Report Seminar 'Perspectives on and Prospects for Civic Engagement through Internet in Syria'

May 26th 2010, University of Amsterdam

At the 26th of May 2010, a seminar was held on the use of new media in authoritarian settings. Fieke Jansen and a researchers from Syria presented their papers on this topic, where after Roschanack Shaery Eisenlohr commented on the content. The meeting was chaired by Paul Aarts.

With the events surrounding the 'Twitter revolution' in Iran last year, attention has shifted towards the meaning of new media in activist networks in authoritarian settings. The Web has become a new space for analysis and researchers are starting to map issue networks of digital activism. In the Middle East and North Africa, broadband connections are growing faster than anywhere else in the world and this development is bringing challenges and opportunities to both governments and activists in the region. Judgments of these developments vary from 'cyber optimists' to 'cyber realists' and 'cyber pessimists'.

In his paper 'Internet or Enter-Not: The Syrian Experience', a Syrian researcher elaborated on the historical development of media in Syria. Until 2000, internet policy was extremely restraining, but this last decennium we can see some liberalization regarding some issues (like economic policy) on the internet. The internet sector benefited from Bashar al-Asad, since he was the head of the Syrian Computer Society. Nowadays around two hundred and fifty websites – from Syria and abroad – are being blocked, mainly oppositional, religious and human rights websites. Because of this, people are actively reacting with new proxy servers, and the government in turn changes its proxy's every day.

In his paper he poses that "the virtual life and real life of Syrians have one characteristic in common: isolation. Syrians continue to live under the law of silence. Until further notice, their fate appears to be confirmed: to live on the margins of advances in web technology."[1] He would qualify himself as a 'cyber realist'.

Fieke Jansen presented her comparative research on digital issue networks in Egypt, Iran, Syria and Tunisia.[2] Her main question was if digital activist networks are indeed issue networks, and if the organization of these networks is being affected by the level of repression in a certain state. On the one hand, internet has provided governments with opportunities to remain part of the global information economy, but on the other hand the control they have over information and communication within their own

---

[1]Internet or Enter-Not: The Syrian Experience.
.

[2] Digital Activism in the Middle East, Mapping issue networks in Egypt, Iran, Syria and Tunisia, by Fieke Janssen.

society is being challenged. For activists we see this same discrepancy between advantages and disadvantages: although the internet and a medium such as Twitter gives them the possibility to challenge existing power relations, decrease their isolation and mobilize for social change, it also makes them more traceable and therefore vulnerable to the oppressing regime. Jansen found that this conflict influences the specific network strategies of digital activists in the Middle East.

In her research, she saw major differences between internet activism in Iran and Syria. Syrian activists are very active in the blogosphere and are highly connected amongst each other. Jansen speaks of 'intellectual issue networks' in this context and found their topics to be on general issues like women's rights or racism. In Iran, activists are less connected but speak more of sensitive issues like political oppression and freedom of speech. Her research also found that language is a very important factor in issue network strategies: in Syria we see how people speak of more moderate issues in Arabic and use English when they want to address issues in the international arena. On the value of new media as a driver of social change, Jansen places herself somewhere in the middle between the cyber-optimists and the cyber-pessimist school.

In the discussion of the papers, several topics were touched upon whereby the returning topic seemed to be the 'cat-and-mouse game' between government and activists. The fact that 'we don't know how much they know', the enormous power of fear and the role of the secret service were all discussed. Importantly, the metaphor of the cat-and-mouse game suggests a certain balance between challenges and opportunities of the government on the one side and activists on the other side. A paper from another researcher however suggests that the government 'is always behind'.[3] Fieke Jansen is of the opinion that the government is indeed perhaps 'behind', but on the other hand it has proven to be very inventive in catching up with the activists' tactics. The administrative branch responsible for online dissident activities is composed of highly educated people, many having attained a Phd in the west. A new strategy of the government has become to use the internet by presenting itself as, for example, a fake activist and in this way trying to influence discussions and articles on opposition websites or on human rights groups on Facebook. The Web has become a true battlefield.

In this context, one attendant was of the opinion that playing the game *in itself* has become an act of activism. Others however took the fact that escaping the government's eye can take up all of the activist's time is illustrative of the small use internet can be for activists and that it actually makes them more vulnerable.

On the usefulness of Twitter, opinions also differed. The advantage of Twitter for activists is that you don't have to go online, which makes you more anonymous. On the other hand, cell phones are being geo-located, so authorities can still find out where you are when releasing your tweet. Some attendants therefore wondered why the protest movement in Iran last year has been called the 'Twitter revolution'. Although Twitter proved to be a real mobilization tool, until now it has not been measured what the real impact of Twitter has been on the political situation in authoritarian countries. Therefore it is perhaps best to conceive the 'Twitter revolution' label as mostly symbolic; as depicting a generation with higher degrees of mobile communication. Like the cat-and-mouse metaphor, which wrongly implies a symmetrical and simple relationship between oppressor and activist, these concepts

---

[3] The impact of cyber sphere on change in Syria.

are highly misleading and obscure the complex and unknown effects of these developments.

How to measure the impact of new media in authoritarian settings; can you measure it at all? And should we actually attach such high value to this so-called 'new media', or is it merely just part of the ever going communication revolutions in line of the telegraph, radio and television? On this point, the division between cyber optimists and cyber pessimists becomes clear. The first school is of opinion that there *is* a difference between the introduction of the television (which had significant impact because people all around the world became marginally informed) and new media such as the internet and Twitter, because nowadays, as an *individual* it is easier to disperse information to a very large audience. The second school might agree on this, but still holds a skeptical position, because the effects new media have on the situation in an authoritarian setting has so far not yet been specified. As a synthesis between these two positions, everyone could at least agree on the fact that it might not be *very* special and unique, but it is *there* and it has proven to mobilize large groups of people and disseminate messages all around the world.

In the end, it is important to keep the difference in mind between a 'normal society' and, for example, the Syrian society. Internet is in itself a neutral medium, but it is the context in which it is used, together with the goals and the meaning people attach to it, which determines the value one can give it. Perhaps it is useful to place this in the debate on 'the politics of small changes', where attention is being paid to small steps which make an individual's life a little bit better; to perceive what this technology is doing to the daily life of an ordinary citizen. In Aleppo we see how it makes the municipality more responsive to citizen's demands, because the mayor has many employees in charge with answering critical questions from inhabitants. According to our Syrian researcher, in a 'special society' you need these new tools to open the window just a little bit. Long-term effects on cultural change are yet to be determined, but some attendants pressed that we should at least allow ourselves to see the potentialities Twitter and the internet are carrying.

Fieke Jansen is junior programme officer CIM at Hivos and wrote her thesis on 'Digital Activism in the Middle East Mapping issue networks in Iran, Syria, Egypt and Tunisia'.

Roschanack Shaery Eisenlohr is a researcher at the University of Chicago and was previously involved within in the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. She wrote an article 'From Subjects to Citizens? Civil Society and the Internet in Syria' (forthcoming).

Paul Aarts is lecturer International Relations at the University of Amsterdam and academic coordinator of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia.