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"Examining the "Independent" and "Alternative" character of Emerging media: A case study of the Syrian revolution"

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines alternative and independent media in the Syrian revolution. Although categorized by academics, journalists and their own assertions, emergent media have maintained the "alternative and independent" characterization for over a decade, including recent reports and statements following the fall of Assad. This article contends that these media are better understood as oppositional entities, strategically positioned to create an accepted voice for the revolution that challenged a regime that did not collapse rapidly like others in the Arab uprisings. These media outlets emerged as part of a broader revolutionary strategy to counter the state's media monopoly and influence public perception. This erroneous distinction overlooks the realities of media in revolutionary contexts, where assertions of independence and alternativity require critical examination rather than being accepted at face value. By situating alternative and independent media within their historical, political, and social contexts, this study recontextualizes them, providing a more accurate comprehension of their role in the Syrian conflict. This research also deconstructs their labels by analyzing practices, positioning, relationships with diverse actors, funding sources, and their role in shaping opposition narratives, particularly in the Syrian revolution.

Keywords: Emergent media; Alternative media; Independent media; Mainstream Media; Syrian Revolution; Dominant narratives.

Introduction:

In March 2011, a significant popular movement in the southern Syrian town of Deraa gave rise to what has come to be known as the 'Syrian revolution'. The country rapidly plunged into a bloody war. The attention of international media promptly concentrated on this situation which was presented as a simplified dichotomy of dominant narratives. On one side, the mainstream Arab and international media, particularly Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, BBC, France 24, CNN, The New York Time, Le Monde, Le Figaro, and others, provided a narrative of the events in support of the revolution. Conversely, the Syrian regime used its monopolized and censored local media to oppose bringing down the Baath Party regime.

During the Arab Spring, numerous media outlets emerged in the affected countries, articulating the call for change and the overthrow of the established order. Such emergence has often been accompanied by the assumption that these media are 'alternative' and 'independent'. This was evident in Syria, where newly emerging media have consistently self-identified—and continue to be characterized by journalists and scholars—as alternative and independent. However, these labels are frequently applied without sufficient justification; not all emerging media can be described as alternative, and not all independent media are truly free of influence. While emerging media in Syria may distinguish themselves from mainstream institutions, their claims to alternativity and independence require critical examination to assess their real position. In reality, they functioned as oppositional media, created by and for the revolution.

This research challenges the automatic association of emerging media with alternative and independent labels. By deconstructing these terms and questioning their application in the Syrian revolution, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of media dynamics during periods of upheaval. It critically analyses the motivations, practices and impacts of the media that emerge during revolutions. This allows to better develop our understanding of the role of the new media in shaping revolutionary narratives and outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Defining Emerging, Alternative, and Independent Media

'Emerging media' are platforms that emerge in response to social, political or technological change (Fuchs, 2011), often crises, transformation or significant upheaval. This is done in response to the limitations or failures of existing traditional mainstream media that are perceived as biased, censored or complicit with authoritarian regimes (Atton, 2002). Emerging media are characterized by their adaptability, innovative use of technology and novel ability to mobilize and engage audiences (Cottle, 2011). "Emergence" refers to the timing and context of the media's creation, not its ideological or operational position. However, media outlets emerging during a revolution does not automatically confer on them the status of 'alternative' or 'independent' media.

'Alternative media' position themselves in opposition to mainstream narratives, propagating ideas not conveyed by dominant outlets (Willet, 1999). They arise to counter mainstream limitations and biases by creating space for marginalized voices and new ideologies. The alternative press is generally defined by describing what it is not: it is not controlled by any authority,

power or government. It enjoys complete editorial independence and freedom of tone and expression, allowing it to put forward its own vision of events. It escapes the monopolization and commercialization of information by economic, political or commercial interests. However, the term is often used without a clear definition of what an 'alternative' is or what these media are alternative to (Downing, 2001). Atton (2002) argues that alternative media must be distinguished by their content, production processes and audience engagement. He also points out these media are unique by how they bypass traditional, corporate-controlled channels, finding creative ways to reach people while maintaining their independence (Atton, 2002). They encourage people to participate as active contributors to the conversation, shaping the content and its reach (Atton, 2002). Without these criteria, media cannot automatically be classified as alternative simply because they emerged in a revolutionary context. In many cases, media labelled 'alternative' during revolutions may not challenge the status quo, but rather present a modified or modernized version of existing narratives.

