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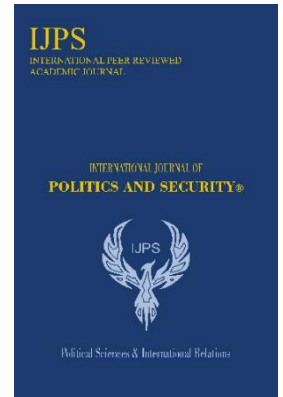
New Media and Their Role in Supporting the Humanitarian NGOs during Armed Conflicts the ICRC's Work in the Syrian Conflict: A Case Study

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New Media and Their Role in Supporting the Humanitarian NGOs during Armed Conflicts the ICRC's Work in the Syrian Conflict: A Case Study

Redouane TOUATI* and Halima TOUATI**

Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the role of New Media, especially the social networking sites, in supporting the international Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) during crises and armed conflicts. The focus is on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which has relied on Facebook in its work during the armed conflict in Syria. This reliance on Facebook has helped facilitate the process of communicating and interacting with the people affected by the conflict, and has made them aware of the consequences of the conflict and the necessary precautions that must be taken. Also, it has contributed to directing them to drinking water points, collective restaurants, and health centres, quickly and with a little effort.

Key words: *Armed conflict, Humanitarian NGOs, ICRC, New Media, Syria, Virtual space.*

Yeni Medya ve Silahlı Çatışmalar Sırasında Sivil Toplum Kuruluşlarını Desteklemedeki Rolü, ICRC'nin Suriye'de Çalışmaları: Bir Vaka Çalışması

Özet***

Bu makale krizler ve silahlı çatışmalar sırasında Uluslararası Sivil Toplum Örgütlerini (STK'lar) desteklemede Yeni Medyanın, özellikle sosyal paylaşım sitelerinin rolünü vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu kapsamda çalışma, Suriye'de ki silahlı çatışmalar sırasında yürüttüğü çalışmalarında Facebook'a güvenen Kızılhaç Uluslararası Komitesi (ICRC)'ne odaklanmıştır. Facebook'a olan bu güven, çatışmadan etkilenen insanlarla iletişim ve etkileşim kurma sürecini kolaylaştırmış ve onları çatışmanın sonuçları ve alınması gereken önlemler konusunda bilgilendirmiştir. Ayrıca, onları hızlı ve az bir çabayla içme suyu noktalarına, toplu restoranlara ve sağlık merkezlerine yönlendirmeye katkıda bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Silahlı Çatışma, İnsani Sivil Toplum Örgütleri, Uluslararası Kızılhaç Komitesi, Yeni Medya, Suriye, Sanal Dünya*

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1. Introduction

International Committee of the Red Cross is a pivotal actor in developing the International Humanitarian Law (IHL), ensuring its implementation and dissemination through training sessions and issuing leaflets to introduce it, not to mention field visits to hotbeds of tension, prisons and detention centres. Nevertheless, the work of this committee remains in need of new means and techniques due to the circumstances and the rapid development that the world has witnessed in recent years due to the spread of the Internet and the emergence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as one of the most important changes in contemporary life.

Accordingly, New Media helped this organization to activate its role and increase the effectiveness of its human performance and tasks, as it adheres to principles that reflect speed, immediateness, interactivity, participation, and breaking down geographical barriers.

Consequently, the paper sheds light on the role of New Media, mainly social networking sites, in supporting the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the Syrian conflict, the latter being one of the longest conflicts that has preoccupied international public opinion.

In fact, every research must involve an explicit approach to arrive at desirable results. In this paper, we will depend on the Qualitative Approach. This, according to Beverley Hancock, Elizabeth Ockleford and Kate Windridge, is concerned:

> "With developing explanations of social phenomena. That is to say, it aims to help us to understand the social world in which we live and why things are the way they are. It is concerned with the social aspects of our world and seeks to answer questions about: Why people behave the way they do, how opinions and attitudes are formed, how people are affected by the events that go on around them, how and why cultures and practices have developed in the way they have... It focuses on words rather than numbers, on description and interpretation and might lead to development of new concepts or theory or to an evaluation of an organisational process".[1]

That in mind, the Qualitative Approach comprises of the following methods:

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[1] Beverley Hancock and Elizabeth Ockleford and Kate Windridge, *an Introduction to Qualitative Research* (UK: the NIHR Research Design Service for the East Midlands /Yorkshire and the Humber, 2009): 6 and 7.

