

Syrian 'Citizen Journalists' Use Social Media to Spread News



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A family escapes from fierce fighting between Free Syrian Army fighters and government troops in Idlib

This is the VOA Special English Technology Report.

Social media networks have come to play an important part in the political unrest in Syria. The Syrian government barred most media from the country after the unrest began almost one year ago. But that has not stopped Syrians from getting out information to the rest of the world. Many Syrians have turned to social media like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to help spread reports about what is happening in the country.

(SOUND)

That is the sound of explosions from a video on YouTube. The video is said to show shells falling on the city of Homs.

This is one of hundreds, possibly thousands of similar videos placed on social media websites in the past few weeks. With few foreign reporters in Syria, social media have become a major tool for telling the world what is happening. Many news organizations have had to depend on reports and videos from people they call citizen journalists.

Emanuelle Esposti has been studying the use of such videos by foreign media. She operates a blog and lives in Britain.

EMANUELLE ESPOSTI: "It's very difficult to know where that video has actually come from, who's behind it, why are they behind it... Because there's nobody there on the ground, because there's no reporter there that can say 'oh yes, I've looked out of my window and I've seen this.'"

Last week, Syria's deputy oil minister resigned his position to join the opposition. In a video on YouTube, Abdo Husameddine criticized the government of President Bashar al-Assad. He said the government had, in his words, "brought a year of sadness and misery to those you claim to be your people." He also said the government had deprived its people of basic needs and humanity and brought the country to the edge of disaster.

Abdo Husameddine is the highest official to leave the government since the unrest began. In his video, he urged other Syrian officials to resign.

Syrian opposition activist Abdi Hakim Ijburi also knows about the importance of social media. He used social media to contact other opponents of the government. He says many of them wanted to hold protests similar to earlier ones held in Egypt and Tunisia.

(ABDI HAKIM IJBURI IN ARABIC)

"At first, we started using Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to get a group of young people and activists together," he says. "And from that group we started organizing. In Talkalakh where I come from, we started writing anti-government graffiti on walls."

Abdi Hakim Ijburi says that, as the protests grew in strength, he was captured and tortured. Like thousands of Syrians, he escaped to Lebanon, where he continues to help organize the online opposition.

(ABDI HAKIM IJBURI IN ARABIC)

"There were lots of people in my hometown of Talkalakh that I didn't even know were part of the opposition movement, or were sympathetic with the movement," he says. "And if it hadn't been for the social media we wouldn't have become united."

And that's the VOA Special English Technology Report, written by June Simms. I'm Steve Ember.

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