإذاعة خمس مرات في الأسبوع (من الإثنين إلى الجمعة) في الساعة الثالثة وست دقائق مساءً بتوقيت جرينتش ويتواصل النقاش على الراديو لمدة 30 دقيقة بعد البث على القناة التلفزيونية والآنترنت. ويعاد البرنامج مرتين يومياً في الثالثة صباحاً والحادية عشرة صباحاً بتوقيت جرينتش.

معلومات الاتصال

الهاتف: 00442077650211

نقطة حوار



نقطة حوار هو المنتدى التفاعلي الريادي المباشر متعدد الوسائط الذي يسر

has not come from the BBC or another news organization. Material from third party organizations such as lobby groups etc. must be labeled to ensure the audience understands its provenance. **It is good editorial practice, particularly when material has come from countries with reporting restrictions, to tell the audience clearly what the BBC knows and does not know about the content, what it purports to show and its provenance.**<sup>88</sup> (Author's emphasis)

## BBC Arabic, Social Media and Interactivity

Since BBC Arabic launched its online service nearly a decade ago, it has championed multi-platform authoring (producing content for radio, television and online) and has continued to build its website under the management of the internet literate former head of BBC Arabic, Hosam al-Sokkari, who left the BBC in 2010 to take a senior position with Yahoo's Arabic ser-

vice. Long before the rise of social media platforms, BBC Arabic launched *Nuqtat Hwar* (Talking Point) in 2003, building on the English language *Talking Point* program (the predecessor of the BBC's *Have Your Say* range of programs). *Nuqtat Hwar* began as a radio phone-in program, later adding a television program as well, broadcast five days a week.<sup>89</sup>

With the increasing use of audience interaction and social media, BBC Arabic online includes interactive features such as comments and debate on its own site as well as on external platforms, like Facebook. BBC Arabic also has an audience interactivity portal on its website called "Participate with Your View," where users can submit their comments, images, and video to audience panels about popular topics.<sup>90</sup> The BBC sets out instructions for uploading content, including details of the terms of use and technical advice.<sup>91</sup> The user must supply his/her name and email but has the option not to provide his/her mobile number and to note that s/he wishes the content to be

<sup>88</sup> Taken from the BBC's editorial guidelines, available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/page/guidance-user-contributions-full#transparency>

<sup>89</sup> The site can be viewed at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/tvandr-dio/2011/01/000000\\_talking\\_point.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/tvandr-dio/2011/01/000000_talking_point.shtml)

<sup>90</sup> The home page is here <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/interactivity/> and this is a sample BBC panel: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middle-east/2011/06/110602\\_syria\\_amnesty\\_panel.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middle-east/2011/06/110602_syria_amnesty_panel.shtml)

<sup>91</sup> That can be found at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/interactivity/2011/01/110125\\_interactivity\\_oss.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/interactivity/2011/01/110125_interactivity_oss.shtml)

anonymous. The audience content available on the BBC Arabic website is focused on moderated comments from the public, with a predominance of stills from audiences as well as from photo and news agencies, rather than video clips or footage. The site functions primarily as a forum for audience feedback that is selected by BBC moderators, so is very different in intent from Al Jazeera's *Sharek*, which focuses more on content provided by the audience.

An interactivity team, distinct from the centrally managed BBC UGC Hub, oversees these social media activities at the BBC Arabic headquarters in London. While content that could potentially be used in news programming is uploaded to BBC Arabic platforms, the interactivity team do not currently have a role in recommending content or evaluating UGC for news programs. The BBC Arabic interactivity team also uses social media platforms to determine popular discussion topics with audiences. In the case of its *Nuqtat Hewar* program, it lets the audience contribute ideas for stories and topics across its interactive output. The *Nuqtat Hewar* Facebook page, with more than 39,000 "likes," and the BBC Arabic Facebook page, with more than 240,000 "likes," were established with this in mind. A senior editor at the BBC said that there is an engagement rate of more than 40% among the visitors to the Facebook site, with comments on individual status updates or posts eliciting hundreds of responses.

## BBC Arabic and Social Media for News

BBC Arabic has a major regional bureau in Cairo and was well placed to cover the Egyptian revolution in 2011. As the conflict in Syria escalated, interviews with BBC staff indicate that the unfolding uprising required extensive and high-level editorial meetings to discuss the particulars of coverage, the dilemmas posed by the verification of activist material, and strategies for future coverage.

During the early stages of the Syrian uprising, the newsroom connected with demonstrators and informants on the ground and liaised directly with the demonstrators who sent them UGC for use in the news, according to a BBC Arabic journalist. BBC and *Al Jazeera Arabic* journalists who were interviewed for this report confirmed that they encouraged activists to try to contextualize the footage by placing placards with the date or by showing current newspapers to confirm when the footage was filmed.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Researcher interview

As the story continued to grow, the BBC established a dedicated Syria News Desk, a step taken before to cover other major stories in the region, such as Sudan. The Syria Desk extends across the BBC news network teams and includes senior editors and management from BBC global and domestic news sectors. It involves regular meetings and information sharing, including through email exchanges. If urgent editorial decisions are required, senior editors and management are consulted or brought into meetings. Importantly, the Syria Desk serves as a mechanism for checking UGC from Syria if it is not deemed easily verifiable by journalists on the news shifts. Interviews indicate that the BBC Arabic selection and verification processes are led by the newsroom team with oversight of the news editor on duty. BBC Arabic, the UGC Hub and BBC Monitoring collaborate in a central verification process, after which all content is "flashed" as ready for use on the BBC's internal *Newswire* system which can then be accessed across all BBC news and non-news output.

UGC verification best practice at the BBC follows a process of noting the internet source or link, date uploaded, duration of the video, content, pictures included, and contextual details.<sup>93</sup> At this stage, members of staff with knowledge of Syria, its geography and language might be consulted, as are journalists at the BBC UGC Hub (which is not housed in the same building) if their expertise is required. If the content is likely to be difficult to verify, contains extreme violence or is controversial, such as containing sectarian insults, BBC Arabic news editors must refer upwards to senior management (making use of the Syria Desk system) who will then make an editorial decision on whether or not to broadcast.