Discourse analysis, logic, ethnography, open-ended interview, participant observation, biography, comparative method, introspection, focus group, literary criticism, meditation practice, historical research, case study, etc.[2]

Since the paper will focus on the ICRC's work during the Syrian armed conflict, the appropriate method for analysis is the "Case Study", which was one of the first methods of research to be used in the field of Qualitative Approach. In this regard, Sagadin states that:

> "*A case study is used when we analyse and describe, for example each person individually (his or her activity, special needs, life situation, life history, etc.), a group of people (a school department, a group of students with special needs, teaching staff, etc.), individual institutions or a problem (or several problems), process, phenomenon or event in a particular institution, etc. in detail.*"[3]

It is worth mentioning that a literature review is also an important step in carrying out any scientific research. In this paper, I critically engaged with existing literature about academic understanding of New Media, the International Humanitarian Law, the International Non-governmental Organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and armed conflict. In this context, the following are highlighted: Lievrouw Leah and Sonia Livingstone (Introduction: The Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs), Sadok Hammami (New Media: A Communicational Approach), Manovich Lev (New Media from Borges to HTML), Timo Luge (How to Use Social Media to Better Engage with People Affected by Crisis), Reem Ramadan (Questioning the Role of Facebook in Maintaining Syrian Social Capital during the Syrian Crisis), Henry Dunant (A Memory of Solferino), Pierre Krähenbühl (The ICRC's Approach to Contemporary Security Challenges: A Future for Independent and Neutral Humanitarian Action)...etc. These studies help to understand the topic and make a general layout of our paper.

Accordingly, it is worth pointing out that the research, in addition to the Introduction and the methodological framework, will address in the second section the definition of the ICRC, and highlight the role it plays during armed conflict, as it is an international mechanism for the International Humanitarian Law's implementation. Whereas the third

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[2] Sylvain K. Cibangu, "Qualitative Research: The Toolkit of Theories in the Social Sciences", *Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to Social Sciences and Knowledge Management.* InTech (2012): 95-126.
[3] Adrijana Biba Starman, "The Case Study as a Type of Qualitative Research", *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies,* no 1, (2013): 31.

section will demonstrate the use of New Media by the ICRC to promote Human Rights during the Syrian Conflict, especially the social networking site Facebook, which ensures the transmission of the information from the team of this international humanitarian organization to many affected people, quickly and with less effort. Lastly, the conclusion will be the final result of the paper.

2.   The ICRC...An International Mechanism for the IHL's Implementation

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an important international mechanism, for its close connection with International Humanitarian Law (IHL). It is considered as its protector because of the historical relationship between them and for their common background. It is characterised by its seriousness and neutrality in its dealings with humanitarian issues resulting from the accumulation of armed conflict, whether through denunciation and work in peacetimes, especially at the legal level, or through its field interventions to contain humanitarian crises and reduce impacts.

For this reason, this section will provide the definition of the ICRC and highlight the role it plays during armed conflict.

2.1 What is the International Committee of the Red Cross?

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral, independent and organised international committee whose purely humanitarian mission is to help people in need during armed conflict, natural disasters, and other emergencies, and preserve their dignity.[4] It was founded in Geneva in 1863 thanks to the ideas advocated by Henry Dunant in his book "A Memory of Solferino", which he published in the year 1862. Touched by the bad conditions of the wounded, who had access to neither care nor ambulance on the battlefield, he then called for the establishment of a framework for the relief of every person who is a victim of war in need of assistance.[5]

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[4] International Committee of the Red Cross, "The ICRC: Its Mission and Work," *International Committee of the Red Cross*, 0963/002 03.2009 5000 (2009): 3.

[5] Henry Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino* (Geneva: American Red Cross (1939, 1959), Reprinted by the International Committee of the Red Cross by courtesy of the American Red Cross.

2.2 The principles of the International Committee of the Red Cross

The ICRC is based on a set of fundamental principles that reflect its credibility at work, and this is what distinguishes it from other NGOs working in the humanitarian field. Those principles are mentioned in Article 4 of its statute, namely humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.[6]

a) Humanity: The ICRC is born of a desire to provide aid and relief to the wounded on the battlefield, without discrimination, and to alleviate suffering wherever it may be found. It aims to protect life and health, and to ensure respect for every human being. Not to forget, promoting a policy of cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.[7]

b) Impartiality: According to this principle, the ICRC makes no discrimination between peoples on the basis of their religion, nationality, race or political affiliation, as its sole purpose is to provide a helping hand to everyone who needs it.[8]

c) Neutrality: To enjoy the confidence of all, the ICRC refuses to participate in military operations or interfere in disputes of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature at any time. What is most important to it is the presence of an unusual circumstance and victims whose condition requires assistance and care.[9]

d) Independence: The ICRC must always maintain its independence to ensure the principles of impartiality and neutrality. According to Pierre Krähenbühl:

> "*The reason for working independently is very straightforward: in any conflict, parties will tend to reject humanitarian organizations they suspect of having ulterior political motives. This explains, unsurprisingly, why the ICRC is so adamant in insisting on respect for the individual identities, mandates and operational approaches of the various organizations working in the humanitarian field.*"[10]

e) Voluntary Service: This principle is derived from Henry Dunant's appeal to volunteer for the relief of the wounded on the battlefields. He himself was not paid by

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[6] International Committee of the Red Cross, Statutes of the International Committee of the Red Cross, https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/icrc-statutes-080503.htm (03.10.2013).
[7] International Committee of the Red Cross, "The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, "*International Committee of the Red Cross*, 4046/002 08.2015 5000 (2015).
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Pierre Krähenbühl, "The ICRC's Approach to Contemporary Security Challenges: A Future for Independent and Neutral Humanitarian Action", *IRRC September* 86, no 855, 512.

any political party except for what was dictated by his human conscience, and the same applied to each person who responded to his call.[11]Accordingly, the ICRC is a voluntary organization that works only for the benefit of humanity.

f) Unity: There must be only one Red Cross in any one country, it must be open to all and must ensure the continuity of its humanitarian work.

