



AREA OF ORIGIN – COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND SOCIAL MEDIA REPORT

SYRIA

THEMATIC REPORT

SEPTEMBER 2015

About REACH

REACH is a joint initiative of two international non-governmental organisations - ACTED and IMPACT Initiatives - and the UN Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT). REACH's mission is to strengthen evidence-based decision making by aid actors through efficient data collection, management and analysis before, during and after an emergency. By doing so, REACH contributes to ensuring that communities affected by emergencies receive the support they need. All REACH activities are conducted in support of and within the framework of inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. For more information please visit our website: www.reach-initiative.org.

You can contact us directly at: geneva@reach-initiative.org and follow us on Twitter @REACH_info.

SUMMARY

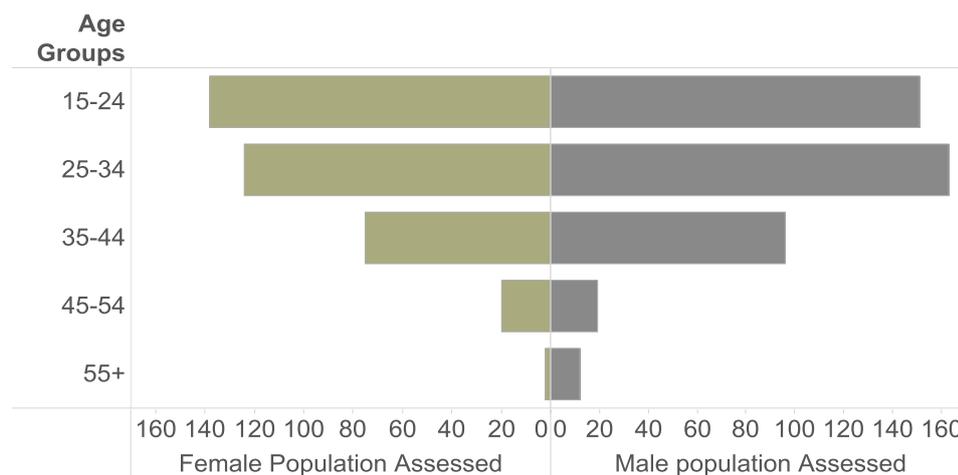
Background and objectives

To date, few surveys have undertaken a broad analysis of the information needs, channels, and barriers faced by Syrians in accessing social media platforms inside Syria. There is little knowledge of the differences between the use of communication platforms in different geographical locations and demographic groups. REACH has conducted a thematic assessment of social media use, and the channels used in Syria, in order to fill information gaps and better inform the humanitarian community on the ways in which social media is utilised by various Syrian population groups inside Syria, as well as to facilitate better analysis of social media posts.

Methodology

This assessment was rolled out in two phases, with Phase I being a qualitative approach focusing on identifying features of social media use, to then be measured more broadly in Phase II. Phase I was conducted with semi-structured questionnaires and focus group discussions with participants in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. Phase II was administered along with the Area of Origin (AoO) June data collection tool.

Figure 1: Key informant participants in the assessment in Syria (June 2015)



Data in this report reflect the situation in Syria in June 2015 and was gathered during one round of a monthly data collection exercise that uses the 'Area of Origin' methodology.¹ Following this methodology, Syrian refugee participants in Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon collect data through key pre-identified informants who still live in their sub-district of origin, in Syria. Key informants inside Syria are also contacted directly from Turkey.

It should be noted that data collected through this remote methodology rely heavily on the perception of participants regarding the sector-specific situation in their area of origin. In addition information is only collected from areas where participants can be identified and can thus only be considered indicative of the overall situation in Syria.

¹ Data was collected from 103 participants in Jordan, 42 in Lebanon, 50 from the KRI and 57 in Syria, amounting to 252 participants in total, each with three or more sources within their community of origin in 96 sub-districts across 13 governorates in Syria.

Key findings

- Prevalent use of **internet based applications** was reported in the communities assessed. WhatsApp² was the most reported application used **to communicate with people outside Syria** followed by, in order of most reported, **traditional voice calling and Facebook**.
- **Internet was reported to be used every day in the majority of communities assessed** on smart phones, computers and laptops. In the case of major electricity cuts inside Syria, **batteries and internet cafes** were reported to be the most common strategies used to access internet when electricity was not available in the community.
- **High costs was an additional barrier to internet access and phone communication**, reported throughout the governorates assessed. Key informants reported **spending more on cell phone communication (including text and calls) than on internet communication**.
- **11 per cent of key informants reported not using any social media platform to contact their family and friends**, but rather relying only on phone calls to contact their relatives.
- **Protection concerns were reported concerning the reliability of both privacy settings of a personal account and information published**. However, a large majority of key informants reported trusting the information published on social media platforms on the current events inside Syria.