As noted before, it is not the responsibility of the BBC Arabic audience interactivity team to pre-select content for news. This is an important point and this structure seems to differ from that of *Al Jazeera Arabic* in as much as the Al Jazeera Network social media team has a role in the selection of UGC for the newsroom. At an organization the size of the BBC, it can afford to have specific and separate teams dedicated to audience interactivity and other teams dedicated to evaluating UGC either via BBC platforms or external social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. One of the members of the BBC Arabic interactivity team said that "People working on the internet are not seen as proper journalists; journalists are in the field reporting or they are presenting on TV, not at a computer screen."<sup>94</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Interview with BBC news producer working on Arab content

<sup>94</sup> Author interview in the BBC Arabic offices

## Syria: Challenges for Verification at the BBC

The BBC position is that "We would rather be right than first."<sup>95</sup> ensuring accuracy protects a painstakingly built reputation. This study did not identify any specific examples of mistakes in broadcasting UGC for news, though there were some suggestions that they existed.<sup>96</sup> The interviews seem to bear out a more cautious approach to Syrian coverage by the BBC than by *Al Jazeera Arabic*, with the BBC becoming even more cautious over time not just with UGC, but with information from other external sources, in particular the international news agencies and their use of social media sources in their stories.<sup>97</sup>

News agency content from major providers, such as Reuters and Agence France Presse (AFP), was highlighted in interviews as a weak link in ensuring accuracy – specifically when they drew on social media sources.<sup>98</sup> The role of news agencies in any story is critically important. The BBC, much like other broadcasters, would usually run a story based on two major news agency sources. However, it surfaced during this study that new practices have emerged across the BBC as a result of inaccurate information from agencies. A journalist working in the BBC Arabic newsroom said that:

AFP reported that the Syrian Free Army (defectors from the Syrian military) had claimed responsibility for the killing of 7 Syrian pilots travelling by bus from the Damascus airport. Other news outlets ran with the story but the BBC telephoned a media spokesperson for the SFA in Turkey who said that they were not responsible. AFP had relied on what it thought was the official SFA Facebook page, it turned out to be a fake page set up by Syrian intelligence.<sup>99</sup>

The AFP agency also made a major sourcing error in its reporting of the Damascus bombs just before Christmas 2011. The Muslim Brotherhood was widely reported to have claimed responsibility for the bombings based on AFP sources. Unfortunately, the agency's main source was a fake website for the Brotherhood that had been set up by Syrian intelligence. The fake website had been set up on a Syrian internet service provider,

raising flags for knowledgeable journalists. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood operates out of London and would not set up their site on a Syrian state-managed network. Yet, *The Guardian* and other news sites carried the story based on the AFP's mistaken information.<sup>100</sup> These errors highlighted a previously unappreciated weak link in the UGC and social media source verification process: the use of such material in agency reports.

To prevent such errors from being introduced into BBC reports, a senior BBC staffer with its College of Journalism said an important element of the verification process is to "speak to a person!" The Syrian context meant that this was easier said than done, not only because the challenges of communication in a conflict zone, but also because of security concerns of the activists. A producer in the BBC's World Service newsroom explained that there is a two-way verification process between journalists and their social media sources:

There are known cases where the Syrian government has tracked activists using satellite phones, such as *Thuraya*, after they have spoken to media outside the country. Also, the activist needs to know that I am not from Syrian security so he will ask me to email him using my official BBC email and then it will take a day or two for both sides to do our own checks before providing information and using it for broadcast.<sup>101</sup>

Because of Syrian security's ability to track people using satellite phones or Syria-based phone platforms, many activists and journalists now operate via Skype, which allows for more secure, encrypted communication, to chat and to send audio and video files relatively safely over the internet.<sup>102</sup>

Apart from contacting the activists directly, BBC teams also check Twitter to see who follows the activist contact, which users he retweets regularly, and how long he has had his account. However, there are far fewer bloggers and Twitter accounts providing relevant content from Syria than there were in the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, making this additional verification measure less useful than in other countries where social media use is more widespread.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Mark Thompson at the Leveson inquiry: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/uk-16677720>

<sup>96</sup> Researcher interview with BBC Journalist in region

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Though Nick Davies pointed out that the BBC will run with one agency source if it is the Press Association (PA) – in *Flat Earth News*, 2008

<sup>99</sup> Researcher interview

<sup>100</sup> See *The Telegraph* 2011 newspaper article. The article confirms that the website was fake and this coverage was also monitored by the researchers and it took 2 minutes to click through and see that the url could not be authentic and was not the usual Muslim Brotherhood url address

<sup>101</sup> Author interview with BBC World Service newsroom producer

<sup>102</sup> Watson, 2011

<sup>103</sup> For analysis on access to the internet in Syria see Kassab and Lane, 2011, in *Syria Today*

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

To see how the verification process and sourcing was communicated to audiences, the study evaluated content from both outlets. The content evaluation focused on the coverage of the Syrian revolt, drawing on three key news events in the time period between March and August 2011. By selecting three events over a period of time, the researchers were able to track the evolution of the use of UGC by broadcasters as the events continued.

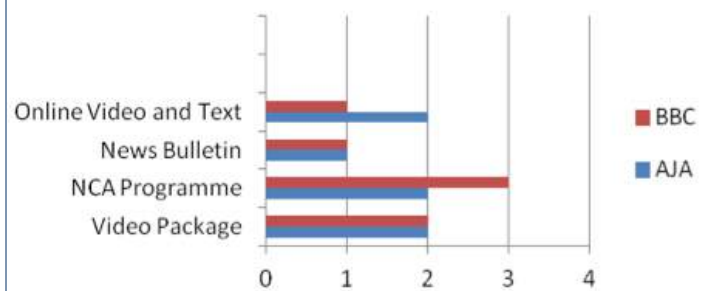
Syria is relatively isolated from major media hubs, with the regional offices for media outlets tending to be in Cairo, Jerusalem, Beirut or Dubai. Even before the blackout, it was difficult to set up an office in Damascus. As the conflict developed and the Syrian government exercised even greater control of foreign and regional journalists, UGC has become essential rather than supplemental for covering the Syrian story.