"This principle enables National Societies to serve as a unifying force in countries and communities, and to promote understanding and peace."[12]

g) Universality: The International Committee of the Red Cross is characterised by being universal, which signifies leading its endeavours towards all parts of the world. This principle has a strong link to the principles of neutrality and impartiality; respecting the latter renders the ICRC's work worldwide acceptable. "Universality" brings the meaning of responsibility and sympathy towards the suffering, even if they are geographically distant.[13]

2.3 The objectives of the International Committee of the Red Cross

The main objective of the ICRC is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. It also maintains and disseminates its basic principles, carries out the tasks assigned to it by the Geneva Conventions and works to implement the International Humanitarian Law in armed conflict. Moreover, it receives complaints about any breach alleged to law.

The ICRC specifically set out its objectives in Article 4 of its Statute, and these are some of them:

"- *To maintain and disseminate the Fundamental Principles of the Movement, namely humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality;*
- To recognize any newly established or reconstituted National Society which fulfils the conditions for recognition set out in the Statutes of the Movement, and to notify other National Societies of such recognition;
- To undertake the tasks incumbent upon it under the Geneva Conventions, to work for the faithful application of international humanitarian law applicable

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[11]Henry Dunant, Ibid.
[12]International Committee of the Red Cross, "The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement", Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

in armed conflicts and to take cognizance of any complaints based on alleged breaches of that law;

- To endeavour at all times — as a neutral institution whose humanitarian work is carried out particularly in time of international and other armed conflicts or internal strife — to ensure the protection of and assistance to military and civilian victims of such events and of their direct results;

- To ensure the operation of the Central Tracing Agency as provided in the Geneva Conventions;"[14]

2.4 The ICRC... Its mission and work

The ICRC contributes to promoting, strengthening and spreading the International Humanitarian Law and the universal humanitarian principles,[15]as stipulated in the Four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Two Additional Protocols of 1977, by using various means like ICT and by encouraging its teaching at the universities, and organizing training sessions and workshops for the volunteers. Besides, it endeavours to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance, especially now that the world witnesses several armed conflicts and hotbeds of tension.

In its modern meaning, a war or armed conflict cannot be stopped or restricted from spreading, but it can be alleviated thanks to the IHL and its mechanisms. Accordingly, what does Armed Conflict mean?

Throughout history, humanity has known armed conflicts that take place between two or more countries to achieve personal interests for each of them, or within the same country that are often between the regular army and the splinter groups. This is despite the prohibition of the use of force in international relations as mentioned in Article 2/4 of the United Nations'Charter;

"All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."[16]

However, nations usually find pretexts under the name of "legitimate defence", which is stipulated in the Charter itself as an exception to the general prohibition.

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[14]International Committee of the Red Cross, Statutes of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Ibid.

[15]International Committee of the Red Cross, The ICRC: Its Mission and Work, Ibid, 4.

[16]United Nations, UN Charter (Full text),https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/.

The armed conflict can be International or Non-International. The former, according to the common Article 2 of the Four Geneva Conventions, is an every declared war, or any other armed conflict, which may arise between two or more of the High Contracting Parties, even if the state of war is not recognised by one of them. It can also be an every partial or total occupation of one of the High Contracting Parties, even if this occupation does not face armed resistance.[17] Whereas the latter, according to the common Article 3 of the Four Geneva Conventions, is an armed conflict not of an international character occurring in the territory of one of the High Contracting Parties between the regular army and one or more splinter groups.[18]

We deduce that Non-International Armed Conflict does not enjoy a comprehensive and clear definition under the Four Geneva Conventions compared to the International Armed Conflict.

2.5 The ICRC's role during armed conflict

During armed conflict, the ICRC engages in many different activities. Adhering to its main principles and values has earned it widespread acceptance, as it works in more than 80 countries whose residents face severe humanitarian crises. It offers its services as follows:

a) **Visiting detainees:** The International Committee of the Red Cross verifies conditions of detention, respect for human dignity and checks the treatment accorded to detainees.[19] It also transmits their concerns and establishes links with their families.

b) **Providing humanitarian aid:** It is required to provide food, clothing, medicine, health services and any other aid that reduces the suffering of victims and civilians, with the exception of war material and weapons. Not to forget, the maintenance of water and sanitation stocks in areas of armed conflict has also become a priority for the ICRC.[20]

c) **Restoring family links:** Armed conflict often leads to the dispersal of families due

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[17] International Committee of the Red Cross, Treaties, States Parties and Commentaries, https://ihl_databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Comment.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=BE2D518CF5DE54EAC1257F7D0036B518.