'Independent media' are generally outlets that are free from governmental or corporate control; yet this is too simplistic (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Couldry and Curran (2003) contend that independence is not a binary condition but a spectrum, and media may exhibit varying degrees of independence depending on their funding, editorial policies, and relationships with power structures. A media outlet may be financially independent but ideologically aligned with a political group. While independent media are defined by their editorial autonomy, this does not necessarily mean that they adopt an oppositional stance; rather, their focus is on self-determination in content creation and the ability to report without external interference (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). In revolutionary contexts, media claiming independence may be subject to political, economic or social influence, despite not being directly state-controlled. They frequently undertake investigative journalism and in-depth reporting, aiming to present varied perspectives while maintaining professional journalistic standards (Cammaerts, 2007). Unlike mainstream media, they tend to rely on alternative funding models such as reader donations, grants, or self-financing, allowing them to operate without the financial or ideological pressures associated with advertising or state subsidies.

Alternative vs. Independent Media: Bridging Theory and Practice

Media consumption has significantly evolved with the development of technology and the Internet which gave rise to emerging alternative and independent media. While they share looking for voices outside the framework of traditional media, they differ in terms of content, objectives, sources of financing and their relationship with the dominant narratives. A significant issue in the study of the media during revolutions is the tendency to use 'alternative' and 'independent' synonymously. This conflation is both theoretical and empirical. Not all independent media are alternative, and not all alternative media are independent.

Emerging alternative media are new platforms that present perspectives and marginalized problems often overlooked by conventional dominant outputs. Their content is often characterized by its radical approach introducing innovative formats and incorporating user-generated content that encourages audience participation. Their main objective is to interrupt the predominant narratives, facilitate social change and train underrepresented communities.

In contrast, independent media are established outlets operating without direct influence or financial support of conventional corporate entities. Although they also present alternative views, their content often seeks broader attraction by addressing broader issues. Independent media can adopt traditional journalistic standards, but tend to prioritize relevant issues for local communities. Their objectives include raising awareness, advocating civic commitment and promoting informed public discourse.

In terms of financing, emerging alternative media are often based on funds, donations and initiatives of crowdfunding, capitalizing the support of the community to remain autonomous of corporate influence. This allows them to be independent from advertising pressures, resulting in a more authentic representation of their audience's interests. However, independent media can seek a combination of income models, including subscriptions, memberships and sponsorships, rendering them vulnerable to external financing influences, which can compromise their editorial addresses.

In terms of relationship with the main media, emerging alternative media tend be in opposition to the main media, frequently criticizing their role in perpetuating the dominant narratives and drawing attention to social inequities. Their striving to dismantle conventional consumers' perceptions can lead to tensions. On the other hand, independent media often look for a collaboration with conventional outlets, convincing them to include surrender voices. They can thus align with conventional objectives while providing a critical analysis that challenges the status quo.

Characterizing emerging media in Syria as alternative and independent is not limited to their self-representation; mainstream and traditional media have also adopted this framing. Since the onset of the Syrian revolution, certain mainstream media outlets, international organizations (CFI, n.d.; Daher, 2017; Kleber, 2012; Morin, 2016) and many researchers (De Angelis, 2014; Issa, 2016; Marrouch, 2014) have classified emerging media in Syria as 'independent'. While other media institutions (Abo, 2013; Afeiche, 2017; SKeyes, 2017) have classified emerging media in Syria as 'alternative'. Also, some media organizations referred to Syrian emerging media as both 'alternative' and 'independent' (Dibo, 2016; Franceinfo, 2015). While analyzing the classification of these outlets may seem outdated, the persistence of these labels underscores the relevance of this study. Even after more than a decade since the start of the Syrian revolution, and the fall of the Assad regime, the Syrian emerging media is still labeled as alternative and/or independent (AMI, 2025; Enab Baladi, 2024; Erhaim, 2022; Haj Hamdo, 2024; Hamou & Mauvais, 2021; NED, 2022; Refsing, 2021). The temporal distance enhances the originality of this research by allowing reevaluating these categorizations with the extensive information disclosed over the years.