FINDINGS

Communication Tools

Communication channels

The prevalent use of **internet-based applications to communicate with people outside Syria** was reported by key informants. The most reported platform to communicate with people outside Syria was WhatsApp, cited by 89 per cent of key informants. Voice calls, using phone lines and not internet, were the second most reported at 71 per cent, despite the fact that overall infiltration of mobile cellular technology is still relatively low in Syria (56 per cent).³ This was due, in part, to the level of damages reported on phone lines infrastructures⁴. Facebook's Messenger application was the third most reported communication channel, cited by 64 per cent of key informants.

Other applications such as **Tango and IMO**⁵ were reported to be used by key informants. These downloadable applications (for smart phones) are similar to Skype. Tango and IMO were reported to be used more commonly in Dar'a and Rural Damascus Governorates, by respectively 10-18 per cent and 4-12 per cent of key informants.

Family and friends were those most contacted outside Syria, reported by 83 per cent of key informants. People who were not friends or family were also reported to be contacted by 9 per cent of key informants with no specification of where these people were living. Humanitarian organisations were only reported to be contacted by key informants living in Idleb Governorate.

² WhatsApp is an instant messaging application for smartphones that uses the Internet to send text messages, images, video and audio media messages.

³ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), [Measuring the Information Society Report](#), 2014

⁴ REACH Initiative, [Assessment of the Needs and Humanitarian Situation within Syria - Thematic Situation Analysis Report](#), June 2015

⁵ Similar to Skype and Whatsapp, IMO and Tango are instant messaging applications for smartphones that use the Internet to send text messages, images, video and audio media messages.

Internet access

Frequency of access

A majority of key informants assessed in May 2015 reported that they used the internet every day (52 per cent) followed by those who used it at least three times a week (28 per cent). 14 per cent of key informants reported using the internet at least once a week. These findings are similar across all assessed governorates except for the Aleppo Governorate where the majority of key informants reported accessing internet at least once a week. According to the International Telecommunication Unit,⁶ in 2013 only 26 per cent of Syrians reportedly had access to the internet. Only 47 per cent of the women surveyed reported accessing internet every day, compared to 52 per cent of the men surveyed. The frequency of internet use decreased with the age of key informants surveyed. The majority of key informants between 15-34 years old reported using the internet every day, whereas half of the key informants aged over 55 years old reported using it only at least once a week (See Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: The frequency of use of social media by key informant age group

Age Groups	Every day	At least 3 times a week	At least once a week	At least twice per month	At least once per month	Less than once per month	Never
15-24	59%	29%	8%	3%	0%	1%	0%
25-34	51%	29%	13%	5%	0%	1%	1%
35-44	47%	27%	19%	2%	2%		3%
45-54	36%	15%	31%	15%			3%
55+	29%	7%	50%	7%			7%

Means of access

The main accessed to the internet was via smart phones (through mobile 3G broadband), reported by 40 per cent of key informants, followed by computers and laptops at 18-19 per cent. The Emergency Telecommunication Cluster corroborates this prevalent use of smart phones and mobile broadband (3G) in its Syria Country Profile of August 2015⁷.

Internet cafes were reported to be accessed by six per cent of key informants. Only two per cent of the female key informants reported accessing the internet via internet cafes in contrast to 10 per cent of the male key informants. Internet cafe usage was also more frequently reported by key informants between 15-24 years old and 25-34 years old, respectively seven and eight per cent of key informants. Key informants between 35-44 years old and over 55 years old had the highest percentage, at seven and eight per cent, of those who reportedly not using internet.

Internet provider

The most reported internet provider was Syria Tell, cited by 26 per cent of key informants, followed by MTN. Thirdly, 17 per cent of key informants reported satellite internet connectivity as means by which to access internet. This was confirmed by Emergency Telecommunication Cluster's country profile which reported that mobile services were mainly provided by the afore mentioned two-privately owned mobile operators, while landlines were provided by the state-controlled Telecommunications Establishment (STE)⁸.