[18] International Committee of the Red Cross, Treaties, States Parties and Commentaries, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/WebART/375-590006.

[19] Alain Aeschlimann, "Protection of Detainees: ICRC Action Behind Bars,"*International Review of the Red Cross* 87, no 857, (2005): 95.

[20] Salah eddine Boudjellal, *The Right to Humanitarian Assistance* (Egypt: Dar Elfikr El Gamie, 2011): 17.

to the fleeing, bombing, and forced deportation. Therefore, those families' concern is to know the fate of their missing relatives and communicate with them, but it is a very arduous and costly process. Here the Red Cross's role in lending a hand appears, where it works as a mediator between families and transmits their news, and reassures each other through written or verbal messages or phone calls.[21] In some cases, it uses radio and television, local and international newspapers and magazines, advertising boards, and social media as well as missing people's research teams to collect information.

d) Refugees repatriation: According to Jean-Philippe Lavoyer, the repatriation of refugees is one of the main problems facing the International Committee of the Red Cross because of its complexity and difficulty in dealing with it. Even though it generally does not engage in such operations, it is putting pressure on the countries and organizations concerned to provide all necessary conditions to resettle refugees, and states warn against returning them early to their home countries because they are not ready yet to receive them.[22]

2.6 The ICRC and its efforts during the Syrian armed conflict

The Syrian Arab Republic is not spared from the wave of change that affected many Arab countries in light of what is known as the Arab Spring since 2011. The Syrian conflict is considered as one of the most complex and multi-lateral conflicts, in which interests differ, so civilians are the biggest losers in the middle of this regional and international military jostle. Most of the basic principles of human rights and International Humanitarian Law are not respected,   and the result; more than 150,000 killed and nearly 7 million internally displaced, and huge numbers of refugees to neighbouring countries, especially Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey,[23] not to mention the dispersed numbers in other countries like Algeria. The suicide attacks, bombings that target population areas, schools and health centres and the use of weapons prohibited under the International Law are considered as one of the international

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[21]   International   Committee   of   the   Red   Cross,   Restoring   Family   Links, https://www.icrc.org/en/what-we-do/restoring-family-links.

[22] International Committee of the Red Cross, Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: International Humanitarian   Law   and   the   Role   of   the   ICRC, https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/article/other/57jmf3.htm.

[23]   Nicolas   Dot-Pouillard,   Syrie :   Le   Politique   au   défi   du   Militaire, https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01063604/document.

crimes committed by the parties to the conflict.

All of these conditions necessitated an immediate humanitarian intervention from humanitarian organizations, especially the International Committee of the Red Cross, to assume several humanitarian tasks throughout the period of the conflict, among which are:

a) Make urgent appeals to accommodate the catastrophic humanitarian situation in areas that lack the minimum requirements for life amid a military siege, as happened in Eastern Ghouta and Aleppo, and to mobilize the international public opinion and exert moral pressure on the warring parties.

b) Field visits by officials of the International Committee of the Red Cross, such as its president, reporting of events, and calling on the international community to take up this issue politically and diplomatically.

d) Condemning the heavy loss of life.

e) Delivering various humanitarian aids, like food and health care, and launching drinking water projects and supporting collective kitchens. Not to mention the opening of a physical rehabilitation centre, transplanting organs, supporting dialysis sessions in Aleppo, to save lives, evacuating patients, and ambulating and evacuating them from confined areas.

f) Children's immunisation.

g) Reuniting families, especially after the launch of the official website of Restoring Family Links.[24] This is evidence of the necessity of updating the means of communication used by the ICRC to reach satisfactory results. New Media may help ICRC to reduce the magnitude of violations, to contain crises quickly, to collect donations, make the victims' voices heard, and facilitate the convergence of views and ideas with international and local humanitarian workers. Accordingly, we will address in the following section the importance of New Media or Virtual Media in strengthening the work of the ICRC during the armed conflict in Syria.

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[24] Restoring Family Links, Reuniting Families, https://familylinks.icrc.org/en/Pages/HowWeWork/reuniting-families.aspx.

3. ICRC and the use of New Media to promote Human Rights during the Syrian Conflict

3.1 What are New Media?

The researchers in the field of Information and Communication Sciences differ in setting a unified and comprehensive definition of New Media due to the complexity of the term and its multiple names. For example, Lievrouw and Livingstone highlighted three elements in their definition of New Media: the message, the technology, and the social context, where these three aspects of New Media appear frequently in many literatures, along with other more specific techniques and practices such as collaboration, digitization, and telecommunications.[25] As for Gitelman and Pingree, they used the time approach, employing the concept of "Media in Transition" to describe the time period in which another medium has appeared to compete and contrast with the Old Media.[26]

The problem of the term in itself baffles many researchers. The use of the word "New" refers to the "time" factor, which passes without stopping. So it would be better if the word "New" was excluded in this context, because there is always something new on the horizon.

