Degree project in the Field of Technology and the Main Field of Study Media Management

Second cycle, 30 credits

A Case Study on social media: platforms for freedom or tyranny?

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Some assert that social media has contributed in one way or another to organizing the work of revolutionaries and those seeking freedom and democracy on its platforms and has provided them with a space to express their opinion against authoritarian regimes. However, the information policies of the companies behind social media can discourage activists and enable authoritarian regimes. This case study examines the views of experts and media professionals on the changes in the roles of social media companies over the past 11 years in the context of social liberation movements. Through interviews with four media professionals and a survey of Syrian social media users, the study identifies the perceived restrictions imposed on the freedom of activists and media professionals to use social media, and at the same time identifies the perceived beneficiaries of these restrictions. The results show that social media companies are now playing a dangerous role in imposing an unethical system on new media that is far from impartiality and objectivity. It also empowers people and groups belonging to certain political parties and gives them freedom of expression at the expense of other people and groups.

SAMMANFATTNING
Vissa hävdar att sociala medier, på ett eller annat sätt, har bidragit till att organisera revolutionärer och de som söker sig till frihet och demokrati på dess plattformar. Att det har skapat ett utrymme att uttrycka sina åsikter på, mot auktoritära regimer. Däremot kan informationspolicy för företagen, bakom sociala medier och dess plattformar, avskräcka aktivister och möjliggöra för auktoritära regimer. Denna fallstudie undersöker synpunkter urifrån experter och media-kunniga, kring förändringar i rollerna hos sociala medie företag under de senaste 11 åren, i samband med den sociala befrielserörelsen.

Keywords: social media, Arab spring revolutions, freedom, tyranny.

Nyckelord: sociala medier, arabiska vårens revolutioner, frihet, tyranni.

DEFINITIONS
-Social Media Platform
Social media are applications and websites that are used to communicate with others and disseminate information over the World Wide Web through computers or mobile phones. Social media also refers to any online communication tool that allows users to share and disseminate content on a large scale.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the spark erupted in what came to be known as the Arab Spring uprisings in at least 6 countries: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria [13]. These liberation movements have largely been described as the social media revolution. However, many researchers and activists did not agree on this label, because social media may be supportive of some revolutions but not exclusively responsible for the events of the Arab Spring [9, p.352]. This case study sheds light on the Syrian revolution that has been going on for more than a decade with no end in sight.

The role of social media, which has been played during the Arab liberation movements of the past decade, has been driven by several factors: time, place, and the type of leader each country has [13]. Digital platforms in Tunisia and Egypt helped deliver their message to the whole world and bring down their dictatorships by organizing protests and gatherings [13]. In Libya, social media helped start the revolution, but then it became more important to share information than to organize protests and rallies. Syria is different because Bashar al-Assad was more willing to confront the popular movement than Ben Ali in Tunisia or Mubarak in Egypt, and his regime is more repressive and brutal [13].

Authoritarian regimes have always succeeded in imposing their control over the traditional media - newspapers, television, and radio - through imposing their ownership over them, as well as methods ranging from bribes to intimidation and threats of arrest. On the other hand, there is an ongoing debate about the ability of authoritarian regimes to control the creation and dissemination of information on the Internet and social media platforms and turning it from a protest engine into another potential mechanism for regime resilience [5].

Some argue that new media, particularly social media, disrupt the ability of authoritarian regimes to censor, because everyone can act as a broadcaster and the generation of information becomes too fragmented to control [14]. While some are skeptical that most authoritarian regimes with increased Internet penetration have used technology and more traditional forms of repression, such as tracking and arresting opponents, to counter the dangers posed by social media [14]. This was confirmed by Human Rights Watch that Syrian security services held Internet writers incommunicado and tortured them simply for telling stories the government did not want them to see [1, p.72].

It is important to understand and realize that social media is used to serve the political goals of reformists, revolutionaries, and authoritarian regimes alike. These platforms, despite their capabilities in establishing democracy, and turning them into necessary tools to ignite protests and mobilize public opinion against authoritarian regimes, probably are insufficient and unsafe to pursue and achieve socio-political transformation. Especially after increasingly skilled autocrats have turned it into a tool of notorious regime consolidation [5].

The current project reviews the literature on the stages of media development in Syria, all the way to digital media, and reveals the perceived role played by social media and their impact on liberation movements from the point of view of activists and media. Furthermore, the research aims to identify the perceived restrictions imposed on the freedom of activists and media professionals to use social media, and to identify the perceived beneficiaries of these restrictions through the eyes of media professionals.

To this end, interviews were conducted with journalists and experts, in addition to an online survey of a wide range of activists and university students regarding the effectiveness of social platforms. Analysis and discussion of the results will be presented, with the aim of integrating them with the existing literature to answer the research question: How do experts, media professionals, and activists, perceive changes in the roles and strategies of social media companies over the past 11 years in the context of social liberation movements in the Arab Spring countries especially Syria?

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is identifying the restrictions imposed on the freedom of activists and media professionals to use social media, and to identify the beneficiaries of these restrictions. In addition to revealing the perceived role
played by social media and their impact on liberation movements from the point of view of activists and media. The focus will be mainly on the Syrian revolution 11 years after its launch.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 History of Media in Syria

In this section, I will shed light on the media and its development in the Syrian society. To do so, I will examine the history of media ownership and media in Syria, the relative freedoms in the Syrian society, and the reasons that prompted the Syrian regime to lift the ban on social media and many global sites after several years.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century when electronic mass communication was introduced, Arab governments who understand the importance of controlling and manipulating public opinion, have retained control over many forms of broadcast media [6]. The Syrian media was mainly characterized by the state’s control over it and the emergence of a “hybrid” private media [6], which was established during the era of Bashar al-Assad. Media owners and elites were mainly linked to political structures and obtained economic and political benefits, and licenses to operate and distribute their publications, due to their connections with important figures in the government or military [6]. The physical facilities and contents of their broadcasts are strictly controlled; and employees in the media and communications sector have always been government employees, resulting in the dearth of private media. We can note the vital importance of radio and television buildings in the Arab Spring countries, especially Egypt and Syria, through the extensive presence of security barriers and checkpoints protected by soldiers and military tanks even before the Arab Spring in 2011 (CPJ [Committee to Protect Journalists], 2012) [1]. This may be a result of the fact that most of the previous military coups against Arab governments targeted these institutions in the same way that they targeted royal and presidential palaces, ministerial buildings, and important military institutions. In the case of Syria, the government, businessmen close to the government, and the ruling family own all the media. The Syrian government has exercised its control over the media for four decades, as it attends criticism of the president and his family and imposes censorship on both the local and foreign press and the Internet [15].

Nominally ‘private’ publications became a mouthpiece of the regime during the revolution. Relative freedoms in Syrian cultural production are seen as mere cases in which the regime allows some to criticize and express opinion as a kind of advertisement for it as a supporter of freedoms, considered ‘licensed criticism’ and ‘commissioned criticism’ which are merely a “democratic facade” [6]. At the start of the protest’s protesters burned newspapers such as Al-Watan in videos they posted on YouTube to express their discontent with these newspapers. The regime allowed several news websites on the Internet to operate within narrow limits. Their work was limited to publishing correspondents on the ground and collecting some local news and stories from the Syrian governorates and publishing them on these websites [6]. These changes did not portend any real political or media freedoms. In response, Syrian youth turned to blogs to express their anger and resentment against the government. As a consequence, the Syrian government imposed stricter censorship on the Internet, and prosecuted bloggers, arrested, and tortured them. In addition to this, access to global websites, social media platforms (Facebook and YouTube) and Internet cafes were blocked [15]. All these small Internet access points were under the control of the Syrian authorities [6].

The Syrian regime lifted the official ban on Facebook on 8 February 2011, just a few days before the start of the revolution. This was not to allow more freedoms but to facilitate the monitoring of social media, especially since during the ban the majority of Syrians relied on foreign servers to access banned websites and platforms, and this hindered government oversight to some extent. Thus, reinstating access to Facebook, encouraged new users to access previously the banned sites through government servers, and thus the possibility of monitoring and tracking them [6].

The decades-old iron-fisted policy of the Assad regime prevented Syrian activists from cooperating, both in virtual and in person, and deprived them of opportunities to experience planning, preparing, and managing nonviolent protests
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against the regime. Yet despite these limitations, Syrians continued to find new ways to circumvent censorship and surveillance on the Internet. In the first months of the revolution, they were able to provide a continuous flow of information and videos documenting the regime’s violations against journalists and civilians alike, and send them abroad for global distribution, whether online through YouTube or through broadcasts on satellite TV channels, especially Al Jazeera [15].

2.2 Social Media and the Arab Spring

In this section, I will focus on the new uses of social media and the Internet by activists and political actors in the context of freedom and democracy. To do this, I will examine the reasons that enabled social media to become a major source of news, and how they contributed to the birth of what is known as the citizen journalist and break the monopoly of the flow of information and news by authoritarian regimes.