The content evaluation was not an extensive, randomized sample but a selected qualitative approach to provide as much insight as possible. The material was selected by examining the daily line up of programming at both the BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic* in order to find similarly-themed shows and have as consistent as possible a sample for comparison purposes. The evaluation included:

- Both BBC and *Al Jazeera Arabic* have regular hour and half hour news bulletins.
- At key points of the day—breakfast, midday, and evening—they also schedule their flagship news and current affairs and debate programs that tackle news issues more in depth.
- Both channels offer online video packages and news segments (only *Al Jazeera* publishes “raw” audience material online with no context or curation) and extensive online services in Arabic.

Program output was selected from across news bulletins, flagship news programs, and in-depth discussion programs. The study drew on a mix of program formats, ranging from 40 seconds to 45 minutes and totaling 14 programs or program clips.

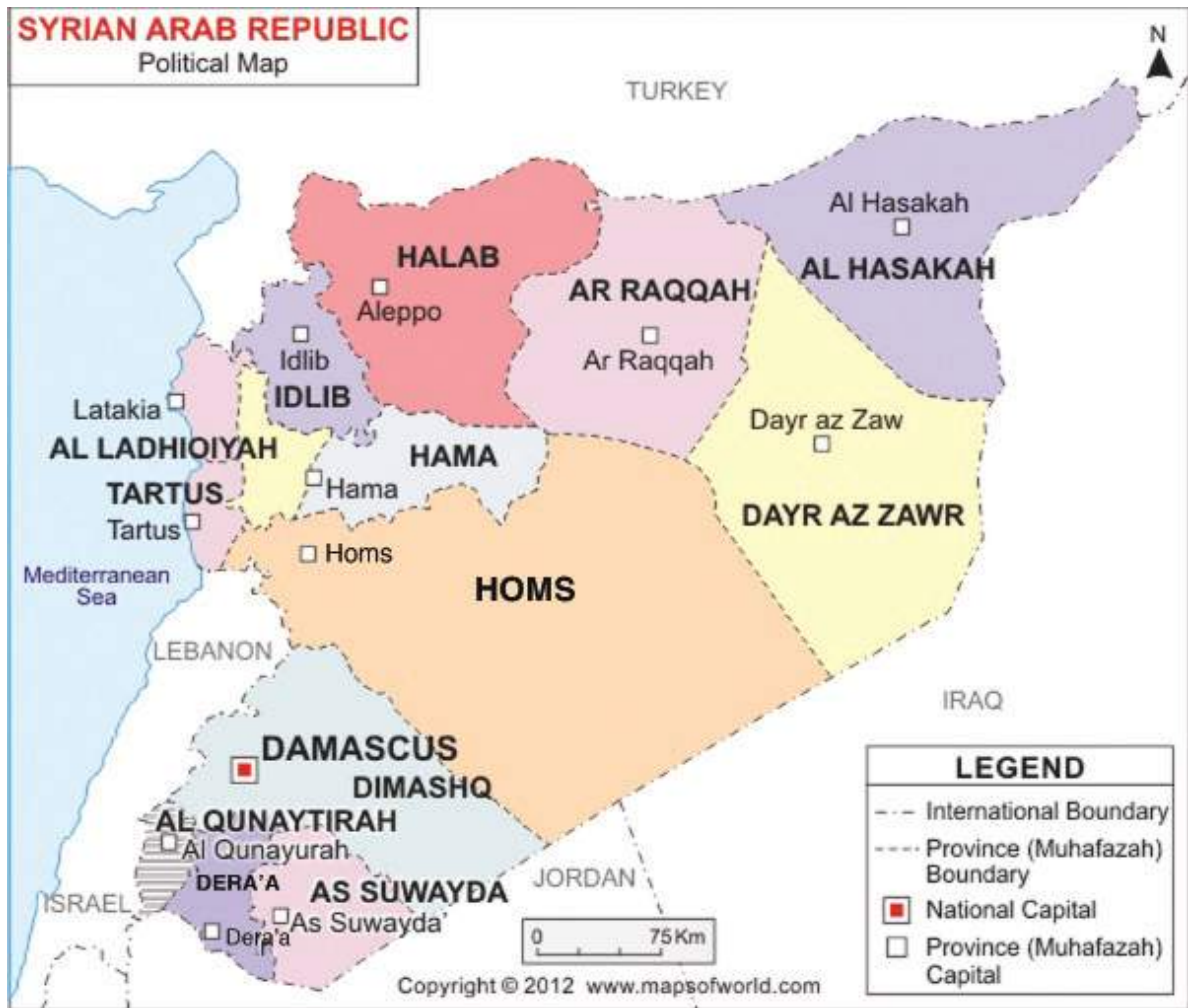
**FIGURE 3: CONTENT ANALYSIS: PROGRAM OUTPUT BY TYPE.**



Note: NCA = news and current affairs.

In all, the programs analyzed contained a total of 64 UGC clips. The content selection is shown in Figure 3.

Access to content was a challenge for the research team, given that the research project was conceived after the events had taken place, and both channels have selective archiving, with *Al Jazeera*'s being more extensive. It was possible to draw on sources like Link TV's *Mosaic*, which reposts selected content on the Middle East. Much content was also available on YouTube, uploaded either by the channels themselves or by Syrian media groups and other subscribers who want to share content about Syria.