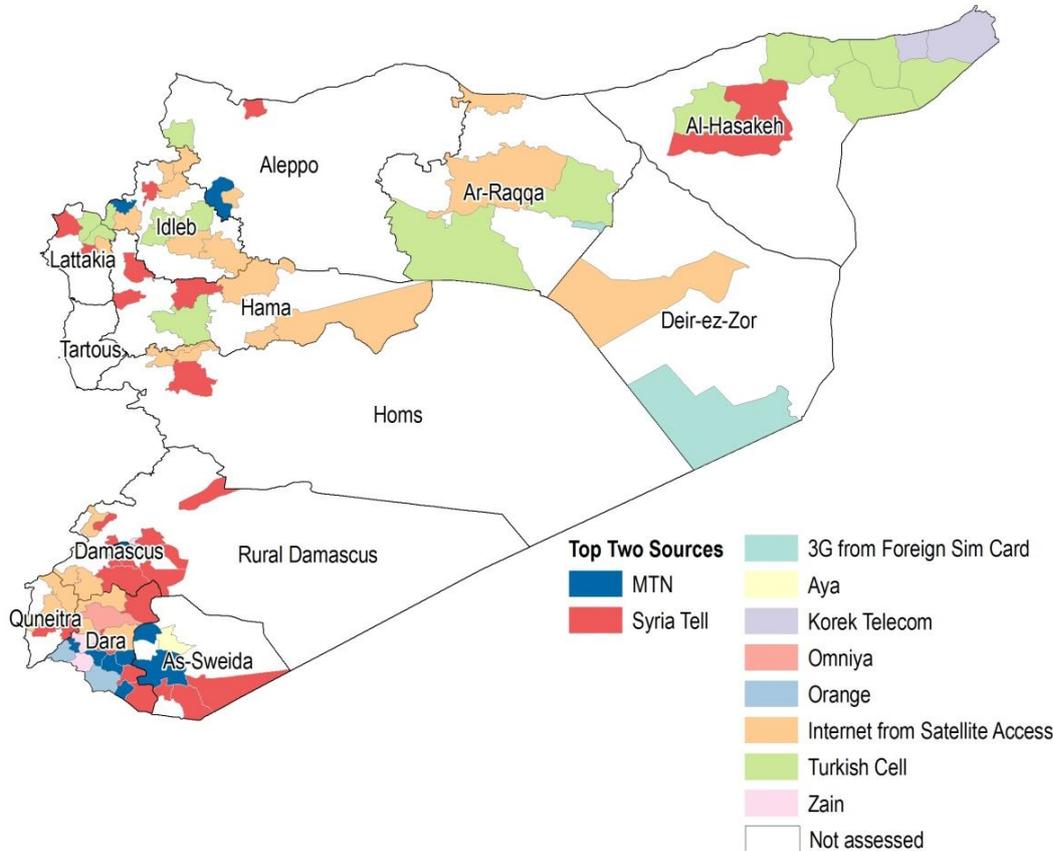
⁶ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), [Syria Profile, 2013](#).

⁷ Emergency Telecommunication Cluster, [Syria Country Profile](#), August 2015.

⁸ Idem

Syria Tell was the most reported internet provider in Lattakia, Quneitra and Rural Damascus Governorates. In the northern Governorates of Al Hasakeh and Ar Raqqa the Turkish Cell company was the primary internet provider reported to be used by the key informants, whereas in Hama and Idleb Governorates satellite internet connectivity was the most reported source of internet used by the communities assessed (See Map 1 below).

Map 1: Most reported Internet provider by key informants, per Governorate in May 2015



Communication Expenditures

Comparatively higher amounts were reported to be spent on traditional mobile phone-based communication (including text and calls) than on internet-based communication. On average, key informants reported to spend 3,374 SYP (US\$ 18) and 4,208 SYP (US\$ 22) per month respectively on internet communication and phone communication.