Social media has revolutionized the way that the world has understood the Syrian conflict and how that conflict has been waged. Syria has been at the cutting edge of the evolution of new uses of social media and the Internet by political actors, insurgent groups, journalists, and researchers [1]. As a result of the government crackdown, social media in Syria became the number one source of news. Arab activists and journalists alike have used Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to draw global attention to the military crackdowns on protests that have killed thousands of people and led to mass arrests during the Arab uprisings. For example: In the early months of the Syrian revolution, the Facebook page of the “2011 Syrian revolution”, which had more than 180,000 subscribers, was a vital source of information for dissidents [1]. The high level of mobile phone penetration in Syria has also played a pivotal role in spreading the regime’s violations. The scenes of the bombing and destruction of Syrian cities were recorded, uploaded to YouTube, and broadcast all over the world. These videos have been widely adopted by the international media. Arab and international media outlets relied heavily on citizen journalists and YouTube videos, after journalists were denied entry to Syria and direct access to the battlefields. Few international media organisations could afford not to use such sources, whatever reservations they may have had, given the intense difficulty of getting journalists into Syria and the need for striking imagery [8].

Many Syrian activists have justified their turn to video evidence in social media because they provide the opportunity to discover the truth and communicate the suffering of Syrian society to a global audience, something that was not possible in the past. Thus, the videos may fundamentally alter the regime’s ability to carry out brutal acts of violence. The most common comparison was with 1982, when Hafez al-Assad, the father of current President Bashar, killed thousands of members of the “Muslim Brotherhood” in the city of Hama. Not only has the massacre been hidden from foreign journalists for a long time, but the regime has also managed to prevent even Syrian citizens from knowing the truth [7].

At the same time, digital platforms have attracted Arab youth to the outside world and opened their eyes to a broader global picture that differs from that offered by censored local media. The access of Arab youth to the new media allowed them to compare their poor living conditions with those of citizens who belonged to a privileged group associated with the regime. Such comparisons amplify their unfortunate fate and give impetus to growing demands for an end to repression, discrimination, government corruption and disinformation [1].

2.3 Social Media and Press Freedom

In this section, I will explain the relationship between social media and freedom of the press, and whether social media is the best option for Arab peoples for more freedoms.

The Arab Spring revolutions led to the belief that social media might be an alternative to newspapers and television as a censorship body that monitors government mistakes [17]. Greater Internet access may indeed be associated with improved government accountability, but the Internet has not always been the best solution. Some consider the gains made from the Internet have been short-term and limited, in addition to increasing digital tyranny in the Arab
Many countries have suffered a decline in fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of the press. In 2013, the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked Syria as “the most dangerous place in the world for journalists” [7]. Very few Western journalists have been able to illegally cross the Turkish border into Syria to cover the conflict in opposition-held places. According to a report issued by “Reporters Without Borders” for the year 2020, out of 178 countries, Syria ranked 174 in the Press Freedom Index [2]. Official government media regulatory bodies have been established to control, monitor, and approve the news media’s content [13]. In other words, the Arab news agencies have turned into mouthpieces for their corrupt regimes, and thus these governmental affiliated agencies decide the types of reports that are published and what is acceptable and what is not [13]. This has paralyzed journalistic practices due to government control of the media, declining internet freedoms, and enforcement of cybercrime laws, which can criminalize any kind of content that is not pre-approved by the regimes [13]. For example, On April 18, 2022, Bashar al-Assad ratified the new cybercrime law, which included penalties from 6 months to 15 years in prison, and fines between 200,000 and 15 million Syrian pounds, for anyone who publishes content on the Internet with the intention of upsetting or changing the system of government in the state or undermining the prestige of the state and compromising national unity. There is no doubt that this law is designed to confiscate the freedom of opinion of the Syrian people, as any digital content can be accused of leading to overthrowing or changing the regime. Thus, it is possible for security agencies to use this law arbitrarily to restrict many of the basic digital rights of citizens, especially freedom of expression and freedom of digital privacy.

Thus, in Gladwell’s view, the social media aspect of revolutions is ineffective. Gladwell points out that “Facebook’s activism works not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice” [4, p.2]. He adds that social media lacks an organized hierarchy, and the absence of a central leader, so social networks have difficulty reaching consensus and setting goals, making them vulnerable to conflict and error.

Thus, in Gladwell’s view, the social media aspect of revolutions is ineffective [4]. Another skeptic is Evgeny Morozov, a Stanford University researcher. He argues that the huge information available on social media distracts the audience and shortens their focus and makes them move to the next big thing more quickly. For example, Mozov noted that the Twitter audience bypassed the news of the unsuccessful Iranian revolution in 2009 as soon as they were exposed to a bigger news, the death of Michael Jackson [4]. On the opposite side, believers think that social media helps make people get organized into functional groups that can spread their message out to larger groups of people. According to Gire [4], a study conducted by the Dubai School of Government entitled "The Arab Social Media Report", which analyses the impact of social media in the Middle East,
concluded “that the growth of social media in the region and the shift in usage trends have played a critical role in mobilizing, empowering, shaping opinions, and influencing change”. Another study confirmed that the adoption of the Arabic language through Facebook and Twitter contributed to the arrival of these platforms to a larger number of audiences in the Middle East [4, p.4].

The spread of the Internet and the lack of barriers to entry into social media facilitate the dissemination of information critical of the government, which is particularly important in authoritarian regimes, where traditional media are subject to strict political control. The horizontal flow of information between social media users allows them to exchange logistical information, such as organizing demonstrations and targeted places. This helps to solve the problems of collective action to some extent and increases the chances of protests through the possibility of larger numbers participating in these protests [4].

As Toyama [21] argues the events of The Arab Spring countries show that social media is neither necessary nor sufficient as a cause of democratic revolution, casting doubt on glib explanations of the Arab Spring that posit social media as a central cause. Just as revolutionaries well before the Internet used the communication tools at their disposal, revolutionaries in the Arab Spring used the tool at their disposal, which happened to be social media [21].

On the other hand, both sides skeptics and believers agreed on the importance of digital platforms and encourage people to continue using them to their advantage by spreading news of protests and government abuses, and mobilizing masses dreaming of change and democracy, because they help the outside world know what is happening in their countries and help spread their message. However according to Joseph (as cited in [4]) it is important to establish more reliable communication methods because social media and the Internet can facilitate persecution just as easily as they facilitate pro-democracy activism [4].

Believers emphasize that everyone who owns a cell phone, and a social media application is a ground sensor capable of collecting and distributing information that could mobilize the masses and ignite a revolution. In April 2011, Syrian security forces arrested the 13-year-old Hamza al-Khatib, who later became the symbol of the Syrian revolution. The boy was returned to his family as a lifeless body after he was subjected to the worst forms of torture (a broken neck, cigarette burns all over his body, and he was shot several times and castrated). The great uproar caused by the video of Hamza contributed greatly to exposing the crimes of the Syrian regime and gathered a large local and international support around the Syrian uprising, which would not have been possible without social media platforms [18]. We can say despite the massive amount of government violations of media freedom and the restriction of privacy on the Internet, we cannot ignore the positive changes caused by the Arab revolutions in the last ten years. The Middle East alone has vastly exceeded the global average in the rise of Internet penetration. The global average has increased to 59% by 2020, being vastly outdone by the Middle East’s 70.2% [13]. Thus, despite the attempt of authoritarian governments to politicize social media platforms and online discourses during the period of protests, we cannot overlook the extent of the power and impact of social media platforms in consuming news and spreading it outside the borders to gather sympathizers and supporters, and facilitated the task of activists, journalists, and the public alike, to discuss issues of common interest [13].

### 2.5 Social Media and Changes (Syrian Electronic War)

In this section, I will describe the role of social media at the onset of the Arab Spring and assess how this role has changed over the course of the revolution and countermeasures by the Syrian government. To do this, I will show how authoritarian regimes have been able to exploit the power of social media and information technology and use it to serve their interests in order to remain in power.

It is no secret that the Syrian revolution is very different from the other revolutions of the Arab Spring. On the one hand, activists and the opposition used all means of information technology to fight the Assad regime, and on the other hand, the Syrian regime used social media platforms and applied surveillance and hacking techniques to respond. The image that emerged in Syria over the past 11 years, is a bloody political struggle on the ground, causing the deaths of thousands and the displacement of millions of people, offset by another conflict in cyberspace between
the Syrian regime and the opposition. The opposition relied on social media platforms and the Internet as offensive weapons at the time, to draw the attention of the international community, to try to gain support and sympathy [8]. The opposition succeeded in the electronic media war at the beginning of the revolution, relying on exposing the brutality of the Syrian regime and filming the violations of the security forces against civilians during the demonstrations, and then publishing videos on YouTube and Facebook, in addition to recruiting and collecting donations electronically [8].

In response to the opposition's victories in cyberspace, technology experts in the Syrian government opened the cyber front led by the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA). Its members denied any connection with the Assad regime and identified themselves as Syrian hackers who vowed to defend the Assad regime from mercenaries and traitors (referring to the opposition). President Al-Assad 2011, welcomed the (SEA), calling them as the “real army of virtual reality” [8, p.5]. Citizen Lab of Toronto University tracked the internet service provider (SEA) and confirmed that it belonged to Syrian intelligence [8].