These media outlets were opposition platforms of the revolution against Bashar al-Assad's regime. Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2007) contend that alternative media often emerge in response to the perceived failures of the mainstream media, particularly in times of crisis. This failure catalyzed the emergence of new media in Syria, serving as a revolutionary strategy to establish a credible voice seeking the removal of the Assad regime, which did not collapse as swiftly as others. Under these circumstances, the partnership between mainstream media and local activists was strengthened to mobilize the public and the international community against the regime (De Angelis, 2014). Rather than providing a genuine alternative or independent discourse, numerous media outlets presented opposition narratives in a modernized form. Some of them exaggerated and/or invented their reports to better denounce the regime (De Angelis, 2014). Some also censored content that could tarnish the image of a peaceful revolution (Harkin et al., 2012). Moreover, emerging media in Syria considered that a silent majority of the population perceives itself as under-represented by both opposition and regime media (De Angelis, 2014). Consequently, they targeted neutral citizens to attract them towards an open and modern oppositional discourse, provided that they do not align with neither the regime's nor the conventional opposition's camp (De Angelis, 2014).

The theoretical issue persists in that those characterizing emerging media in Syria as alternative and/or independent also acknowledged that they were born from the Syrian revolution (Dibo, 2016; Franceinfo, 2015; Refsing, 2021; SKeyes, 2017). Others indicated that as the revolution commenced, new mechanisms needed to be established for a new opposition media discourse that would refute the regime's discourse (Dibo, 2016; Franceinfo, 2015). In this context, these media served as an act of resistance carried out by Syrians in their revolt against the Assad regime (Daher, 2017) that could serve as genuine alternative to the regime's media (Abo, 2013).

The automatic labelling of emerging media as alternative and independent is often reinforced by stereotypes about traditional media, which are often described as tools of propaganda and manipulation, especially in authoritarian contexts (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). This creates a simplistic divide between so-called 'bad' mass media and 'good' alternative or independent media, reducing a complex media landscape to an oversimplified binary. In many cases, these labels are automatically assigned, even as some emerging media continue to push specific political or ideological agendas rather than offering a truly independent or alternative perspective (Allan & Thorsen, 2009).

In the complex Syrian situation, the role of the emerging alternative media is to challenge the existing authorities of the narrative and represent marginalized groups while forging horizontal links between the components of society. The alternative media often claimed to represent a 'third way' distinct from both the regime and the traditional opposition (Sreberny & Torfeh, 2013), but their narratives often aligned with specific political factions rather than offering independent or revolutionary points of view (Lynch, 2012). Many of these media presented opposition narratives in a modernized form and were often dependent on external funding from international organizations or opposition groups.

Case study: Syria

The Emergence of Syrian Media During the Revolution

In the Syrian conflict, the emergence of new media met the expectations of much of the population. These media claimed to present a new vision of the conflict and exposed different aspects of the same narrative, positioning themselves as alternative and independent in terms of the context of production, content, target audience and method of funding. They responded to the urgent necessity to document everyday life whereby a substantial community of Syrian activists, professionals and journalists mobilized to bear witness to the war, promoting reforms in the media sector and contributing to the establishment of a post-Assad Syria.

In late April 2011, Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and BBC news networks, long regarded as the main sources of information for many Syrians, closed their offices in Damascus. Amidst this media shortage, certain mainstream channels commenced hiring local activists as ground correspondents. These activists emerged as the exclusive source of information for foreign journalists who had refused to operate in the conflict zone. It was against this backdrop that the activists endeavored to establish their own news agencies. The Syrian Prints Archive (n.d.-a) reports that 278 publications, both print and online, appeared in Syria in 2011.

Foreign Assistance and NGO Influence on the Syrian Media

The amateurishness of the new journalists was evident in the unreliability of their reporting, compounded by a deficiency of detachment and transparency concerning the material covered. To enhance the role of emerging Syrian media in the dissemination of trustworthy, high-quality and impartial information, foreign governments and non-governmental organizations provided funds and contributed to the training of Syrian journalists.

