

TECH WE'RE USING

# How Syrians Pioneered Digital Tools to Stand Up to Authorities

By Anne Barnard

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*How do New York Times journalists use technology in their jobs and in their personal lives? Anne Barnard, The Times's bureau chief in Beirut, Lebanon, who covers Syria and the Middle East, discussed the tech she's using.*

**You've spent much of your time covering the Syrian war. What have been your most important tech tools for doing your job?**

Covering Syria has transformed the way I use technology at work. Not that I use especially high-tech tools — I don't. But the particular journalistic and logistical challenges of covering this conflict have prodded everyone to use basic technology in new and different ways. That means not just me and my colleagues, but also the Syrians whose experiences we are covering.

The most important of those tools is the ubiquity of smartphone video and the ease of sharing it. Also critical are social media networks, which have helped connect journalists to a wide variety of sources. There are too many apps and devices to mention, but they include the familiar list: Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter and Skype.

Methods that Syrians helped pioneer and develop, using these simple tools, have been adopted all over the world by people struggling against authority, including in the United States with witnesses recording police brutality or Black Lives Matter activists sharing those videos.

The Syrian government has long kept tight control on international journalists' access to Syria and their movements inside. So when the protest movement began in 2011, Syrian activists knew they had to film their own actions — and the government's crackdown — if they wanted the outside world to know.



Ms. Barnard and Hwaida Saad, right, another Times reporter, interviewing Wael Nader al-Halqi, who was the prime minister of Syria, in 2013. The top challenge when relying on technology to reach witnesses and sources in Syria, Ms. Barnard said, is safeguarding their security. Andrea Bruce for The New York Times

This began with individual witnesses and activists narrating the date and location as they used phones to film protests, then security forces attacking protesters, then opposition fighters taking over neighborhoods, then government helicopters — and, later, fighter planes — bombing those neighborhoods. As the war dragged on, opposition areas became just as difficult to reach as government ones; they were blocked by sieges, or journalists there were threatened by extremist kidnappers, by airstrikes or by both. So these tools became important for covering all sides and areas, although we've never stopped traveling to any areas we can get to.

Seven years later, the use of such digital media tools has become far more systematic. The rescue group the White Helmets, working in opposition-held areas, routinely takes video from cameras mounted on volunteers' helmets as they try to pull survivors from rubble. The conflict has become partly an information war, and all sides record videos they hope will go viral to spread their point of view.

But we journalists also use the same tools to steer the conversation and verify information, not just passively receive what people want to send us. From the start, we've combined online and in-person contact, meeting people online and seeing them in person later, or using social media to quietly keep in touch after meeting inside the country.

Using Skype or WhatsApp videos or photos, we can witness what a person is going through in real time. We can also ask them to show us their surroundings or send images of shrapnel or documents or locations, to bolster or debunk claims. We use reverse image search to make sure that photos and videos being shared online are not recycling old incidents. And with the help of colleagues, we can use geolocation to verify the time and location of photos and videos.

### **What are some of the biggest challenges of using these tech tools?**

The number-one challenge is the security of witnesses and sources. Whether in the United States or in Syria, electronic communications cut two ways: They provide an avenue for a government's surveillance to identify and/or locate the people struggling against it.

In Syria, the government chose not to block Facebook and other platforms; it used those networks to track activists and the relationships among them. People have been arrested and tortured for their social media posts, or even a "like" on someone else's comment, and private messages are often hacked and tapped. So we are constantly looking for safer means of communication.

### **How do you use technology differently in Beirut than you did in the United States?**

Technology is more of a lifeline here as I communicate with family, friends, colleagues and sources around the world, with video and audio apps a cheaper and clearer alternative to subpar cellphone connections. And Facebook and WhatsApp groups are an easy way to share photos and feel more in touch.

But it's also frustrating, limited by slow internet speeds. I work with colleagues on amazing visual multimedia projects that I and many residents in the region are unable to view fully because we literally don't have the bandwidth to load and run them efficiently.

I also have become a devotee of podcasts during my time here, since they're the best way to get the radio broadcasts I like to listen to back home. It's also invaluable to catch up on the global and Mideast news in the morning without looking at a screen — while walking, or working out.

### **What is Beirut's tech scene like? What are some of the most popular homegrown apps there?**

There are some tech start-up incubators in Beirut. Lebanon has terrible communications infrastructure, except for a small area in downtown Beirut that has better internet speeds. But it has lots of creative human capital with an incentive to work on tech ideas that bypass the corruption that is prohibitive for many brick-and-mortar businesses.

My favorite Beirut tech idea is MakerBrane, which comes from Ayssar Arida, an urban designer, and Sabine de Maussion, a curator, a married couple we met when they had the cubicle next to my husband's in a shared office space a few years ago.

It's still in development. The idea is a reinvention of building sets like Lego and going to a more creative and sustainable mind-set. It's a combination of physical and online tools that allow kids and adults to connect pieces of existing modular building sets they already own to one another. (You could combine Lego and other toys, for instance.) The online part lets people share and collaborate on designs as in Minecraft.

The idea is to let people design toys locally and for the company to make money not by selling plastic but by letting people share their designs. So kids can design their own toys and sell the designs to others. Or they can pay small fees for designs they can then build themselves with stuff they have — kind of like paying for a recipe — plus the “branes,” which are small and sent for free.

### **Outside your job, what tech product are you currently obsessed with?**

Books! Enjoying reading offscreen is increasingly important for everyone in an over-digitalized world where email and other digital communications encroach on the boundaries between night and day, home and work.

My kids, 10 and 7, spend hours reading books every day; we don't have cable or satellite TV except in our home office for me and my husband, who is also a journalist and a researcher, to very occasionally watch breaking news on Arabic regional channels. Kid screen time is restricted to a few hours on the weekend.

The biggest challenge in trying to fit our stuff back into the smaller apartment we'll be moving home to in New York soon is not clothes or even beautiful Middle Eastern textiles and woodwork. It's our shelves and shelves of books. One of the biggest consolations we've offered the kids for leaving Lebanon, where they've grown up, is a promise that a few blocks from our apartment, there will be a public library.

**Follow Anne Barnard on Twitter: [@ABarnardNYT](https://twitter.com/ABarnardNYT).**

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