## Key Dates for the Content Analysis

The focus of the case study is on three key dates in which major newsworthy events occurred:

### MARCH 18, 2011 - THE FIRST DEATHS FROM THE DEMONSTRATIONS IN DERA'A

Apart from some small-scale (albeit unprecedented) demonstrations in Damascus during February 2011, Dera'a was the catalyst for the uprising, when some teenagers were arrested for scrawling anti-regime slogans on walls in the main city. The parents and local community made efforts to negotiate with the authorities for the return of their children. There was a major demonstration in Dera'a on Friday, March 18, demanding the children to be returned. This event marked the first time that the Syrian army opened fire on civilian protestors, causing outrage among the local community. During the funeral proces-

sion the next day, the army fired at the mourners, killing more civilians.<sup>104</sup>

The demonstrations and killings in Dera'a signaled to the international media that the events in Syria were now a major news story. It marked the beginning of the time line for major newsgathering on Syria.

### APRIL 29, 2011 - THE SIEGE OF DERA'A

The citizens of Dera'a reacted against the regime's policy of trying to put down the protests with growing demonstrations until April 28, when the Syrian regime initiated a military assault on the city. This was the first time that the Syrian army had turned on its people for nearly 30 years, so the shock was significant. The coverage of this military operation lasted from

<sup>104</sup> For an authoritative account of the start of the uprising see the International Crisis Group, 2011



April 28 to May 3. For the purposes of this study, we selected April 29, as it was the day in which deaths started to escalate and presented suitable archive material. The events in Dera'a, also called the 'Friday of Anger,' had by this time led to demonstrations in sympathy by Syrians in other towns and cities, and it was evident that the regime had misunderstood the strength of feeling by the people. The governor of the province and the security forces were seen to have acted in an uncompromising manner; it had not gone unnoticed that because of his relation to Bashar al-Assad, the governor of the city was not held accountable for any of his responses to the protests.

### JULY 31, 2011 - THE SIEGE OF HAMA

Hama is historically very significant as there was a massacre by the Syrian government there in 1982, with accounts on the numbers dead varying from 10,000 to 25,000. Because of this experience, the very idea that people there would dare to rise up against the regime or that they would demonstrate in the streets was unthinkable before 2011. When Hama's residents did take to the streets and when the military tanks rolled into the city, it was quickly evident that it would be a major news story and was therefore selected for evaluation. July 31 was chosen as it was the first day of major media coverage.

## Content Evaluation

The research team prepared a content evaluation template for the three events that gathered the following data:

- Was a source given or shown during the broadcast of UGC content?
- Did the broadcaster confirm verification of sources? If so:
  - What language was used to indicate provenance of the sources for UGC?
  - What, if any, caveats were given about UGC content broadcast? At what point in the broadcast were they given and how were they presented?
- What kinds of classification of sources were given, such as the date or place where the video or photo was taken?
- How did broadcasters provide context (i.e. interviews and guests in the video tape, other non-UGC sources and sources cited in any wrap-around text accompanying the video, or in online cases)? Was the video clip just raw footage and was it accompanied by text?

Using these criteria, we now discuss the material evaluated on the three representative dates.

## The First Deaths in Dera'a

There was very little archive material available for this event, probably reflecting the lack of established sources in the city at the time and the fact that these demonstrations were not part of a more orchestrated and organized activist network (on or offline).<sup>105</sup> Both *Al Jazeera Arabic* and the BBC used UGC of the first deaths of the Dera'a demonstrations and the subsequent shootings at the funerals on the day after. This material was most likely taken by demonstrators and mourners as the images were shaky and showed close-ups from inside the events taking place, very likely taken on smart phones.

**BBC Arabic** – In an archived television news package taken from the BBC Arabic web site, the presenter, Kholoud Amr, gave commentary against pictures of a funeral for two martyrs killed on Friday, March 18. No mention was made of the source of the images, but they appeared to be material taken on mobile phones from the scenes by the demonstrators. Eight pieces of UGC were used in one short package lasting 2 minutes and 13 seconds. For a brief period, the audience could see the logo of one of the sources, SNN, as it replaced the BBC's own logo for 10 seconds on the top right hand corner of the screen. The presenter provided some context by mentioning the location and dates of the events being shown on the screen. The video was embedded in text on the website that draws on other sources to contextualize the story, including human rights groups, activists and eyewitnesses. The evaluation of this TV package suggests that there was no systematic process of signposting UGC at the beginning of the uprising.

**Al Jazeera** – The footage available from the *Al Jazeera Arabic* archives consisted of a short clip showing a mobile phone recording of the first death in Dera'a, a clip that was also used by the BBC in its package. The online text accompanying the video clip indicated a Facebook source, and cited Reuters and AFP, as well as reactions from western governments. It was not possible to gauge what the live television coverage of Syria was like from *Al Jazeera Arabic* on the day as there were no archived programs. However, there have been claims from Syrians spoken to during the course of this study that *Al Jazeera Arabic* was slow to start covering the uprising. This would account for

<sup>105</sup> This is a view point of a BBC Arabic journalists involved in Syria's coverage — he contrasts it to Egypt where activists have a long experience of organizing and getting information to the media

the lack of material the researchers could access for this significant event. This clip confirms that social media sources were being utilized from the start. We know from interviews that this content might well have come from the social media team who had already established audience interaction through *Sharek* and by monitoring social media sources.

## The Siege of Dera'a

Both channels drew heavily on UGC from the field. The quality of the recordings ranges from poor to satisfactory; at this stage, material was still mainly provided via mobile phones. Both networks covered the 'Friday of Anger' protests in towns across Syria in support of their peers in Dera'a.

**BBC Arabic** – In a TV package embedded online with a text article, the BBC reporter Mohammad Reda talked over UGC of protests from different locations, most footage was non-specified, and the only clear source was SNN. There was no attribution for content or any caveats on air or on the screen. The location of the UGC was not always evident, except where banners and signs were in evidence or where the presenter made it clear. The package was 2 minutes and 37 seconds long and made use of interview material, agency images, Syrian state sources, a pre-recorded studio interview with the Muslim Brotherhood, an eyewitness source, human rights organizations and the Syrian army. As has been the case for most of the content used, UGC was brought in to show demonstrations taking place.