The question of funding plays a crucial role in shaping the content, objectives and narratives, and the positioning of alternative and independent means, especially in the context of contemporary conflicts. Also, the way that the recipient perceives democracy promotion programs and foreign assistance is subject to ideological debates. Some see these programs positively due to their assistance to disadvantaged communities living under brutal dictatorships. Others, perceive foreign assistance as a form of external interference in a state's internal affairs. Also, some believe that foreign support can be accepted since the end justifies the means – the dire situation justifies the use of all available methods to free oneself from a repressive regime. In this context, everything is relative.

Dependence on particular sources of financing can lead to the prioritization of specific narratives that align with the interests of donors, undermining editorial autonomy. It also generates donor-influenced editorial biases (Picard, 2011) that distort public perception through agenda-driven story selection (Riffe et al., 2023), while compromising journalistic integrity in both narrative framing and operational decision-making. Hence, maintaining balance between funding and editorial autonomy is essential in shaping how these media address pressing social problems. According to interviews conducted by Antoun Issa, Middle East affairs expert at the Middle East Institute, an NGO representative informed him that “coming from an approach of bottom-up, you need time, which no one grants because donors want results immediately” (Issa, 2016, p. 25). Accordingly, donations are often directly linked to expected results. In political contexts, aid always comes with a price, as everything depends on a strategy to be implemented and an objective to be achieved.

The financing mechanisms that sustain these media outlets influence the diversity of voices and perspectives they offer. When financing is targeted or linked to particular ideologies, the ability of independent media to preserve editorial autonomy and of alternative media to challenge the dominant narratives is compromised.

Confronted with the complexity of the situation in Syria, the majority of emergent media were incapable of self-financing or developing sustainable economic models. They were made up of young people and activists affiliated with the Syrian civil movement. Their funding was predominantly reliant on the benevolence of Western NGOs and a limited number of private Syrian investors. While this was essential for preserving and enhancing the quality of ‘independent’ Syrian journalism, it only concerned rebel-held areas (Issa, 2016).

European NGOs significantly contributed to the development of Syrian media and training initiatives. In the first five years, various programs were initiated and implemented, mostly in Lebanon and Turkey (Issa, 2016). The director of Free Press Unlimited [FPU], which has been involved in Syria since 2012 (FPU, n.d.), claimed that these programs were promoting an inclusive professional dialogue (Issa, 2016). However, this assertion contradicts that FPU did not collaborate with media organizations associated with the Syrian government.

Likewise, the U.S. has been involved in programs to develop emerging media in Syria. The U.S. government allocated grants to promote new media in areas not controlled by the Syrian government. In 2012, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations [CSO] launched a program called Support for Independent Media in Syria (Issa, 2016). From 2012 to 2014, the CSO allocated an annual sum of 12 to 13 million dollars to this program (Issa, 2016). This constituted the largest project ever executed by the CSO, comprising 94% of all its grants during that period (OIG, 2015). Originally, U.S. funding for these media programs was short-termed. But given the scale of the challenges, the U.S. government moved to long-term support for the development of the Syrian media by transferring the CSO's assistance program to the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs [NEA] (Issa, 2016; OIG, 2015). In fact, the NEA is closer than the CSO to the implementation process required by the State Department allowing for better, more stable and long-term management of the program (Issa, 2016).

It should be emphasized that the emergent media in Syria were sometimes so dependent on foreign aid that the donors carried all or part of the operational costs, including salaries (Issa, 2016).

Shaam News Network: A Case Study in Oppositional Online Media

Shaam News Network [SNN] emerged as one of the most influential 'alternative' media in the field. SNN was not only the first to transmit videos to journalists, but it was also the most organized, with a large network of contributors across the country. SNN is a Syrian non-profit organization established by a group of Syrian activists residing in California in the U.S. in August 2011. It appeared on social media platforms in February 2011 (Shaam Network, n.d.), three weeks prior to the commencement of the Syrian revolution (Harkin et al., 2012). Its creation was significantly influenced by its Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts. Its aim was to oppose the regime's propaganda and to counter disinformation that threatened to polarize public opinion (Boundaoui & Werman, 2013).

