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ABSTRACT

Social media usage during the recent uprisings in Arab countries has gained increasing attention in human–computer interaction research. This study adds to these insights by providing some findings on the use of information and communications technology (ICT), specifically mobile media, by opposition forces and political activists during the Syrian civil war. The presented study is based on 17 interviews with Syrian FSA fighters, activists, and refugees. A first analysis showed evidence for some very specific use patterns during wartime (compared to media usage of political activists under less anomic conditions). The study also describes a fragmented telecom infrastructure in Syria: government-controlled regions offer fairly intact infrastructures while rebel-controlled regions have been cut off from telephone and Internet. Moreover, the central and very critical role of mobile video for documenting, mobilization, and propaganda is discussed.

1. Introduction

Studies of social media use have, unsurprisingly, paralleled the rapid growth in their use. These studies have included, for instance, the rehearsal of the way in which users orient to, for instance, Facebook and Twitter use in general; to their use for more practical purposes (Bakardjieva, 2005); their relationship to, and the way they might influence, the political context and structures of power and freedom (see e.g. Castells, 2003); and, more recently, their use in social and political contexts, which are in various ways unlike those of Western Europe and the United States. It is the latter that is of primary interest to us. The authors have been variously involved in a number of studies, which have aimed to do two things. First, they have sought to understand better what the relationship between social media use and "on the ground" behavior looks like in such contexts, and second to understand the particularities of their use and the degree to which they do or do not become "normalized" over time. Bakardjieva (2005) makes the point that, from a phenomenological point of view, people are not simply passive consumers of new technology. They "do things" with it. Although her focus is primarily on the home, she alludes to potential political ramifications, suggesting that "use genres":

> "[are] related to conditions of individual existence characteristic of contemporary society and represented responses to widespread situational needs. I see these genres as a rich resource of ideas that can direct a pursuit of democratic Internet development. Democratic, in this context, means not only building a medium that is equitably accessible, but also equitably meaningful: inclusive of users' interests and goals, diverse in terms of features and supported activities, open and responsive to users' intervention and actively seeking users' involvement. The point is not to concoct utopian schemes for realizing the visions of theorists, technologists and political leaders, but rather to elaborate visions to be

asserted in a technical and political process with an eye and ear turned to the unglamorous everyday initiatives of ordinary users. The political quality of users' resistance and creativity … lies in small gestures immersed in the current of daily life that despite their apparent triviality prove to be crucial in countering domination and instigating social change." (Bakardjieva, 2005, p. 192)

This quote raises a number of issues, notably the role of theory in relation to political and social change and the degree to which various factors/interests interrelate to produce outcomes. Here, it appears, new technology can play a critical role. The appeal to practical action is also one we are entirely in sympathy with. At the same time, and as has been variously pointed out, there are any number of different ways in which we can characterize engagement with the Web as "political." It can, for instance, be a reference to grassroots, self-help groups of the kind that Christian Fuchs, following Deleuze and Guattari, identifies as "rhizomatic" (Fuchs, 2007). It can refer to the appeals to resistance associated with (some) hacker spaces (see e.g. Jordan & Taylor, 2004), to "information warfare" and cyberterrorism (see e.g. Karatzogianni (2006) for a summary) or to overt mobilization.

Moreover, and in the situations we are concerned with, the ambition to identify these "small gestures" is not necessarily easy to realize. This ambition is, even so, important. As Karatzogianni (2006, p. 3) has pointed out:

> "In political terms, the Internet is viewed as a vehicle for educating individuals, stimulating citizen participation, measuring public opinion … offering a public forum … such study was urgently required, in order to come to grips with the consequences of the use of this technology by political actors and groups."

She goes on:

> "It has been termed a powerful tool for grassroots democracy and one that, by facilitating discussion and collective action by citizens, strengthens democracy."

Such a view has been analyzed in some detail by, inter alia, Loader & Mercea (2011). Not least, it can be argued that there is a certain technological determinism about the idea that the social media are causing social change or unrest. Conversely, of course, it would seem perverse to suggest that new technology is wholly irrelevant here. The concept of the "public" advanced variously by Dewey and Habermas (see e.g. Antonio & Kellner, 1992; Kellner, 2000; Dahlgren, 2005, for a discussion of these themes) is one that has been deployed in order to examine this relationship between the discursive and the material. As Marres (2012, p. 33) puts it, "According to their definition, the problem of the public is that it is at once intimately affected by issues but also finds itself at a remove from the platforms that are in place to address their issues." For writers such as Warner (2002), publics and "counterpublics" are to be understood in largely discursive, or ideological, terms. Moreover, they are also to be understood in terms of "relations between strangers." The context of interest for Warner is that of sexuality. In contrast, Marres (2012) argues that objects have a mutually constitutive relationship with human agency such that they can be spoken of in terms of "material participation." The point about her argument is that she explicitly suggests that material objects are increasingly being deployed with specifically political ends in view and that such moves (in her case, largely in the context of ecological movements) have been under-analyzed. Of course, and in turn, such concerns with materiality ramify in interesting ways in the context of the social media since such media are hardly "material" in any traditional sense. Writers such as Leonardi (2010) and Dourish & Mazmanian (2011) have recently examined the ways in which the digital and the material are interwoven. Two things might be said about this. First, political and economic ambitions are likely to exist, and be motivational factors, regardless of the existence of technologies that facilitate their communication. Second, the take-up of social media for these purposes will in turn depend on a number of factors. Of course, much of the debate about materiality, the Internet, and the creation of "publics" has taken place in the context of mature, stable, democracies. In this context, Livingston & Bennett (2003) have elaborated on the altering effects of technological development on the construction of news, seeing event-driven journalism on the rise, but came to the conclusion that most journalists are still heavily reliant on officials and institutions in selecting and cueing their political content. Howard & Hussain (2013) found that although conventional mass media such as radio, television, and newspaper played a major role in other stages of the ongoing democratization processes, mobilization was initiated via social networks during the early days of the uprisings in each country (Howard & Hussain, 2013). On a more general level, Bennett et al. (2006) have discussed the limits of press independence when reporting on political scandal. Their analysis shows how "despite available evidence and sources to support a counter framing of the Abu Ghraib prison story in terms of a policy of torture, the leading national news organizations did not produce a frame that strongly challenged the Bush administration's claim that Abu Ghraib was an isolated case of appalling abuse perpetrated by low-level soldiers" (Bennett et al., 2006, p.467).

There is, then, an emerging relationship between the conventional and new media, one that can be characterized in relation to the formation of "publics," which are technologically mediated. Whether the concept is relevant to situations that are less stable, indeed deeply divided, is much less clear. One feature of this use of the social media in these environments might, for instance, be the unreliability of, or complete absence of, representation in the conventional mass media. Aouragh (2008) has argued that, in the Palestinian context, the development of online communities constitutes the formation of "counterpublics" (see e.g. Warner, 2002). We discuss this further below. Nevertheless, and as she is careful to say, "During assessments of the political/economic potential of the Internet it is important not to misunderstand Internet activism for offline resistance." Wulf, Misaki et al. (2013 have argued along similar lines. Such authors are insistent that any "ethnographic" approach to such matters entails both on- and offline study, or as Wulf, Misaki et al. (2013) term it, "on the ground" study. Not least, this serves to reveal the fractures in what otherwise might easily be seen as coherent communities. Put another way, it rather problematizes the notion of the "public" itself in contexts where *stable* platforms of the kind that Marres (2012) refers to do not exist.

A crucial element of such an ambition, then, is empirical study to ascertain whether such "counterpublic" ambitions are, to any significant degree, realized and, if so, how. Moreover, such assessments will depend on empirical work, not only in the context of mature democracies, but also in areas where the political situation is fragile, conflicted, and emergent. The emergence of social movements that challenge the status quo may well be paralleled by a developing sophistication on the part of government agencies. If it is true that, in mature democracies, political engagement can be facilitated by the Internet because it is cheap, rapid, and more or less universally available, we evidently cannot assume the same of conflict environments.

A perspicuous setting for the study of these emergent and fragmented political environments is currently, as indicated, the Middle East. Protest movements in the Arab world have attracted special attention (e.g. Al-Ani et al., 2012; Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Wulf, Misaki et al., 2013; Wulf, Aal et al., 2013). In this article, we want to contribute to this discourse specifically by describing ICT use during the Syrian civil war.

In relation to the events in other Arab countries, civil uprisings started in Syria in spring 2011 and gradually developed into what has effectively become a civil war since then. Estimates suggest that more than 100,000 Syrians have been killed and some 4 million have left their homes up to the end of 2014, fleeing mostly (in the first instance) to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey (Amnesty International, 2016).