This is while Al-Sadiq Al-Hamami has indicated that New Media is a new communication system, different in the ways it works from the one of institutional communication or the one of collective communication (mass communication). It is based on a specific system of relationships between the actors within it. For example, a mobile phone can be used as a medium for different communication systems, as the economic institutions that use it for marketing, public relations and trade purposes (advertising or commercial purposes), whereas individuals use mobile phones for other purposes such as talking, chatting, surfing the net, exchanging small consignments and video documents. This use has a purely social dimension.[27] As for Manovich, he has linked New Media to the cultural dimension of

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[25]Lievrouw Leah and Sonia Livingstone, "Introduction: The Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs," *Handbook of New Media*, ed. L.A. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone, *CA*: Sage, 2002.

[26]Gitelman L. and G. B. Pingree, "What's New about New Media?" *New Media* 1740-1915, ed. L. Gitelman and G.B.Pingree (MA: Cambridge, MIT Press, 2003): xi-xxii.

[27]Sadok Hammami, "New Media: A Communicational Approach," *Arab States Broadcasting Union*, no 4, 2006, p.5.

their content and their distribution via digital media.[28]

We also find Steve Jones who mentioned the possibility of talking about New Media due to the use of the computer in the place of the Old Media, which includes printing press, cinema, radio and television. New media are distinguished in that they describe forms of digital communication, and they have the advantage of exchanging and interaction between the sender and the receiver. However, many of the differences between the New and Old Media have been crossed because the -old- has been adapted to the requirements of the times by reconfiguring, improving and revising it to meet the -New - in certain aspects.[29]

In addition, New Media have adopted several names that differ from one researcher to another, including: Digital Media, Interactive Media, Online Media, Multimedia and more... they also take many forms such as blogs, forums, podcasts, wikis, websites, and social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

3.2 The characteristics of New Media

New media have a number of characteristics, the most notable of which are:

a)Switching from Analogue to Digital: In the digital system, information is transferred in the form of separate numbers, which are zero and one. When the information reaches the receiver, he in turn translates it into a completely pure sound or image, in contrast to the analogue system that can contain partial values ranging from zero to one and then the possibility of interference is larger. The digital system is also distinguished by being compatible and integrated with other types of technology such as computers; it is expected that broadcasting devices, telephones and information networks will all become digital in the future. The digital system based on the principle of (On-Off) does not differentiate when it is used to transfer audio, text or video between that information, but rather deals with all of them in one stream, which makes storing, editing, transferring and receiving messages quicker.[30]

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[28] Manovich Lev, "New Media" from Borges to HTML, *The New Media Reader*, ed. N. Wardrip-Fruin and N. Montfort, (MA: Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2002).

[29]Steve Jones, *Encyclopaedia of New Media: An Essential Reference to Communication and Technology,* (SAGE Publications, 2002).

[30]Samira Chikhani, "New Media in the Information Age,"*Damascus University Journal* 26, no 1-2, (2010): 445.

b)Interactivity: The transition from one-way vertical information to two-way communication where the sender is a receiver and the receiver is a sender. Exchanging roles and ideas between them, participating in expressing opinions and sharing information creates the so-called Virtual Interactive Space, which emerged thanks to interactive websites, chat forums and social networking sites.

c)Narrowcasting: There is a kind of control in the communication process, where the informational message arrives directly from the sender to the receiver, and that the latter is not necessarily from the general public, but rather it can be a specific individual or group.

d)Universality: Thanks to the spread of the Internet, New Media have managed to overcome geographical barriers, as information is transmitted among users from around the world and in multiple languages. The world became a small village, as Marshall McLuhan predicted a couple years ago.

e)Transferability: Thanks to a group of applications, a message can be converted from one form to another. Where, for example, an audible message can be converted into a readable or visual message.

f)Hypertextual (Links): In the sense that there is diversity in the elements of the communication process, which provided the user with greater choices to employ the communication process in accordance with his needs and his motivation for communication.

"In more technical terms, links in web sites offer non-sequential connections between all kinds of data facilitated by the computer."[31]

3.3 New Media and humanitarian action

The importance of New Media has emerged after the decline of Traditional Media(Printing Press, Cinema, Radio and Television), which do not accomplish their role as a fourth power within society, as they have been emptied of their true meaning based on public service and defending the simple citizens' rights. It became more concerned with making profits at the expense of serving society, by using Propaganda and misinformation...etc. And because of that change in the structure of Traditional Media, it has become necessary to rely on New Media and civil society to defend human rights. For example, Citizen Journalism is

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[31]Main characteristics of New Media, https://revisesociology.com/2018/12/13/main-characteristics-new-media/ (13.12.2018).

the voice of the voiceless; it plays a great role in ensuring freedom of expression, public service, and raising public awareness.