To thwart activists' online activities, the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) created a fake version of the famous YouTube website, to take revenge on the Syrian digital activists who turned this platform into tangible evidence and witness to the crimes of the Syrian regime against its people. The fake YouTube platform attacked activists, by asking to enter YouTube login credentials to leave comments, and then installing malware disguised as an Adobe Flash Player update (EFF, 2012), then taking control of the victim's computer and stealing its data [8]. The Syrian regime's cyber warfare capability supports Morozov's theory of "The Net Delusion", where he argues that information technologies are in the hands of authoritarian regimes not in the hands of activists [8].

The Syrian government has been extracting IP addresses from user accounts to locate and arrest them, then subjecting them to physical torture, to reveal the usernames and passwords of their accounts on social media and the real identities of other activists and post pro-regime misinformation on their accounts [15]. According to Brumfield (2012), in its cyber war, the Syrian regime used viruses capable of spying on its opponents. These viruses can steal information from computers and send it to a server in a government telecommunications company in Syria [15]. The process begins by stealing the identities of some activists and impersonating them by (SEA), then they have chats with other users and pass on viruses to them, and once opened, the information is transmitted automatically from their computers to third parties [15]. International companies were accused of providing the Assad regime with surveillance technology that it used in its war on activists and journalists. These companies denied any dealings with the Syrian regime, and it's said that the regime obtained their products without their knowledge [15]. Activists responded by downloading surveillance evasion software such as Psiphon, in order to safely use communication services [15].

2.6 Social Media Enabling Bad Regimes

In this section, I will describe how social media companies transformed from companies founded on the principles of freedom and democracy, as they claimed, to companies that empowered authoritarian regimes and increased their support base. In addition to evaluating the enabling or oppressive features of social media.

Over the past years, elites in authoritarian and hybrid regimes have begun to reap the benefits of online technology without incurring its destabilizing costs and have transformed social media from an engine of protest into another potential mechanism for regime resilience [5]. The expansion of the Internet may play a role in diminishing the ability of regimes to control local media, or even provide a reason for increased censorship [19]. But after the Arab Spring revolutions, the Internet was used to significantly consolidate the rule of non-democratic regimes. Authoritarian and hybrid regimes are most interested in providing online communications to apply the theory of "oppression technology" providing society's elites with access to the Internet is a very calculated move by these regimes to increase control over the public sphere [19]. For example: the Syrian regime provided access to social media and some international websites after a long period of ban. This step came to facilitate the process of monitoring and tracking opponents, and indeed it succeeded [6].
In the face of potential opposition online, authoritarian regimes can use social media platforms to mobilize their support base. Just as activists can use social media to facilitate collective action and mobilize protesters, regimes can also use online technology to organize and mobilize their local allies. Not only are the political and military elites benefiting from the privileges of these regimes, but even ordinary citizens. In addition to the ability of authoritarian regimes to use digital platforms to disseminate propaganda and targeted speeches in a more effective and accurate manner. Social media counter-mobilization emerged most noticeably during the Arab Spring protests, as the Syrian government encouraged pro-regime bloggers and hackers to use social media to mobilize supporters and plan attacks against anti-government activists and Western media collaborators. Also, during the January revolution, the Egyptian authorities ordered mobile phone companies to send text messages to mobilize President Hosni Mubarak’s loyalists against demonstrators in public squares [5].

According to Morozov, what is interesting in cyberspace is how flexible and quickly authoritarian regimes can learn from each other. For example, Syria has turned to Iran to take advantage of its expertise in surveillance and Internet filtering to track and identify opposition members. Countries like Saudi Arabia have brought in internet specialists from China to teach them more effective ways to block Western websites. It is likely that the pace of authoritarian adjustment will accelerate in the near future in the Middle East, especially after the failure of many revolutions. These regimes are also increasingly learning from the mistakes and successes of their peers and are sharing tactics and techniques used to subvert social media [5].

Paradoxically, social media companies have transformed from a democratic space into a community police. It removes and imposes strict and unjustified controls on its users in the name of combating terrorism. In 2018, YouTube removed 33 million videos it deemed “terrorist propaganda” and removed 180 Syria-linked channels from the internet. From YouTube’s point of view, these clean-ups are legitimate and legal, as their rationale is based on the company’s terms-of-service to which every user must subscribe before being allowed to sign-up and open a channel. The same applies to Facebook and other social networks, with the absence of any commitments by these companies to preserve the digital memory of the country and its history [3].

Jillian C.York [11] says that the policy of removing content on social media platforms began after Facebook announced in 2017 the introduction of artificial intelligence to help remove extremist content, and YouTube and other social platforms followed later. She pointed out that the New York Times reported: “Artificial intelligence will largely be used in conjunction with human moderators who review content on a case-by-case basis. This is what many activists deny contains [11, p. 157].

Jillian C.York added, quoting a human rights worker named Kayyali: “The same algorithms used to tackle extremism were also removing vital documentation of the Syrian conflict, lots of demonstrations videos removed, in addition to videos of the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons attacks, which were described as genocide” [11, p. 158]. The Intercept published a lengthy article accusing Facebook and YouTube of removing evidence of atrocities and endangering cases against war criminals [11]. GIfCT (Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism) is the most controversial and ambiguous initiative. This initiative was launched in 2017, as it uses a shared database by major social media companies (Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Twitter). Video evidence posted on social media can be an essential asset to prosecuting war criminals, but if a social media giant determines that a particular video represents violent extremist or terrorist content and removes it, any other company using the same database will also remove the same video without being able to see what it contains [11].

Shortly, users are controlled, and their content is restricted by corporate policies and user terms. Definitions of terrorism and violence, the rules of community policing, and what is acceptable and what is not, are imposed by these companies’ using algorithms that have been programmed according to the goals of these companies and the governments behind them. Social media platforms have primarily commercial goals (increasing users and profit), and these goals set by developers are likely to conflict with the uses of social platforms as tools for civil society and grassroots mobilization. The great changes that have occurred on social media from the adoption of artificial intelligence, and the sharing of databases between companies may negatively affect activists and journalists, while the biggest beneficiaries of these policies are authoritarian regimes [11].
3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Collection

The primary data for the research was collected by conducting an online survey for a period of two weeks on the effectiveness of social media in several Syrian cities. The focus was on the Syrian nationality only, as the research targets the Syrian revolution more than other revolutions of the Arab Spring. The sample included 62 people, and the percentage of males was 67.74%, while the percentage of females was 32.26%. The survey consists of 28 questions in Arabic to ensure the convenience of the participants in communicating on the one hand and obtaining constructive answers stemming from a deep understanding of the nature of the questions on the other hand. The answers were multiple-choice and yes or no answers. No question was asked that required open answers. Given the existing likely stressors on the Syrian population short multiple-choice and simple yes/no questions were chosen to reduce burden on the participants.

The survey questions were divided into 5 groups. The first group included 5 questions to identify the gender and ages of the samples, in addition to their educational level and the number of hours they spend on social media. The second group of questions included 7 parts aimed at identifying the respondents’ view of social media. The third group of questions, which included 7 parts, focused on the real motive behind the use of social media and its importance to the life of the Middle Eastern citizen. The fourth group, which included 3 questions, took a more specific focus to identify what is being circulated about the relationship of social media with social liberation movements, its decline in credibility among the peoples of the Arab world, and turning it into platforms for confiscating freedoms and restricting independent journalists. Finally, the fifth group, which contains 6 questions, focused on the positive roles played by social media in the success of some Arab revolutions and the transformation of its platforms into social cafes that enabled its users to easily organize and gather. The survey was distributed online through social media groups. There was difficulty in reaching the targeted samples due to the Syrians’ fear of security prosecutions by the Syrian government, if their names and accounts on social media were revealed after answering these survey questions that have a character to some extent politically, full guarantees were given to the samples that answered the survey not to disclose or use any real names or information that would expose their safety to any kind of threat or harm.

The data was only generated for the purposes of the present project and will be deleted upon its completion. Data and information analysis was carried out by following descriptive statistics on IBM SPSS Statistics.

In addition, 4 interviews were conducted with a group of experts and journalists, some of whom had a role in establishing independent electronic newspapers that had a significant impact on the Syrian revolution, in addition to social media managers in some TV news channels. The interviews were semi-structured, in the style of conversation and reflection and relied on dialogue methods. Questions were asked about how the interviewees see the current state of social media in their engagement with social liberation movements, and the changes in roles and strategies of social media companies in the past 11 years, and how the new policy of social media companies affected the work of independent journalists and activists against authoritarian governments on their platforms.

The case study explores one major research question:
How do experts, media professionals, and activists, perceive changes in the roles and strategies of social media companies over the past 11 years in the context of social liberation movements in the Arab Spring countries especially Syria?

3.2 Ethics

The research involves surveys and interviews with people who have experienced the revolution and oppression in the Syrian context. All agreed to participate freely, were not compensated for their participation, and the effort required to participate was kept to a minimum wherever possible. The expert participants agreed to be identifiable in the report, including using their real names, as they continue to show their opposition to the oppression. While any real names and personal information of the samples participating in the survey were covered up at the request of the
participants and in order to preserve their personal safety.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Survey

4.1.1 Demographics.

Most of the respondents are between 32 to 38 years old, with the 25 to 31 age group being the second age group with the most participants (see Figure 01). The percentage of male participation in the survey exceeded the participation of women, as the percentage of males reached 67.74%, while the percentage of females reached 32.26% (see Figure 2). The number of people with a bachelor’s degree reached 46 people, 10 people with postgraduate studies, and 4 people with a high school (see Figure 03). The sample is heavily over representative of active social media users, with 85% of the participants answering that they are active on social media compared to 15% who are not active (see Figure 4). The largest percentage went to 4 hours with 23 people, then 2 hours with 19 people, and third for more than 4 hours with 13 people. In summary, participants in the survey for the most part are male, aged 25-31, with a bachelor’s degree. Participants are mostly active on social media, with the majority spending 2-4 hours on social media. Full statistics are available in Appendices, Table 1.