SNN was a crucial source of content from Syria to Arab and international satellite networks. It was among the most prominent and most monitored sources operated by online activists. Prominent BBC journalists regarded SNN as a generally reliable source (Harkin et al., 2012). The channel was perpetually available and prepared to cover any event. SNN ensured that its logo was constantly pinned to its content, maintaining visibility on air. SNN played a significant role during the popular uprising, due to its extensive involvement in events progression, its connections with on-ground activists, and its affiliations with mainstream media. However, according to a Beirut-based activist, SNN tended to censor or be selective when choosing images to exclude evidence of civilians carrying weapons (Harkin et al., 2012). Furthermore, several of its activists were less reliable in their sources of information, hindering SNN's objectivity (Harkin et al, 2012).

To fully comprehend the objectives of SNN, we focused on its practices prior to the onset of protests in Syria. On March 4, 2011, ten days before the start of the revolution, the SNN YouTube channel posted videos titled [Call for Independence] (ShaamNetwork, 2011a) and [Call for Revolution] (ShaamNetwork, 2011b), which incited Syrians to mobilize against the regime. Also, to incite the country's Sunni majority to rally against the regime, the network published six videos titled [The Shiite Invasion of Syria] (ShaamNetwork, 2011c). Similarly, more videos were published regarding the actions of the Assad family, along with a series of reports titled [File of Change] (ShaamNetwork, 2011d), and segments emphasizing the class struggle (ShaamNetwork, 2011e). The topics addressed were so diverse that it would be exceedingly challenging to determine whether SNN was intended to be left-wing, liberal, Islamist or independent. This manipulation strategy is frequently used by media outlets to reach all societal segments, regardless of their political and ideological affiliations, by identifying a common enemy; in this stance, the Syrian regime.

Print Media in Rebellion: Newspapers as Revolutionary Tools

Since the onset of the Syrian revolution, numerous publications and newspapers have been established to raise awareness among the Syrian diaspora and to provide an alternative to the regime's official communications. Among these media are Souriatna, Hurreyyat, Akhbar Almundas, Ahrar Souriah, Alhaq, Souria Bada Hurreyyah and Ahfad Khalid, whose publications are archived by the Syrian Prints Archive website. As per their websites' descriptions, these media outlets were all independent, politically oriented and opposed to the regime, focusing on the issues concerning the Syrian revolution and, in certain cases, advocating for the revolution (Syrian Prints Archive, n.d.-b).

Identifying oneself as both independent and a proponent of the revolution presents a dilemma in defining the concepts of alternative/independent media. For example, the Hurreyyat newspaper states its support of the revolution with the aim of defending citizens' freedom, justice and dignity (Hurriyat, n.d.). Akhbar Almundas aims to "perpetuate the pacification of our revolution" (Jaridat Akhbar Almundas, n.d.). Ahfad Khaled was "devoted to news of the blessed Syrian revolution" (Sahifat Ahfad Khalid, n.d.). Regarding the new journals' affiliations with the conflicting parties, Ahfad Khaled belonged to the Revolutionary Command Council, in Homs (Syrian Prints Archive, n.d.-c). As for the newspaper Alhaq, it was published by the Coordination of the Syrian Revolution in Damascus (Syrian Prints Archive, n.d.-c). The Souriatna newspaper has been financed since 2015 by the European Endowment for Democracy [EED] and has received funding from the European Commission and approximately 30 European countries. It specialized in investigative journalism, covering civil society events and human rights issues (EED, n.d.).

In late 2011, one of Syria's most significant newspapers and news websites Enab Baladi, was established. It was registered in the United States and Turkey, and identified in both countries as a "non-profit organization" (Enab Baladi, n.d.-a). Enab baladi has aimed for expanding its network and has formed several partnerships and strategic alliances with local and international entities, in particular "organizations which support free media and democracy in Syria" (Enab Baladi, n.d.-b).