New media, then, play many roles within society and in several fields. Thanks to them, people have become conscious about their various issues and about the civil and political rights and the fundamental human rights and liberties, which are considered as one of the most important international issues on which UNESCO focused.[32] In addition, they are a lifeline for millions of people affected by natural disasters and armed conflicts, as social networking sites and messaging applications help to maintain contact with family and friends, and they also guarantee access to information related to, for example, where food, medical services, or shelter are located. Moreover, they allow those people to suggest solutions and share responsibility. Therefore, this information provided can directly affect how people prepare for and overcome various crises.

3.4 New Media and Humanitarian NGOs

In the past few years, the role and presence of New Media and digital communication has been prominent in people's lives, especially in times of disasters and crises. For example, during the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and Tsunami, and the 2015 Nepal earthquake, as well as the "Syrian conflict" since 2011, "Facebook" and "Twitter" were crucial components of the humanitarian response. They allowed the national and international actors to participate in the relief effort, by disseminating lifesaving messages in real time.

The affected local communities are now required to create pages on different Social Media, through which they ask for help such as food, clothing and medicine, as well as to contact and gather separated family members. Concerning the beneficiaries, they may also interact and share their views about the quality of assistance provided to them, which will be taken into account by activists to improve the service and adapt the program when possible.

Accordingly, many current studies show that ICT, such as smart phones, can be an effective means before, during and after natural disasters, crises and armed conflicts. Disseminating early warning messages and safety tips, helping people to reconnect with their

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[32] Intissar Brahim Abderrazak and Safad Houssam Al Semouk, *New Media: The Evolution of Performance, Means and Function,1. ed.* (Baghdad, 2011), 61.

relatives, make complaints, and direct affected people to humanitarian services, all contribute in one way or another to saving lives and reducing suffering.[33]

It is worth mentioning that natural disasters and humanitarian crises are often followed by chaos and the spread of rumours and fake news. Left untreated, it can shake people's confidence in humanitarian organizations and in the work of its staff and volunteers. Accordingly, it became necessary for Humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), in the aftermath of emergencies, to contact the people affected and interact with them directly through social networking sites to know what worries them and follow up what they post and what they share, so that there could be a decisive response (accurate and collaborative).[34]

The use of New Media by the humanitarian organizations has become essential, especially with the increase in the number of Social Media users in the world, as they exceeded more than three billion users, including the individuals affected by natural disasters or armed conflict, who use new media to find and share information. In this regard, Charlotte Lindsey-Curtet, Director of Communication and Information Management at the ICRC, said:

"If we want to better inform and adapt our response, it is imperative that we also meet and engage affected people online."[35]

However, the use of New Media by humanitarian organizations to communicate with those people affected is still largely untapped due to a lack of scientific documentation and practical guidance. Accordingly, ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), with support from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), have proposed providing a brief guide that includes a set of practical advice on how to make an effective use of Facebook and Twitter to communicate and interact with people during crises. This guide is directed to all staff in humanitarian organizations who assume responsibilities in the official media channels.[36]

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[33]Timo Luge, *How to Use Social Media to Better Engage with People Affected by Crisis*, A Brief Guide for those Using Social Media in Humanitarian Organizations (*ICRC. IFRC.OCHA, 2017), 2.*

[34] International Committee of the Red Cross, How to Use Social Media to Engage with People Affected by Crisis, https://www.icrc.org/en/document/social-media-to-engage-with-affected-people. (11.10.2017).

[35]Ibid.

[36]Timo Luge, Ibid, *1.*

Among the qualities that a virtual space human rights NGO activist must have to build proximity and trust on Social Media are:[37]

a) Add value: The information that he shares must be part of the activities of the community in crisis, which would be useful, life-saving, and implementable. He must also put himself in the shoes of his audience to determine the type of information and advice they may need, and work to realise them.

b) Be present: He must demonstrate that he is willing to participate in a dialogue with others, by asking questions and responding to comments within a 24-hour period.

c) Be human: His personal communication style on social networks must be clear, tactful, and more effective, because affected people do not believe in the fake slogans of anonymous activists. It must also be "a human being" in all meanings of the word, in terms of love, mercy and brotherhood, by showing interest and sharing sorrows and difficulties.

d) Connect with others: An extensive network must be created that includes influential personalities from the same organisation and from other humanitarian organizations, to exchange ideas and cooperate in the dissemination of information and messages.

e) Involve his audience: The activists should involve the target audience in the content production process, especially the audio-visual content. The people affected will have more trust in people who are in a similar position to themselves, who share the same conditions and the same fate than in the demagogic discourse of local political figures.

f) Be timely and consistent: He must be sure to provide consistent information whenever people need it, and it must be in optimal formats. For example, life-saving information, if not published in a timely manner, it is of no use.

g) Sharing: He must ensure that he has all the necessary facts and information about the crisis or issue in question, before commenting or providing advice and suggestions via Social Networking Sites. Sharing the wrong information is the biggest thing that destroys the trust contract.

