Internet Caffee

Internet Caffee

inks
internet caffee

Next door please

AUGUST 2012

COUNTRY CASE STUDY:
SYRIA

Support to media where media freedoms and rights are constrained

BBC
MEDIA ACTION

Executive summary

After more than a year of rebellion in Syria, the situation remains perilous and unpredictable. Lessons from uprisings in the Arab world show us that transitions are long and arduous processes and that donors need to understand the particularities of each country if they want to support reform.

Before the uprising began on March 15, 2011, Syria had been going through a slow but steady stage of reform driven by the ruling Ba'ath party. Yet, there is little culture of public dialogue and civil society, or a clear understanding of what these mean. This is not surprising in a country where the Ba'ath party has ruled since 1963, operating under emergency law from the outset to the present day. Emergency law, justified by the Government as a response to the state of war with Israel and threats from militant groups, suspends, in effect, most constitutional protections. This has resulted in major human rights violations, including the detention of anyone suspected of endangering public security and order.

Between 1963 and 2001, all media in Syria were owned and run by the ruling Ba'ath party. In 2001, Bashar al-Assad, the son of Hafez al-Assad who had been in power since 1970, became President and the country experienced some liberalisation when he allowed private publication for the first time. Yet this move was more indicative of economic reforms than any opening up of the media landscape. To this day, the Ministry of Information monitors content to ensure that all outlets adhere to government policies and directives. All private media that cover political content are aligned strongly to the regime. Watchdog organisation Freedom House has rated Syria "Not Free" for years and, in 2011, rated it 7 on political liberties and 6 on its civil liberties, with 1 representing most free and 7 least free.

The Arab Spring in the region is a momentous turning point. Yet the transitions in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia show us that not only does authoritarianism vary from one country to

> **It has been very difficult to get a clear picture of what is happening inside the country even for those living there.**

another but that even where regimes fall, authoritarianism can still dominate the system.

However, those watching Syria's media in the current crisis have seen subtle attempts to take advantage of the uncertain times to push boundaries and, perhaps most remarkably, a change not in the media itself, but in the attitudes of the Syrian public to the importance and role of the media. Maurice Aaek, a Syrian journalist, says "before the [uprising] the media was of no importance to people, now people are reading and discussing the news and commenting on it from all sides." This is a new development and a very important one, given that the State in Syria is the principal agent of media and development.

Those interviewed for this case study believe that media development is one of the most neglected areas for donor support in Syria. Specific figures for media support investment are hard to find. Given the sensitive and restrictive media environment, much of the work that is carried out is either under the radar or focused on less contentious development themes and constitutes only a small portion of donor investment. A UNDP breakdown of international support shows that the European Community has provided €29 million to government and institutions and €21 million to the private sector and NGOs. UNDP itself has invested €1.8 million in government and institutions in Syria, while France seems to be the biggest donor in terms of culture and youth.

Donors have taken two approaches to working in Syria. The first is unofficial: donors or implementing organisations do not have an official local partner or an endorsement by the authorities and their activities are usually limited to training journalists (often abroad) or supporting online initiatives and the Syrian Diaspora. The second – perhaps the only way to work inside Syria on a large-scale project – is working in partnership with Syrian ministries or government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs).

Before the uprising, there were advantages to working on strategies within the system and/or in collaboration with

the Government, if organisations could identify the right individuals within it. Indeed, the hope was to work with reform-minded individuals who sought change within the system. But after a year of rebellion and bloody crackdown, all reform initiatives have stalled and the regime is focused on security. The media itself has also come under fire. All foreign publications have been banned in the country, international journalists has been barred from entering the country, Syrian journalists have been detained continuously since the uprising and freelance journalists have been threatened. Some private media organisations, such as Syria News, have temporarily re-located to Turkey. Moreover, the Government has been restricting journalists' access to the real stories by preventing them from working on the ground, refusing interviews and sometimes shutting down their offices. International media outlets have been relying on citizen journalism and eyewitnesses with disclaimers from media outlets that cannot vouch for the authenticity of the material or statements.

It has been very difficult to get a clear picture of what is happening inside the country even for those living there. Organisations working within Syria, such as the UN and EU have suspended all project activities because of the security situation. Some donors and implementing organisations are still funding individuals and groups in the Syrian Diaspora. The situation is highly volatile and it is difficult to predict what the future holds.

It would be premature and naïve to make conclusive recommendations on media reforms and support in Syria at this moment. Instead I have highlighted some of the key findings from this case study and strategies that donors could consider – whether there is a change in regime or not.

- **Recognising that regime change doesn't guarantee media freedom.** The examples of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia have shown that even when authoritarian regimes fall, the old bureaucracy and mentality remains. Cultural and structural factors that are embedded in Syrian society should be recognised when setting up media support projects, regardless of the outcome of the uprising. At this stage, and before investing in Syria's media, there needs to be serious research into the situation and context. Indeed, one of the most common problems with media support initiatives in Syria is that the support often lacks a clear strategy or careful consideration of the realities of media on the ground and the circumstances in which it operates.

- **Investing in research on media reform processes, and aligning donor strategies to fit the local media context.** The domestic political environment determines the types of media development work that can have real impact, so evidence-based academic research looking at processes of reform and change is important. There is a lack of literature on Syrian society and politics and development partners would be wise to build a picture of what is happening before they implement projects. They could partner with regional universities, researchers and think tanks that have detailed local knowledge on

the ground. Such efforts can support the development of dialogue and communication on development and governance issues.

- **Supporting links between media elites and the grassroots by encouraging mainstream media practitioners to understand and engage with new media.** The role of social media during the Arab Spring reflected the changing status of bloggers and social media users in the regional media and their aspiration to be viewed as credible social commentators. There is a disconnect between traditional media and a burgeoning young community that is using new technologies to overcome some of the restrictions and traditions of old media. Syria has also witnessed a proliferation of new online fora that signal a major shift in its journalism field.

Background and methodology

This report is one of a series of case studies examining support to, and development of, the media in countries where media freedoms and rights to information and communication are restricted – with a particular focus on people, politics and media. Five case studies focus on Bangladesh, Cambodia, South Sudan, Syria and Uganda. They consider the impact of both policy and practice, and are intended to feed into decision-making at both levels to enable delivery of more focused and effective media support.

Three central questions guided case study research:

- What is the state of media freedom and public dialogue in the country?

- Who is supporting the media (i.e. donors and international civil society organisations) and how?

- What has been the impact of this support?

Studies draw on substantial desk research and in-depth interviews conducted over a period of up to nine months. Semi-structured interviews with key media and development stakeholders gathered information on a variety of approaches to, and expectations of, media support. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and in-country where possible.

The Syria case study carried out ten in-depth interviews with a range of experts including academics, journalists, donors, NGOs and implementing organisations. Interviews were semi-structured and were undertaken in person or by telephone/Skype. The interview with Mazen Darwich, head of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression, was conducted face-to-face by a Syrian journalist; then transcribed and sent to us via email.

Almost all calls for interviews made to international donors and implementation organisations working inside Syria were unanswered because of the crisis that began in March 2011 and sensitivities around the work of international donors. At the time of writing, most international donors and media implementation organisations had suspended their work in Syria. Two interviews were carried out with implementing organisations that have worked in Syria unofficially, with the interviewees wishing to remain anonymous. For this reason, their specific projects are not mentioned.

Follow-up interviews with a number of informants enabled us to probe further and gather responses on themes and perspectives that were being developed throughout the latter stages of the production of the report.

▶The country context

Syria came into being in 1916 under the Sykes-Picot agreement, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. Before that, it was one of the Ottoman provinces of 'Greater Syria' that today would consist of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestinian Territories, parts of Turkey and Iraq. Administered by France under a League of Nations mandate from 1921, Syria declared its official independence in 1946.

Between 1946 and 1960, Syria went through "a period of turbulence that was then emblematic of the personality-based, weakly institutionalized and coup prone politics of the Arab world".[1] In 1949 alone it experienced three military coups.[2] The Ba'ath regime has ruled Syria since 1963 and has been under the control of the Assad family since 1970.