4.1.2 Social Media Values.

This question, which consists of 7 parts, aims to find out what social media means from the point of view of the samples participating in the survey (see Figure 06, and Appendices, Table 02). 43 people out of 62 surveyed agreed that social media are platforms for entertainment, while 10 people strongly agreed and 7 others disagreed. Secondly, 40 people agreed that social media are platforms to connect with the outside world, 20 people strongly agreed, and
only one disagreed. Thirdly, 38 people agreed that social media is a source of news and information, while 22 people strongly agreed, and one person disagreed with that and another one strongly disagreed. Fourthly, 34 people surveyed disagreed to considering social media as platforms for relaxation, 14 people strongly disagreed, while 9 people agreed and one person strongly agreed. Fifthly, 28 people agreed that social media is a platform for spending time, while 14 people strongly agreed, 13 people disagreed, and 3 people strongly disagreed. Sixthly, 26 people agreed that social media is a democratic platform for expressing opinion, 14 people strongly agreed, while 14 people disagreed with that, and 7 people strongly disagreed. Finally, 25 people surveyed strongly agreed that social media is a platform for profit and advertising, 21 people agree, 9 people disagreed and 2 people strongly disagreed.

Figure 06: The meaning of social media for the survey participants.

4.1.3 Motivations for Social Media Use.

This question, which consists of 7 parts, aims to find out the reasons behind the increase in the number of users of social media with the onset of the Arab Spring (see Figure 07, and Appendices Table 03). 31 people out of 62 respondents agreed that their use of social media at the beginning of the Arab Spring came because of the freedom to work on social media at that time compared to the traditional media that are under the control of the Syrian government, 24 people strongly agreed, while 4 people disagreed, and one person strongly disagreed. Secondly, 30 people agreed that their use of social media at the beginning of the Arab Spring is because these platforms brought revolutionaries together with those who share their feelings, 25 people strongly agreed with that, while 4 people disagreed and one person strongly disagreed. Third, 30 people agreed that these platforms are a quick source of the latest news and information, 28 people strongly agreed with that, while 2 people disagreed. Fourth, 30 people disagreed that these platforms are a more confidential source, 5 people strongly disagreed, while 18 people agreed and 7 people strongly agreed. Fifthly, 27 people disagreed that their use of social media at the beginning of the Arab Spring came because these platforms are a more reliable source, 2 people strongly disagreed, while 20 people agreed and 11 people strongly agreed. Sixth, 29 people agreed that their use of social media at the beginning of the Arab Spring came because of the ease of access and communication with the outside world to spread news, 29 people also strongly agreed while one person disagreed. Finally, 25 people agreed that their use of social media is due to their lack of trust in traditional media that is biased towards authoritarian regimes, 25 people also strongly agreed, while 8 people disagreed and two people strongly disagreed.

Figure 07: Reasons for the increase in the number of social media users in the Middle East at the beginning of the Arab Spring.
4.1.4 Journalism and Social Media Use.

In this group, 3 questions were asked with the aim of revealing what is being circulated about the role of social media in restricting the work of journalists and activists and the decline in the credibility of these platforms in the Middle East Spring (see Figure 08, and Appendices Table 04). 49% of those surveyed agreed that social media declined in credibility after the liberation movements in the world, especially in the Middle East after the Arab Spring revolutions, 21% strongly agreed, while 26% disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed. Secondly, 42% agreed that social media has made it difficult for journalists and independent activists to work on its platforms in the Arab world, and to some extent confiscated their freedom of expression against corrupt regimes, 19% strongly agreed while 29% disagreed, and 9% strongly disagreed. Third, 51% agreed that social media played a role in imposing an immoral system on the new media, 18% strongly agreed, while 28% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed.

4.1.5 Positive Role Of Social Media.

This group of questions aims to find out the samples’ point of view about the positive roles played by social media at the beginning of the Arab Spring, as planning and gathering revolutionaries on their platforms, and the ability of these platforms to mobilize public opinion against corrupt regimes. And to what extent fair policies are followed in page deletion operations (see Figure 09 and 10, and Appendices Table 05). First, the samples were asked whether social media follow fair policies in closing users’ pages? 88% answered no, while 11% answered yes. Secondly, 67% agreed
that social media is still able to mobilize public opinion, and 24% strongly agreed, while 6% disagreed. Third, 54% agreed that social media played a role in the success of some of the Arab Spring revolutions, and 27% strongly agreed, while 17% disagreed. Fourth, 54% agreed that social media was the first spark for the Arab Spring revolutions, and 19% strongly agreed, while 22% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed. Fifthly, 61% agreed that social media facilitated the planning and budgeting process that revolutions need when it comes to gathering crowds. 19% strongly agreed, while 17% disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed. Sixth, 50% disagreed that the Committee of the wise that was formed to oversee Facebook content played a positive role in favor of the anti-authoritarian revolutions. While 45% agreed with that.

Figure 09: Fair policies and social media

Figure 10: The positive roles played by social media.

4.2 Interviews


Each interview began with a quick introduction describing the purpose of the interview. Each interview lasted from 1 hour to 2 hours. Whenever possible, I interviewed participants via zoom. The interviewees responded to open-ended and an identical set of predetermined questions that are written in clear and comprehensible Modern Standard Arabic, that were thematically chosen to cover the focus of the study, and then transcribed and translated into English. It is worth noting that all the participants who were interviewed specialized in the Syrian conflict and were active participants in the theatre of the uprising that took place in 2011. To be able to answer the research question. In each interview, I sought to learn the following:

- The view of experts and media professionals on the changes in the roles and strategies of social media companies over the past 11 years.
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- How social media companies deal with independent journalists and pages affiliated with international news agencies in terms of the freedoms granted on social media and a comparison between them.
- The restrictions imposed on the freedom of action of journalists and activists on social media.
- The credibility of social media and the policies they impose on their platforms when it comes to freedom of expression.
- Protecting users from hacker attacks and counterrevolutions, which endanger their lives.

4.3 Data Analysis

4.3.1 Roles and Strategies Of Social Media Companies

Citizens of the Western hemisphere enjoy a great number of individual freedoms that are not shared by all societies around the globe. Instead, people often find themselves oppressed by authoritarian regimes, granting them little to no freedoms. However, freedom is one of the West’s most profound values today and citizens are entitled to it through their constitutions. In 2011, waves of protests swept the Arab region bringing down decade long-ruling authoritarian leaders in both Tunisia and Egypt. The initially small sparks of public disobedience lightened a massive fire that ignited protests in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Morocco, and Saudi-Arabia, reshaping the political sphere of the entire region. New protest representatives, such as the generation of young digital natives who used social media to organize and communicate, forced Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to lay down their office. It is fortunate for these young people that their revolution did not extend for more than 3 months, during which time social media companies took a position of neutrality and allowed citizens of the Arab Spring countries to use their platforms to expose their authoritarian regimes (Fathi Bayoud, 01.09.2022).

Bayan Alkhangi argues that the main reason behind the protesters’ reliance on social media at the beginning of the uprisings is due to citizens’ loss of confidence in traditional media and its bias towards the presidents and authoritarian regimes of the Arab Spring countries. Social media companies took advantage of the need of Arab people for these platforms to attract them to social media and open accounts on their platforms, due to the small number of Arab users on social media in 2010, which rose to record levels estimated at millions in 2011.

Bayan Alkhangi says, she was responsible for managing the social media in Orient channel in 2011, and she was publishing videos coming from the Syrian interior, which contained shocking scenes of bombings and massacres against civilians committed by the Syrian regime, and they were displayed on Facebook and YouTube without even any warning. Even the algorithms used on Facebook at that time were somehow enabling the videos coming from Syria to reach the largest number of viewers, and this support policy continued for all journalists and activists who publish news and videos coming from Syria until the beginning of 2012. Then, social media companies adopted strict new policies on their platforms, and updated their algorithms, which began deleting news and videos coming from Syria that violated their new policies, which stipulated the deletion of any video that contained scenes of blood or violence, whether this video was real or false news. This is due to governmental and political pressures and deals concluded with some regimes in the Arab Spring countries under the pretext of combating terrorism (Bayan Alkhangi, 29.08.2022).

All of those interviewed agreed that at the beginning of the Syrian revolution, social media companies adopted all the information, news, and videos that come out from inside Syria, and used their platforms as a space for these news and videos, to inform the outside world of the reality of what is happening in Syria, and thus denying the narrative of the government media, which has been obscuring facts and acts against human rights practiced by the Syrian authorities against civilians.