These alliances and partnerships enabled Enab Baladi to overcome the war obstacles that prevented other new media from succeeding in publishing. Importantly, nearly all of these media outlets ceased operations owing to financial constraints, yet Enab Baladi, which identified itself as an "independent Syrian media organization" (Enab Baladi, n.d.-a), has persisted to the present and continues to receive financial and professional assistance from approximately ten organizations, including the National Endowment for Democracy, which is predominantly financed by the US Congress (Enab Baladi, n.d.-b; NED, n.d.).

Radio as Resistance: Broadcasting the Syrian Revolution

In rebel-held areas, lack of access to the Internet and electricity necessitated the use of conventional media, such as radio and newspapers. Numerous radio stations emerged on the media scene in 2012-2013, including SouriaLi, Nasaem Syria, Alwan, Rozana, ANA and Raya. They were generally run by professionals (De Angelis, 2014) and operated from countries outside of Syria (De Angelis, 2014; Marrouch, 2014).

In his study on the evolution of citizen journalism in Syria, political communication expert Enrico De Angelis identified three essential parameters related to radio that enable us to address our research questions.

Firstly, he asserted that with the rediscovery of radio, we were witnessing a step backwards in ideological terms, "because it reflects the spirit of the first months of the revolt in 2011" (De Angelis, 2014, p. 45). As a result, there was a return to a stance that favors one perspective at the expense of another. Accordingly, they were established to promote freedom of speech, lay the foundations for a democratic system in the post-Assad era and defend democratic values, citizenship principles and women's empowerment within Syrian society (Kleber, 2012; Radio ANA, n.d.; Sout Raya Radio, n.d.).

Secondly, the selection of radio broadcasting was linked to the project's editorial mission, which sought to "engage the silent majority who feel themselves under-represented by both opposition and regime media" (De Angelis, 2014, p. 45). The objective was to target neutral citizens and attract them towards a more open and modern oppositional discourse, provided that they do not align with either the regime's or the conventional opposition's camp. Hence, some worked for the revolution, yet without having any direct relationship with it (De Angelis, 2014). Despite this claim, their objective was to indirectly support this movement by providing a professional alternative source to that of the regime.

Thirdly, the rediscovery of radio was intended to rebuild the foundations of a robust media infrastructure that had disappeared due to the chaos that ensued in the country during the initial year of the popular uprising; Syrian media coverage "disjointed between social media, regime propaganda and international coverage that was insufficient in many respects" (De Angelis, 2014, p. 47). In this context, these radio stations have helped rectify specific media errors, provide an alternative narrative to that of the regime and present supplementary information to fill in the gaps left by the foreign media. To gain credibility while assuring their survival, the new radio stations were eager to maintain robust relationships with NGOs, local coordination committees and the mainstream media. For example, Rozana and Arta stations took funds from dozens of organizations, including governments that are part of the conflict in Syria (Arta, n.d.; Rozana, n.d.). Also, upon the establishment of Radio Ana, its audience was associated with local councils and local authorities (Marrouch, 2014). Notably, the director of Nasaem Syria has been working as a correspondent for the Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya networks in Aleppo (De Angelis, 2014). In context, was she not contributing in the propagation of the editorial stance of the Gulf channels, which represented a dominant narrative in the Syrian conflict?

Oppositional Narratives on Screen

The television landscape during the revolution was significantly hindered by the country's economic and security situation, and the deficiency in experienced and professional personnel. Yet, in the first year, several television channels emerged in Syria. Syria al-Shaab is a television channel that was created in July 2011. Its name, signifying 'Syria of the people', is a response to the famous slogan of the regime's supporters, 'Syria of al-Assad'. This channel has been important to the Syrian revolutionary community because of its service of the revolution against the al-Assad regime and its reliance on information sources, especially images, provided by citizen journalists – with reporters being the demonstrators themselves (France 24, 2012; Jaulmes, 2012). This channel was deeply engaged in the Syrian conflict whereby its reporters claimed working for a cause rather than a job (Jaulmes, 2012). One year post-establishment, the channel attained significant reach among the Syrian public, rivalling Al-Jazeera in terms of audience. Consequently, the Syrian authorities obstructed its broadcast on two occasions. The channel was founded by Jordanian businessman Mohammed Al Ajlouni, who "wanted to do something to help the demonstrators" (Jaulmes, 2012). Al Ajlouni is also the founder, chairman and managing director of ABS Network (Crunchbase, n.d.), having previously served for seven years as national director of Al-Jazeera (ABS, 2022a). It should be

noted that the majority of the mainstream media are currently the main clients of Al Ajlouni's company (ABS, 2022b) which collaborated with international news organizations, including Al-Jazeera, BBC and Reuters, to cover wars in the region (ABS Network, n.d.).

Aleppo Today, also known as Halab Today, is a television channel that began broadcasting via satellite since December 1, 2011, across Syria and the Middle East. By December 2012, the Syrian regime had obstructed their broadcasts on four occasions. The channel's deputy director, Omar Halabi, stated that being in the regime's target helped boost its popularity because of "the unique approach we took compared to other opposition channels" (Tuysuz & Watson, 2012). This channel perceives itself as an opposition entity, entirely independent of the conflicting parties. It relied heavily on confirming eye-witnesses (Tuysuz & Watson, 2012). Given the circumstances, didn't this provide a risk of disinformation, considering that the verification process relied solely on confirming eyewitnesses' stories?

A CNN article indicated that Aleppo Today personnel asserted that their channel endeavored to maintain impartiality in its coverage of the Syrian opposition. Yet, former news editor Samir Kanjo asserted that the channel was becoming into spokesperson for the Transitional Revolutionary Council, one of the largest political opposition groups active in Aleppo. Kanjo acknowledged that he was an opponent of the regime, "but I don't want to work for the opposition" (Tuysuz & Watson, 2012), which prompted his resignation from his position. The channel sustained strong relations with the city's Revolutionary Council, and simultaneously operated in partnership with the Assistance Coordination Unit, which receives funding from governments and organizations directly engaged in the Syrian conflict (ACU, n.d.).

Conclusion: Examination of the alternative and independent characteristics of the emerging media

Despite their objectives, financing methods, interests and partnership structures, numerous emerging media outlets were characterized as independent and/or alternative as they aspired for a democratic change. Prior to the revolution, there existed one dominant narrative, that of the regime. However, the revolution resulted in two dominant narratives: the regime's and that of the revolution. It is essential to acknowledge that the narratives of both parties hold a legitimacy that we cannot dispute or affirm.

The emergent media performed complementary and logistical roles, filling the gaps left by mainstream media and provided a new, modernized vision of the conflict. They served as offered an alternative discourse that reoriented the dominant Syrian media landscape. They enhanced the polarization and the depiction of the dichotomy, by reviving the ideological orientations that emerged during the initial year of the revolution. By positioning themselves within the framework of mainstream media, they reinforced one dominant narrative rather than providing an alternative to both or maintaining independence from them. Moreover, when mainstream media and academic publications designated emergent media in Syria as independent and alternative, they further contributed to the polarization and the portrayal of a dichotomy. Hence, they portrayed the situation as if there exists one dominant narrative, that of the regime. This approach undermines the theoretical foundations of alternative and independent media, allowing any new media emerging from a revolutionary upheaval to be classified as independent and alternative solely because the existing regime embodies the negative aspect of the narrative.

Furthermore, one of the primary objectives of these new media was to engage the silent and neutral segments of the population. Instead, they sought to integrate these groups into the oppositional discourse, thereby reinforcing rather than diversifying the spectrum of narratives within the Syrian media landscape. As a result, their approach mirrored the mechanisms of mainstream media.

Additionally, several media outlets were financed during the initial phase of the revolution and have sustained existence. This indicates that they were delivering the results set forth by their financial backers. As such, financing a single successful initiative may trigger a spontaneous snowball effect, where additional media outlets emerge, aligning themselves within the same political framework. It is also important to note that certain new media were established even before the revolution, anticipating its outbreak and preparing to act accordingly. Moreover, most of these new media outlets established connections with conflicting parties and organizations. Some were founded by local committees while others were financed by entities with distinct political position in this conflict. Although many of these emerging media were founded spontaneously in response to the urgency of the situation, the political stakes remain equally critical for them.