The underlying vision of the socialist Ba'athist regime was to create a sense of nationhood and unity across class and sect. The State implemented social reforms, providing free schooling and improved living standards through public sector employment and subsidies on necessities such as wheat and oil. As part of this process the party apparatus sought to end the historical inequalities suffered by rural minorities, including the Alawi communities, elevating some to key posts in the party.[3 4 5]

Syria has been under emergency law since the Ba'athists took power, which continues to be justified by the state of war with Israel and by continuing threats from different militant groups. It is this law, which effectively suspends most constitutional protections, that has resulted in large-scale human rights violations, including the detention of anyone suspected of endangering public security and order. Political parties are prohibited unless they are co-opted into the National Progressive Front, set up in 1972, which allows parties to operate only if they work under the umbrella of the Ba'ath party. The law restricts public and private gatherings of five or more people and uses travel bans to punish activists and dissidents. Syria's security agencies detain people without arrest warrants, and in many cases, torture them to extract confessions.[6]

When Hafez al-Assad died in March 2000, his second son Bashar al-Assad inherited the presidency. In the early days of his leadership, the country experienced some liberalisation. Hundreds of political prisoners were released and tentative steps were taken to ease media restrictions, such as allowing private media. Bashar al-Assad's presidency, however, has failed to generate any political reforms to match the economic reforms that continued, unevenly, during his first decade in power.

During this period the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon put paid to any notion of real reform. Many who once saw Bashar al-Assad as a potential partner, open-minded, and Western-oriented, now see him as just as tied to the regime as his father – a regime far more entrenched and stronger than the President alone.[7]

Right
Traders and friends outside shops in Bab Sharki, Damascus

MAHA TAKI/BBC MEDIA ACTION

A 2009 report from the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCMFE), an unlicensed non-governmental organisation (NGO), listed 417 political and human rights activists banned from travelling, with bans extended to their families in some cases.[8] Watchdog organisation Freedom House has rated Syria "Not Free" for years, rating it 7 on political liberties and 6 on civil liberties in 2011, with 1 being most free and 7 least free.[9]

However, the regime has always enjoyed legitimacy on two important issues. First, the Assads created political stability. The prolonged Lebanese civil war of 1975 to 1990, in which Syria's military and security played a role, and the occupation of Iraq and its subsequent violent internal clashes show what could happen to Syria should its leadership collapse. Second, the Assad regime has been seen as the strong hand that protects Syria from Israel. Most Syrians agree with the struggle against Israel and want the return of the Golan Heights, land seized by Israel in the 1976 war.[10]

Scholarly studies of Syria, exemplified by Nikolaos van Dam in 1996, stress the importance of the sectarian and tribal nature of the minority Alawi regime that rules over a mainly Sunni majority.[11] Other academics say that this reading neglects more nuanced power structures that cut across sectarian lines and that there are other factors that explain the resilience of the regime. These include the populist structure and rhetoric of the Ba'ath party, a growing security apparatus and the co-opting of certain bourgeoisie elites with wide business interests that have flourished with the regime's help. Ruling elites and a growing network of inter-related businesses and families have benefited from the state's *ta'addudiya policy* (pluralism – private alongside state), strengthening the regime's hold over key constituents and blocking any move towards democratisation that might undermine their privileged relations and access to government.[12 13 14]

Recent literature has examined the resilience of the regime and the economic networks in which Sunni, Alawi and Christians have nurtured and benefited from their relations with the ruling elites.[15 16 17]

Meanwhile, Syria's official 'opposition' has not been a viable alternative as it has been ruthlessly suppressed by the regime as well as being fractured and weak. The most recent organised opposition to the Government – the Damascus Spring in 2000 consisting of human rights associations, political parties, civil society forums, intellectuals and underground Islamic groups – was fragmented and ineffectual, collapsing in under a year with the imprisonment of eight of its civil society leaders.[18]

What's more, people have been afraid of regime change and the chaos that may ensue. As a result, they often behave as if they support the regime. This is what Lisa Wedeen, in her work on the cult of Assad, calls the "politics of dissimulation".[19] She argues that "the focus of coercive compliance is not the actual meting out of punishments to those who disobey but the dissemination of credible

Syria in brief

Demographics	
Population	23,000,000 (2011 est.)
Ethnic groups	Arab: 90.3% Other (Kurds, Armenians): 9.7%
Religions	Sunni Muslim: 74%, Other Muslims (includes Alawite, Druze): 16% Christian (various denominations): 10% Jewish (tiny communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo)
Languages	Arabic (official); Kurdish, Turkmen, Neo-Aramaic, and Armenian
Literacy	Total population: 79.6% Male: 86.0% Female: 73.6% (2004 census)
Urbanisation	Urban population: 56% of total population (2010) Rate of urbanisation: 2.5% annual rate of change (2010-15 est.)

Source: CIA World Factbook[20]

Media penetration and freedom	
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	10
Total dailies circulation (2009)	379,000
Total TV penetration (2009)	90% (Satellite TV penetration: 74%)
Broadband penetration (2009)	0.5%
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	16

Source: CIMA (Center for International Media Assistance)[21]

threats of punishment. Although threats, to be credible, must at least occasionally be carried out, in general they suffice to ensure the compliance of most citizens".[22] Authoritarianism in this sense, she writes, is explicit: it produces a sense of unconscious compliance. People are aware of the political charade that is being played out, and while they do not internalise the regime's doctrines, they adopt a more pragmatic or sceptical acceptance.[23]

What we are seeing now is a tearing down of the parameters of fear in Syrian political life.[24] It is precisely because people have been 'acting' rather than 'internalising' that today's events are unfolding.

▶The media context

The media regulatory environment

When Hafez al-Assad was in power, every part of the media was owned and ruled "by a political agent of the ruling group".[25] In 2001, Bashar al-Assad issued Presidential Decree no. 50 on press legislation, which allowed for private publication for the first time since 1963. However, six months into his term, a subsequent press law imposed a further range of restrictions, and publications could be suspended for violating content rules.

Today, private media must obtain licences from the Prime Minister who can, at any time, refuse an application on the basis of 'state national interest' and 'social security' – terms that are not clearly defined.[26] In addition, journalists are required by law to divulge their sources when requested to do so by the authorities.

❝ Journalists are required by law to divulge their sources when requested to do so by the authorities. ❞

The Ministry of Information monitors content closely to ensure adherence to government policies and directives.[27] Outlets can be legally required to submit programming for pre-approval and possible censorship by the State. Under Articles 9 and 10, the Ministry must approve all foreign publications and has the power to ban them if it disapproves of their content. Private, commercial FM broadcasters have been given the green light, but cannot transmit news or political content.

Wedeen writes that the state media specifies "the parameters of the permissible, communicating acceptable forms of speech and behaviour to citizens".[28] While it does not disseminate barefaced lies, it omits information, censors facts and publicises partial truths.[29]

There are well-known taboos, such as discussion of religious minorities and religion and references to sex. Criticism of the State may target institutions and make veiled references to certain ministers, but must not name names. The President's name must never be mentioned with sarcasm or in humour. None of these prohibitions are written down, but they are perfectly understood by everyone.[30]

Syria's only professional journalism organisation, the Syrian Journalists Syndicate (SJS), is dominated by the political elite and serves national rather than professional interests. This was underlined in a statement by Elias Mrad, Head of the SJS, in an interview with Omar Abdul Latif in 2009:

"It is not a professional but a national syndicate. I'm not ready to give any journalist who is not patriotic the card of a contributing or working journalist. If a journalist works inside Syria and criticises, then there is no problem. But if you work for an external newspaper that fabricates bad news about our nation, I won't protect you or give you a card".[31]

Who censors who?