Loujein Haj Youssef was one of the reporters in the official government media in the first months of the Syrian revolution, before she defected from it later and fled outside Syria for fear of arrest and murder, as she described it.
Loujein says, she was a witness to many demonstrations and protests, and instead of practicing her work as a journalist reporting the truth, there were great pressures and threats of arrest if these demonstrations were discussed and talked about, but they as journalists were forced to deny these demonstrations that we see in front of us, and misleading public opinion and the global public, and trying to cover up these facts and prevent them from spreading. Loujein believes that Facebook during that period had a positive role in allowing the publication of facts documented by independent journalists and activists, and denying the discourse issued by the Syrian official media. Loujain adds that Facebook, at that time, did not know the importance and seriousness of the role it was playing during the information conflict emerging from inside Syria and other Arab Spring countries. However, with time, Facebook became aware of the importance of its role with the developments that took place in the Arab Spring countries, especially when the Syrian revolution turned from a peaceful movement to an armed movement. And she says that Facebook was involved in this conflict, given that the speech addressed by the Facebook administration to the public in the Middle East at the beginning of the uprisings, urging them to use the Facebook platform to express their different political opinions, with the aim of attracting the largest possible number of Arab users at the time (Loujein Haj Youssef, 10.11.2022).

The interviewees confirmed that the policies of the new social media companies that were adopted after 2012 depended on deleting any content considered sensitive to viewers, and as a result of the adoption of these policies, YouTube deleted millions of videos that documented thousands of massacres and violations against civilians in Syria, especially the chemical weapons massacres, which were unequivocal evidence against Syrian regime. In addition to deleting hundreds of Syrian revolutionary pages that contributed to publishing these videos, after social media companies considered them unreliable and publish videos inciting violence and hatred. While human rights organizations considered these policies of social media companies an attempt to spare corrupt regimes from punishment, according to (Bayan Alkhangi, 29.08.2022). Apparently, what YouTube says about deleting data in violation of privacy rules or shocking scenes that do not suit public taste are not the real reasons behind deleting these videos that documented the crimes of corrupt regimes, according to what Hanadi Al-Khatib says, and thus removing content related to the Arab revolutions, especially the content of the Syrian revolution. It is a crime against the Syrian people, and an attempt to hide the humanitarian violations against civilians, and of course this is in the interest of the Syrian regime first and foremost. Hanadi also says, without a doubt, the policy of deletion was not a coincidence. Rather, there are deals that were concluded behind the scenes to obliterate the evidence that may be the only evidence in the hands of the Syrian people to hold the head of the regime, Bashar al-Assad, accountable in the International Criminal Court. Also, the deletion policy pursued by YouTube and Facebook did not distinguish between videos containing violent scenes and videos documenting peaceful demonstrations in Syria at the beginning of the revolution. Rather, most of the videos were deleted indiscriminately, and this makes the option of political pressures and deals sponsored by some major countries the most realistic (Hanadi Al-Khatib, 05.09.2022).

The interviewees described 2018 as the most difficult year for journalists and activists, as the policy of major social media companies was updated, and artificial intelligence was introduced into the algorithms of these companies. As a result of this update, social media companies have adopted a purely commercial policy on their platforms. For example, it is not possible to place a commercial advertisement on political videos or videos documenting suffering and violations against civilians. Of course, this contradicts the objectives of these commercial companies, and therefore they tried to limit and minimize revolutionary pages that publish this type of video because they are unable to use it for commercial interests.

The new artificial intelligence algorithms, according to the description of Bayan Alkhangi, relied on fishing any news or video that begins with a keyword that violates its policies. For example, if you are an independent journalist or activist, you have a page on Facebook specialized in publishing news of the Syrian revolution that is not documented or licensed by Facebook as a news page, and you try to publish a video with the keyword (crime in Damascus), then the news or video will be deleted after two days at the latest, and that Due to the violation of Facebook policy, before 2018, Facebook considered scenes of blood or war as a violation of its policy, but after 2018, even the keyword or video title is considered a violation of Facebook policy, even though the video does not contain any sensitive scenes or a violation of Facebook policy. Knowing that movies and video games that are promoted on the Facebook platform contain very sensitive scenes of blood and killing, but Facebook treats them as entertaining dramas and commercial
deals that bring ads and profits, unlike videos related to revolutions and popular movements that cannot bring any ads. Therefore, it is an attempt by Facebook to ban any speech or independent political movement against the Syrian government on its platform. Bayan Alkhangi adds that she was explicitly and publicly warned by the TikTok platform to be removed from the platform if she used any offensive term against Bashar Al-Assad, this is because a significant percentage of the employees working in Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok in the Middle East region are affiliated with Bashar Al-Assad and the Syrian government, and they take strict measures against journalists and opposition activists and send warnings to them over any content that condemns the Syrian government (Bayan Alkhangi, 29.08.2022).

4.3.2 Social Media and Counter-Revolutions

Loujein Haj Youssef points out how the Syrian regime took advantage of the great change in the policy and strategies of social media after 2012, and given the failure of the Syrian government to control information on the Internet and the absence of the effectiveness of traditional media to fight opposition media, she said that the Syrian government tended to establish an electronic army that includes large groups among the hackers spread in several countries, such as China, Russia, America, Iran and of course Syria, and published them on social media platforms, especially Facebook. Their first task is to track any news about the Arab Spring that is published on the Internet and social networking sites to be hunted and then publish a news or Counter-information to discredit its and thus waste the truth and create confusion and chaos with the information that comes out, whether from Syria or other Arab Spring countries. What was interesting, however, was the complete absence of roles for social media companies in trying to limit the expansion of the electronic army on their platforms, and to stop the hate speech against independent journalists and activists adopted by the Syrian security services and their hackers (Loujein Haj Youssef,10.11.2022).

Fathi Bayoud the publisher and founder of the independent Zaman Al-Wasl newspaper, confirms that the Electronic Army was a big name in the cyberspace because it had a lot of money and cadres, and was able to develop itself and shake up facts on social media and hide them by spreading false news to influence public opinion. This is what caused the closure of dozens of revolutionary pages under the pretext of terrorism. Of course, those who determine that the content has links to terrorism are the management of social media companies and the Syrian Electronic Army, which has devoted all its cadres to influencing the algorithms of social media, by reporting any anti-government publication, describing the owners of these pages as supporters of terrorism. Fathi says, dozens of news reports that he published on the Zaman al-Wasl Facebook page, which were talking about some symbols of the Syrian revolution were deleted under the pretext of our support for terrorist figures. Thus, there is a clear directive by the Syrian Electronic Army that influences the algorithms, in addition to the management of Facebook that is not supportive of this type of news reporting.

Fathi describes how the Zaman al-Wasl page on Facebook has had 1,600,000 followers since 2014, but this number has stopped increasing 9 years ago, because the content being published is not welcomed by the Facebook administration, which considers the people working on the Zaman al-Wasl page to be half-terrorists. Because they call for the change of an authoritarian regime, according to Fathi’s expression. Consequently, Zaman al-Wasl’s publications do not reach a large segment of people, despite not violating the policies of social media companies.

All interviewees confirmed that social media companies deleted thousands of accounts belonging to the Syrian Electronic Army in the early years of the Syrian revolution, but after a short period of time, other accounts were created that exceeded the number of deleted accounts. The political pressures and the commercial benefit obtained by the social media companies in return for maintaining the activity of the Syrian Electronic Army on these platforms were great. Of course, these companies are commercial companies in the first place and not companies to mobilize political opposition and revolutionaries according to those interviewed. Hanadi Al-Khatib pointed out that many dictatorial regimes in the Middle East threatened social media companies to block their platforms in these countries if social media companies did not respond to the requests of these governments to delete opposition accounts and restrict the news that is published against these regimes. So, the social media companies had nothing but to acquiesce because these platforms are purely commercial, and the fight against corrupt regimes does not meet the goals of these companies. The presence of these platforms in Syria is better for them than fighting the regime there,
and their spread is what achieves profit for them not taking a position of hostility against this or that regime (Hanadi Al-Khatib, 05.09.2022).

Based on the personal experience of the journalist and publisher Fathi Bayoud and after deleting dozens of news reports and publications for the independent Zaman Al-Wasl newspaper by the Facebook administration, and even deleting the page several times on Facebook despite not violating the policies of social media, he confirms the existence of real efforts to abort the work of journalists and activists opposed to the Syrian regime on social media, as supporters of terrorism. In addition to the absence of any recognition by social media companies of the existence of a Syrian liberation movement that parallels the regime, and that it has the right to change and obtain its freedom. And there is no real Syrian flag in the emoji options on social media, and these platforms only show the Syrian flag of the regime. This is evidence of social media companies excluding the audience of the revolution and not recognizing any liberation movement in Syria (Fathi Bayoud, 01.09.2022). The interviewees added that as journalists and activists, they do not have any rights on social media. They are threatened with losing their page and their work, which they have worked hard on for more than 10 years, within a minute. For example, publishing an audio clip of you singing an enthusiastic revolutionary song against the Syrian regime exposes you to a warning from Facebook, deletion of the post, and restriction of your posts for a month, and if the same mistake is repeated, your page will be deleted. Social media companies have come to play the role of the community police, as they decide what is allowed and what is forbidden, what is possible and what is not.