The distinction between most emerging media in Syria, was nearly indistinguishable due to their similar operational methods and behavior. Their assigned title as independent/alternative was determined by their self-definition and the characterization they received from others. However, they failed to adhere to the theoretical foundations of both terms, as the bulk of them

operated similarly in objectives, goals, content, target audience, funding, partnerships, and political agendas. This suggests that 'alternative' and 'independent' were merely labels, disregarding the inherent implications of each term. Hence, the re-emergence of a new revolutionary narrative, while rooted in the old one, adapted to the needs of the revolution. By redirecting and reorienting the revolutionary discourse using modern methods and tools, these media aimed to attain the goals that the revolution had failed to achieve in its initial stages.

The diversity of media in Syria has progressed in tandem with the political, economic and security changes that have occurred since the start of the revolution. Their work must be understood as part of the ideological and logistic machinery of the revolution, aimed at creating revolutionary consent. In this regard, they significantly impacted the deconstruction of the value systems of Syrians both domestically and abroad. Their political objective was clear: to reshape the opposition and galvanize efforts to take down the Assad regime.

Consequently, their emergence was not motivated by the need to serve the marginalized parts of the Syrian population or to challenge the dominant discourses of the two camps. It was a necessity for the revolution itself—a tool to revive and modernize opposition discourse. Therefore, any media that uses this method of operation will be labelled as oppositional instead of independent or alternative. As a result, characterizing the emerging media in Syria as alternative and/or independent is imprecise.

The critical perspective adopted in this research emphasizes the need to move beyond simplistic categorizations of these media as "alternative" or "independent." Instead, their role and impact must be understood within the specific historical, political, and social context of the Syrian revolution. This analysis offers insight into how we can define emerging media in journalistic articles and academic papers.

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"تحليل الطابع "المستقل" و"البديل" لوسائل الإعلام الناشئة: دراسة حالة الثورة السورية"

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مدرسة الدكتوراه في العلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية

كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية

قسم علم الاجتماع والأنثروبولوجيا

الملخص:

تتناول هذه الورقة، بعين نقدية، ما يُسمّى بالإعلام "البديل والمستقل" الذي ولد خلال الثورة السورية. وإذ تبنّت المنصات الإعلامية الناشئة هذا التصنيف لتوصيف نفسها، كما عرّفها به الأكاديميون والصحافيون، فقد حافظت تلك المنابر على هذه التسمية، طيلة أكثر من عقد، وواصلت استخدامها له حتى في تقارير صدرت أخيراً في أعقاب سقوط الأسد. ويجادل هذا البحث بأنه من الأنسب تعريف وسائل الإعلام تلك، بكيانات معارضة تموضعت استراتيجياً في موقع يمكّنها من تكوين صوت مقبول للثورة، في مواجهة نظام لم يتهاوَ بسرعة، خلافاً لما جرى في انتفاضات عربية أخرى. وانبثقت هذه المنصات كجزء من استراتيجية ثورية أوسع تهدف إلى مواجهة احتكار الدولة للإعلام وتأثيرها على الرأي العام. غير أن التصنيفات المشار إليها تعدّ خاطئة كونها تغفل واقع الإعلام في السياقات الثورية؛ إذ لا يُمكن التعامل مع ادعاءات "الاستقلالية والبدائلية"، على أنها مسلّمات، بل ينبغي إخضاعها لاختبار نقدي. ومن خلال وضع هذه الوسائل ضمن سياقاتها التاريخية والسياسية والاجتماعية، يعيد هذا البحث تأطيرها نظريّاً، بما يتيح فهماً أدق لدورها في الصراع السوري. أيضاً، يفكّك هذا البحث تصنيفات وسائل الإعلام من خلال تحليل ممارساتها، وتموضعاتها، وعلاقاتها مع الجهات الفاعلة المختلفة، ومصادر تمويلها، ودورها في تشكيل السرديات المعارِضة ولا سيما في الثورة السورية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإعلام الناشئ؛ الإعلام البديل؛ الإعلام المستقل؛ الإعلام السائد؛ الثورة السورية؛ السرديات المهيمنة.