While there are now a high number of 'privately' run newspapers that push social and cultural boundaries, political coverage remains firmly under the regime's sole guidance. Indeed, only two or three of the privately-run media outlets cover politics at all, and their owners have close ties to the regime. For a private media outlet to exist in Syria at all, it must comply with the regime's parameters of what is permissible. Indeed, some interviewees said that private media outlets do not just comply with these parameters, they help to set them as they are part of the regime itself. It has become clear that Syria's media privatisation is about the country's economic liberalisation, rather than any positive change in the media landscape.[32]

Some argue, however, that authoritarianism in the sense of top-down and central media control is only part of the picture. Juliette Harkin argues that Syria's private media operate in a dynamic power relation that involves negotiation and compromise between different parties and between the Government and media owners.[33] Similarly, Reinoud Leenders says that the private sector in Syria "operate[s] in an ambiguous authoritarian atmosphere, thereby compelling them to engage in complex interactions with the state".[34] Ibrahim Yakhour, former producer at the State-run Syrian Television station and trainer at Arij (Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism), explains "margins of freedom of thinking and expression are not consistent, because there has never ever been a strictly designed information policy".[35]

The rule of law on the ground is erratic and subject to the political context and even the mood of officials. Because of this ambiguous environment, the effects of this kind of repression are never direct. Instead, it is often the culture of fear that leads journalists and writers to self-censor – perhaps a more dangerous form of media repression in the long-term.

Syrian journalists work in a field that is contested and sometimes blurred, with differing views on the role of the journalist. Harkin's interviews with Syrian journalists show that they are no longer a homogenous group sharing a unified view of their role in society. She says that there is a dual media system: the private and state sectors. Journalists in the private sector see those working in the state sector as civil servants, not journalists.[36] Yet, she continues, a new generation of journalists in the private sector are less cynical about potential problems. They are embedding new professional working practices and challenging the old relationships between the state and the media.

Other interviewees, including Donatella Della Ratta, a researcher specialising in Syrian media and new media, believe it is easier to have a controversial piece issued by State media such as a Ba'ath newspaper or on *Tishreen* than by private media outlets such as Baladna or al Watan TV.[37] She cites the coverage of Al Duniya (private) which she explains is much more aggressive and unbalanced than Syrian state TV.

New and changing media

Before the March 2011 uprising, an overview of the Syrian media in the past 10 years would suggest that a more open and hopeful future was possible. Satellite receivers are widely used, and many viewers tune into pan-Arab and regional TV stations. While we don't know how many Syrians watch regional and international media rather than the official Syrian channels, there is ample evidence to suggest that they are widely watched.[38] One sign is the mass of satellite dishes on the roofs of buildings across the country, especially in major cities.[39]

Much has been written about the democratic potential of satellite television to liberate viewers from government controls on national media. Syrians, however, tend to be wary of coverage of Syrian affairs by international and national satellite channels, seeing them as just as tied to their home nations as Syrian television. Naomi Sakr, writing on satellite television in the Middle East and North Africa, acknowledges that while the satellite channels let viewers escape from the territorial and jurisdictional confines of the country they live in, there are doubts about whether these stations are intrinsically de-territorialised.[40] Her research suggests that power relations are not de-territorialised and can be traced to the exercise of political power and access to capital by groups and individuals within the state.[41]

Despite disappointment on the potential role of satellite television, it can be credited with forcing the media inside Syria, as elsewhere in the Arab world, to redefine their discourse to keep their audiences.

Syrian TV, for example, has started to carry political programmes and debates that feature once 'taboo' issues, and even airs interviews with opposition figures on occasion.

Syria has a long tradition of underground publishing, with *Ar-Rai* journal published by the banned Syrian Communist Party and various Kurdish publications, despite a ban on the Kurdish language.[42] This tradition has seen a resurgence during the uprising. But, just as before, the penalties for

Below
A satellite dish is set up outside a traditional mud-brick house in Aleppo, Syria.

ALFREDO CALIZ/PANOS

those who are caught include immediate arrest without trial and possibly torture, with only those who have a fervent and committed political mission prepared to take the risk.

The proliferation of new websites suggests a shift in journalism in Syria. One unintended result of the President's push for the Internet in Syria may have been the plethora of websites that have emerged in the past decade. While focusing mainly on developments around economic reform, the fact that they are new platforms operating outside existing legislation created a grey area in which journalists could push boundaries. At the same time, Syrians could use social networking sites to explore sensitive and taboo topics. The State responded by setting up a dedicated online monitoring team, pressuring editors to self-censor online and arresting journalists and bloggers.

> 🗨️🗨️ The most remarkable change in Syria today has not been in the media itself, but in the attitudes of the Syrian public towards the importance and role of the media. 🗨️🗨️

In late 2010, the Syrian Government approved a new Internet law that would allow authorities to enter the offices of online journalists and bloggers, seize materials, and prosecute bloggers in a criminal court.[43] A 19-year-old girl, Tal al-Mallouhi, was said to be the youngest Internet prisoner in the entire region in December 2010, having spent a year in prison for blogging poems about her yearning for freedom of expression. This can work both ways: journalist Claire Duffett reported from Syria that when a video posted to Facebook in September 2010 showed two Syrian teachers beating students, the Ministry of Education removed them from their positions.[44]

Facebook, YouTube and many social networking sites and websites were officially banned until February 2011 – the ban was lifted before the uprising began in the following month.

Above
The Free Hussein Facebook campaign page. Hussein Ghrer is a political activist and blogger who was detained by the authorities on 24 October 2011 for 37 days then detained again on 15 December 2011. As of June 2012, he has not been released.

Pushing the boundaries

Despite widespread condemnation of Syria's state-owned or supported media, observers claim evidence of subtle attempts to take advantage of the uncertain times to push the boundaries. Maurice Aaek notes that "the emergence of media content coming out of Syria has been mostly compiled by opposition members who attempt to distribute them online because of the barriers they would face to printing and publishing". Yet, he laments, "these initiatives lack professionalism, support networks and – for the most part – can hardly compete or form an alternative space to local and international mainstream media".[45]

Even before the uprising, it was very difficult for foreign journalists to enter Syria, and impossible without authorisation. Once in the country, journalists were accompanied by a 'minder': an official from the Ministry of Communication. Those who came into Syria on tourist visas but practised journalism quickly found themselves 'persona non grata'.

All foreign media have been banned since the uprising and those who are allowed in are kept under the watchful eye of the state security, or even targeted by security forces. Even regional newspapers such as Lebanese dailies *Al Safir* and *Al Akhbar* that are politically aligned to the Syrian regime have been banned. Major broadcasters have got around this blackout by working with activists to send in undercover teams to report from cities like Homs, often at great risk, and even at the cost of their own lives.

Maurice Aaek and other interviewees outline the huge shift in reporting within Syria. He argues that *Al Watan*, a private newspaper, has been covering taboo political issues that it would not have dared address before the crisis. Even the Government's mouthpiece, *Tishreen*, he notes, while standing alongside the regime politically, is covering issues in a different way. In January 2012 for example, *Tishreen* published an article by Omar Hallaj, CEO of the Syrian Trust for Development, in which he criticised both the Government and the opposition for inciting hate speech in the current crisis.[46]

Sham FM, a private radio station in Syria with a licence to cover non-political issues, is now one of the sources many Syrians tune into, and has started to cover political issues for the first time – breaking through many so-called red lines.[47] Aaek comments "of course it still operates within Syria so it cannot take an opposition line per se, but it has become the freest stations with excellent centre line political coverage and a good alternative to the state stations".

Interviewees in Syria have commented that the most remarkable change in Syria today has not been in the media itself, but in the attitudes of the Syrian public towards the importance and role of the media. Aaek says "before the [uprising] the media was of no importance to people. Now people are reading and discussing the news and commenting on it from all sides." This is a new development in Syria and a crucial one, given that the State is the principal agent of media and development.

Mazen Darwich, head of the SCMFE, explains the phenomenon. He says:

> "Before when someone had a bit of information, they would hide it and be scared of even knowing it. Recently, the attitudes have changed and people want to publish and put out this information. Today I see almost a race between media and individuals to influence public opinion in Syria. This may seem normal in other parts of the world but in Syria, the notion of 'public opinion' did not even exist to us."[48]

In his 2011 policy paper, *Re-thinking Civic Activism in the Middle East*, Kawa Hassan argues that the tipping point of fear in Syria has shifted and, at this time, it is the small incremental changes that can lead to meaningful social change, once the political opportunity arises.[49]

▶Civil society and public dialogue

Given the current media context in Syria, there is little opportunity for the media to carry out its role as the 'fourth estate': stimulating public dialogue to hold the Government to account. Despite the small steps that have been taken on the back of the uprising, there is little opportunity for citizens to make their voices heard via the mainstream media.

A look at Syria's wider civil society reveals a similar picture. Historically in Syria, and elsewhere in the region, artists, poets and writers have played a role in contesting authoritarian regimes.[50] In Syria, however, films and writings that are highly critical are banned in the country and film directors, for example, have been co-opted into the system as they rely on state-financed organs to make their films.

This has been the case for other parts of civil society, from unions to student groups. Indeed Caldwell states that until 2005, any manifestation of civil society was "funnelled through the State through a process of permits and regulations designed to control any expression of popular will".[51] The current legal framework for associations and their activities is governed by constitutional texts and the Associations and Private Institutions Law no. 93 of 1958, its Implementing Regulations, No. 1330 of 1958, and subsequent amendments introduced in 1969 under Legislative Decree no. 224.[52]

The regime has recently reversed legislation that once allowed the existence of NGO branches (while limiting their effectiveness and reach) and NGOs are still constrained by an environment dominated by approval procedures. Syrian associations must have prior approval from the Government to receive any international funding or assistance.

Syria's civil society is a relatively new sphere and has emerged as a result, very largely, of the Government's own reforms.[53] This also means, however, that it comes under the Government's full control.

The past 10 years have seen a new wave of NGOs, mostly focusing on areas such as the environment, women and youth issues, and sometimes authorised as a result of support from Syria's First Lady. According to the International Programme of the Charity Commission,[54] the number of associations has roughly doubled since 2003 when the current Minister of Social Affairs and Labour was appointed. There are around 1,400 officially registered NGOs currently working in Syria, and some unregistered bodies that are involved in small-scale local activities. However, the number of NGOs is one of the lowest in the Middle East, compared with some 3,500 and 2,000 NGOs in Lebanon and Jordan respectively.

Omar Hallaj, CEO of The Syrian Trust for Development explains that there is still a long way to go before there is a change in the culture of mistrust between government and civil society, even if the legal framework changes. He said "I think it's going to take some time, beyond the changing of the framework, to be engaged on some level of trust. It boils down to the lack of understanding of the role of civil society and the lack of a clear social contract between civil society and government. In many ways, the Government

has always concentrated on how they can ensure that the sector is working within the confines of its own social and development priorities. Meanwhile civil society sees the role of the Government as totally controlling and not flexible enough and not allowing NGOs to take on their true roles in the developmental sphere".[55]

The increasing access to the Internet has allowed writers some freedom, partly because the bureaucracy has not caught up with the developments in information technology and partly because the Internet was not, initially, seen as such a threat as the mass media.

Social networking sites, however, allow users the freedom to publish raw unedited material, ensuring bottom-up communication where everyone's voice is heard and that is not subject to state-controlled gate-keeping. There are many examples of bloggers and online journalists helping to foster debate about particularly sensitive subjects in Syria. Such debates have reflected some key modern disagreements on a wide range of basic issues: identity, religion, state and personal freedom. Recently however, most of the growing alternative online media aims to counter the State's line on the uprising and represent the demonstrators, activists and opposition groups within and beyond Syria.

Yet web-users in Syria still face major general barriers to actually accessing the Internet. When considering the use of the Internet for development, implementation organisations need to look closely at government regulations, the infrastructure and telecommunications systems, the role of debate in Internet use, self-censorship, the political climate and illiteracy rates. These key factors can determine how technologies are used and appropriated and how technologies can empower or disempower citizens.

Above
A protestor holds up a sign during a funeral in Damascus in January 2011.

TOM PILSTON/PANOS

The role of the Internet in Syrian public dialogue: potentials and constraints

MAHA TAKI/BBC MEDIA ACTION

The Internet is a major topic for most young, urban people. However, its continued expansion in the Arab world is hampered by two factors: negative attitudes to web-based content in parts of society and in official circles, and enduring problems with connectivity. On the first issue, there is widespread filtering and site blocking by the Syrian authorities, often resulting in self-censorship amongst browsers and bloggers alike.

This may be why Arab society is rife with perceptions that much Internet content is harmful (in that that young people can access porn, chat with strangers and play computer games for hours on end). Media literacy is practically absent from the educational curriculum and the educational potential of websites is often overlooked. Teachers rarely have the training to incorporate the use of the Internet for research in their teaching. Instead, young people learn about the Internet from their friends and tend to see it as a source of entertainment rather than a space to develop opportunities. As one Syrian Internet Service Provider manager said during an interview: "People are afraid of the Internet. People are afraid of the Internet for their children. They think there is bad content, that it is wasteful, that they will spend all their time on it chatting."[56]

Left
Street near Bab Tuma Square, Damascus.

Farah, an 18-year-old Syrian journalism student and blogger said in an interview that when she goes to her friends' houses, she would never mention that she is a 'blogger'. She explained "either they would not have heard of it or if they had, they would think it is a bad thing to do for a young girl like me".[57]
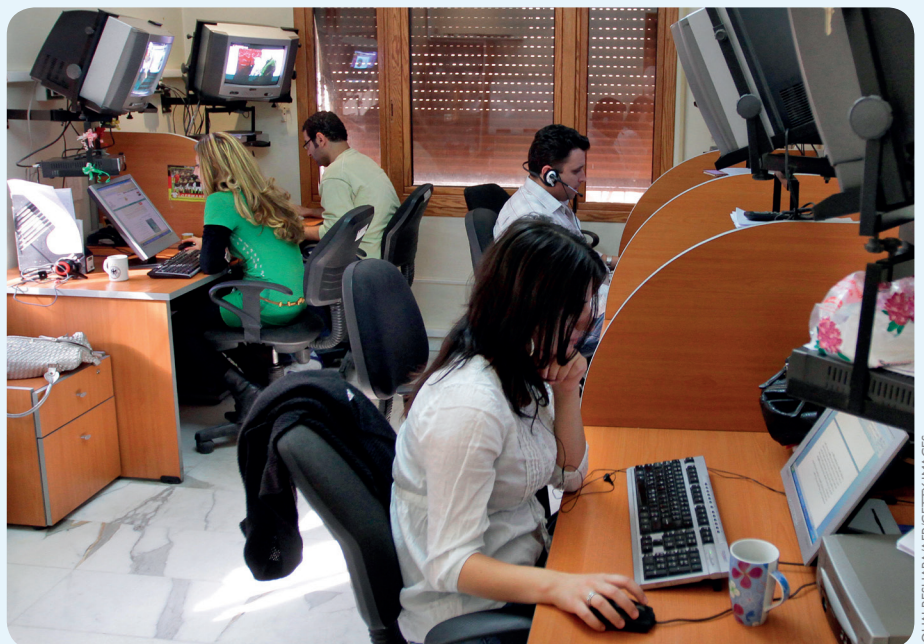
Then there is the availability of suitable content and the cost of accessing the Internet. If users don't think they will benefit from the Internet and think that the content is irrelevant to them, they have no incentive to learn how to use it or pay for it.

Questions on whether people understand the potential of the Internet, know they can publish their own content in their own language, can gauge the quality of the information they get and can take advantage of searches on the Internet are all issues to consider when measuring Internet access and inequalities.[58]

A manager of an Internet Service Provider in Syria explained the obstacles regarding Internet use, saying "There is a need for the production of ICT-related products and services online. The Internet is generally seen as source of entertainment more than anything else".[59] A national Project Director who wished to remain anonymous talked of a joint donor and government project on Internet development in Syria, saying:

Below
Journalists from the *Syria News* website work at their offices in Damascus.