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[37] Ibid, *4.*

h) Be accountable: If the communications manager (the admin) makes a mistake in providing information, he must be responsible and acknowledge it to fix the situation. Deleting the "tweet" that carries the wrong information is not the best solution, because things will remain vague in the mind of the target audience. Therefore, he must correct the erroneous post directly and publicly.

i) Knowing his limits and be transparent about them: He must acknowledge what he does not know, since he is not necessarily able to answer all questions. And if he needs more time to find the right information, there is nothing wrong with asking this from the target audience. He can also share a link to another organization, if he knows that it has the information the audience needs.

j) Verifying his accounts: Most social networking Sites have a system that allows to verify the identity of accounts' users. Therefore, this system supports the safe sharing of information and the elimination of fake identities.

3.5 The role of New Media in enhancing the ICRS' work during the Syrian armed conflict

The ICT, in general, is very important for the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Syria, which is why it decided to make an immersive virtual reality movie called "The Right Choice" to put users next to a Syrian family trapped in urban warfare. That collaborative film with Google's Daydream Impact Project and the creative agency Don't Panic London, used a simulated experience to help people understand urban warfare and its impact on real lives. With "The Right Choice", the ICRC has developed a new way of interactive storytelling. The experience gives viewers a choice in the face of attack. But in the end, none of the options leads to a positive outcome, underscoring how war gives civilians nothing but bad options.[38] In this context, Christopher Nicholas, the ICRC's project lead of The Right Choice said:

"We wanted to create a short and dramatic experience that was still compelling and realistic. We want people who aren't familiar with urban conflict to get a sense of what it

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[38]International Committee of the Red Cross, War at the Front Door: A Virtual Reality Challenge Inside Urban Conflict https://www.icrc.org/en/document/war-front-door-virtual-reality-challenge-inside-urban-conflict, (22.10.2018).

looks and feels like."[39]

Whereas, Sarah Steele VR Program Lead at Google declared:

"It can be hard to raise awareness around some situations - especially when they are distant. We are thankful to have partnered with ICRC to leverage VR for a vital mission: giving insight into a complex situation, and helping give a voice to those left behind."[40]

On the other hand, the ICRC in Syria made changes to food parcels in 2016, which doubled the amount of food they contained. This was done because the time between food distributions was becoming longer, as security continued to deteriorate. In order to inform the people affected of that change and explain the reasons, the departments of Communications and Economic Security produced a short video, which was shared via Facebook. The video has been viewed more than 50,000 times, with hundreds of accompanying comments, including a request to "double the amount of sunflower oil" as well as a claim to "improve the quality of the carton boxes" containing food, to avoid spoiling it during the transportation process. Indeed, there was a constant interaction by the Social Media team with all the comments, and they tried to answer all the questions and inquiries with explanations and advice. For example, when a user suggested adding the infant formula to food parcels, the organization explained that milk could not be distributed in Syria due to the uncertain conditions of hygiene, which would inevitably put children at risk of dehydration or diarrhoea. It is worth mentioning that the Social Media team thanked users for their interaction on Facebook and assured them that their opinions and suggestions would be carefully studied and taken into consideration by the Economic Security Department.[41]

When one of the major water networks in Aleppo, northern Syria, was damaged in June 2015, the ICRC, with the participation of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the Aleppo Water Board, cleaned 56 drinking water points and set up water tanks across the city. As part of that project, the ICRC's Water, habitat and Communication teams have posted a map on Facebook and Twitter to direct the local population to where they could find water. Parallel to that, those teams asked the interacting population on Facebook and Twitter, to comment and

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[39] Ibid.

[40] International Committee of the Red Cross, War at the Front Door: A Virtual Reality Challenge Inside Urban Conflict, Ibid.

[41]Timo Luge, Ibid, *11*.

give opinions, to help them improve service and provide the best. After a period of time, those teams posted an additional version of the map to be used on smart phones and tablet computers, which helped people locate the water point closest to them.[42]

In this regard, the ICRC's spokesperson, Pawel Krzysiek, says:

"The map is very simple and works on every phone, and everybody now has access to a mobile phone with 3G. However, the important thing is that it's not just a map - which many people may not know how to read - it's the GPS that's making a difference because people can actually be guided to the water point closest to them,"[43]

Bearing in mind that the number of shared posts linked to the interactive "water points" initiative on Facebook has reached ten times the number of people holding regular jobs about other ICRC activities in Syria.

Accordingly, the importance of New Media for the work of the ICRC in Syria is clearly remarked. It used Social Media, especially "Facebook" to provide assistance and guidance through various communication forms represented in:

a) A written text (linguistic message): This is when the information needs to be disseminated quickly, or when the bandwidth is low.

Here is an example of the use of the written text by the ICRC during the Syrian Conflict:[44]

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[42]Ibid.

[43] Magdalena Mis, Syrians Discover New Use for Mobile Phones Finding Water, 16, https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-water-map/syrians-discover-new-use-for-mobile-phones-finding-water-idU SL8N12E28F20151014 (14.10.2015).