4.3.3 The Double Standard Of Social Media

All the interviewed guests emphasized that social media companies today play a dangerous role in imposing an unethical system on new media that is far from impartiality and objectivity. It is the one who imposes on journalists the type of content that must be published, and therefore it is the one who determines the type of news that the public should receive so that it does not conflict with its interests. As a journalist or independent activist, it is not enough to publish the truth to avoid the wrath of social media companies that result in banning your account and restricting your work on these platforms. Rather, you must publish news according to the desire of these companies and in line with their political and commercial interests. Hanadi Al-Khatib says that the news coming from third world countries or from the Middle East does not receive the amount of spread and coverage as the news coming from Europe. For example, Syria is still being attacked by the Syrian, Russian and Iranian regimes with various types of weapons, which leave dozens dead, and hundreds injured daily, but talking about these massacres and violations has become impossible on social media, while the Ukrainian war is being circulated and promoted in an unprecedented way on social media. In addition, social media also contributed to making the Ukrainian war a trend on its platforms by one party that is in the interest of the Ukrainians at the expense of the Russians. She also says, most of the social media companies are American and the US government is the one who imposes on these companies the way they deal with the news (Hanadi Al-Khatib).

All the interviewees confirmed that in recent years there has been an American decision to maintain Bashar al-Assad's regime because there are no better alternative options, in addition to America's unwillingness to clash with the Russian army in Syria, given that Putin is the de facto ruler of Syria now not Bashar al-Assad, from this standpoint social media has become restrict the work of journalists and activists who promote news against the Syrian regime. On the other hand, the news coming from Ukraine is the one that has the priority of social media now, although the killer is the same in Syria and Ukraine, and it is the Russian army, but in the case of Ukraine, the US government has taken a position of hostility against Russia, and this is what we see clearly in the way social media works and its coverage of events there.

Another form of inequality pursued by social media companies, according to Loujein Haj Youssef the role of unethical social media companies, led by Facebook, in empowering people and groups belonging to certain political parties and granting them freedom of expression at the expense of other people and groups. For example, a specific name is put forward by a certain political group to the Facebook administration, and this person is recommended as credible, and then the Facebook administration gives him the blue mark and a large area of expression, regardless of the type of
speeches and news that are circulated on his page, whether it was false news or inciting violence against some groups and journalists. But as an independent journalist who does not have a large network of relations and does not belong to an influential political group, he is unable to obtain these privileges (Loujein Haj Youssef).

The interviewees also argue about the state of discrimination and racism in the way social media companies deal with the refugee issue, despite the constant calls by these companies to combat hate speech and discrimination on their platforms. For example, in 2022, videos were promoted on social media showing journalists from major news agencies and Western news channels inciting racism and ethnic discrimination towards refugees coming from Syria and third world countries and demanding their expulsion from European Union countries as Muslims and not belonging to the white race, while the priority should be in receiving Ukrainian refugees as they are of the white race and of the Christian religion. Of course, social media did not show any reaction to this type of video, which spread strongly on its platforms, but rather contributed to promoting it and reaching the largest possible number of viewers. Hanadi Al-Khatib described this case of discrimination as a double standard in the way social media deals with news and makes its programs possible for a certain segment of journalists at the expense of other journalists (Hanadi Al-Khatib, 05.09.2022).

Loujein also claims that the policy of discrimination extends beyond people to institutions and news agencies. For example, Google and social media companies have stated about the Ukrainian-Russian war that any news that contradicts the news that is published by Western and Ukrainian news agencies will not be circulated in any way on social media platforms, and there was an explicit letter addressed to RT TV and the Russian News Agency, that all news and videos that will be issued by these institutions will be fought and their publication will be restricted. Thus, social media companies imposed a certain type of news and information that users must be exposed to, whether this news is real or false, and did not give users the opportunity to compare all the news and violations that occur in the Ukrainian-Russian war and make them decide for themselves. Rather, it chose to play the role of the community police and impose on users what they should see and hear and what they should not. This exactly applies also to the Arab revolutions, journalists and activists working on social media, as certain terms and conditions were imposed on them that are far from freedom of expression. Of course, these conditions do not apply to large media organizations, that can publish whatever they like, unlike independent journalists and activists. (Loujein Haj Youssef, 10.11.2022).

As another proof of the double standards that social media companies are practicing today. Fathi Bayoud reveals a secret journalist’s investigation that was worked on nearly a year ago in Zaman Al-Wasl newspaper, on a series of mass massacres committed by the Syrian regime against political detainees in its prisons, all of them were civilians who were arrested on the background of their participation in the demonstrations calling for the overthrow of the regime. Fathi and his team were able to obtain many videos of the bodies of these detainees and testimonies of survivors of these massacres. Fathi says that he prepared a news report to expose the Syrian regime and add a new massacre to the list of massacres it committed over the past 11 years. He adds that all privacy conditions and new policies of social media companies were verified before publishing the report on these platforms, and all harmful and sensitive scenes were covered, in addition to covering the faces shown in the video, noting that the video is not suitable for those under the age of 18, in short. All conditions required by social media companies have been applied when publishing this type of video. Fathi published the news report at the beginning on YouTube, and in less than 10 minutes, YouTube deleted the video, then it was posted on Facebook, and after half an hour it was deleted, according to Fathi, he objected to the management of Facebook and YouTube, and the response came As follows: “This video threatens the safety of society, incites hatred and violence, and stirs up conflicts. If it is repeated, your page will be deleted forever”. But according to official partnership and cooperation contracts between Zaman al-Wasl newspaper and some international news agencies such as (France 24, Reuters, BBC, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Sky news and The Guardian), Fathi and his team provided to these agencies with all the videos and information that prove the validity of his report, and then they were published on the pages of these agencies on social media, without any reaction from social media companies, and until now these videos are still present on the pages of these news agencies, as Fathi claimed that the news agencies that published the report did not apply the lists of conditions and privacy related to covering faces and sensitive viewing, as he and his team did (Fathi Bayoud, 01.09.2022).
4.3.4 User Protection

Hanadi Al-Khatib describes the artificial intelligence that was recently introduced into the algorithms of major social media companies as insufficient to reduce violations and protect users, whether from harassment, tracking by security services, or exposure to false news. At a time when social media companies impose any new terms and conditions, fake accounts can manipulate and circumvent them in some way. Digital intelligence is not unilateral intelligence, it is mutual intelligence between these companies and fake accounts. For example, the real name policy on Facebook was able to prove the identity of the person, but it was unable to prove or verify the authenticity of the news that this person publishes. The electronic army of the Syrian regime has created many accounts with real names, but the news that was circulated on these accounts is fake, whose mission is primarily to discredit journalists and activists and to report what is published on their accounts. Therefore, the new Facebook algorithms failed to reduce false news, and to distinguish between what is real and what is fake, and what should be deleted and kept, and it adopted an unfair policy, which is deleting all, and this is what many jurists criticized, describing it as a policy, Shutting Mouths (Hanadi Al-Khatib, 05.09.2022).

This was also confirmed by Fathi Bayoud, describing social media companies as the biggest enemy of users, and their safety is the last thing these companies think about, which base their policy on profit and money. Fathi says that the IP used by most members of the Electronic Army is in Syria, and specifically the security centres there. Simply, the Facebook administration was able to limit the hacking of the pages of journalists and activists by suspending the work of any electronic device that has an IP address of the security centres in Syria, especially since the same electronic device has many fake pages involved in hacking the pages of many journalists and endangering their safety. Unfortunately, the Facebook administration completely ignored this issue and allowed them to create new pages and hack more users' pages (Fathi Bayoud, 01.09.2022).

5 DISCUSSIONS

First of all, it should be noted that the participants who answered the survey are in the majority university students or those with university degrees, but from the ordinary class. In other words, they are ordinary people who dreamed of change and democracy one day. Most of them live within Syria, and their presence on social media is limited to their participation in their daily lives and the social issues that they face every day without expressing any political opinions against the Syrian regime by virtue of their presence inside Syria in cities controlled by the Syrian regime forces. These contrasts to the experts who were interviewed, who are journalists, reporters, and managers in international news agencies, and are active on the Internet professionally to cover global events in conflict and war zones, and they are known to the Syrian regime as opposition figures to this regime.

In the question about: What does social media mean to you today, 11 years after the Arab Spring revolutions? Most of participants chose social media as platforms for "entertainment" and "communication with the outside world" as a first choice that justifies their presence on these platforms, with the agree of the majority of respondents, while voting on social media as platforms for freedom and expression of opinion came as a last option as shown in (Fig. 6).