"The Internet does not flow like water in Syria. The development projects that are bringing Internet access to remote areas in Syria are bringing in an alien technology and throwing it on a community. There has to be a wider investment in it and a regulatory framework. This in turn will create demand. For the time being, the Internet is seen here as a luxury and waste of time rather than a necessity."

Indeed, much of the failure of the early promises for communication technologies to assist developing countries can be attributed to neglect of the context.[60] Failing to consider the political and cultural realities, processes and effects against which new technologies should be viewed will only lead to a partial analysis of the Internet and its impact on different societies.

LOUAI BESHARA/AP/GETTY IMAGES

▶Donor responses and media support

According to the country evaluation report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the European Community (EC) and its member states are the largest donors to Syria, followed by Japan and UNDP itself, but in global terms Syria is a not a big recipient of aid.[61] Among regional donors, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development has provided significant finance for agricultural development. Other regional donors include the Islamic Development Bank and the Arab Authority for Agricultural Investment and Development.

It is hard to find specific figures for donor investment in media support. Given the sensitive and restrictive media environment, much of this work is either carried out below the radar, or focuses on less contentious development themes. Either way, it accounts for only a small portion of overall donor investment. A breakdown of international support by UNDP shows that the EC has provided €29 million in support to government and institutions and €21 million to the private sector and NGOs. UNDP itself has provided €1.8 million to Syria's Government and institutions, while France seems to be the biggest donor to cultural and youth initiatives.[62]

There have, in general, been two approaches by donors working in Syria. The first is unofficial: donors or implementing organisations do not have an official local partner or endorsement from the authorities and usually limit their activities to training journalists (often abroad) or supporting online initiatives and the Syrian Diaspora. The second approach – perhaps the only way to work inside Syria on a large-scale project – is working in partnership with Syrian Ministries or government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs). Given that there is no genuine media regulatory body in Syria and that the media is controlled by the Ministry of Information, many donors have worked directly with the Ministry on media reform. At the time of writing, however, all donors working in Syria, such as the UN and EC, had suspended their projects because of the security situation. It is likely that they will review their strategies for the coming years: Michael Ryan, EU Political Counsellor in Syria explained that the EU Country Strategy Paper for 2011-2013 will be scrapped and a new one created when the situation is clearer.[63]

A political reality check

Mazen Darwich believes that the media sector is one of the sectors most neglected by donors in Syria. He complains that media support often lacks a clear strategy or a proper understanding of the realities of media on the ground or the challenges it faces, saying:

> "They [donors] usually improvise and so media support programmes have not made any big impact! But let's not hold these donors and institutions fully responsible for this. The media is part of the political situation in Syria. We cannot talk about a free media in a non-democratic country. We cannot create a free media within the framework of a dictatorship either".[64]

Similarly, Michael Ryan from the EU said "very little goes to media support because it is so difficult and because you need the political will of the Government".[65] Donatella Della Ratta also believes that funds are usually allocated into one of three strands – freedom of expression, arts and culture – because they are safer and easier to work with than media and technology with its burgeoning activists.[66]

Other donors prefer to work outside the system – either because they are banned from entering Syria or because they believe that working with government institutions on media support is a futile process. One Project Manager of an international media development organisation who wished to remain anonymous said:

> "To be honest, we got funding and we wanted to do whatever we could in those circumstances. It was more of a priority to make a project happen rather than do nothing. We took journalists out of Syria and trained them – we had to be incredibly low profile – all the training was done by Arab trainers and hosted in Arab countries."

> ❞❞[Donor] funds are usually allocated into one of three strands – freedom of expression, arts and culture – because they are safer and easier to work with than media and technology with its burgeoning activists. ❞❞

▶ Hivos: Working on the margins

The work of Hivos (the Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation) in Syria, Iran and Iraq is coordinated by a dedicated team and managed at the Hivos head office in the Netherlands (all other work is managed from in country). At present, Hivos supports online initiatives, including Global Voices[67] and Mideast Youth[68] an online news site set up by a Syrian.

Marjan Besuijen, Hivos's Programme Specialist on ICT and Media, explains "In country we haven't done anything in Syria with media. It's impossible now to work inside. We support initiatives such as the annual Arab bloggers conference. We do regional stuff and try to find Syrian activists or people to join us."[69]

Explaining Hivos's general strategy for working in Syria, Marjan says "When we work in Syria we tend to concentrate on technical stuff to be quite neutral. Our media strategy in Syria (and Iran and Iraq) is to focus on basic technology skills/core skills so that we can do it more in the open, so to say".

While supporting online work and the Diaspora can be extremely beneficial when working under such constraints, Hivos does not have systematic reporting or evaluation of these projects, which usually have more than one donor. So their impact is hard to gauge.

Hivos also has a Knowledge Programme, a collaboration between practitioners and academics to develop knowledge on key issues for the work of civil society organisations (CSOs) and the wider development sector, working closely with CSOs, academic centres and think tanks worldwide, including in the Middle East. The resulting policy papers and newsletters are useful contributions to the literature on media and civil society in Syria.[70]

Working within the system

Some donors and implementing organisations working outside Syria feel that it is futile to work with its Government's organisations.

💬💬 I think the first problem we [Syrian journalists] have here is with ourselves and 'self-censorship', not with the government. 💬💬

However, Ibrahim Yakhour believes that even journalists working for state media "have opportunities and margins to make better journalism exist" and they should not be neglected.[71] Speaking of his experience of training with Arij, he says:

"We worked for the most part with state journalists. There were a few professional ones who had high ethical values and were constantly looking to change and reform the media work they do within the parameters of the acceptable."

One Arij trainee who works for a state media complains:

"People do have a bad stereotype of journalism in Syria. Yes, we have our red lines, but so do all countries. I think the first problem we [Syrian journalists] have here is with ourselves and 'self-censorship', not with the Government."[72]

▶ UNDP Syria: Working with the Government

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) works with Syrian Government counterparts and stakeholders on its media support and other developmental programmes. In 2010, UNDP provided $444,000 for 'Support to the Media Sector in Syria' to be used over two years by the Syrian Ministry of Information. The aim is to strengthen institutional and human resource capacity in the media sector – a contribution to a United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) outcome: Efficiency and accountability of governance structures at central and local levels strengthened by government, civil society and the private sector towards sustainable development. The direct beneficiaries are public media institutions, national media outlets and journalism students.

UNDP has carried out two other media support initiatives with the Ministry of Information in recent years:

- *Tawasul* (Empowerment of Journalists): The project, launched in 2009, aims to create an online national network of youth journalists backed by a training programme to develop their skills. UNDP Syria managed the funding and related administration. However, the Syrian Ministry of Information (with some UNDP involvement) has taken over the project and it has stalled for lack of funding.

- *Syria Times* Newspaper project: In this on-going project, launched in 2008, UNDP has partnered with the Ministry of Information to re-launch the *Syria Times* as an influential English language daily newspaper for Syrians and others interested in Syrian news.

An independent evaluation of UNDP activities in Syria points to the fact that it has focused its relationship on government and has missed the opportunity to promote civil society – a relatively new sphere in Syria that has been met with official caution, if not suspicion.[73]

Juliette Harkin, former BBC Media Action Project Manager, and an expert on Syria, says:

"We [BBC Media Action] worked in 2004 with individuals within the ministry who wanted change and tried to get them to be the drivers of that. All media development work that has been done in Syria has, in my opinion, been predicated upon this idea that there can be change from within – you have an authoritarian regime and you find who the reformers are within that (individuals) and you work with them."[74]

Training for journalists that takes place in Syria usually focuses on social and environment reporting and benefits the trainees in two ways. First, these issues matter. Second, the reporting and producing skills they learn can be applied to political issues later on.[75]

It is hard to measure the impact of such training, but it can – at the very least – help to build a cadre of journalists who understand and promote best practice, and who have the skills to support media reform.

