Syria Aftermath: IT and Media after Democracy Crisis

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Abstract: The issue of democratization in Syria is indeed a worthy event to be discussed. Many changes occurred in various aspects of life when the Syrian conflict emerged in early 2011. The chaos that occurred gives impact to the development of economic, social, politics, and even the field of IT and mass media. This paper will try to explain specifically about the post-democratization media in Syria. The subjects that the authors examine are not only the conventional media, such as TV, radio, and newspaper, but also roles of social media as a medium to spread the information regarding the emerged issue in Syria. Qualitative descriptive method will be used to help the authors analyse the case. The results of this study are expected to provide an overview and illustration about what happen to the development of mass media in Syria in times of crisis.

1 INTRODUCTION

The media has a very important role in the practice of democracy. In the democratic state, the media is considered as the fourth branch of the government because it has the power to exercise oversight for the decision-making process (Coronel, 1994). Although it is difficult to measure, the mass media are perceived to have a significant impact in influencing people to get involved in politics. It means that mass media help people to be political educated, therefore people will have the awareness to participate in politics. In addition, the media also has a crucial role in the process of information exchange among members of the society. The spread of thoughts and ideas has a benefit of broadening people's insight into critical thinking.

In Syria itself the development of mass media have started a long time ago. However, in that certain amount of time, the freedom of the press in Syria is also limited. Information published by local media has been largely influenced by the government. In the 1970s, newspaper publishers such as Al-Baath, Tishreen, and Thawra and a local TV station were already controlled by Hafiz Al-Assad under his authoritarian power (Marrouch, 2014). The restrictions of media and press by the government continued through the reign of Bashar Al-Assad. Entering the year of 2011, the revolutionary movements and massive demonstrations to depose the regime of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria was begun. Social media plays a major role in the emergence of protests against the government. The spread of news in social media about the struggle of people from other countries, such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, who tried to overthrow the authoritarian regimes, motivated the people of Syria to do the same. The spread of revolutionary ideas made the people of Syria aware that they could not remain silent when they saw their brothers and sisters are being restricted and mistreated by Bashar al-Assad. They want the establishment of democracy in their country that respects the rights of every citizen. Not long after that, the resistance began to emerge and the conflict became more and more severe.

During the times of crisis, the media and press freedom are increasingly restricted by the government. Much of the information related to the ongoing conflict reported via electronic and print media have also been diverted by the government. On the other hand, there are still some neutral media in broadcasting information to the people of Syria, but there are also many opposition media which actually preach hoax to impose the image of the government. It proves that the conflicts in Syria can have wide-ranging impact to the development of mass media in there. In this paper, the authors would like to discuss about what happen to the Syrian media after the crisis. This paper tried to describe

not only the conventional media, but also the digital media as well, since there are a lot of changes in Syria as a nation during the crisis, especially the ones that related to the IT and media in Syria.

2 METHODS

This paper used qualitative descriptive as the method to analyze the issue. The purpose of this research is to answer the research question in the form of statements which is to describe the characteristic of an individual, phenomenon and certain relation between one symptom to another in society as general, therefore descriptive method is suitable for the research. The data for this research collected in form of tangible words and is not a series of numbers and can't be arranged in categories or structure classification, therefore this paper will be using qualitative research as its method (Sillalahi, 2009). The data for this topic obtained by applying study literature, which is collecting data from books, online journal, official sites, and internet article.

A concept from McLuhan about media as the extensions of the government that plays role as a medium which affects the society was used to analyze the topic of this paper (McLuhan, 1994). This research tried to discuss how the democracy crisis in Syria since 2011 has changed the face of the conventional media within the country and how the social media is shifting the purpose not only as an information transmission but also has become the stimulus to a movement and to exhibit the violations occurred as well as enclosing the international response regarding the emerged conflicts in Syria.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Conventional Media in Syria after Crisis

The conventional media in Syria experienced a very significant change after the conflict took place. The public has difficulty in obtaining accurate information related to the current situation in Syria. Most of the Syria's conventional media are owned by the government, therefore the news broadcasting tends to be not neutral and full of manipulation. One of Syria's local TV stations, Dounia TV, became one of the medias that has the most questionable sources of truth. It is because the station's editorial board is always distorted the facts they acquired. Dounia TV

station once reported the demonstration that took place in Damascus on April 1st 2011, but concealed the fact that the demonstration happened without bloodshed (Marrouch, 2014). In reality, the security guards shot eight people to death in that demonstration march. Also, the reporters from Dounia TV are often interviewed false witnesses, most of whom are television talents and paid people, to provide inaccurate information about what happen in reality. One of the fake witnesses also stated that their country is in alright condition and there is nothing to worry about. In addition, this channel also often features programs that are irrelevant to the situation and conditions in Syria at that time. The majority of its programs prefer to review other non-essential issues compared to the large demonstration events that are happening there. Such manipulation of the facts is basically done by the government to protect Assad's image from evil allegations. Many facts are hidden by the government, thus the number of people who oppose the regime is not growing and keep increasing.

However, the people of Syria do not give up easily in searching for the truth related to their country's situation. They turn to other media run by local activists or foreign media to find out the recent news about the conflicts. There are some private media such as newspaper publishers and radio stations that are still operating in the midst of crisis. They try to provide information for the public without manipulating the facts. Not only reporting on the current situation, they also criticize the government, the rebels, ISIS, and other actors involved in the conflict. Unfortunately, many of those media are out of business because they do not have sufficient funds to keep them operating. Lack of human resources also become the main factor of those media to stop operating. Many journalists and reporters were captured by the government or killed in the war zone. In addition to the previously mentioned media, the people of Syria still have the opportunity to get the latest news through private television stations. One of those TV stations is Aleppo Today TV. They broadcast photo slides with two bars running in the bottom row which provide important information regarding the ongoing wars and current situation in Aleppo to the viewers (Tuysuz & Watson, 2012). Aleppo Today TV operates in neighboring countries to avoid sabotage from the Syrian government and for the safety of its staff. They are still broadcasting the latest situation report for the people of Syria until now.