Most analyses of the recent uprisings in the Arab world attribute a major role to the use of social media. During the first wave of uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Facebook, for instance, is considered to have played a major role. It has contributed to mobilizing the population under the constraints of rather rigid censorship and on the organization of political activities (Lotan et al., 2011; Wulf, Misaki et al., 2013; Wulf, Aal

et al., 2013). In case of Syria, however, the uprisings did not result in a change of the regime but led instead to a civil war and continued instability, involving regional and international powers.

In the following, we want to investigate the use of ICT, and just as importantly, its absence, during the civil war. The work is part of a more general and systematic attempt to make sense of the relationship between ICT use and the social, technical, economic, and political contexts of political activism. As such, we have conducted "on the ground" studies in a number of locations over time, including Palestine, Tunisia, and Syria. In each case, and as a result of the very difficult and dangerous conditions under which such studies have to take place, we are forced to manage our data collection and analysis methods under significant constraints.

The article is structured as follows. First we discuss some related studies on the role of the media in situations of political and social conflict, and on ICT and media use during the so-called "Arab Spring," and then we briefly introduce the situation in wartime Syria. After a description of our research methods, we present data from the interviews we conducted. Last, we discuss some insights from our analysis and draw some conclusions regarding findings and further work.

2. State of the Art

The role of the media in situations of political and social unrest and war has long been in the focus of research from communication studies, media and journalism studies, discussing the limitations of freedom of the press (e.g. Price, 2002; Bennett et al., 2006), objectivity in reporting (Aday et al., 2005), and media systems dependency (e.g. Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007). In the context of the recent uprisings in the Middle East, a special focus of media effects studies and communications research has been on the role of satellite TV and global news media. Al-Jazeera English and global news networks like CNN International and BBC world have been compared in their impact on fostering cross-cultural understanding and reconciliation among their audiences. Several studies have emphasized the special impact of Al-Jazeera English as an independent news organization that is capable of bringing diverse audiences together and frequently taking up a conciliatory position with its model of journalism and broadcasting (Powers & Gilboa, 2007; Powers & El-Nawawy, 2009; El-Nawawy & Powers, 2010). Al Jazeera carried out another important innovation, namely presenting user-generated content to its online viewers (e.g. from the 2009 Gaza invasion or the uprising in Tunisia), in situations where its journalists had been banned, thus effectively bypassing the telecommunications ban (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Al Jazeera even developed an application based on SMS technology and Twitter to collect incident reports from citizens on the ground (Al Jazeera, 2009).

New Media studies form one line of discourse here. Recent publications explored different dimensions of social network sites (SNSs), especially regarding Facebook. Błachnio et al. (2013), for instance, present the main trends in Facebook research, including topics such as the role of self-efficacy and motivations for using specific SNS. The motivation to use SNSs was also investigated by Kim et al. (2010) concluding "that interdependent self-construal is associated with social-motivations to use SNS." An earlier publication of Brandtzæg et al. (2010) focused on content sharing and sociability, and conducted in-depth interviews and usability tests to explore how privacy experiences and usage behavior were perceived in SNS.

Within the above-described social and political context of unrest and uprising, a series of studies on social media use during the so-called "Arab Spring" have been published more recently (Lotan et al., 2011; Al-Ani et al., 2012; Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Starbird & Palen, 2012; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). These studies describe aspects of the use of blogging and micro-blogging sites, such as Twitter, mainly during the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. While highly valuable, these studies mainly use "logging" methodologies (of online data) and as such tell us less about how the use of social media relates to users' political activities in practice. In addressing this gap, Wulf, Misaki et al. (2013) investigated how social media use supported political activists "on the ground" in Tunisia. These researchers conducted a similar study in Palestine to observe political activists using social media to demonstrate against wall building near their village (Wulf, Aal et al. 2013). Howard & Hussain (2013) have suggested, in a similar vein, that social media represent "information networks not easily controlled by state and coordination tools that are already embedded in trusted networks of family and friends." (ibid: p. 34)

Al-Ani et al. (2012) investigated the Egyptian blogosphere during the "Arab Spring" uprisings in 2011, based on qualitative and quantitative analyses of blog postings. They identified so-called "counter-narratives" created by Egyptian bloggers to protest against the government's official communication and described the blogosphere as an "alternative public space" (Al-Ani et al., 2012, p. 25). These spaces enabled equal debate between men and woman about policy alternatives, corruption, and wealth disparities (Howard & Hussain, 2013). In another study on blog postings, Mark et al. (2012) focused on "war diaries," published by bloggers during the war in Iraq. Based on topic modeling and a quantitative analysis of postings, the authors investigated the relationship between war postings and other topics, notably postings on people's everyday life and their daily routines. Semaan & Mark (2011) examined trust building in disrupted environments, based on (mainly telephone) interviews with Iraqi civilians during the second Gulf war, focusing on (public) identity. In another study, Mark & Semaan (2009) focused on collaboration structures and patterns of action during wartime, based on semi-structured telephone interviews with civilians from Iraq and Israel. Zhou et al. (2010) carried out a quantitative study about the usage of Twitter during the postelection protests in Iran, and analyzed over three million tweets of publicly accessible users, thus providing insights into "the dynamics of information propagation that are special to Twitter" (Zhou et al. 2010, p. 123).

Nonetheless, the empirical project we mention above has, for very good reasons, remained substantially unfulfilled (but see Aouragh & Alexander, 2011). There are few papers that directly investigate how Internet and social media are

actually appropriated by political activists under dangerous conditions (such as armed conflicts, political instability, disrupted environments, occupation, or military rule) and how their use is mediated by a range of social, political, and economic factors.

3. Syria and the Civil War

These disrupted contexts quite often form significant obstacles for empirical research that extends beyond log file analyses of digital communication data. One might anticipate that there will be significant differences between temporary unstable political conditions and life during (longer lasting) conditions of civil war. In this study, to obtain deeper qualitative insights into the use of social and mobile media during the ongoing civil war in Syria, we present findings from interviews with Syrian activists and refugees.

After the end of the Ottoman Empire, Syria became part of the French mandate zone and achieved its independence in 1946. The first 25 years of Syrian independence were characterized by political instability; republican periods were interrupted by various military coup d'états. In 1971, Hafiz al Assad, the father of the current president, came to power and remained up to his death in 2000. A savvy politician, he brought political stability and economic development to the country. During his 30 years of one-man rule, political dissent was suppressed by arrest and torture. When the Muslim Brotherhood mounted a rebellion in the provincial town of Hama in 1982, Assad suppressed it, killing (an estimated) 10,000–25,000 people. The Assad regime is characterized by the fact that the upper ranks of the military hierarchy, the political elite, and the secret service organizations are highly intertwined and run by networks of loyal Alevis, a religious minority to which the Assad family belongs (see e.g. Perthes, 1997).

After his father's death, Bashar al Assad came to power in 2000. It has been suggested that his accession to power "evoked ripples of derision and criticism within and outside the country" (Zisser, 2007) even then. His policy initially followed a political and economic reform agenda, although political reforms ceased within a year. Some aspects of the Syrian economy have nevertheless been reformed. Like other Arab countries, over the past few decades Syria has seen one of the internationally highest birth rates, leaving the country with more than one-third of the population below 14 years and an unemployment rate among people under 25 of almost 20% (CIA, 2013; UN Data, 2016). Socioeconomic inequality increased. This became specifically an issue in cities with a high poverty rate, such as Daraa and Homs, rural areas hit hard by a drought in early 2011, and the poorer districts of other large cities.

The political protests began on March 15, 2011, in the southern city of Daraa—well after the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes had already been toppled after popular political uprisings (which is a wave that has been widely considered as the Arab Spring). Over the next few days, demonstrations and confrontations escalated in Daraa and started to spread to other Syrian cities. Protesters demanded the release of political prisoners, the abolition of Syria's 48-year emergency law, more freedoms, and an end to pervasive government corruption.

In April 2011, the Syrian Army was deployed to quell the uprising, and soldiers were ordered to open fire on demonstrators. After months of military sieges, the protests evolved into an armed rebellion. Opposition forces, mainly composed of defected soldiers and civilian volunteers, became increasingly armed and organized as they unified into larger groups, with some groups receiving military aid from several foreign countries (Amnesty International, 2016).

The Internet played a considerable role in the developments under Bashar al Assad. Under his government, the Internet was introduced to Syria in 2001. However, access to social media applications, such as Facebook and YouTube, was officially banned. Even so, the government left the country's access to the Internet mostly intact during the 21-month struggle with rebels—except for shorter shutdowns in the end of November 2012 (Chozick, 2012).