It is important to note however that journalists, overall, have few opportunities in Syria. Journalism is still seen as a poor man's trade, yet there is fierce competition for a small number of jobs, which often go to those with the best connections. Some young journalists feel compelled to leave Syria and work for pan-Arab stations in order to innovate with content and editorial direction.

Finding the right partners

The interviews conducted for this case study suggest that there is a strong argument for working with individual activists, such as bloggers, film-makers, and journalists. Kawa Hassan highlights the importance of working with activists in Syria whose activities may seem apolitical on the surface, but political in that they fight for social inclusion and social justice.[76] Campaigns in Syria that have been driven by such activists include the 'National Campaign against Honour Crimes' and the 'Personal Status Campaign'.

Donatella Della Ratta says that in her experience of working in Syria donors usually go to the usual suspects: organisations that speak good English, that have received donor support before and that can write reports for them. However, she explains "this support is not going to the right places because in Syria the most interesting and active people do not speak any English".[77]

Individuals in Syria cannot easily create NGOs because the legal framework doesn't allow this. Donors, however, rarely fund – or have access to – individual activists. Michael Ryan of the EU says that "it is often dangerous for individuals to get funding from the EU directly and real NGOs [as opposed to GONGOs] haven't made themselves known to us [the EU] in Syria".[78]

The BBC and Arij: Working in Syria, but not within the system

BBC Media Action
(formerly the BBC World Service Trust)

In 2004, BBC Media Action launched a three-year £1.5 million Arab Media Dialogue programme across seven Middle Eastern countries. In Syria, BBC Media Action conducted journalism skills, business and management training and mentoring for selected journalists, editors and managers, working in close partnership with both state and private media outlets. The private online newspaper, *Syria News*, was identified as a promising start up and, in 2006; its managers were trained on sustainable business models for online news. Seven of its staff attended BBC-run workshops in training for trainers and mentoring skills before *Syria News* set up its own training operation for young graduates. Many of those who took part in this programme still work in the media and have become respected media trainers, journalists and editors in their own right.

The programme highlighted the structural blockages that hold the profession back in Syria, while recognising the potential to work within such a restricted media system if that work is based on needs and has buy-in from senior staff and the support of the Government – in Egypt and Syria in particular.

In 2008, BBC Media Action launched its three-year project 'Socially Responsible Media Platforms in the Arab World' with funding from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. *Syria News* was the official Syrian partner, endorsed by the Ministry of Information on behalf of the BBC. The project aimed to set up an interactive online training platform, the Ara2 [opinions] Academy, for Syria's journalistic and blogging communities, creating networks between the two. This reflected the changing status of bloggers in the regional media and responded to their aspiration to be seen as credible social commentators. The project also supported *Syria News* as an example of a sustainable independent media organisation, with managerial staff taking part in study tours in London and in business development training.

BBC Media Action did not work with a local partner on blogger training, as this could have alienated and excluded parts of the blogging community. Instead, the BBC collaborated with an informal network of bloggers from across the country and recruited mentors for the distance learning system (the Ara2 Academy) who were trained at workshops in London and Damascus. Two Arabic-language courses, 'Basic Journalism Skills' and 'Social Media Tools', were delivered through the bespoke Ara2 Academy platform and face-to-face workshops that gave beneficiaries the chance to apply theory to practice.

The programme did not advertise courses officially, yet within days of the announcement of the training programme on the Syrian blogosphere and through word of mouth, over 70 journalists and

bloggers applied for places – a sure sign of the huge appetite for training on basic journalism principles and social media tools in Syria. A total of 25 bloggers, 31 web journalists, and 7 trainees who were both bloggers and journalists took part in the training programme before the worsening political situation put an end to it.

For most of the journalists on Ara2, the social media course was their first introduction to online publishing tools and the use of blogs. Many bloggers were largely unaware of ethical standards of journalism and were introduced to web tools that they had heard of, but did not have the skills, confidence or know-how to use. The project revealed that those who use the Internet – even those with their own blogs – often lack the skills to use the medium to its full potential.

These partnerships have not survived Syria's recent upheavals. The owners of *Syria News* have opened a second office for the newspaper in Turkey while the bloggers keep a low profile as the Assad regime continues to crack down on all dissent. Some former students have been detained for their outspoken blogging or journalism. Some have left Syria. Participation in Ara2 (a foreign-funded platform) was used as an excuse for detentions, as it is illegal to have contact with foreign organisations, even though no bloggers were charged with anything related explicitly to their participation in the programme. Their plight is a clear demonstration of the risks of working with individuals in Syria.

Arij (Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism)

Arij [http://arij.net] was created by leading Arab journalists, editors, media activists and professionals concerned about the lack of investigative reporting skills that could benefit local communities. The programme was originally set up in 2005 with funds from the Danish Parliament, disbursed through Copenhagen-based International Media Support (IMS). The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) is now a key donor.

Arij works within the parameters set by the Syrian Government, with official approval from the relevant ministry to train private and state-sector journalists through its office in Syria. Journalists trained by Arij form a strong clique and there is no sense of threat or risk involved in participating. This method of working in Syria is what Ibrahim Yakhour, calls "comforting" and "expansive".[79]

Arij has trained many young journalists with no objections from the Government and with official endorsement, resulting in a bigger buy-in from those who don't want to cross any red lines (such as working with foreign media). The training usually focuses on social and environment reporting, which are important issues for Syria, but the skills learned can be applied to many other areas, including politics.[80]

Local grassroots initiatives

almudawen.net: Syria's blog aggregator

The Riyadh-based blog aggregator and website Al-Mudawen.net was started by Syrian blogger and programme developer Omar Mushaweh. Its goal, according to its creator, is to "bring together the diverse bloggers around a cause; whether it be political, social or humanitarian". He explains, "When you have a large aggregation of bloggers in one place, you have the chance to blog about causes, support them and market them online and hopefully forward them to the offline world".[81] The website includes a section for campaigning and provides updated statistics on the number of blogs in Syria, the language in which they blog, the author's gender and the number of new posts.

Syria News: The place I live
www.syria-news.com/wilive

Syria News is one of the first online general affairs newspapers in Syria and the most successful in number of views. In 2004, having worked with BBC facilitators and trainers, it launched 'The place I live', a section of the site that created a space for citizens to share their complaints with the right officials. Users log their complaints by region or topic on the site. *Syria News* collates them every day and sends them on to the appropriate officials and ministries by fax. Their responses are then published on the site. These online discussions have spurred officials to respond to a wide variety of issues, spanning the environment, traffic, government administration, health, schooling and many more. A recent and fairly typical example was "We are suffering from daily seven-hour power cuts in Mashrouh El Andulus…". The Damascus municipality has received more than 6,400 complaints in recent years via *Syria News*, with more than 2,100 addressed by officials.

Syrian Women's Observatory
www.nesasy.org

The Syrian Women's Observatory (SWO) an online forum and information website in Arabic, focuses on the rights of women and children in Syria, with female volunteer writers contributing stories and stimulating online discussions. SWO is not licenced but has operated relatively freely since 2005. However, its head, Bassam Kadi, has been banned from travel for the past19 years following his political activities in 1980s.

He told *Syria Today* that "Political decisions are necessary for improving society, but they are not enough. Change should be initiated from below before pressure is applied on the Government to enforce it".[82] One of SWO's most successful campaigns 2005 challenged a proposed fundamentalist draft law that would replace the existing Personal Status Code and, therefore, violate women's rights. Under pressure from the campaign, the Government dropped the draft law. SWO is now building a network of organisations and NGOs committed to the creation of a civil society in which women and men are equal. Bassam himself has pushed civil society actors in Syria to lose their fear and realise the potential that exists beyond the red lines.

Lack of long-term donor strategies

Many media projects in Syria consist of one-off training activities for journalists, and are unlikely to produce real change on the ground. They also run the risk of frustrating rather than empowering individuals, when they are unable to use what they have learned in practice.