The results of voting on this question are consistent with what the interviewees confirmed. They considered that social media platforms are not the best place for people to express their freedom and political opinions, given that these companies are commercial companies and not companies to mobilize political opposition or fight regimes. Also, the interests of people on these platforms changed according to the description of the interviewees. 11 years ago, people were more open to discussing the political and humanitarian side, but now people have become more bored and prefer humorous content, fashion, and video games due to their large presence on the web, given that this content does not bring them problems. This is confirmed by Morozov, who argues that the overwhelming amount of information available on social media distracts the audience, shortens their focus, and makes them move on to the next thing more quickly [4]. Arab users have become afraid of security prosecutions on these platforms if they express their political opinion, especially in light of the absence of the slightest elements of privacy on these platforms, and
the development of forms of electronic surveillance that authoritarian states are perfecting. In addition to the enactment of new laws related to cybercrime in the countries of the Middle East, especially Syria, these laws managed to curb the wheel of Arab youth who dream of change and democracy. And what authoritarian governments cannot detect in terms of anti-political activities on social media, social media companies have contributed to revealing it, especially since these companies have precedents in selling personal information to millions of users and endangering their safety, as happened with Facebook and the Cambridge scandal according to those interviewed. These results reinforce the literature discussed about the Syrian government’s ratification of the new cybercrime law, which included penalties from 6 months to 15 years in prison and financial fines for anyone who publishes content on the Internet with the intention of disrupting or changing the regime in the country, or undermining prestige of the state and damage to national unity [16]. After the revolutions of 2011, surveillance and the enactment of electronic laws became a suffocating issue in Arab societies. Authoritarian governments have increased surveillance techniques to stay in power and slow down the movement of democracy [16]. Parikesit (2020) argues that peoples’ who become objects of surveillance fear being threatened and get disturbed, which changes their behaviour to become more submissive to authority [16].

In the question about the reasons that prompted Arab youth to the great demand for social media at the beginning of the Arab Spring, the majority of participants consider that their use of these platforms came about because of working freely on these platforms, and because of the security grip imposed by authoritarian governments on traditional media, where 31 people agree, 24 strongly agree, while 4 people disagree. The participants, by a large majority, disagreed when considering social media as a reliable and more confidential source of news and information, as shown in (Fig 7). Clay Shirky (2011) argue that online technology is a powerful new tool for mobilizing anti-regime dissent and facilitating democratization [5].

At the start of the revolution in Syria, great hopes were pinned on social media and its ability to motivate the masses, just like in Tunisia and Egypt. Taking into account the difference in the political condition between Syria and Egypt, which, despite the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, enjoyed a higher degree of political and intellectual freedoms, as well as the field condition with the participation of the Syrian army in suppressing the popular movement on a large scale. It can be said that social media contributed to the leadership and support of the revolution in Syria to a large extent during the first months, and this prompted a large segment of the Arab public in general and the Syrian public in particular to create accounts on these platforms. Larry Diamond (2010) argues that the internet can function as a “liberation technology,” allowing residents of closed societies to disseminate news and opinions, expose corruption, and mobilize protests [20].

This was also agreed upon by the interviewees, as they emphasized that many violations against civilians occurred over the past fifty years under the rule of the Assad family in Syria that no one had heard of, and remained confined within the geographical area in which these violations were taking place, but social media has proven its effectiveness in exposing corrupt regimes in the Middle East, as the interviewees confirmed, if the video of the young Tunisian Bouazizi, who set himself on fire, had not spread on Facebook, there would have been no revolution in Tunisia and then Egypt, which spread to the rest of the Arab Spring countries. However, with the passage of the first months of the Arab Spring, the role of social media declined at various levels due to commercial deals and political pressures, and the hope that social media would incite a large wave that would overthrow corrupt regimes faded [17].

It is not surprising that 70% of the participating samples agree on the decline in the credibility of social media after the Arab Spring revolutions, while 29% disagree. Also, 61% of participants agree that social media companies have made it difficult for independent journalists and activists to work on their platforms in the Arab world, and to some extent confiscated their freedom of expression against corrupt regimes, while 38% disagree. And about whether social media played a role in imposing an immoral system on the new media, 51% of the participating samples agree with that, and 18% strongly agree, while 28% disagree, as shown in (Figure 8). These results reflect the state of long-term skepticism about new media that lack media values, which makes it as close as possible to trading in financial and business stock exchanges, as this website today is in the hands of one person and tomorrow in the hands of another, and users and their data are sold with it in full.
The results of the survey agree with what the interviewees said, as they emphasized that social media has lost its credibility in the eyes of the people, and that it has a loud voice that it uses to cover up other voices calling for greater freedoms on its platforms and condemning the policy of community police imposed by these companies on their users. Those interviewed also considered that social media companies made it possible for the fittest to survive on their platforms. For example, there is page A that has a million followers, although it is not credible and incites hatred and violence, and on the other hand, there is page B that has credibility and works professionally and ethically, but it only has tens of thousands of followers. Page A can close Page B and stop its work on social media because of the material and numerical strength it has. It is sufficient to employ 100 people who report on Page B for the Facebook administration to close it without verifying the validity of these reports. This is exactly what happened with independent journalists and activists who were subjected to a large campaign of reports by the Syrian Electronic Army, which ended with the closure of most of their pages. It is also worth mentioning, according to those interviewed, that most of the international news agencies are now opening investigations about the credibility of the information that is spread daily on social media coming from areas that are difficult to reach by reporters, such as analyzing videos and focusing on errors that appear through artificial intelligence programs, and tracking news sources, and if this indicates something, it indicates a low level of credibility in social media. This move supports Morozov’s theory of ‘The Net Delusion’, where he argues that information technologies are in the hands of authoritarian regimes not in the hands of activists [8]. As Morozov put it ‘the internet may favors dictatorships rather than democracies’ [8, p. 4].

The results showed that the Arab peoples despite their dissatisfaction with the mechanism of work of social media companies, and the low level of their credibility still rely on social media and use it as the only hope left for them after the absence of traditional media that are controlled by corrupt regimes. There is no way for these peoples to spread their suffering and its news except through the Internet, and this is the only justification for continuing to rely on social media.

The results also showed that the deletion operations targeting the pages of journalists and opposition activists by social media companies are not only institutional, but also individual by influential individuals and managers working in social media companies and supporting the Syrian regime, according to those interviewed. In addition to the ignorance of some employees in social media companies in making correct and just decisions when it comes to deleting a post or video that criminalizes a particular regime or entity that opposes human rights. This justifies the answer of the majority of the respondents’ samples when I asked whether social media companies follow fair policies in deleting journalists’ pages and videos of the Syrian revolution, as 88% of the samples answered no, while 11% of the samples answered yes, social media companies follow fair policies, as well shown in (Fig. 9). This is confirmed by Jillian C.York in her book “Silicon Values” [11], that the policy of deletion and removal of content pursued by Facebook and YouTube endangers cases against war criminals. It is the most controversial and ambiguous policy because videos posted on social media are sufficient assets to prosecute war criminals.

We also note that despite the dissatisfaction of the samples surveyed with the roles that social media play, 91% of the participants agree that social media is still able to mobilize public opinion on an issue, while 6% disagree (Fig. 10). These results confirm what the interviewees claimed, social media companies failed to mobilize people to do a revolution as in 2011, but it is still able to mobilize public opinion against or with an issue whether the issue is in line with the interests of the social media companies and meets their commercial aspirations. In the end, these companies have millions of users from all over the world, and if these platforms want to adopt a cause, it can make it succeed or shed light on it with great momentum, but not to the extent of changing regimes and distributing freedoms to peoples. This corresponds to the writings of Gladwell that the social media side of revolutions is ineffective, due to their lack of an organized hierarchy and the absence of a central leader [4].

The results showed that the electronic warfare in the Syrian revolution was fighting over the content. The balance of power in reality was reflected in this war. The most organized party, which has the human and financial resources, is the winner. Indeed, the way Facebook operates in terms of content management paves the way for these balances of power to spread into the virtual space as well. According to the interviewees, Facebook evaluates content according to its own Community Standards. Of course, these criteria are affected by the contexts of the countries in which
Facebook is deployed. Thus, Facebook is subject to government restrictions, because its presence in many countries depends on the authorities allowing it, and it is under their supervision. This means that governments, especially authoritarian ones, have an opportunity to exert legal and political pressure on shaping Facebook’s social standards. It also has the power to censor accounts, posts or pages that threaten its rule by making requests directly to Facebook or any other company. Clay Shirky (2011) argued that social media allows for more organizing [5]. In the Syrian electronic war, we can note that the party that had more resources was able to more organize, and this was clearly reflected in the results of this war. The Syrian electronic army, because of its strong organization, was able to turn the equation in its favor. It is also worth mentioning the ability of technology to amplify matters, Kentaro Toyama (2010) argues in his amplification theory that the greater one’s capacity, the more technology delivers; conversely, the lesser one’s capacity, the less value technology has. Technology helps the rich to become proportionately richer and helps the powerful to expand their sphere of influence, thus increasing power imbalances [10]. Philip Agre (2002) writes that “the Internet changes nothing on its own, but it can amplify existing forces, and those amplified forces might change something.” Thus, outcomes are context specific and depend on the exact nature of existing forces as well as how the Internet interacts with them [10].

The community standards that social media publishes on their platforms are much smaller than the guidelines that these companies’ employees work on. In other words, what is published openly for all is very public, while the employees of these companies have detailed documents with names and lists of organizations that should block any content related to them. And it is possible that the societal laws that are determined by social media companies can change overnight, for example, the interviewees say that a hashtag was published in solidarity with “Abdel Basset Al-Sarout”, one of the most important revolutionary faces in the Syrian revolution, and it turned into a national symbol later; there was no problem with posting his photos on social media, but to expand the circle of those in solidarity with him, he became overnight on the list of terrorists of social media companies, and therefore any content that praises him must be removed. Considering that the Syrian Electronic Army is the most powerful and organized party, it had the greatest influence on social media companies in changing their policy towards influential revolutionary names on social media, according to those interviewed.