During the civil war, the Internet itself became a contested space (Howard, Agarwal, & Hussain, 2011). Opposition actors claimed to have monitored the inboxes of Assad and his wife in real time for several months. In several cases they claim to have used information to warn colleagues in Damascus of imminent regime moves against them ("Exclusive," 2012). The pro-government Syrian Electronic Army, mentioned in (Chozick, 2012), has also been accused of DDoS attacks, phishing scams, and other tricks to fight opposition activists online (Atlantic, 2011). At checkpoints, Assad forces examine laptops for software that would allow users to bypass government spyware. In Internet cafés government officials checked users' identification (Chozick, 2012). The government seems to also survey and manipulate Facebook and Google access via "man in the middle" attacks ("So machen's die Diktatoren," 2012). In sum, government in this context has a sophisticated appreciation of Internet affordances and how to use them for its purposes.

It is important to note that our study represents the state of affairs in spring 2013, covering the first 20 months of Syrian civil war. The situation continues to evolve. The first phase of the Syrian civil war was dominated mainly by three armed factions: the official Syrian Army (OSA), the oppositional Free Syrian Army (FSA), and armed Kurdish forces (mainly in the northeast of Syria). In the meantime, newly emerging armed forces gained increasing influence on both sides (as with Assad's allies, e.g. the Iranian revolutionary guard and the Hezbollah, and for the opposition, e.g. different Islamist groups like the Al-Nusra Front, Syrian Islamic Front, ISIL) in addition to the complex role of the international coalition and Russia. Furthermore, several (sometimes violent) quarrels have been recorded between opposition factions, which further complicates the picture.

4. Research Methods

Our method focuses on an exploratory analysis of narrative interview data. Narrative interviews are intended to elicit detailed "stories" and are regarded as reflexive productions of both interviewers and interviewees. They tend not to take the question/answer form associated with traditional social

science (see e.g. Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002) but instead, and as stated, have a much more exploratory and unstructured character. Given civil war conditions, interviews could not realistically take place in Syria itself. The research is therefore based on empirical data directly collected from interviews with Syrian citizens in Turkey (near the Syrian border in 2013), Germany (2013), and Jordan (near the Syrian border, in 2014). We gathered additional data from participants from one Skype interview, a written e-mail interview, and an analysis of online sources. Finally, we had one informal interview with a representative of a nongovernmental organization who provided us with information about the different ways in which governments and other agencies were managing Internet engagement.

In a first phase, two authors traveled to Turkey from December 29, 2012 to January 8, 2013. Keeping its borders open at the time of writing, Turkey hosts a large number of Syrian refugees. The authors started their journey from Istanbul, flying to Adana, and then travelling on public transportation to Iskenderun, Antakya, Reyhana, Kirikan, Kilis, and Gaziantep. The authors visited the border at Kilis and went to two Syrian refugee camps: a tent camp at Apaydin and a container camp directly near the border control in Kilis. However, the Turkish authorities did not permit the authors to enter and so conversations took place at the entrance. Since Turkey was hosting more than 200,000 refugees in January 2013 with a high concentration in the border areas, travelling on public transportation enabled the authors to observe and talk to a variety of Syrians who had left their country for different reasons. While the travelling route was chosen deliberately, the interviewees were selected opportunistically. We approached people wherever we saw opportunities and interviewed those who were willing to speak to us, for instance in buses, hotels, at border posts, or in front of refugee camps.

In this part of the study, we conducted 11 interviews: four with (former) soldiers of the FSA, three with political activists, and four with other refugees. The interviews lasted between 15 min and 2.5 hrs. In the case of the political activist called A in this publication, we had a 20-min interview at the Turkish–Syrian border complemented by a 90 min Skype interview two weeks later. The interviews were mostly conducted in English, with one in French. We used an interpreter when interviewing X. The choice of interviewees was mostly limited to those Syrians who could speak English, German, or French. For reasons of practicality and confidentiality, we did not audio record the interviews. However, we documented the interviews every evening and added additional (field) notes. Furthermore, we took photos selectively, asking carefully for permission (which understandably were not always granted).

In the second phase in spring 2013, we conducted four additional interviews with Syrian refugees in Germany (face to face), one Syrian MA student in Germany, and a PhD student in Switzerland. Germany hosted at that time some 16,000 Syrian refugees (BAMF) and another 2,000 students from Syria (DAAD, 2013). Our interviewees in Germany fled from northern Syria and had a Kurdish background. The four refugees were living in a small town in central Germany in rather basic accommodation provided by the

local municipality whilst awaiting the decision on their application for political asylum. The apartment they lived in did not have Internet access. All of them had family members already living in central Europe before they arrived in Germany. Two of them had paid human traffickers to cross the border from Turkey into the European Community.

One of them, C, had been a political activist in Syria and by then had lived for six months in Germany. The other three refugees had escaped from Syria during the previous year. The fifth interviewee, B, came to Germany as a student some eight months before the interview (spring 2012); he is still politically active in Germany. The PhD student moved in 2012 to Switzerland to write his thesis; he is not politically active but is in contact with political activists in Syria.

Given the political situation, it took time to build mutual understanding and trust for the interviews. Adler & Adler (2002), among others (e.g. Roulston, 2014), have elaborated in detail on a range of "reluctant respondents," with issues of secretiveness, relative advantage or disadvantage, and the sensitivity of certain topics. To minimize risk of self-censorship and selective answers to our questions in the interviews, we conducted at least two interview sessions with each of our interviewees. The interviews focused on the refugees' lives during the civil war and their usage of ICT. Three interviews with refugees were conducted in Arabic; the other one was in German and supported by a native Arabic speaker who translated when necessary. The interviews with the students were conducted in German and English, respectively. Two refugees showed us videos on their mobile phone or laptop. The interviews lasted between one and two hours.

Even the interviews in Germany involved a delicate process of relationship building. Refugees expressed concerns that the Syrian government could get access to the recordings and might take revenge against their families in Syria or even in Germany. Three of the interviewees refused any recording. The interview with the PhD student started face-to-face and was continued via e-mail.

In a third phase, two authors travelled to Jordan from 2nd to 9th of March 2014. Compared to the first field visit, the number of Syrian refugees had significantly increased in the neighboring countries. While Jordan's share of officially registered refugees was at 600,000, the real number was assumed to be close to one million. We arrived in Amman and travelled to the North of the country, close to the Syrian border where most of the refugees are hosted. The authors visited Al Zaatari, the largest refugee camp in Jordan (though were not allowed to enter), and the towns of Al Mafraq, Ar Ramtha, and Irbid (30 km south of Daraa). We also visited two field offices of international help organizations, and the Syrian border near Al Ramtha. In this part of the study, we conducted three group interviews, one with three young Syrian brothers working in a food stall near the border at Al Ramtha. They told us that they continued to cross the border to fight in the civil war. Moreover, we had two group interviews with three elderly male refugees and seven female refugees in the office of one international help organization. Finally, we visited a Syrian refugee family in their very humble apartment. The interviews lasted each around 30 min. Apart from the

first one, the interviews were conducted in English and translated into Arabic by local employees of the international help organization. We documented the interviews every evening and added additional (field) notes. Photos were taken where appropriate and when allowed.

Over all phases, we collected 62 pages of interview notes and over 5 hrs of audio recordings. In addition to these interviews, we observed various ongoing Facebook groups and Twitter accounts dealing with the civil war to better understand the situation in Syria. One author, a native Arabic speaker, transcribed the Arabic interviews and translated interview parts and Internet sources selectively into English.

To triangulate the empirical data from the three phases of the investigation, we followed three strategies: (1) we talked to different actors about similar topics; (2) we matched Internet-based materials with interviews and observational data; and (3) we followed the mass media coverage of the Syrian civil war in international media. According to our exploratory approach, we mainly analyzed the raw data from narrative interviews by coding the transcripts with ex-post categories. The interview data was open coded. First, authors coded their own materials. Then, their coded categories were compared and discussed. Our resulting coding scheme covers all essential parts of the interviews. Later we mainly analyzed the raw data from the transcribed interviews to explore new findings relevant for our research.

In the following, we present the accounts of four soldiers and of two political activists in depth. Such an actor-centric presentation of the empirical material, we believe, offers a better understanding of unfolding personal paths during the civil war and offers important empirical insights to better understand the actors' appropriation of mobile media.

5. Findings

The presentation of our findings follows a twofold structure. First we present six actor-centric accounts of the civil war. In the following we then elaborate more specifically on the use of IT and mass media by our interviewees.

5.1. The Civil War: Perspective of Soldiers of the FSA

In Turkey in 2012, we interviewed four soldiers of the FSA. We were mainly interested in their experiences as soldiers and in their appropriation of mobile applications and social media. We focused primarily on mobile use, since this was the main mechanism available to these fighters.

A Suburban Poor Worker from Aleppo

We met X, a former fighter in the FSA with a Sunni background (as mentioned by himself), in Istanbul where he is working illegally in a bakery. The interview was arranged by a hotel receptionist with Lebanese-French background. He also translated from Arabic back and forth into English and French. The receptionist had known X for some months; he framed his relationship to X in the following way: "I feel a bit like a father towards him."