**Al Jazeera** – Al Jazeera's flagship news and current affairs daily roundup program included extensive UGC from demonstrations around Syria as it covered developments with regard to the besieged city of Dera'a. The footage from the city showed dead bodies in giant refrigerators. The researcher found it confusing to follow the coverage, which included video clips of a crowd of protestors, poor quality video images of marching, tear gas being used on crowds, marching with banners in Arabic and English, and images from Homs, which were confusing due to an apparent error on the caption. Other sources used included Reuters and AFP, the Syrian official news agency, Syrian State TV, and Syrian dissidents. There was no information about the provenance of the user-generated content and no caveats mentioned on air or on the screen, except general references to the "internet."

## The Siege of Hama

By July, the broadcasters were using the term "internet sources" and or simply "internet," "activists," or "Syrian activists/demonstrators" on air during longer and flagship news and current affairs programs. YouTube was also mentioned as a specific source, even though it is not a source but rather a platform, and, in the case of Syria, there are a multitude of groups who have set up their own channels on the website to distribute content. Generally, the quality of some of the UGC seems to have improved.

At the same time, there was evidence of improvements from April in classifying the information sources. On air, the presenters signposted information about location for audiences, and the images were long shots in open spaces of large crowds demonstrating. These images are much more reliable and harder to fake.

**BBC Arabic** – Both BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic* used similar UGC footage in their coverage, although the BBC used less. On air, presenters made general reference to material coming from the internet and YouTube. For the Hama coverage monitored here, the BBC used at least eight different UGC sources; nearly all of those sources were indicated as being from SNN and had its logo in the footage. It is not clear if this reflected an effort to ensure the source was shown to the viewer or if it just happened that SNN provided all its UGC for this story. The viewer was not given any information about SNN as a news source, so it was essentially treated as an alternative news agency. For the text accompanying this story online, the BBC widely cited human rights groups, Facebook sites, Reuters, resident eyewitnesses and the Syrian Association for Human Rights as well as the Syrian government, U.S. government and international sources.

**Al Jazeera Arabic** – In the *Al Jazeera Arabic* flagship breakfast program "This Morning," the improving quality of the footage coming from Syria was on display in a dramatic video showing the military strike on Hama. Presumably, activists were now accessing better equipment, some of which might have been provided to them as has been discussed elsewhere in this report. In one segment, the presenter interviewed a number of sources via telephone, including eyewitnesses from Hama, as live UGC footage from Hama played. The story used at least three different UGC sources, but viewers were informed in only

general terms about the content being aired, such as that it was “from the internet”. Material from the city of Deir Azzour is credited to the SNN; other unclear logos of third party sources were visible at different times. Information about sources continued to be inconsistently and incompletely provided.

## Evaluating the use of UGC and Social Media Sources

### VERIFICATION OF SOURCES

It was noted that neither BBC Arabic nor *Al Jazeera Arabic* explicitly mentioned in any of the programs or video packages that were evaluated whether the sources were verified or were reliable. The common on air explanation of “this footage cannot be verified,” was absent in all the content evaluated for this study. While not necessarily a criticism, the lack of information about verification does flag the need to understand the standard way in which the channels refer to material that is unverified. In the context of coverage of the Syrian uprising, it might be argued that given the volume of UGC clips used it would not be possible to finesse announcements about validation processes for each clip, and indeed may not actually be required.

### SOURCING AND CONTEXTUALIZING UGC IN THE OUTPUT

This is not a quantitative study, and the figures relating to UGC used here have been used to illustrate the frequency with which no sourcing information was given about the content. Of the 64 pieces of UGC (of varying format and length) used in the programs surveyed, the majority (nearly 75%) provided no information for the audience about the source for the images, either through the presence of an on air logo for the source or through on air announcements by presenters. The identified sources included:

1. The Shaam News Network (SNN), a loose network of Syrian activists who work with contacts outside Syria to disseminate videos from protests and demonstrations
2. A number of lesser-known and rarely-used sources, including Free Syria (SF), Ahrar Hama (Liberated Hama) and DPN, a source of unknown provenance that the researchers have not traced. These sources may have been present only once or twice across all output.
3. Internet sources, referred to simply as the “internet” or in some cases by platform, such as YouTube or Facebook.

It is worth noting that in a two and half-minute package there might be six to eight UGC clips used for a matter of seconds. However, longer clips might be used to illustrate a live interview or news broadcast. In communicating the sources to the audience, in a small number of cases, the viewer could see a logo for a Syrian media network on the screen (SNN, for example). The preponderance of UGC clips used in the coverage reviewed that were identified came from the Shaam News Network. SNN was quite well organized from early in the uprising, and it is possible that the network always ensures its content carries its logo. This might also make it more desirable for broadcasters as they can show the provenance on screen. As mentioned elsewhere, SNN is regarded by some respected journalists as a reliable source for video footage, however, as noted earlier, a Syrian activist based in Beirut stated that he felt that SNN was prone to censoring footage received by their activist contacts inside Syria or at the very least being selective in their choice of footage so as not to include evidence of civilians taking up arms.

**Of the 64 pieces of UGC surveyed, nearly 75% provided no information for the audience about the source for the images.**

As well as not providing sourcing information, presenters gave overly broad sourcing information on content gleaned from the internet, often from social media sources. Generally, in broadcast packages as well as online text accompanying video that had been aired, both channels would say the material was from the internet, YouTube, or Facebook. Such references to the platform provide no sourcing information for the viewer and give no information on the reliability. One way viewers could be made aware of the provenance of such sources would be by referring to the YouTube account or channel with relevant background of the user or account, or, in the case of Facebook, the channels could refer to the group or page with brief information about the group to put it in context of the conflict. If the channels have security concerns about revealing source information, that should be communicated to viewers in lieu of more specific source information.

The way in which broadcasters describe UGC is becoming particularly complicated in the case of Syria. Opposition to the Assad regime is not unified, and activist groups are getting more politicized. The social media groups represent a wide



Protesters in Maree, Aleppo Suburbs, Syria. Photo by Tiny.cc/Syria Freedom, Flickr.

range of different points of view and political factions. Moreover, Syrian intelligence is setting up fake Facebook pages and groups in order to spread disinformation to the world's media. In March 2011, few Facebook groups existed relating to the uprising in Syria (one of the main ones being the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page). But since the evaluation was carried out, Syrian activists have set up a multitude of social media sites. Despite this the channels continued to have general references to Facebook sources even in July, long after the proliferation of groups on the social network. So, while it might have been sufficient at the start to make only general references, this does not hold true for future reporting.

There are a number of reasons that much of the UGC aired was not accompanied by information about its source. It might be that the UGC came from individual sources who were at the demonstrations or filmed events covered in the evaluation. The source might be a contact on the ground who has been referred through trusted contacts or has contacted the broadcaster di-

rectly or who has contacts in the organizations. It is not clear if the lack of sourcing information might be a conscious decision to protect sources in Syria. In that case, it would be sufficient to say that the material was from activists or local residents, without divulging information that might threaten the security of the sources. Perhaps a more likely explanation for the failure to cite sources is the challenge of getting multiple UGC clips in a news package or program in quick succession – resulting in a lack of sourcing information for the viewers.

## SIGNPOSTING OF SOURCES

Both broadcasters also failed to consistently provide context and additional information about the UGC they used, such as where and when the footage was taken. This might normally be achieved through on air captions with the name of the city and the date. Interviews suggest that obtaining information was difficult at the start but to help with this, journalists said they asked activists to ensure that demonstrators put banners up with dates and information. This has subsequently become much more common in coverage (after our content evaluation was conducted).

Given the volume of UGC clips being used in the often relatively short TV packages, how realistic is it for the broadcasters to provide detailed signposting? It might be that it is merely a technical issue of getting captions on the screen, rather than necessarily because the information is not available about the location and date.

Where they did add context to the UGC clips, BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic* drew on other sources on air and online. These include news agencies, Syrian government or official sources like Syrian state TV or its state news agency (SANA), Syrian dissidents and activists, eyewitnesses, human rights groups in and outside Syria, and political groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. However, these were not necessarily used to provide further information about the UGC but rather to present other positions and arguments. In cases where video excerpts were used online, additional sourcing information was included in the text that accompanied that video.

## FINDINGS

While it is important not to over-interpret findings from such a small-scale study, below are some of the main findings. This report also sets out to present some of the key issues that might benefit from further study:

- The interviews indicate that there are detailed verification policies in place, but the content evaluation reveals that BBC Arabic and *Al Jazeera Arabic* have not explicitly communicated to audiences what they have been able to verify and what remains unverified, contrary to their editorial guidelines and also in contrast to their English sister stations;
- Audiences are not systematically given clear information or visual signposting about where activist material has come from, how reliable it is, or when or where it was filmed;
- Lack of transparency in using UGC for news suggests that technology and production processes might need improvement to accommodate the inclusion of more detailed information about the content;
- Ethical issues in the developing relation between activists and broadcasters have emerged during this study - this needs to be explored more fully.
- Broadcasters have regarded Syria as a major challenge as they attempt to cover an ongoing international news story while relying heavily on user-generated content and information from social media sources in the form of video footage and picture stills;
- Management at both channels have boosted editorial and management oversight with regard to the ongoing coverage of the Syrian uprising;
- Both broadcasters have evolved their practices and newsroom workflow to more effectively use user-generated content and information from social media sources for Syria, and the BBC and *Al Jazeera Arabic* have both set up dedicated Syria Desks, in part, to improve use of such sources;



Demonstrators, with balloons and the Syrian opposition flags, protest against Assad after Friday prayers in Al Qasseer city, near Homs. Photo by Tiny.cc/Syria Freedom, Flickr.

- The broadcasters have tightened verification policies. The BBC has new guidance for news agency copy that contains UGC, and *Al Jazeera Arabic* has introduced new guidance for using UGC in its Syria coverage;
- Coverage of Syria has led to greater integration of the social media team at Al Jazeera with the *Al Jazeera Arabic* newsroom.

# 8

## CONCLUSION

Channels such as Al Jazeera and the BBC, together with news agencies and other major media outlets, amplify user-generated content being shared via social media, and therefore, they have an exceptional duty of care in using social media content.

Syria seems to have presented a major challenge for journalists, as the regime exercised a high degree of control over normal newsgathering activities. This has forced news organizations to rely more heavily on UGC and social media sources in Syria than they have in other uprisings, such as Tunisia and Egypt.

### **How did these news organizations manage the heavy use of UGC and social media while being true to their editorial guidelines?**

This study has demonstrated that the increased reliance on UGC in the coverage of Syria highlighted issues in providing necessary information about verification, sources and context. It suggests that UGC best practice in use at the network level at both the BBC and Al Jazeera might not be in place in the Arab newsrooms of those networks. Clarification is required about how broadcasters determine the duty of care with respect to incorporating UGC in their coverage of complex, challenging stories like Syria.

### **How have the news organizations in this study verified this material?**

Both organizations have set up Syrian desks and are diligent in establishing the veracity of UGC content. However this does not mean this is flagged or mentioned during broadcasts.

### **How have these news organizations informed their audiences of the provenance of this material?**

This study has found some problems in ensuring the systematic incorporation of UGC in program output in a transparent way. Viewers may be confused about whether or not the UGC is reliable and fully verified or whether it is being shown with the appropriate caveats and disclaimers. Audiences do not have full information about the location and date of footage that they are viewing. It appears that since the analysis was completed, both channels have improved providing context for UGC footage used, by signposting the exact location as well as the date of demonstrations, for example; however, the matter of informing about verification still seems unresolved.<sup>106</sup>

General references to YouTube, Facebook, internet sources, and activists can be misleading when Syrian groups on YouTube and Facebook have differing political agendas, and demonstrators and activists might or might not belong to increasingly organized political groups or sub-groups. The increasingly complex political situation in Syria necessitates a level of information and disclosure about sourcing that was not seen in the content analyzed for this study.

## AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study identifies a number of avenues for future inquiry into the role of social media and user-generated content in newsgathering.

- It would be valuable to establish what constitutes standard practice with respect to user-generated content in Arab newsrooms by researching day-to-day coverage, with a systematic content analysis methodology. This would enable researchers to establish how embedded processes for verifying and producing UGC are in the newsroom, and the extent to which increased reliance on UGC in coverage of closed societies might cause news organizations to depart from their standard practice relating to such content.
- It would also be valuable to evaluate how news organizations navigate covering a crisis situation like Syria. In addition to the normal challenges of covering conflict, restrictions forced news organizations to rely heavily on non-traditional newsgathering methods. The study only started to identify how news organizations adapt to these crisis situations.
- Understanding the in-depth newsroom workflows and practices in relation to production and technical capabilities would allow researchers to better understand the challenges that newsrooms face in evaluating UGC and integrating it effectively into news packages and programs. A set of best practices could emerge from further inquiry into these processes.
- Although not the focus of the study, the research uncovered shortcomings in how news agencies are using UGC and the impact this has on news organizations, who rely on these international agencies. It would be instructive to further explore the extent to which social media policies and best practice are established in the Arab services of these international agencies.
- The Syrian case study provides a rich opportunity for further study which could explore the ways in which its information ecology is transforming the role of the activists in building a grassroots alternative media service and by extension, the ethical issues arising from the relationship between activists and mainstream news broadcasters.
- In the course of the research, examples of staff training and development and best practice have arisen, but these are only touched upon in the report. Another possibility for further study would be to establish the ways in which Arab newsrooms are being or have been integrated into the wider social media age.
- Important ethical issues emerge from this study that cannot fully be pursued here but require attention. For example, there are credible claims that *Al Jazeera Arabic* has been paying soldiers and activists for content. This was stated by two BBC journalists and one AJA journalist as well as a Lebanon-based academic during the interviews we conducted. The Lebanon-based academic also indicated in the researcher interview that these payments may have encouraged soldiers to inflict torture and to record it and earn money. It has also been suggested that *Al Jazeera Arabic* has provided Syrian activists and contacts with ICT support so that they can get video footage out of Syria (This was mentioned in a researcher's interview by an AJA journalist as well as a UK-based academic and social media consultant who said that the issue had arisen at a social media conference in Turkey).

# APPENDIX ONE: LIST OF INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

## **BBC:**

One senior manager responsible for journalism training

One bureau chief based in the Middle East region

Two journalists working for BBC Arabic in London

Two editors working for BBC Arabic in London

## **Al Jazeera Network:**

One bureau chief working for AJA based in the Middle East Region

Two journalists working for AJA in the Middle East Region

Two members of staff from the AJN New Media team

One editor working on the AIE website

## **Other:**

Four academics focusing on Arab media and/or Social Media

One editor working for The Guardian

One former Syrian journalist based in London

One Syrian activist based in Lebanon



# ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bardoel, J., & Deuze, M. (2001). 'Network Journalism: Converging Competencies of Old and New Media Professionals,' *Journalism Studies*, 23, 91-103

Focusing on the rise in internet journalism, this study provides some early indications of the kinds of challenges that the profession of journalism will face as it seeks to incorporate the internet and to look at ways to engage with audiences.

Beckett, C., & Mansell, R. (2008). 'Crossing Boundaries: New Media and Networked Journalism,' *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 1:1, 92-104

Charlie Beckett and Robin Mansell give an extensive definition of Network Journalism, identifying it as a new form of journalism that involves the interaction between traditional and citizen journalism. This new form of journalism raises many ethical issues, and changes the way journalists perform their job. Beckett and Mansell claim that citizen journalism has, in a sense, improved the traditional media in terms of accuracy. In recent times, the job of the journalist has shifted to that of a facilitator of news more so than a reporter of news.

Cottle, S. (2011) 'Media and the Arab Uprisings of 2011: Research notes,' *Journalism*, 12:5, 647-659

This paper sets out some research questions around how media systems and communication networks have facilitated the historical events in the 2011 Arab uprisings. Cottle examines the role the media played leading up to and during the revolutions, but importantly provides much needed political context so as not to falsely elevate social media solely as an agent of change. The term media is categorized into social and new media, Arab state-controlled media, and international media, including western media.

Hijjawi, A. (2011) 'The Role of Al Jazeera (Arabic) in the Arab Revolts of 2011,' in *People's Power: The Arab World in Revolt: Political Analysis and Commentary From the Middle East*, April 2, 2011, Heinrich Böll Stiftung

As a veteran broadcast journalist and former head of Birzeit University's media department in the West Bank, Hijjawi's insight and views on the role of the *Al Jazeera Arabic* channel in the Egyptian revolution are significant. Hijjawi contends that AJA took on the role of a campaigning channel during the Egyptian uprising and that this has important implications for the

field of journalism.

Hänska-Ahy, M.T. & Shapour, R. (2012). 'Who's reporting the protests?' *Journalism Studies*, 13:1, 1-17.

The 2009 protests in Iran and the 2011 Arab uprisings took place in complex and fast evolving media ecologies. Hänska-Ahy and Shapour examine the BBC's Persian and Arabic language services, which reach millions, and which draw heavily on content created by ordinary citizens to cover events. This paper traces the flow of this content through the news process to examine how collaboration between newsrooms and citizen journalists changed from 2009 to 2011. The article argues that participation in the news process hinges on the congruence between newsroom practices, and the practices of those producing content on the streets. Such congruence requires mutual knowledge of broadcasting requirements. It finds that by 2011 journalists felt more comfortable and effective integrating user generated content (UGC) into their news output. Importantly, UGC creators appear to have taken on board the broadcaster's editorial requirements, making them savvier content creators.