This shows how politicized the formulation of society’s norms is, even if the changes seem arbitrary at times. In addition, to what extent do content moderators really understand the merits and context of each country or situation, it is also a questionable site. The time available for them to decide on a post is narrow, and they depend on their training and the instructions that social media companies provide them with, although these guidelines have shown to be ineffective due to its bias and the outright errors it contains, and its ability to silence one side of a national debate through its control over the content.

6 ETHICS AND SUSTAINABILITY

This paper reports on a survey and interview study conducted with Syrian people and media experts. The concern of the dissertation has been the role of social media platforms in supporting or oppressing popular revolution. In addition to whether social media is seen as a good or bad thing in Syrian society. Whether that makes it more or less sustainable, it is about freedom of expression, freedoms of the press and their contribution to the healthy public sphere to hold governments accountable.

What the results point to is the complexity of the possibility for social media to open up a possibility for people to have a voice on their platforms. Citizen journalists may share the kind of stories that do not get out into the world, but on the other side, it seems that the ability of authoritarian regimes to use social media to oppress people and create a society that is less sustainable, and more authoritarian is the closest picture to the reality.

The work engages with the question of social sustainability as it pertains to the functioning of societies and technological opportunities and harms in the search for peace. This most strongly associates with the UN Sustainable Development goal 16 on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.
Unfortunately, achieving social sustainability in Syria has become a complex and difficult task. The war had devastating consequences for the country, causing massive loss of life, displacing millions of people, and severe damage to infrastructure and social institutions. In addition to significant environmental damage, as a result of the use of various types of environmentally harmful weapons that are internationally prohibited. Rebuilding and promoting social sustainability in such a context require addressing various aspects of interdependence, including reconciliation, human rights, education, health care, and economic development.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This study concluded that social media is not the only one responsible for the decline in interest in dealing with liberation movements in the Middle East, especially Syria. The matter is not only related to the policies and terms of social media companies, although these policies have been politicized and manipulated. Those who have money and numerical power are not required to apply any of these terms. But also depends on the way the global public deals with liberation movements, which affected also in the decline or progress of interest in dealing with certain events and not others. For example, what happened in Syria 11 years ago until now, a political decision was taken by the major countries in the world, which in one way or another imposed on social media companies to reduce the momentum of public exposure to news and videos coming from Syria, and thus the audience’s interaction decreased with the news coming from there. Whereas the social media audience was directed to new content that more closely fits the profit-based social media companies’ policy. As a result, this led to the decline of any motivational and essential role in mobilizing people against tyranny, since the idea of fighting tyranny contradicts the profit policy adopted by social media companies.

The terms and conditions that social media companies adopt today do not focus on the news as a whole or its content, but rather focus on keywords related to global propaganda such as ISIS, Taliban, or terrorism. Despite this, social media companies have failed to curb the work of these terrorist movements, as they still exist today and are able to have a strong presence on social media and attract sympathizers from all over the world. As for authoritarian regimes such as the Syrian regime, which killed many times more of its people than all terrorist movements combined, its activity on social media is not banned, and there are no efforts to reduce public exposure to false news published by the accounts and electronic armies of this regime. On the contrary, any independent journalistic efforts working to expose the crimes of this regime are banned and restricted.

This study also concluded that compliance with the terms and conditions imposed by social media companies on users, especially journalists and activists working in the news sector, is not enough to spare them from arbitrary deletion operations or protect them from security prosecutions. Journalists and activists may be exposed to threats, blackmail, security prosecutions, blocking, and restriction of their work on social media because a group of people reports a picture or news that they may not like or that is not in line with their political beliefs. Things have become more complicated and difficult for the journalist and activist because his efforts are subject to deletion for the smallest of reasons and sometimes for no reason. It is enough for one of the haters of this journalist to report one of the posts or photos, which causes the social media company to delete this post and photo. This contradicts the statements of social media companies in 2017 when artificial intelligence was introduced into the algorithms used by these companies to help remove extremist and unwanted content after a human review of each content or post on a case-by-case basis [11].

The results also showed that the negative repercussions of social media continue despite the positive aspects that cannot be ruled out in these platforms. But without a doubt, the margin of freedom narrows from the beginning of its appearance. In the absence of real and realistic legislation that regulates the new media process in the interest of users and removes the power of social media and its monopoly in the hands of one person, it would be disturbing and dangerous for freedoms. This, in the belief of some, constituted digital tyranny in the interest of groups at the expense of others, in light of the deletion by social media companies of millions of videos and tens of thousands of important accounts that documented real war crimes in Syria and the rest of the Arab Spring countries, which sowed suspicion on the part of the user towards these platforms.
8 FUTURE WORK

The lack of freedom of expression in authoritarian countries has major implications for the country's sustainability. Without the ability to freely express their opinions and ideas, people cannot participate fully in the political process or contribute to the development of sustainable solutions to the country's problems. Technology has proven over and over its great role, whether negatively or positively, in shedding light on the issues of peoples and their suffering. It succeeded in some places, but had bad results in other places. Perhaps Syria is one of the examples that has been affected by technology in a bad way, as the Syrian regime benefited from technology to serve its interests, and it transformed it from a means that serves the freedom of peoples into a means to monitor them in collusion with the giant technology companies.

In order to shed light on these problems in a deeper and perhaps more professional way, there are many avenues for future research on the way social media companies work and their relationship to authoritarian regimes and to what extent can we prove their involvement in supporting these regimes against the will of the people. And how facilities are provided to these authoritarian regimes by technology companies in return for ensuring the continuation of the work of these companies in the countries that are under the rule of those regimes. And how can these measures affect delaying the wheel of social liberation and confiscating individual freedom. More in-depth results can be reached by conducting research studies and surveys targeting people and decision makers in these companies. In addition to interviews targeting all parties, whether the beneficiaries of these facilities or the affected parties.

Another topic that may deserve further research is how we can transform social media into a safe and sustainable alternative to traditional media owned by authoritarian regimes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Rob Comber for his academic support, guidance, and encouragement during the research. Additionally, I would like to thank my classmates and partner for their support and assistance throughout the process. I Want to thank every person who answered the survey and their trust in me, and a big thanks to my interviewees who took time out of their busy schedules to provide valuable information. Finally, a special thank you to KTH for giving me the opportunity to explore this topic.

REFERENCES

11 Appendices

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Table 1: Demographics from the survey results.
### Descriptive Statistics

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<th>A) social media to connect with the outside world</th>
<th>B) Source for news and information seeking</th>
<th>C) Entertainment</th>
<th>D) Pass time</th>
<th>E) Relaxation</th>
<th>F) Commercial or profit benefits platforms</th>
<th>J) Democratic platforms for expressing opinion</th>
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Table 02: Social Media Values

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<th>A) losing your confidence in traditional media (Newspapers, Radio, Tv)</th>
<th>B) A faster source for the latest news and information</th>
<th>C) A more reliable source</th>
<th>D) A more confidential source</th>
<th>E) Ease of access and communication with the outside world to spread news</th>
<th>F) Work freely because of the security grip imposed by authoritarian governments</th>
<th>J) Gather revolutionaries and freedom fighters with people who share their feelings</th>
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Table 03: Motivations for Social Media Use

| 1) The credibility of social media declined after the liberation movements in the world, especially in the Middle East after the revolutions of the Arab Spring. | 2) Social media has made it difficult for journalists and independent activists to work on its platforms in the Arab world, and to some extent confiscated their freedom of expression against corrupt regimes. | 3) Social media has played a role in imposing an immoral system on the new media. |

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Table 04: Journalism and Social Media Use
A Case Study on social media: platforms for freedom or tyranny?

Descriptive Statistics

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1) Does social media follow fair policies in closing the pages of influential revolutionary figures?</th>
<th>2) Social media can still play an essential role in inciting authoritarianism and mobilizing people to gain their freedom.</th>
<th>3) Social media played a role in the success of some of the Arab Spring revolutions.</th>
<th>4) Social media is the first spark of the Arab Spring revolution.</th>
<th>5) Social media has facilitated the planning and budgeting process that revolutions need when it comes to gathering crowds and advocating for contentious issues.</th>
<th>6) The formation of the recent committee of the wise to oversee the content of Facebook, played a positive role in favor of the anti-authoritarian revolutions.</th>
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Table 05: Roles played by social media.
Some assert that social media has contributed in one way or another to organizing the work of revolutionaries and those seeking freedom and democracy on its platforms and has provided them with a space to express their opinion against authoritarian regimes. However, the information policies of the companies behind social media can discourage activists and enable authoritarian regimes. This case study examines the views of experts and media professionals on the changes in the roles of social media companies over the past 11 years in the context of social liberation movements. Through interviews with four media professionals and a survey of Syrian social media users, the study identifies the perceived restrictions imposed on the freedom of activists and media professionals to use social media, and at the same time identifies the perceived beneficiaries of these restrictions. The results show that social media companies are now playing a dangerous role in imposing an unethical system on new media that is far from impartiality and objectivity. It also empowers people and groups belonging to certain political parties and gives them freedom of expression at the expense of other people and groups.

Keywords: social media, Arab spring revolutions, freedom, tyranny


Keywords: sociala medier, arabiska vårens revolutioner, frihet, tyrann