X was 17 years old at the time of the interview. He was brought up in one of the very poor northern suburbs of Aleppo. His parents and siblings are still living there. He is the eldest son of the family and he was the only one to be active in the war. He went to school for six years. X started his political activities by demonstrating against the regime. He was arrested three times by the police during the demonstrations. The first time, he suggested, he was beaten but only "a bit." The second time he was manhandled in a more serious way. The third time he was tortured and described how he left the prison with "badly swollen legs." After this experience, he decided to fight with the rebels. Even before the center of Aleppo was attacked by the rebels, the northern suburbs were already (partly) controlled by them. So, it was not difficult to find the rebel groups—they were, he said, everywhere in his suburb.

He received a rudimentary amount of military training (lasting a few hours), and then was sent directly into combat against Assad's army. His original training was only in the usage of an automatic gun. Later on he was also trained to become a sniper using specific NATO guns. His unit of the rebel forces had about 20 members. He was not allowed to know who was fighting in the other units of the brigade nor how large the whole rebel unit was.

After some months fighting for the rebels, X finally decided to leave. He explained to us that he had realized that his unit was committing similar atrocities to those of the Assad regime. He witnessed, he said, one situation where soldiers of Assad's army on the roof a building in his neighborhood were surrounded and cut off from their supply lines. It being the case that the rebels were not easily able to remove them from the building, they decided to put five packages of TNT in the basement of the building—knowing that there were civilians in the building as well. He told us that, at that point, he felt a strong distaste, not to say horror, and was able to defuse three of the five TNT packages by putting sand on the dynamite and the fuse. Even so, two packages exploded, killing the soldiers and civilians in the building. That was the moment when X decided to escape from the rebel forces. It was quite easy to get into Turkey since the rebels mainly controlled the northern border.

In the interview, it did not become clear whether X had used social media applications before the rebellion. The receptionist assumed that the boy had not used them before, at least not in a serious manner. After arriving in Istanbul he used what he initially earned at the bakery to buy a rather expensive smartphone. However, he could not reach his family since the telephone lines and mobile networks in the rebel-controlled northern suburbs of Aleppo were broken. There was no regular phone or Internet connection available for him with which to maintain contact with his family. To contact him, his mother, once a week, went to a part of the town controlled by the Assad troops.

X explained that the officers of the rebel fighters had sophisticated satellite communication equipment, delivered mainly by the United States and Western Europe. This way they coordinated activities and are able to order ammunition and arms supply.

According to the receptionist, the main reason why X had bought the expensive smartphone was that it enabled the

reception of long text messages sent by his Imam. The receptionist mentioned that there were many imams from Qatar, Libya, and other Arab countries travelling through the liberated parts of Syria in order to gain supporters. He believed that these imams were dangerous and were actively involved in the recruitment of young supporters with a view to conversion into suicide bombers. The receptionist argued that by promising people like the young boy some money for their families ("1,000 US $ is a lot of money nowadays in Syria") and "some 40 virgins in heaven," their followers were susceptible to the imams. The receptionist felt that X's relationship with "the guys with the long beards" was deeply problematic.

An Academic from Deir ez-Zur

We met Y, a soldier with a Sunni background by accident in our hotel lobby in Antakya. He had travelled there with two comrades. He spoke good French and used to work as a lecturer at a university. Before the war, Deir ez-Zur had some 500,000 inhabitants and is now almost empty. Y explained that bombs and artillery shells had almost completely destroyed the city center. In spring 2013, there were some 600 FSA fighters almost encircled by 4,500 government soldiers armed with tanks. The FSA fighters had, in contrast, only guns and light weapons. The rebels engaged in house-to-house fighting while the government was systematically bombing the city center.

Y explained that the demonstrations in Deir ez-Zur started later than the ones in Daraa and were peaceful for quite some time. Students were among the first to demonstrate. However, the secret services arrested the demonstrators along with their family members—and subjected them to serious physical abuse. "After some time the situation became unsupportable," according to Y. So the opposition began to arm itself with guns to defend themselves against the police and secret services.

According to Y, the Assad regime had tried to play the people in the city centers off against the people in the suburbs. In Deir ez-Zur the situation was very different from that in Aleppo where the poor suburbs were rebelling against Assad while the richer city center tended to support the regime. In Deir ez-Zur the middle class living in the city center was driving the protest. However, Y also mentioned that the majority of the active FSA fighters in Deir ez-Zur were from relatively poor backgrounds and in many cases were incomers from other places in Syria.

Y first supported the rebels by working in their hospital. However, six months before our interview, he decided that he also needed to get involved in the fighting. Since then, he had been a soldier. When we met him in Antakya, it was the first time that he had been out of the country, "to relax," as he said. When travelling the 300 km through Syria he needed to take side roads. There seemed to be bus lines avoiding the main roads, which were at that time still controlled by Assad's troops.

Afterwards, the city center was taken over by the rebels and the air force started bombing it. Almost the whole population left the city and fled to cities in the North or even into Turkey. There were only 200 families left—"the very poor," as Y characterized them. His own family lived in a Turkish refugee camp close to the northern Syrian border hosting some 30,000 refugees. He visited his family just once for a day. The rest of the time, he had no contact with them and vice versa.

In the center of Deir ez-Zur no telephone or Internet connections were working at least from the point in time where the rebels had taken over. The FSA fighters had two satellite phones that connected them to their command and supply lines. He was not able to use any other method of (private) communication. In his words "I do not have time for that. We are at the front!"

During the house-to-house fighting in Deir ez-Zur they found dead bodies. At one place they found the bodies of 80 women and children, and in another quarter they found another 12 dead bodies—decapitated. To support his claims, he offered to show us photos or videos which he had on his mobile. He mentioned one more of these massacres—also stating that the government forces used civilians as human shields in case they got encircled. Government forces seemed to have specifically targeted students since they were the ones who were leading the local demonstrations and resistance.

Two Lower Middle Class Fighters from Baniyas

We met Z, a young Syrian soldier of Sunni background (as mentioned by himself), in front of a refugee camp at the Syrian–Turkish border in Kilis. After some conversation, he took us into a room inside a container building where more members of his family were sitting on mattresses. This building normally housed Syrians visiting their relatives in the camp. However, he and his family had stayed there overnight because they had not been directly admitted to the camp, which offered, according to them, better sleeping conditions.

Z's family consisted of his brother, also an FSA soldier who had been wounded by a grenade, their mother, and two younger women. We were not able to ascertain for sure whether they were siblings or the soldiers' wives. Like Z, the mother spoke good English, while the other members of the family did not. All three women were fully covered with headscarves; the young fighter was wearing a small green keffiyeh (Palestinian type of scarf) on his head. The brother's wound was already healing but a large bandage covered it. The mother later said that the pieces of metal were still inside his body. The brother had also scars at other parts of his body (belly and arm), which he showed us in the course of our talk.

The family is from Baniyas, a port town between Latakia and Tartus, where the demonstrations started already on March 18, 2011. The town was later besieged by the Syrian army and is, according to our interviewees, now almost completely destroyed. Z used the English "flat" and the German term "kaputt" to describe the state of his hometown and their family house. The mother showed us a photo on Z's older smartphone, showing the place where their family home had been.

Z had been working as a sailor on a ship before the uprising started. He participated in the demonstration movement from an early stage. Following the siege of their hometown they armed themselves and joined the FSA. After the crackdown on the uprising in Baniyas, Z and his brother left their hometown to serve on another front. Thereafter, their mother reported that she had been badly mistreated and, as a result, she and the rest of the family decided to follow her sons who meanwhile did "their service" with the FSA in Aleppo. From Aleppo they had travelled to the Turkish border to rest and heal the brother's wounds.

They talked openly about the military conditions in Aleppo at the time of the interview. The Syrian air force was bombing Aleppo, or parts of it, with MIG 21 and 23 planes and heavy bombs. According to them, the Syrian air force also bombed the liberated city of Azaz, just next to Kiliz on the Syrian side of the border, at least five times a day. Iranian soldiers seemed to be fighting in Aleppo on the Assad side. The brother of Z claimed that he saw the beheading of two Iranian soldiers during the fighting around Aleppo.

With regard to media use, Z told us that he had Facebook and Skype accounts and used Facebook inside Syria to get information about the political and military situation. He did not post information himself. He showed us the Facebook icon on his smartphone.

To illustrate their accounts of the fights going on in Aleppo and in Baniyas, Z and his family each used older mobile phones equipped with camera and video function, obviously owned by the two brothers. While it was not always easy to see what was going on in the videos on the very small screens, we could discern the content of three short videos and one photo (presented by Z):

- A video of a deserted street scene inside a city, probably in Aleppo, supposedly a part of the frontline.
- A video showing a dead person wearing clothes, laying in a ditch, inside an urban environment.
- A video presenting the dead body of a friend of the two soldiers, his head facing the ground and covered in blood. The head is lifted up by someone, a pond of blood becoming visible under his head. The dead body is located inside a destroyed house.
- A photo of a completely burned body located inside a destroyed house.