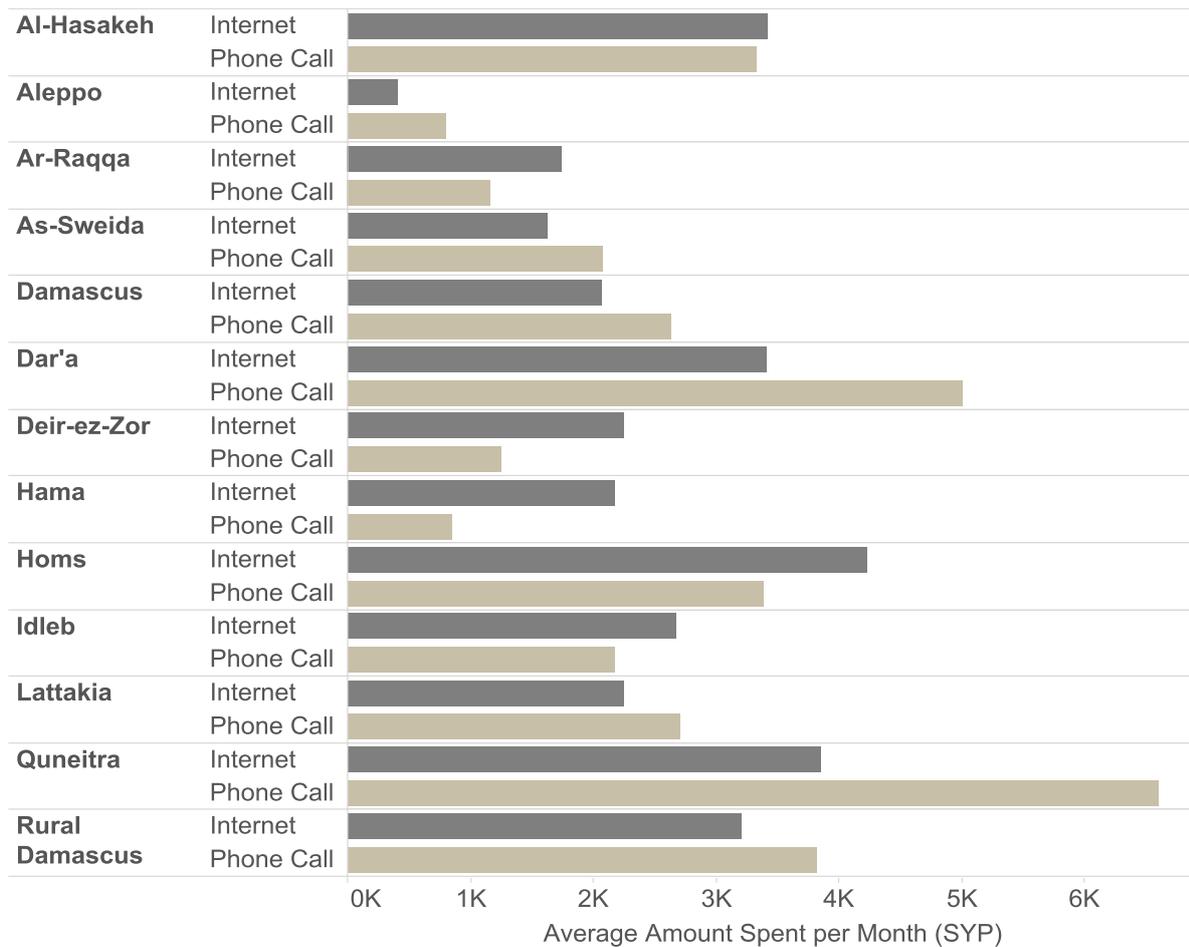
The highest amount paid for phone communication was reported in Quneitra Governorate with 6,594 SYP (US\$ 35) spent per month on average. Internet communication was reportedly the most expensive in Homs Governorate with 4,225 SYP (US\$ 22) per month on average.

When electricity is down **batteries were the most reported strategy to maintain internet access**, cited by 84 per cent of key informants. Internet cafes were the second most reported, when electricity was not available in the household, reported by 10 per cent of key informants. However, if not equipped with a generator, the internet cafes were also unable to provide internet access to their customers.

In Hama and Ar Raqqa Governorates, 48-50 per cent of key informants reportedly going to internet cafes to access the internet when electricity was not available. Solar panels were only reported once, in the Dar'a Governorate.

The lowest number of energy sources alternatives available were reported in Deir Ez Zor Governorate where 43 per cent of key informants reported that internet could not be accessed whatsoever when electricity was down. A similar situation was described in Ar Raqqa and Aleppo Governorates, by 20 per cent of key informants.