[44]ICRC in Syria, https://www.facebook.com/ICRCsy/, (18.05.2015).

Using "narration", as a form of digital communication via Facebook, the ICRC's members in Syria expressed the problem of Internally Displaced People's (IDPs) access to drinking water, especially with Ramadan fasting and high temperatures. That written message came simple and easy for everyone to understand. But it carries in its depth many meanings of reassurance and hope, especially since many indicators suggest changing conditions towards a better future. The statistics were used to highlight the important role the ICRC played in Syria, and how it managed to contain the water crisis.

a) A picture or a picture accompanied by a linguistic message: Pictures can also be caricatures, illustrations, info-graphics, or GIFs. They may contribute to expressing the message with very little effort and speed, but some of them need to be analyzed at the levels of Denotation and Connotation, according to the Roland Barthes' theory, to describe the apparent and discover and analyze what is implied.

Here is an example of how the ICRC used the picture accompanied by a linguistic message, during the Syrian Conflict:[45]

The armed conflict in Syria has introduced epidemics and infections that have spread throughout vulnerable populations in the country, such as "Leishmaniasis", which was transmitted by female sand fly. Due to the seriousness of the disease, the Facebook page team of the ICRC in Syria posted those photos, which expressed a serious disease transmitted by a

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[45]ICRC in Syria, Ibid.

fly. That is why red colour was used, which often symbolizes danger.

It is worth mentioning that those pictures were accompanied by explanatory sentences and a written text defining the disease and showing the places of treatment. So, the linguistic message has been used to support the pictures and perform a function of emphasizing on the poor health status and insisting on educating the citizens and providing them with advice.

b) A video: A video is an audio-visual product that attracting people's attention by catching their eyes and ears. It is a pillar of communication, and one of great influence too. It allows access to people who are unable to read, but what is inconvenient with it is that it requires a relatively fast internet connection. Moreover, most social networking sites limit the length of pre-recorded videos that a person can post, and this is despite the fact that the length of the video clip is not as important as the content. That is why we found the most successful videos were less than two minutes long, with the exception of live broadcasts, whichlast longer. It is worth mentioning that the accompanying translations might contribute to spreading the video and understanding it well.

Here is an example of how the ICRC used the video during the Syrian Armed Conflict:[46]

Since "Leishmaniasis" has affected many Syrian citizens of all ages and spread very quickly in that unstable social environment, the ICRC in Syria has once again used its official Facebook page to tackle the issue of that disease, not by posting pictures, but through a live

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[46]ICRC in Syria, Ibid.

audio-visual broadcast. As the live broadcast lasted about 18 minutes, the doctor talked about all the aspects of the disease and the methods of prevention and treatment, where he tried to answer all questions and concerns of those who interacted with him.

Through that audio-visual communication system, the ICRC in Syria managed to inform a large number of citizens about the seriousness of the situation, and this is evident by the number of views (14000), the number of likes (433) and the number of the video-sharing (56). In addition, the doctor's interactive broadcast was accompanied by many comments that took various forms, most of which were questions and inquiries about "Leishmaniasis", the rest were thanks and gratitude for the service provided.

Finally, we understand that the virtual space matches the physical real world in its importance and existence. Virtual space, then, has become more real than the real, as Jean Baudrillard said.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the role of new media in the ICRC's humanitarian work during the Syrian Armed Conflict. Through analyzing the Facebook page of the ICRC in Syria, we deduced how important this electronic media is in activating and improving its services in real life.

Communication through social networking sites such as Facebook ensures the transmission of the information from the team of this international humanitarian organization to many affected people, quickly and with less effort. Time and space barriers no longer exist in a vast virtual world open to all communication, interaction and participation. The ICRC relied on its Facebook page and used various communication pillars like pictures, written texts, videos and graphics through which it transmitted various information and messages. The contents of the messages are varied and this is due to the enormity of problems in Syria; some are related to health, some to the scarcity of drinking water, and others are pieces of advice and precautions to reduce the danger of weapons. The positive thing is that there is feedback and interaction between the users of that Facebook page, with all the educational

messages and preventive advice, which are posted, they express their satisfaction with these new initiatives that would save the lives of many people. One example would be the short video about parcel contents: the under 2-minute reel racked up 51,000 views, near 1,500 likes, and over 250 shares.[47]

The social networking site Facebook, then, is an important bridge between the ICRC and the affected people in Syria, especially since that statistics say that Facebook was rated among the top used Social Media channels reaching to 97%. The vast majority (83%) of current Facebook Syrian subscribers access the channel on a daily basis. Facebook app usage is the highest in Syria (95%) among Arab countries.[48]

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[47] Tina Bouffet, How Organizations Can Use Social Media to Better Serve Crisis Affected People, https://news.itu.int/organizations-social-media-serve-crisis-affected-people/ (11.10.2017).

[48] Reem Ramadan, "Questioning the Role of Facebook in Maintaining Syrian Social Capital during the Syrian Crisis", *Heliyon,* (2017): 2.

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