Additionally, Z's brother presented to us, using the other smartphone images, a street fight in a city, probably Aleppo, with sounds of shooting.

Having left the family's quarter, one author was sitting by herself in front of the mobile home. A Syrian boy from Aleppo of maybe 16 or 17 years of age came to her and presented videos from a mobile phone. The first video was professionally produced, probably from TV news. There was some information in Arabic before the video started. The boy explained to the second author what that video was about: it apparently showed an Assad soldier beheading a person with a sword. The video took about three minutes and it was presented in considerable detail. While presenting this video, a whole group of younger and elder boys and adults joined the crowd to watch.

On the second video that the young Syrian boy showed us on the mobile, an old man who walking in an urban area was suddenly shot and fell down, probably still alive. Then more shots hit his body. The video lasted for about one minute. This video was not professionally produced and its quality was not very good.

5.2. The Civil War: Perspectives of Political Activists

We also interviewed three political activists. Here, we want to present two of their accounts. We were mainly interested in their experiences as political activists during the different stages of the uprising. Special emphasis is devoted to their appropriation of mobile applications and social media.

An Early Political Activist from South Idlib

We met A, an activist with Sunni background, who speaks perfect English, in a local bus from Antakya to Reyhana. His family is from the region south of Idlib in western Syria. He studied in Syria and then worked in Dubai. When he came back to Syria, he had saved some money and was preparing to leave for Europe to continue his studies. At that point, the uprisings happened in Tunisia and he felt that something needed to be done in Syria. He told us that he started to think about mobilizing against the Assad regime in December 2010—when the uprising had just started in Tunisia. At that time, he was already thinking of mobilizing against the corruption of the regime. He was not, at that point, thinking about ousting the president: "We were against the corruption not against Assad—in the beginning."

A started to work on Facebook in mid-January 2011, creating a group called "Syrian Revolution." He got some personal friends involved. They in turn added some more friends of their own. In the end of February 2011, when A was arrested, the group consisted of a rather small number of activists. A thought of carrying out some coordinated actions such as crushing a monument dedicated to Hafiz el Assad, former president of Syria until the year 2000, or blocking the road between Aleppo and Damascus by means of a demonstration. Coordinated actions of this type, they hoped, would attract international attention and kick-start an uprising in Syria.

While still planning these activities, A was arrested in an Internet café in the town of Hama. At that time he lived in Homs where it was relatively safe to conduct political activities via Facebook. In Hama, due to the city's history, there were considerably more secret service activities. Not living in Hama and lacking the appropriate social networks, A did not know that the owner of the Internet café was an informant of one of the secret services.

When A was arrested, the other members of his Facebook group began to hide, fearing arrest as well. During the interrogations, A was asked to give away the passwords for both of his Facebook accounts. They also asked him for his other passwords ("They asked for the password of everything"). After being detained, his family had to bribe officials just to find out where he was imprisoned. Again, he alleged mistreatment but he did not give details since we did not ask for them. Normally, he said, people like him would be detained the first time for some five days. However, he had hosted university students from Germany, the UK, and the U.S. in 2008, a fact that he had to declare to the police at that time. The secret police, it seems, found that suspicious: "they had somehow black marked me for that" and argued that he had hosted spies in the past. Therefore, he was imprisoned for almost a year.

We asked him why they used Facebook for organizing their political activities. He said it was the safest way to do so. Telephone networks were strongly surveilled in Assad's Syria. Facebook was the most common communication media. According to him, Facebook worked perfectly

effectively for their group. He added that the first demonstrations in Syria were all organized via Facebook ("Under such regimes, you know, you cannot just talk to people about going to a demonstration").

Via Facebook, he also came in contact with a London-based opposition TV station, called Barada (that, according to WikiLeaks, is funded by the U.S. government). One of his friends knew about their broadcast programs and their Facebook site. At that time, they were far less well-known than Al Jazeera. But he started to watch and then contacted them via Facebook. Barada tried to organize a demonstration in Damascus on February 5 (via their TV program). However, due to rain and cold weather this call for action did not result in anything, according to A.

While A was in prison, two of his brothers were killed. According to him, they had become politically active after his arrest. They had organized demonstrations and an uprising in his hometown—which became one of the first to be fully controlled by the opposition. When his hometown was taken over by the protesters, one of his brothers protected the local policemen who were his friends. This brother was later shot at a government control post because the secret service assumed that he was one of the leaders in the local uprising (at that time the local resistance in the town was still non-violent).

His hometown was also one of the first to start armed resistance. The town got weapons and won a small skirmish against the army in June 2011. According to A, the people in his village were very badly equipped at the beginning of their armed fight, "they had only four Kalashnikovs, the rest were equipped with small hunting weapons," compared to the army: "The reinforcement was a convoy of some 30, partly armored, cars." His second brother died in the fighting around his hometown.

When A was finally released from prison, he was able to make money by engaging with international media. He started working for Al Jazeera (Arabic Language Edition) after a friend who was in contact with Al Jazeera contacted him. He provided information directly to the headquarters in Qatar, and three of his reports were broadcasted. He communicated with Al Jazeera via Skype on what he called "Airspace Internet." Interestingly, he was not exactly sure how the network was working, for instance, whether the router communicated via a satellite. However, he knew the brand name of the routers: "one was a German company, called iDirect."

While staying in his hometown, he was wounded by a shell. In November 2012, he finally left the town with his remaining family. Just before, a nephew had been killed by a helicopter attack in the town. At the time of the interview, his town was more or less deserted apart from a small number of families and rebel fighters. The Assad army was running 18 checkpoints around the town. He felt somewhat guilty that he left his hometown but found it necessary to do: "we needed to buy things … now I need to make some money." He took the rest of his family out of Syria and rented a house in Turkey.

Since being released from prison, he has also been working as a freelancer for the BBC and different German media. His primary activities for them seem to be translating, finding informants, and organizing trips into Syria.

He sees himself as an Internet activist who uses Facebook and Skype to inform the world about what is going on in Syria. He also created his own news stream, publishing via Facebook about the current situation in Syria and the political regimes all over the Arab world. He also thought about producing a newspaper for the liberated part of Syria.

A Kurdish Activist in Germany

We met B, who speaks decent English, in December 2012 in Germany. He lived in Aleppo where his family has a flat, and a country house in Afrin, a town north of Aleppo, where the majority of the inhabitants have a Kurdish background. His brother is still in Aleppo; both of them were already politically active in Syria. His parents are still living in Afrin. Some of his uncles live in Germany.

There were about 2–3 million Syrian Kurds living along the northern border with Turkey (B quantified the population as 3 million). B explained that the Kurdish population mainly works in agriculture, specifically olive tree-related. There are some 360 Kurdish villages in the Northern part of Syria. Almost every Kurd in Aleppo comes from a village where they have residences. Therefore, it was rather easy for them to leave Aleppo after the fighting started.

The situation in the Kurdish areas of the North was complicated at the time of our research. Among the Kurdish political parties, the PYD seemed to have won the upper hand. The PYD is closely related to the PKK, a Kurdish guerrilla in Turkey, which is internationally condemned as a terrorist organization. The Assad regime seemed to have voluntarily given up control in some Kurdish parts with the intention of enabling the PYD to take over and operate against Turkey, which supports the Syrian uprising. B contested the fact that control had been handed over by the Assad regime and presented the PYD as a part of the anti-Assad rebellion. He also explained that there was already fighting between the radical Islamist Al Nasr Brigades and Kurdish forces. The Al Nasr brigades had killed Kurdish people in one village but were then kicked out of the village by Kurdish forces.

B left Syria via the Turkish border and got his visa for Germany in the consulate in the Western Turkish city of Izmir. At the time of the interview he had been in Germany for several months, doing a language course to enable him to take a master's program in law at a German university.

B was still politically active in Germany; at the time of the interview he had just participated in a demonstration at a Syrian consulate. He also works for a Kurdish study center and published articles via their website. B explained that the revolution had changed. While it started with graffiti and peaceful demonstrations in many cities, armed groups on both sides are now committing all sorts of atrocities. He states "You can see them at YouTube." The fights in Aleppo, he suggested, are the worst in this respect.

B is very active on the Internet in collecting information on the current state of the fighting, mainly via Facebook, but also with TV channels like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. According to him, German news media are not especially reliable or forthcoming with information about the situation in Syria. He said it is difficult to judge the quality of information reported on Syria from a distance. The best sources of information, according to him, are friends to talk to, specifically

his brother who was still in place. He discusses with them via social media.

He also uses mobile phone networks to call his family, which is still almost completely based in Syria. On the day of the second interview, he could not reach his brother in Aleppo because the mobile network was not operating. In the past it was possible to contact his friend and family via Skype; however, the Internet connection was also unstable at this time.