Figure 3: Average amount spent per month on Internet and phone calls per governorate (in SYP) in May 2015



Social Media Use

Social media platforms

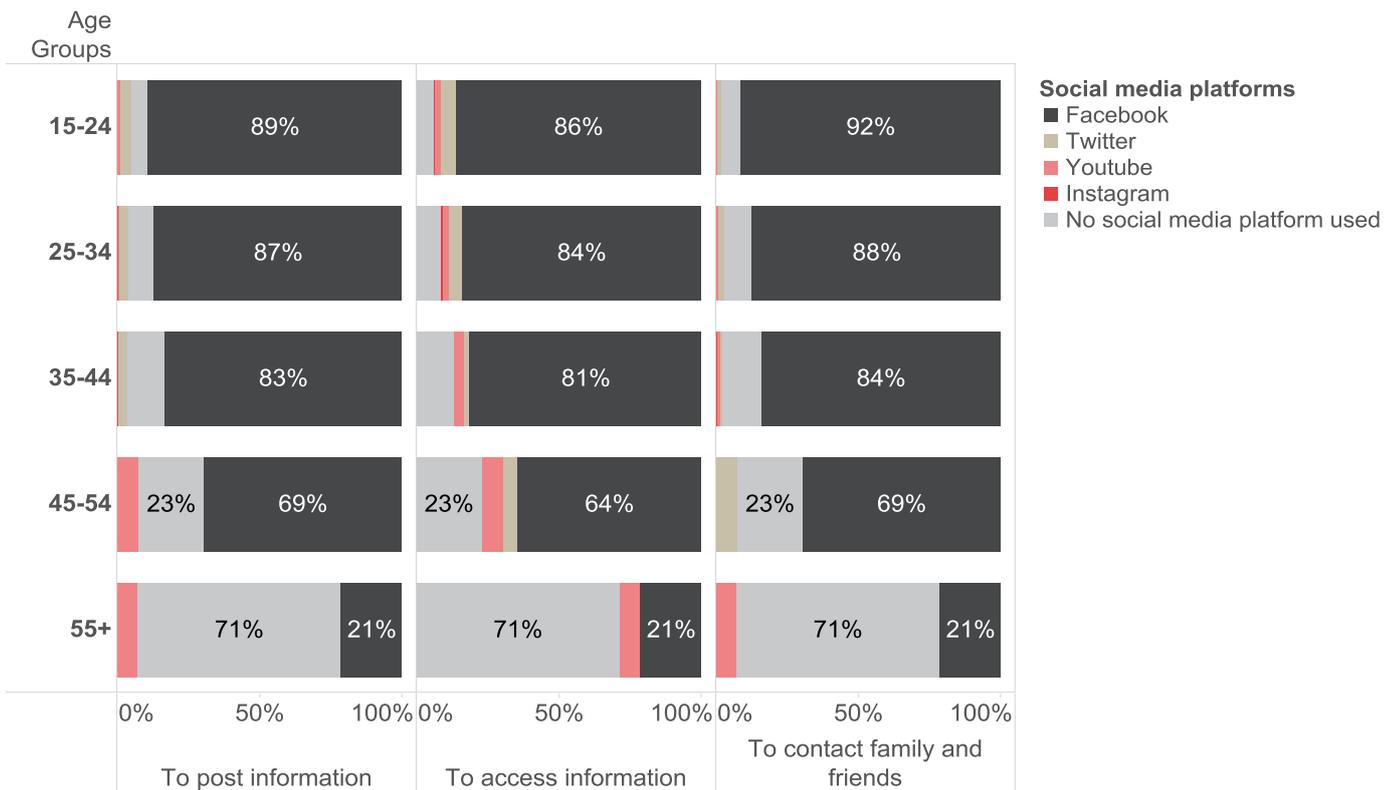
Reported by 82-85 per cent of all key informants, Facebook was the most frequently used social media platform to contact family and friends as well as to access and post information (See Figure 4 below). Similar findings were presented in a report published by Freedom House in May 2014 which reported the widespread use of this social media platform as a means of sharing news, discussing events, coordinating activities, and so on.⁹ Overall, 11 per cent of key informants reported never using any social media platform.

Twitter was the second most reported social media platform to post and access information followed by YouTube, both reported by only three-four and three per cent of key informants, respectively. This was consistent across all governorates assessed.

Key informants over 55 years old reported using social media platforms the least (71 per cent of key informants). While 83-90 per cent of key informants between 15-24 and 25-34 years old, reported using social media platforms to post or access information, as well as contact their family and friends. Facebook was the most commonly reported social media platform used by the key informants across all age groups assessed.