Mazen Darwich complains about the sort of training programmes that have no long-term objectives. He explains "there is a lot of organising of visits to Western countries for journalism training in what is called the politics of freedom of expression". However, he laments, "up until now we do not find efforts that have supported independent and professional journalists to produce a social magazine, for example, so that they can at least apply what they learnt in these training sessions".[83]

In her 2006 paper 'Foreign Support for Media Freedom, Advocacy in the Arab Mediterranean', Sakr argues that it is self-evident that programmes for journalistic training will top the wish list, given that they are easy to replicate.[84] Journalism training, she maintains, is easy to carry out because it maximises the number of beneficiaries and faces the fewest objections from political authorities: they are confident that existing political and legal structures will stop trainees applying any subversive lessons they learn.

Krishna Kumar (cited in Sakr, 2011) notes that NGOs prefer to train journalists rather than building local institutions because institution building is an "uncertain and arduous process" and "international donors tend to be risk averse".[85] Indeed, it is often a frustrating experience for journalists to be trained to carry out the sort of journalistic work that they can't practice in reality.

▶Research on donor support to the media

There is a chronic lack of research on media habits and consumption in Syria. With the exception of country reports produced by the UN and World Bank that are for the most part descriptive rather than analytical, it is very difficult to find information on Syrian society and media. Damascus University's Sociological Department focuses on quantitative research, while its Media Department has no research strand. Foreign academic researchers studying political or sociological phenomenon in Syria are often faced with bureaucratic challenges and viewed with suspicion.

Within the media development context, donors and implementing organisations are rarely aware of each other's activities (with the exception of EU countries). Given the sensitive and restrictive environment in Syria, most donor work on media has been carried out below the radar, or has focused on less contentious development themes. Some donors steer clear of media work altogether or allocate only a small portion of overall donor investment to media.

Furthermore, implementing organisations working with the Syrian Diaspora or supporting online initiatives do not make their project activities public or disseminate impact reports for fear of endangering those involved. For these reasons, there has been a lack of coordination, which has led to wasted resources, little knowledge transfer and contributed to the lack of a long-term strategic vision on media development work.

This case study has drawn on the limited literature available and on interviews with key informants to generate the following key findings.

Key findings

The research for this case study suggests the need for long-term and strategic approaches to media development that supports legislation, institution-building and the growth of civil society. Media development to reform laws or regulations in countries where government obstructs the creation of NGOs or advocacy bodies is bound to be difficult. It is important to remember that the domestic political environment will determine the type of media development work that is possible. Support for the media without any understanding of a complex political context is not only ineffective: it can be dangerous. One method is to support those who are already trying to change the current legislation, making them stronger and independent, and to expand support beyond the intellectual and political elite based in the capital.

The situation in Syria, while tragic, has renewed interest in the emergence of CSOs. However, the Government is on the alert to stall any kind of reforms. Nedal Malouf, Editor in Chief of *Syria News*, outlines the state of civil society in Syria, saying:

> "The recent events showed us how weak our civil society is. We have no tools for these changes. We don't have institutions that can take these changes and I think if we had this, we would have avoided a lot of the problems we are facing now. The first thing that needs to be done in terms of development work is institution building and a culture of understanding what civil society means".[86]

It is useful to find the right individuals and agents of change and create networks between them. The Syrian uprising has shown that focusing only on urban media elites overlooks and can even marginalise important individual actors. Kawa Hassan maintains that individuals can form 'coalitions for change' centred on specific issues without confronting the State in an overtly political manner.[87] However, supporting one-off popular online media initiatives, usually based outside the country, without any form of strategic approach is not enough. As Della Ratta rightly points out, individuals who can be agents of change in Syria usually only speak Arabic and operate underground.[88] Donors rarely have access to the 'unusual' suspects who are in greatest need of training and support. And when they do, this causes problems on two fronts: first, it is illegal, and second, it can put those individuals at risk.

There are benefits to working on strategies within the system and/or in collaboration with the Government, if organisations can identify the right individuals within the system. On the one hand, support to the Government might end up putting more power in the wrong hands, can become ensnared in the corruption and bureaucracy of existing government bodies and may not yield any changes. Yet, as many interviewees for this case study have argued, there are agents of change and reformers within governmental organisations that can push the boundaries of freedom and enhance the media professional field in small steps. Programmes that work with the Government can help to elevate and progress the whole media sector rather than just the individuals concerned. It must be stressed, however, that after a year of rebellion, there are doubts that the reformist agenda is still alive in Syria or that any change can be possible from within. Right now, the regime's priority is security, rather than reform.

❝❝ The collapse of Assad doesn't mean the collapse of 'Assadism'. ❞❞

It would be naïve to assume that the media will operate freely and democratically if there is a change in regime. Interviews with experts on Syria all confirmed the often repeated (but often overlooked) point: that there are *cultural* as well as structural factors that are embedded in Syrian society that should be taken into account when setting up media support projects, regardless of the outcome of the uprising. Kawa Hassan explains that the "collapse of Assad doesn't mean the collapse of 'Assadism'".[89]

Omar Hallaj stresses that even if legal frameworks change, there are still cultural habits and mind sets that are not likely to change quickly.[90] Juliette Harkin cites the example of the revolution in Egypt, where the media is still not free, and warns against the assumption that a people's revolution will result automatically in a media revolution.[91] Egypt had far greater press freedoms than Syria before the revolution but the pressures on individual, so-called 'liberal' journalists were intense – they compensated for a dysfunctional opposition and political system while trying to act as a Fourth Estate. The old bureaucracy and mentality still dominate in Egypt, and any discussion of reform takes place in the shadow of military rule.

Right
Man resting at a busy
souk in Damascus.

▶ Where do we go from here?

The research for this case study has revealed a number of issues that donors should consider in relation to media support in Syria.

Aligning donor strategies to fit the Syrian context

Evidence-based academic research on processes of reform and change really matters. There is a chronic lack of research and literature on Syrian society and politics, and it is important that donors have a true picture of what is happening before projects are implemented. Support cannot be effective without understanding the realities on the ground and without greater coordination between donors, implementing organisations, civil society and GONGOS. The piecemeal activities of some donors versus interventions at local level leaves a gap in terms of knowledge production and lessons learnt. As a result of the restrictive environment, the different donors and organisations are unaware of each others' activities in Syria and – as a result – limit their overall impact.

💬💬 Donors could support links between media elites and the grassroots by encouraging mainstream media practitioners to understand and engage with new media. 💬💬

The knowledge transfer initiative by Hivos is a good example of this kind of coordinated effort. In the long term, more collaboration will add to literature on the media in Syria, and help donors understand the realities of working on the ground. By sharing this type of knowledge, donors and implementing organisations would be better equipped to identify potential 'coalitions for reform' – where groups may join together to support a more independent media sector, creating a potent constituency for reform.[92]

Supporting agents of change

Donors need to find more thoughtful ways to work with the grassroots. Some initiatives by local grassroots organisations and individuals in Syria have made a real impact, but donors rarely have access to them, partly because of time constraints, but partly because of their lack of knowledge on Syria. Partnerships among regional universities, researchers and think tanks that have detailed local knowledge on the Syrian context are crucial, helping to develop dialogue and communication on development and governance issues.

Providing new media literacy and skills training programmes

At the micro level, the *effective* use of the Internet can enhance the quality of life for individuals no matter how poor, marginalised or isolated they might be. At the macro level, the *effective* use of the Internet can advance political participation. The role of social media during the Arab Spring has reflected the changing status of bloggers and social media users in the regional media as well as their aspiration to be seen as credible social commentators. The experience of training journalists on social media tools in the BBC Media Action programme Ara2 Academy showed that they are willing to engage with, and even contribute to, social media platforms but that they often lack access to these platforms because of poor Internet skills. It is important to establish equity in the use of the Internet to include citizens who are currently excluded from the opportunities (economic, political and educational) that the Internet provides. Donors could support links between media elites and the grassroots by encouraging mainstream media practitioners to understand and engage with new media.