He uses his real name in Facebook to gain information and watch videos from Syria. Sometimes he shares videos and pictures that he receives from friends or he writes an article about situations in Syria from his perspective.

He also told us that he was once arrested at a border control returning from Turkey—well before finally leaving the country. He feared that the border guards would force him to open his Facebook account to check whether he posts in favor or against the government. He was able to call his brother and provide him with the log-in information for his Facebook account and asked his brother to delete his whole account.

5.3. IT Usage: Empirical Findings

After presenting five actor-centric accounts, in the following we want to elaborate more specifically on the use of IT and mass media by our interviewees.

Telephone: Availability and Surveillance

In early 2013, the telephone infrastructure, both landline and mobiles, was broken in the rebel-controlled parts of (northern) Syria. The former rebel fighter, X, already mentioned that the telephone network did not work anymore in the rebel-controlled suburbs of northern Aleppo. The Kurdish interviewees coming from the rebel-controlled rural areas north of Aleppo confirmed this finding. They all mentioned that it is very difficult to stay in contact with those members of their families who still live in the country. For instance, refugee E mentioned that, at the time of the interview, he did not have contact with his parents for more than 2 months. C had not even talked to his relatives in northern Syria for 9 months.

Our interviews revealed two strategies for civilians in rebel-controlled areas to get access to telephone networks: either going into the government controlled parts of the city or country or trying to access the Turkish mobile networks. The last strategy typically requires being geographically close to the Turkish or Jordanian border or climbing higher mountains in northern Syria. As refugee C put it: "They [friends and family member in northern Syria] need to climb a mountain and phone via Turkish mobile providers."

The situation was rather similar at the southern border in 2014. Most of the refugees coming from Daraa explained that they are in close contact with their remaining family members across the border via Jordanian mobile networks. Those from Homs and a Damascus suburb were only in very sparse phone contact with their families.

While ordinary people in FSA-controlled areas inside Syria did not have easy access to telephones, FSA officers were well equipped with satellite telephones (see the accounts of the FSA fighters X and Y). Moreover, foreign TV stations, such as Al Jazeera, seem to have provided these telecommunication devices to their informants (see A's account). At the same time, according to the NGO representative, satellite telephones can be tracked very easily since GPS location information is automatically added when calls are made (this is necessary, it seems, so that satellite antenna can be directed). So, our Syrian informant (who worked for Al Jazeera as a journalist), who believed that it was Skype that allowed the Syrian government to reveal his GPS location, was mistaken. Having said that, our NGO informant did say, "it is known that …" Skype has given the U.S. government the key to decode chat content and believed that the U.S. government has passed this key to all other governments (e.g. the Egyptian government). We are not in a position to confirm such observations but it does show that the use of media technology depends to some extent on knowledge or beliefs about what that technology does, and how.

Most of our interviewees were certain that the telephone network was surveilled by the Syrian government. Refugee C described it this way:

"I knew that Internet and telephone were surveilled, like anything else one could imagine. … Since my father was highly respected and had a high position he was not surveilled, but his friends and also poorer people were. You never knew who belonged to the government and who did not. … In general all Kurdish parties were surveilled, however the PKK was the strongest and got most intensely surveilled."

Once C tried to call his father and a government official answered the phone, asking him whom he tried to call. C assured him that "the telephone number was correct." Despite this incident, C was still convinced that his father wasn't under surveillance.

Activist A reported that the surveillance of phone lines was a significant factor in his preference for using Facebook in trying to organize political demonstrations.

Internet: Access and Surveillance

Before the uprising, it took time and effort to get Internet connectivity to private homes. One of the Kurdish refugees, E, interviewed in Germany, described it this way:

"I had to wait for the Internet several months … the time you had to wait was dependent on your religion: Alevi got it the fastest, then Christians and Muslims, finally all others."

Therefore, cafés played an important role in accessing the Internet. Political activist A had already described the importance of cafés in organizing political activities. However, Internet access was strongly controlled. The users' identity was registered by the cafés' staff. B described this procedure in the following way: "In the Internet café everybody had to be identified by means of an ID card. First and family name get written down together with the ID number, the date, and the time." Moreover, the cafés were regularly inspected. One of the Kurdish refugees described how two policemen accompanied by a computer specialist checked the Internet café he typically visited almost daily. Indeed, our respondent from the NGO subsequently confirmed that the Assad government had

made Internet owners specifically responsible for activities in their cafés.

Activist A told us that the owners of Internet cafés in Hama worked for the secret police. B reported that users of the Internet café were sometimes forced to open their Facebook account and even got arrested while inside the café.

With the availability of Internet, many refugees used Skype to stay in contact with relatives and friends and obtain information about the latest situation. This behavior changed with the limitation of the Internet availability in Syria (BBC News, 2013); it is used, at the time of writing, very sporadically.

Facebook Usage

Facebook played an important role in the accounts of our interviewees—specifically for those being well enough educated and living in urban centers. Influenced by the events in Tunisia and Egypt, A used it at a very early stage in trying to organize political action even before the Syrian uprising finally started in Daraa. According to C's experience, Facebook was important during the uprising, specifically for staying informed about armed strikes and demonstrations. He explained: "The demonstrations were first organized via posters, mosques, and TV-stations. However, then the people created Facebook groups and organized demos that way, reported about them, and about other things."

However, our interviewees mentioned that supporters of the Assad regime were active on Facebook, as well. C explained "There were also Facebook groups on the government side which wrote reports and revealed a different perspective." The Kurdish activist B developed sophisticated practices around Facebook to crosscheck the credibility of news. However, tactics for controlling Facebook pages were also evident. The freezing of Facebook accounts is commonplace when there are complaints about a given page or group. It seems to be the case, according to our NGO respondent, that checks on such complaints are not done manually (probably for efficiency reasons).

It also should be pointed out that analysis of Facebook usage, in and of itself, paints a quite unrealistic picture of political activism or opinion, since access to the Internet itself cannot be guaranteed. Most of the population living in the rebel-controlled areas of the north did not have any access to the Internet, at the time of investigation.

Given the surveillance of the Internet and the security staff's demand that suspects to open their Facebook accounts, our interviewees developed different strategies. C for instance told us that he does not post or view any clearly political message via Facebook—but watched videos of political content on YouTube. Others stayed politically active on Facebook and at the same time tried to protect themselves. E described how, after getting Internet to his home, he created four Facebook accounts: one account was his original one, then he had one account to conduct political activities in favor of, and one against, the Assad regime. From home he only used the one supporting the Assad regime, the one for activities against the Assad regime he used only from an Internet café where he knew the owner. Therefore, he did not have to register when using the Internet. Via this account he shared videos almost every day. He even used his double identity in

the online world to influence people's thinking. He knew a young woman who was supporting the Assad regime and became a FB friend with her from his pro-Assad account. However, later on he tried to influence her thinking from his Assad critical account without letting her know that behind the different FB identities was the same person. E mentioned a fourth account on Facebook which he shared with several friends for political purposes like posting mobile videos or statements.

The practice of account-sharing was very common among activists. Another interviewee, G, a refugee with Kurdish background, explained that he used one account with five friends to distribute reports, videos, and pictures, but he didn't use Facebook to gain reliable information.

Facebook was an important resource for those who have left for Europe. It helped B stay informed about the events in the country. However, the municipality's housing for asylum seekers did not offer Internet access. So, C, D, E, and F were basically deprived from this source of information and networking. C described that he can only access Internet when he visits relatives. Before the final decision on the request for political asylum is taken, the refugees are not offered any courses to learn German. Together with the lack of contact with their relatives and friends in Syria, these conditions of deprivation and isolation make C, for instance, desire to return to Syria—although the civil war is still going on.

Satellite TV

Arab satellite TV, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabia, played an important role for our interviewees in staying informed about recent developments in the civil war, specifically for those living in Europe (France, Germany, and the UK) (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Those seeking political asylum often lacked even basic access to the Internet.

The creditability of Arabic Satellite TV, specifically Al Jazeera, is, in this context, quite contested. An interviewee of Kurdish background judged Al Jazeera's approach to covering political uprisings in the Arab world as "changing." While C regarded the satellite emission of videos downloaded from Facebook and, more generally, Al Jazeera's role in the Tunisian revolution positively, his attitude changed with the Libyan uprising ("Libya was treated badly by Al Jazeera because it is influenced by Qatar and Saudi Arabia"). However, we found also less critical judgments on Al Jazeera's role in the Syria civil war. Another refugee of Kurdish background referred to the quality of the news reported from Aleppo. E explained, "[I] trust al Jazeera because I experienced directly that their reports are true. I could verify that by their reports on Aleppo which I know very well." FSA-related actors were generally more positive with regard to Arab Satellite TV. Activist A was even working for them.