The international community also responded to the restriction of media in Syria. Many international media have difficulty covering the news in the conflicting country. In addition to the difficult access into Syria, foreign journalists are also afraid of losing their lives if they dare to do coverage there. In response to that condition, the International Media Support (IMS) then provides assistance to the local media to ensure the availability of reliable media coverage in accordance with the professional ethical standards. IMS collaborated with Radio Rozana, The Syrian Observer and the local journalists in order to provide the latest news and valuable information related to the conflict that are free from the government's manipulation for the people of Syria itself as well as the international community.

Syria became one of the countries that do not recognize the freedom of expression. Conventional media such as TV, radio, and print media have a confined movement to provide important information for the public. The government twists the facts and diverts the information broadcasted by the media in order to maintain their good image. In addition, the government also manipulates the mass media for propaganda purpose. That condition is getting worse after the uprising began in 2011. With the decline of credible media in Syria, people then switch off to the social media as a source to get information and seek the truth. That case leads us to the next part of our discussion.

3.2 The Crucial Role of Social Media after Democracy Crisis

The rapid growth of IT has stimulated the dissemination of information, where the international community could access and witness the events going on in the other parts of the world more efficiently by using social media. Not only its function to spread the information in vast world, social media has a crucial role to deliver a new awareness regarding the issue to the international community, likewise to the countries where conflicts are still occurring, such as Syria which still facing crisis of democratization. Not only used to disseminate information, social media is also used as a tool of propaganda both in Assad government and in rebel parties (Ahmad, 2015).

After the emergence of conflicts that was formulated from the democratic crisis in Syria that began in 2011, the life of the nation has changed, including how the social media is used. Since most of the Syria's conventional media are owned by the government, social media has become much more important in shaping how the crisis is portrayed and perceived. McLuhan stated that the ever-expanding media provides an indirect governmental representation to expand the participation of a new model in which everyone can be involved. The development of media technology not only makes the whole word accessible locally but also creates a new form of participation in which everyone can engage in every global issue. In some ways, this condition has the potential to increase the social awareness of the community as they begin to react to global issues and their implications for local issues (McLuhan, 1994). Because of its fundamental tool to spreads information to the vast international community, the social media has shifted its purpose where in the first few months of the crisis, it still used as a tool to inform and misinform, later it has become a reserve way to report particular aspects which are censored by the conventional local media and it has become so intense that it has been defined as the first social media war (Salvadoretti, 2013).

However, after the crisis of democracy, the tension rose and apparently, connectivity in conducting internet or social media has been heavily censored by the government to limit the transmission of information regarding the ongoing conflicts. Nevertheless, the rebels have adopted several methods to overcome the heavily restrictions applied on the use of internet. In addition, many mainstream foreign journalisms which also play a crucial role to spread the information by using the social media as well as the medium to the international community, such as Al Jazeera.

There are three crucial roles of social media after the democracy crisis, as a medium to disseminate information in vast range of audience, as a booster or certain movement and as a medium to exposed the violations happened in the conflicts area. Since the conventional media of the nation are less trustworthy on broadcasting the news update of the crisis, many foreign journalists enter the field of the conflicts to cover the situation directly. But the risk sometimes only could be paid off by their own lives. Marie Colvin is one of many media workers that had been killed by the Syrian army on 2012 (Bowcott, 2018). And she wasn't the last indeed. Hence, news institution started to rely on the social media for information updates of Syria's conflicts.

In the early 2011, there was one of the first Facebook pages that intended to mobilize Syrians

against Assad regime, namely "The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad" which triggered for demonstrations on March 15th in the Al-Hamidiyah market in old Damascus. Despite of it based in social media, the Facebook page managed to draw thousands of Syrian Facebook user attention who were encouraged by the revolutionary movements in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt to gain democracy (Salim, 2017).

Many videos footage such as the conflicts of Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta which exposing the bloodshed dispute in Syria, could be found in mainstream social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and especially YouTube as the mainstream video platform of social media. These videos footage could be accessed anytime and anywhere by the international community, hence, not only to exhibit the violations of the crisis, these videos footage are expected to raise awareness and attention of the international community regarding the ongoing democracy crisis in Syria.

The exposed democratization crisis occurred in Syria apparently has attracted international community attention towards real actions. Since the very beginning of the conflicts in the year of 2011, HRC (United Nations Human Rights Council) had adopted a resolution establishing a Fact-Finding Mission to investigate the violations of international human rights law happening in Syria (United Nations). Until then, many actions have been taken by the organization especially for the civil society sake in Syria as the victims of the chaotic circumstances.

4 CONCLUSIONS

It can be seen that the information & technology role, manifested in social media has a big role in reforming the society, during and after democracy crisis. From the discussion it can be understood that the democracy crisis in Syria since 2011 has changed the face of the conventional media within the country and how the social media is shifting the purposes not only as an information transmission but also has become the stimulus to a movement and to exhibit the violations in the emerged conflicts in Syria.

Moreover, in the Syria case, social media still gets the top priority as the source of information of the conflict now. Whilst it is still quite bias, whether it is the government who takes an advantage of the

usage of social media or the rebels who try to spread the information regarding the oppression that is done by the government, information technology definitely stands as the new important factor to inform or even to shape opinion regarding democracy crisis in a country.

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