Endnotes

1 Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria*, Cornell University Press, 1999, p. 1

2 Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, Zed Books, 2003, p. 3

3 Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria*, Westview Press, 1990

4 Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1999

5 Heydemann, op. cit.

6 See annual human rights reports (before the uprising) by Syrian groups such as http://www.shrc.org/data/aspx/10NEWSEN.aspx and also by international agencies: http://www.hrw.org/en/node/87733

7 W. Raad, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad*, unpublished PhD thesis, The American University Of London, 2008

8 Syrian Center for Media & Freedom of Expression, Problematic of the Travel Ban in Syria, accessed 14 June 2010): http://www.scm- sy.org/?page=category&category_id=22&lang=en

9 Freedom House, 'Worst of the Worst 2011', Accessed from: http://freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/101.pdf

10 Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago University Press, 1999, p. 7

11 Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle For Power in Syria*, I.B. Tauris, 1996

12 Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Assad*, I. B. Tauris, 1995

13 Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*, Standford University Press, 2011

14 Aurora Sottimano and Kjetil Selvik, *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria*, The University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009

15 Hinnebusch, op. cit.

16 Heydemann, op. cit.

17 Haddad, op. cit.

18 Joshua Landis and Joe Pace, 'The Syrian Opposition', *The Washington Quarterly*, Volume 30, Issue 1, Winter 2006-07, pp.48-65

19 Wedeen, 1999, op. cit.

20 Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html

21 Jeffrey Ghannam, 'Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprising 2011', Report to the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), 3 February, 2011

22 Lisa Wedeen, '"As If": Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Volume 40, Issue 3, pp. 503-523, 1998, p. 519

23 Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, 1989, p. 268

24 Kawa Hassan, Re-thinking Civic Activism in the Middle East: Agency without Association? Policy Paper 1, *Hivos Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia*, 2011

25 William A. Rugh, The Arab Press: *News Media and Political Process in the Arab World*, Syracuse University Press, 1987, p. 65

26 George, p. 122, op. cit

27 Freedom House, License to Censor: The Use of Media Regulation to Restrict Press Freedom, September 2011

28 Wedeen, 1999, pp. 44-45, op. cit.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. 88

31 Omar Abdul Latif, Syria's only National Journalists' Union: Membership has its Privileges. In *Menassat*, March 26, 2009. Available: http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/6259-syrias-only-national-journalists-union-membership-has-its-privileges

32 Leah Caldwell, 'Privileging the Private: Media and Development in Syria', *Arab Media and Society*, Issue 12, winter 2010, p. 2

33 Juliette Harkin, 'A Reappraisal of the Practice of Journalism in Syria', unpublished MPhil thesis, St Antony's College, Oxford, 2009

34 Reinoud Leenders, 'Newsletter Civil Society in West Asia', Issue 3, *Hivos Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia*, 2011

35 Telephone interview, 10 January 2012

36 Harkin, op. cit.

37 Telephone interview, 29 November 2011

38 Najib Ghadbian, 'Contesting the State Media Monopoly', *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, Volume 5, No. 2, June 2011

39 Ibid.

40 Naomi Sakr, Freedom: Diverse Responses to Satellite Television in the Middle East and North Africa', Javnost/The *Public*, Volume VI, Issue 1, 1999, pp. 93-106

41 Ibid. p. 104

42 George, p. 125, op. cit.

43 In 2005, the Press Law was amended to apply to electronic publications, requiring editors of electronic media to be at least 25 years old, Syrian nationals and current residents of Syria, and not employees of a foreign government.

44 Claire Duffett, "Facebook, banned in Syria, is widely used – even by the Government," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 18, 2010, available: http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global- News/2010/1118/Facebook-banned-in-Syria-is-widely-used-even-by-the-government (accessed on 3 December 2010)

45 Face-to-face interview, 6 December 2012

46 Source: www.dp-news.com/pages/detail.aspx?articleid=109452

47 Source: http://www.shamfm.fm/new/Main/Default.php

48 Face-to-face interview conducted by Maurice Aaek, 5 January 2012, transcribed and emailed

49 Hassan, 2011, op. cit.

50 Nicola Pratt, *Democracy & Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Lynne Rienner, 2007

51 Caldwell, op. cit.

52 Source: http://www.ngoregnet.org/country_information_by_region/Middle_East_and_North_Africa/Syria.asp

53 Zeina al-Azem, 'Clash of Visions', *Syria Today*, November 2011, accessed from http://www.syria-today.com/index.php/focus/17031-clash-of-visions.

54 Source: http://www.ngoregnet.org/country_information_by_region/Middle_East_and_North_Africa/Syria.asp

55 Telephone interview, 20 December 2011

56 Interview conducted in 2010 with one of the main ISPs in Syria, who wished to remain anonymous

57 Face-to-face interview in 2010

58 Paul Dimaggio, Eszter Hargittai, W. Russell Neuman and John P. Robinson, 'Social Implications of the Internet', *Annual Review of Sociology*, Volume 27, 2001, pp. 307-336. 2001

59 Interview conducted in 2010 with one of the main ISPs in Syria, who wished to remain anonymous

60 Frederick Williams, Ronald E. Rice and Everett M. Rogers, *Research Methods and the New Media*, New York: Free Press, 1988, p. 45

61 United Nations Development Programme Evaluation Office, 'Country Evaluation: Assessment of Development Results – Syria, 2005

62 AMIS database (managed by the State Planning Commission with the support of UNDP)

63 Telephone interview, 8 December 2011

64 Interview, op. cit.

65 Telephone interview, 8 December 2011

66 Telephone interview, op. cit.

67 Global Voices [http://globalvoicesonline.org] is a blog aggregator – bloggers blogging other bloggers. It 'seeks to aggregate, curate, and amplify the global conversation online – shining light on places and people other media often ignore'.

68 Mideastyouth [http://ar.mideastyouth.com] was created in 2006 by students in Bahrain to promote constructive dialogue within the Middle East and North Africa. It relies on voluntary contributions, rather than external funding.

69 Telephone interview, 29 November 2011

70 Hivos Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia. http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-in-West-Asia

71 Telephone interview, op. cit.

72 Source: http://arij.net/en/help-ngo-arij-syrian-investigative-journalists-are-revealing-underreported-social-issues-concern-man

73 United Nations Development Programme Evaluation Office, 'Country Evaluation: Assessment of Development Results – Syria, 2005

74 Face-to-face interview on 1 December 2011

75 Shanthi Kalathil, 'Developing Independent Media as an Institution of Accountable Governance', The World Bank, 2011

76 Hassan, 2011, p. 14, op. cit.

77 Telephone interview, op. cit.

78 Telephone interview, 8 December 2011

79 Telephone interview, op. cit.

80 Telephone interview, 8 December 2011

81 Shabablak, 'Young Syrian bloggers: searching for a virtual foothold', Shabablak Magazine, Issue 42, Nov. 2008

82 Nadia Muhanna, Q&A: Bassam Kadi Director of the Syrian Women Observatory, *Syria Today*, November 2009

83 Interview, op. cit.

84 Naomi Sakr, 'Foreign Support for Media Freedom, Advocacy in the Arab Mediterranean: Globalization from Above or Below?', *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1–20, Routledge, March 2006

85 Krishna Kumar, 'Promoting Independent Media: Strategies for Democracy Assistance', Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006 cited in Naomi Sakr, 'Public Service Initiatives in Arab Media Today' in Greg F. Lowe and Jeanette Steemers (eds) Regaining the Initiative in Public Service Media, Nordicom, 2012

86 Telephone interview on 5 January 2012

87 Hassan, 2011, op. cit.

88 Telephone interview, op. cit.

89 Hassan, 2011, op. cit.

90 Telephone interview, op. cit.

91 Face-to-face interview, op. cit.

92 Kalathil, p. 15, op. cit.

Acknowledgements