Against the background of an increasing amount of different information sources, our interviewees developed quite sophisticated strategies to verify specific news and the quality of certain sources. Interviewee B is a good example; he displayed practices that often involve a carefully judged use of social media. By observing the different media over time, he became able to identify which ones were reliable. He also

crosschecks his judgments in conversation he had with his family and friends via Facebook. Another method B developed was to validate specific news by the amount of their appearance in different Facebook groups.

Videos: Mobile and User-Generated

Limited access to the Internet in rebel-controlled parts of the country seems to have made mobile phones an important media for video production and replay and led to a Bluetooth-based sharing of these videos among mobile phones. Our experiences when interviewing Z and his family showed the prevalence of video clips, both professionally produced and user-generated, shot with mobiles.

When visiting the border town of Kiliz, we were shown amateur videos documenting atrocities taking place in the ongoing Syrian war. We saw young people openly sharing such content, including the beheading of a prisoner of war. This content was shown to one of the authors.

Mobile phones enable the documentation of atrocities by those who commit them and those who see them with a previously unknown immediacy. Their documentation is used for political purposes. For instance, Y suggested showing us proof of the mass murders of the Assad regime in Deir ez-Zur.

A year later at the Jordan border town of Al Ramtha, we again met young fighters of the civil war working at a fruit stand. While showing us the scars of war, they also presented to us different videos on their mobiles. The first one depicted the owner of the mobile fighting house-to-house in Daraa. A second one presented himself and three more fighters driving fast in a jeep in southern Syria, all highly armed. The video was accompanied by music. A third one showed, according to them, a scene in the center of Daraa where a crowd of people are attacked (not clear whether from the air or from snipers), leaving two dead bodies on the scene, one portrayed in close-up detail.

Another of the young fighters showed us a whole collection of photos showing him in house-to-house fight, posing with an automatic rifle and two ammunition belts, followed by traditional baby photos (his daughter or a relative), and then photos with the baby posing with a real Kalashnikov (which is still clearly taller than her).

During the second phase of the study, we asked more deliberately about the practices of dealing with videos recorded and shared via mobiles. One of the refugees, E, explained his usage of videos in Syria:

> "I traded mobile videos with my friends when we met. But we were recording videos on our own too and posted them on Facebook or YouTube. We share one Facebook account, which we only use for political purposes."

Another refugee, F, described his video-related practices in Syria as follows:

> "The majority of the videos I posted were about demonstrations, for example the police arresting somebody. I saw the videos with the atrocities only on YouTube, but I shared them later."

Another politically active refugee explained how quite a sophisticated division of labor could be entailed when producing a mobile video (in this case covering a demonstration in the first months of the uprising):

> "We divided the work on the mobile videos. I was responsible for filming, because I had a good place to view the main street, where I lived in Syria. Then I gave the memory card to another man, who was responsible for the cutting. A third one uploaded the video to a social media platform."

On the other hand, some refugees raised concern with regard to the cruelty of the videos' content and expressed doubts concerning their authenticity. C argued that it is often unclear who created and who uploaded them. He spoke about a video displaying a massacre committed by FSA soldiers. However, Al Jazeera had used this video and claimed that the massacre was committed by the government forces. He took that as an example of how problematic and manipulative the handling of these videos can be.

6. Discussion

Our study is based on narrative interviews with Syrian activists and refugees conducted from December 2012 to March 2014, along with an interview with a representative of an NGO. The situation and conditions in wartime Syria are changing very dynamically. Thus, our insights represent mainly historical "snapshots" in respect of the states of affairs in early 2013 and spring 2014. As the PhD student pointed out:

> "Even more, in the beginning of the uprising there was not much differentiation in positions: there were those who were against the regime, and those who were with the regime. Now there are multiple camps differentiating across multiple issues: military vs. peaceful action; religious vs. secular future."

In this context, our following insights provide mainly a "snapshot" of the situation in spring 2013 and a follow-up interview phase in March 2014. There are clear limitations in our methodology, due to restrictions of data sampling and empirical research inevitably faced in wartimes and conflict regions. For security reasons, one cannot freely travel around the partly devastated country but can have access only to pacified or border regions, etc. Access to interview partners is very limited as well: Not being able to enter the war zones directly and speak with fighters or persons affected, research has mainly been dependent on persons who successfully fled the conflict zones, e.g. people in refugee camps, etc. Furthermore, our study is based on interview trips in two border regions next to Syria, which means we conducted two short visits instead of staying in the region for a longer time period. We did not speak to the same interview partners again but added interviews with new partners on each visit. Therefore, we are not able to tell a "story," which fully reflects the experiences of interviewees or (re-)trace a historical development of the Syrian situation in a continuous fashion. Instead, we analyze data from two or three snapshots over different times and places.

Nevertheless, despite the restrictions and limitations for such studies in war zones, our interviews provide some rich insights into the context conditions for ICT and media use in these particular disrupted environments. More

particularly, they provide for some nuance in what is otherwise a somewhat generalized discourse. While existing studies demonstrate a high degree of usage of social media and, in some cases at least, argue for a democratizing tendency, our study points in a preliminary way to the need for the contextualizing of media use.

6.1. The Ecology of Social Media

Social and other media use, we argue, in the situations we describe (and arguably a great deal more so than in stable contexts), has a distinctively spatial and temporal character. It is evident from our results that choices about what media to use, and how to use them, depend on a number of factors, which relate to the overall media landscape, a landscape that can rapidly evolve. At any given moment, some media will be more or less stable and others will not. In a similar way, and as a result of this, issues of trust, surveillance, and safety clearly intervene in quite practical ways. As we have seen, interviewees had recourse to a number of different channels, both for accessing information and for communicating it. Mobile phones are commonly used for what we might call, "local sharing," "local" in the sense of their immediate environment. This, we presume, is precisely because they are mobile. They are easy to transport around and can be used discretely. Certainly sharing of some information (images and videos) seems commonly done using this vehicle. Indeed, videos seem to become a central communication channel (if not the sine qua non) for documentation, mobilization, and propaganda. Most videos are taken with mobiles and are generally amateurish in nature, none of which draws from their power. Such videos primarily attest to personal experience, providing narratives that represent, above all, victimhood. Their local production and distribution among fighters' phones or via video-sharing platforms circumvent the traditional mechanisms of media aesthetics—typically applied by the mass media, such as TV stations. It is worth investigating whether and to what extent this media usage may contribute to the enormous cruelties characteristic of the Syrian civil war —whether, in other words, there is an "amplification" effect. It is also possible that this willingness to share video content is a function of uncertain language skills. Visual images require no translation. One methodological issue that could possibly have added to this presentation of video documents to western researchers might be some lacking language skills. If communication between Syrian interviewees and German researchers is hindered to some extent by missing Arabic or English language skills, sharing video content (or documentary pictures, by the way) could support personal experiences and point of views.

The emerging situation we describe above reflects something of an "arms race" between those who wish to use social media and those motivated to control it. The use of Facebook, for instance, can be problematic (to say the least) when military forces of the government insist on access to Facebook pages and we see above some fairly intricate attempts to manage this by maintaining more than one Facebook page. Users find new ways to utilize social media

and institutional forces attempt new ways to prevent them from doing so (there is a parallel here with peer-to-peer networking). On a more long-term basis, this ecology can be thought of as potentially very fragile. We discuss this below.

6.2. Politics and Identity Politics

Political situations in the Middle East change very rapidly and are evidently extremely complex. There is a wide variety of opinion and behavior even in our small sample among the users of social and other media in these contexts. Indeed, it is not entirely clear that some of this behavior can be thought of as a "public" at all. Warner (2002) defines publics as totalities that "come into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (p. 50), implying that they are substantially constituted in discursive, textual, forms. This textuality is emphasized in and through an insistence, as mentioned above, that publics are characterized by "relations among strangers." This is in stark contrast to the view that material factors strongly influence the formation and maintenance of publics. The behaviors we describe evidently do not constitute a "public" in the sense that Warner advocates, although along with Aouragh (2008, 2011) we believe that "counterpublics" may adequately describe the situation. Views are strongly contested and, in some instances, may be heavily disguised. Political attitudes and behaviors cannot be simply described as "relations among strangers." Lack of trust and feelings of insecurity mean that the use of some media to share experiences and opinion is carefully managed and often limited to family and friends. Our point here is that any sense in which we might discuss the use of social media in the circumstances we describe is of relatively little value without reference to the physical/material circumstances in which discourses are offered. Our respondents, while sometimes communicating with a wider public, clearly for the most part locate their motivations in the experiences of themselves and their friends/family. We are not the first to comment on the somewhat arbitrary distinction between the "public" and the "private" made by, for instance, Habermas. Nor are we the first to observe that the social media have a somewhat ambivalent role in the public sphere. Our data, we suggest, supports the view that the boundaries of the public and the private are fluid and contested and, more importantly, that these boundaries are constituted in real, on the ground, constraints.