Howard, Philip et al (2011) 'Opening Closed Regimes: What was the role of social media during the Arab Spring?' Seattle: University of Washington, Project on Information Technology and Political Islam

Based on a detailed quantitative survey of major social media platforms like Twitter, this study concludes that social media played a central role in shaping the political debates, that revolutionary comment on Twitter preceded major events, and that it helped spread democratic ideas across borders. This study is included here as an example of how isolating research to look only at Twitter and other social media can be ahistoric as it obscures consideration of the social and political dynamics in countries like Egypt over the last 30 years, which have included organized demonstrations and activism that has not required imported ideas via western technology.

Kai, H. Ed. (2008) *Arab Media: Power and Weakness*, New York: Continuum

Contributions from major Arab media academics and commentators make this book an excellent background to the current debates around social media. It serves as a useful reference in understanding the dynamics and diversity in the regional media landscape, as well as the broader journalistic issues around

objectivity and ownership.

Mellor, N. (2011) *Arab Journalists in Transnational Media*, New York: Hampton Press, Inc.

Mellor provides rich information on the workings of the newsrooms for the major international and regional broadcasters who serve the Arab-speaking world. While theoretical in part and sometimes broad in scope, the findings from her interviews with Arab journalists and the level of access she achieved provide rich insights into the changing landscape of Arab journalism.

Newman, N. (2009) 'Working Paper on the Role of Social Media and its Impact on Mainstream Journalism,' *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, available at [http://thomsonreuters.com/content/news\\_ideas/white\\_papers/media/487784](http://thomsonreuters.com/content/news_ideas/white_papers/media/487784)

This report gives a useful overview into how large media organizations are shifting to recognize it is important to involve audiences and to ensure editorial safeguards at the same time.

Newman, N. (2011) 'Report on Mainstream Media and the Distribution of News in the Age of Social Media,' *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, available at [http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Working\\_Papers/Mainstream\\_media\\_and\\_the\\_distribution\\_of\\_news\\_.pdf](http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Working_Papers/Mainstream_media_and_the_distribution_of_news_.pdf)

Newman's timely report on the increasing influences of social media on the 'mainstream' media moves the debate on as it considers how major journalists have become 'network nodes' and news media business models have been 'disrupted' or challenged by the changing social media landscape.

Pew Research Center (2010) 'New Media Old Media: How Blogs and Social Media Agendas Relate and Differ from the Traditional Press,' *The Project for Excellence in Journalism*, available at [http://www.journalism.org/analysis\\_report/new\\_media\\_old\\_media](http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/new_media_old_media)

This instructive study shows, on the one hand, how social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and news blogs have increasingly become the place to share and find news information, and, on the other, how 'legacy outlets' such as the BBC, CNN and the New York Times significantly feature in the dominant social media news feeds.

Sakr, N. (2007) *Arab Television Today*, London: I.B.Tauris

An accessible reader on the political economy of Arab satellite television, Sakr's book is still relevant as it charts the political and economic/business relations within the media industry in the region – a trend that is likely to be mirrored in the commodification and commercialization of social media.

Silverman, C. (2011b) 'Best Practises for Social Media Verification,' available at [http://www.cjr.org/the\\_news\\_frontier/best\\_practices\\_for\\_social\\_medi.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/the_news_frontier/best_practices_for_social_medi.php?page=all)

This article gives a succinct round up of the main thinking behind self regulation of Twitter and other social media platforms, with contributions from Andy Carvin, the Huffington Post and the BBC Hub.

Thurman, N. & Hermida, A. (2008) 'The Future of Newspapers: A Clash of Cultures,' *Journalism Practise*, 2:3, 343-356

This academic study on British and American newspapers and their efforts to incorporate social media in their journalism practices is proof that despite some organizational and cultural resistance, the media industry is embracing and using social media.

Wardle, C. & Williams, A. (2008) 'Ugc@thebbc: Understanding its impact upon contributors, non-contributors and BBC News,' *Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies*, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/knowledgeexchange/car-diffone.pdf>

Although focused solely on the BBC, this study of user-generated content is a comprehensive survey of how UGC is used and understood from the perspective of media practitioners and audiences. It tackles many of the fundamental issues raised in this study about news culture, resources and terminology, giving real insight into the workings of a mainstream broadcaster.

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## ABOUT THE INTERNEWS CENTER FOR INNOVATION & LEARNING

The Internews Center for Innovation & Learning supports, captures, and shares innovative approaches to communication through a creative program of research and development worldwide. Founded in 2011, the Center seeks to strike a balance between local expertise and needs and global learning in order to develop a comprehensive approach to understanding and catalyzing information exchange.

In Internews' 30-year history of promoting independent media in more than 75 countries around the world, the last five years have arguably seen the most changes in the global media and journalism environment. Across all Internews programs, adoption of cutting-edge technology is integral to advancing the work of the journalists, bloggers, citizen reporters, scholars and others who provide a vital interpretive role for their communities. The Internews Center for Innovation & Learning deepens and enhances our capacity to link existing expertise to research that helps define, understand and monitor the critical elements of changing information ecosystems and to pilot projects that apply and test the data, platforms and digital tools to meet information needs of specific communities. This is far from a solo endeavor. A network of partners, ranging from technologists to academics to activists is critical to creating and sustaining a dynamic and iterative collaborative space for innovation.



### **Internews Washington, DC Office**

1640 Rhode Island Ave. NW Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20036 USA  
+ 1 202 833 5740

### **Internews Administrative Headquarters**

PO Box 4448  
Arcata, CA 95518 USA  
+1 707 826 2030

[www.internews.org](http://www.internews.org)

E-mail: [info@internews.org](mailto:info@internews.org)

Twitter: [@internews](https://twitter.com/internews)

[facebook.com/internews](https://facebook.com/internews)

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