Nevertheless, online behavior has explicit political purpose a large part of the time, such as when oppositional activists in Syria report atrocities and shocking violations of international legal standards on both sides of the war. Their accounts also point to the fact that evidences about the ruthless suppression techniques that the Assad regime applied, which include the sniping at demonstrators with live ammunition and their torture in prison, have prepared the ground for their active engagement. There is a difference between motivations prompted by direct experience and those prompted by shared content but, even so, they seem to be mutually elaborative. All interviewed persons have in common that they first were victims of aggression and suppression, before they became active. At the same time, we should be cautious about attributing explicit political motives to all such sharing. The

production of videos seems to have become an important part of framing collective memories (see e.g. Zerubavel, 1995; Olick et al., 2011; Pennebaker et al., 2013) of this civil war. Watching these videos, and photos, seem to have become a common practice among Syrians of different age and backgrounds. Users, however, may have many different motives for their use of social and other media. The sharing of what, to our sensibilities, are rather shocking images is not necessarily done for explicitly political purposes. Loosely connected to this is the problematic nature of what constitutes political communication in the first place.

6.3. Differences in Media Usage between Arab Uprisings and Longer-Lasting Conflicts

In other studies on uprisings in Arab countries (e.g. in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya) evidence showed the high importance of social media usage (e.g. for mobilization and organization of protest activities and direct action). In several case studies Facebook was found to play a major role in the communication of political activists. As Wulf, Misaki et al. (2013) have pointed out in Tunisia, the key success factor for political mobilization was the interplay between social media (Facebook) and traditional mass media (Al Jazeera TV news channel).

In addition to the findings of Mark and Seeman (2009) investigating social media use by Iraqis during wartime, our study provides insights from a much more activist group of people. The four soldiers interviewed represent rather distinct socioeconomic backgrounds and life histories. However, there are some obvious parallels in their accounts. None of them originally had an explicit political agenda and wanted to change the political order by means of violence. They were drawn, rather, into becoming soldiers or activists due to the openly violent suppression of the demonstration and, at least in the case of X, after suffering from the regime's torturing procedures. Although some of the studies we cite showed that political activists using social media took severe personal risks (imprisonment in Tunisia, cf. Wulf, Misaki et al., 2013; arrest and ban from Internet in Palestine, cf. Wulf, Aal et al., 2013), the situation for social and mobile media users in the case of Syrian activists differs significantly. While in case of the shorter Arab uprisings single users were banned from using Internet sources and social media, during the longer-lasting wartime in Syria government, secret services and telecom providers cut off Internet infrastructure for whole cities and regions.

6.4. Fragile Ecology of Media Infrastructures

One strong finding of our study is that the war has also fragmented the Internet infrastructure of the country, often for long periods of time. Thus, Syria in the beginning of 2013 was divided in two parts: in government-controlled regions we found a fairly intact telephone and Internet infrastructure but with quite sophisticated control and surveillance strategies, and in regions controlled by rebels there was little or no telephone and Internet infrastructure. Hence, the civil war frontlines were represented in the communication

infrastructures. While one saw a total cut-off of infrastructure, e.g. during the uprisings in Egypt, for a short period of time, the Syrian civil war produced much more differentiated government control strategies. Due to the complex geography of the frontlines, the geographical distance between stable Internet access and cutoff infrastructure could be very short in many cases, areas of on- and off-Internet access reflected the division of cities into government- and FSA-controlled quarters. This also applies to other services such as electricity, water, and transportation.

There are some exceptions. Some rebel regions near the Turkish–Syrian border are provided with mobile telephone and Internet infrastructure from Turkish providers. However, the northern region near the Turkish–Syrian border is characterized by mountains, limiting the access to these mobile infrastructures. In contrary, the southwest region near the Jordan–Syrian border doesn't face these infrastructural and topographic limitations. Here, the coverage with mobile net access provided by Jordan providers works well even on Syrian territory. Our interviewees reported that they have regular phone and Internet contact to their relatives in Syria.

Furthermore, the West has donated an alternative telecommunication infrastructure to the rebels: satellite phone. This costly infrastructure was, at least at the time of research, reserved for fighters, and in reality mainly to their commanders. The population living in those parts of the country controlled by the opposition has been disconnected. While the FSA soldiers are preoccupied with military activities, they still lack access to their families, specifically when they live in liberated areas.

7. Conclusion

Our study aims to add to the corpus of knowledge on ICT usage of political activists during the Arab Spring uprisings under destabilized and disrupted conditions. In dealing with this complex and under-researched theme, we were interested in establishing an empirical foundation for discussions around the role of new technology, and especially the social media, in situations which are, not to put too fine a point to it, radically different from most work on the social media. Our focus was the "political." That is, we were, and are, interested in trying to conceptualize the activities we rehearse above and, moreover, to compare and contrast them with more orthodox notions of the "public," notions that increasingly inform discourses on political activity in stable democracies. We chose the method of narrative interviews with Syrian activists, soldiers, and refugees in order to gain some insight into the way in which media usage has developed and diminished as a result of background conditions and how such use is wedded to the biographies of interviewees. Here, again, narrative interviewing techniques provide a different flavor to the "big data" story provided through the analysis of often mainly Twitter feeds. In our interviews, Twitter was rarely mentioned and seems to have been of limited use and impact, also before the civil war started. In this situation, understanding how activists and refugees obtain and disseminate news requires a more qualitative approach.

Perhaps the most important aspect of our enquiries lies in the relationship between new media use and the merging and fragmented nature of the existing media infrastructure. The fact of government intervention in, and surveillance of, certain media creates new patterns of use. Interestingly, Assad himself made Internet infrastructure widely available in Syria and it remains available in the parts of the country that are controlled by his troops. The first demonstrations and protests in Syria were organized via Facebook, and social media probably played an important role in letting people know about the Arab Spring and in organizing the first mass demonstrations. Nevertheless, and as we have seen elsewhere, Facebook, Twitter, and even Skype activities were surveilled and used to identify political opponents. Early on, individual accounts were blocked, and later on oppositional cities or regions were cut off from telecom infrastructures as a whole.

In the latter case, we can see the emergence of a new communication elite: rebel army officers who are equipped with satellite telephones (mainly provided by Western regimes). They are the only actors with access to communication infrastructures in the heartland while the rest of the population (armed forces and the civil population) is offline; around two-thirds of the country is disconnected from Syrian Internet providers (Freedom House, 2015). Accessing Internet is only possible near the border to Turkey, relying on microwave links from Turkish cities or satellite connections (Al Monitor, 2015; Freedom House, 2015). Furthermore, there is evidence that social media is also used by new actors whose agenda is mainly unclear, e.g. different types of imams, Internet journalists, etc., who are specifically addressing recipients with infrastructure access in the government-controlled areas or Syrian refugees in border areas. Syrian refugees and emigrants are often well equipped with smartphones, although they are not often able to contact relatives and friends in Syria, at least if they are living in rebel-controlled regions.

In turn, "sharing" becomes spatially mediated. A striking feature of our findings is the way in which relatively low-tech videos of war scenes and related atrocities play a central role in framing narratives and developments in the civil war. While often displayed on YouTube, it is also very common for them to be shown in colocated situations. One feature of these videos is that their provenance is almost always unclear. In many if not most cases, it is hard to establish who shot the videos, who exactly is acting, or, in case they display atrocities, which side is responsible for them. Being widely disseminated, via mobile devices as well as via social media platforms such as YouTube or Facebook, they are serving multiple purposes: for documentation of atrocities and war crimes, for disinformation and propaganda, for humiliation and demoralizing of the enemy. Interestingly enough, it is now argued that the use of such "shock and awe" videos has become an explicit strategy of groups such as IS in Syria and Libya. Again, this suggests a rapid evolution of strategy on the part of the "counterpublics" we attempt to understand here. Future research, we argue, needs to better understand how, for instance, mobile videos are produced and circulated under the conditions of civil war and how they form part of a delicate, unstable, ecology of available media. The interaction with (international) mass media deserves specific attention. We know from the Tunisian case that its interplay with satellite TV played a major role in enabling the uprising (Aouragh, 2011). A's account points in a similar direction. However, here we deal with a long-lasting civil war, which creates different curves of mass media attention.

To understand the activities of these Syrian emigrants a thorough and nuanced understanding of their communication practices is needed, a task that our research is intended to begin. Our empirical study is a small and initial contribution based on narrative interviews covering the first one and a half years of the Syrian civil war. In its methodological stance and its focus on the role of ICT and mobile media in such a situation, it is, to our knowledge, still a relatively unique piece of work. Based on current events in Europe in general, and Germany in particular, future work will explore how refugees especially from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan use ICT such as mobile phones and social media and more during their forced migration.

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