⁹ Freedom House, [Freedom on the Net : Syria](#) , May 2014

Figure 4: Social Media platforms usages of key informants per age group, across Syria in May 2015



The type of information reported to be shared by key informants on social media platforms was consistent across the different age groups and genders. Over half of both male and female key informants reported posting information about the **overall situation in Syria** (69-73 per cent of key informants). The second and third most reported types of information posted on such platforms were, **personal information and information about friends and family**, by 13-14 per cent of key informants. Key informants over 55 years old were amongst the highest that did not posting any information on social media platforms.

Perceptions

Privacy

Facebook was the most trusted social media platform in terms of protecting ones privacy reported by 79 per cent of key informants, followed by Twitter which was cited by only four per cent of key informants.

Reasons for considering Facebook as a trusted social media platform included: the option to manage privacy settings so as to protect personal information (60 per cent of key informants); the anonymous publication of posts by using different nicknames while creating an account; along with the ability to hide the location of where the account was accessed from (18 per cent of key informants).

On the contrary, the **least trusted social media platforms, as regards users' privacy protection, were Twitter and YouTube** reported by 30-33 per cent of key informants. Facebook was reported as one of the least trusted social media platform in terms of protecting ones privacy (11 per cent of key informants). Reasons for this reported mistrust of different social media platforms vary little across different gender and age groups of key informants.

The primary concerns regarding privacy protection of social media platforms were the **lack of insurance of privacy settings** management (32 per cent of key informants) and the **absence of access restriction to the information published** (30 per cent).

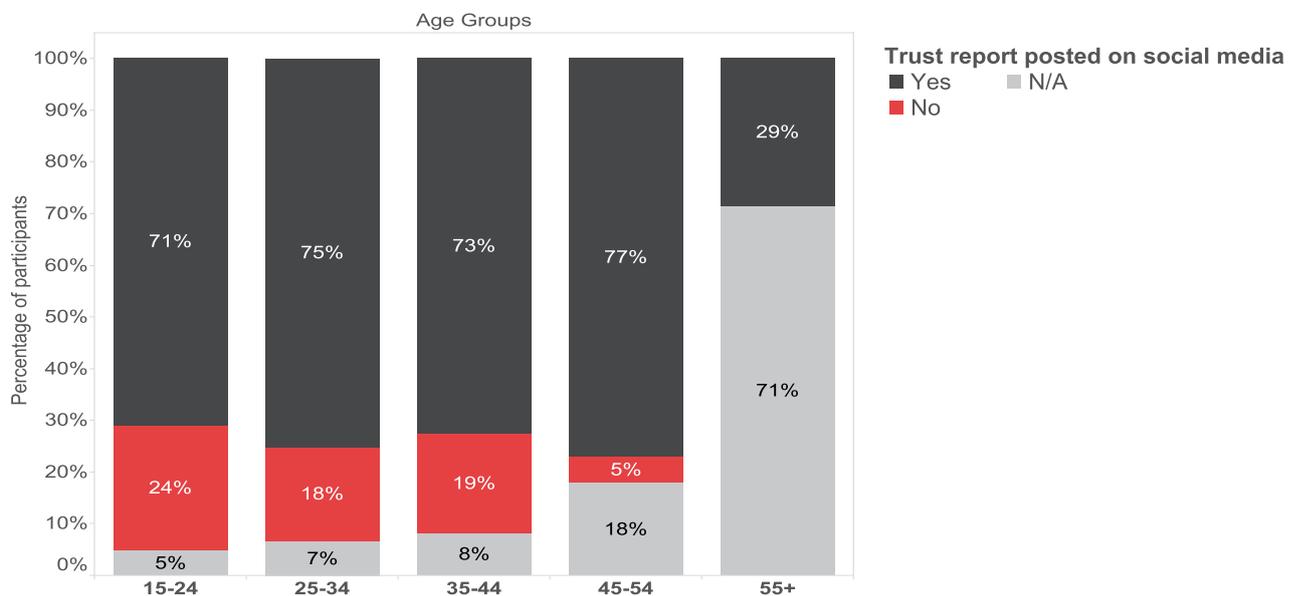
Trusted information sources

Overall, **72 per cent of key informants reported that they trusted information posted on social media platforms** concerning the current events in Syria. Such high levels of trust and dependence on social media, as a news source, can be attributed to the overall lack of traditional reporting and verifiable journalistic reports on the ongoing conflict.¹⁰ The highest percentage of key informants that did not trust information posted on social media platforms was reported by those aged between 18-25 years old (See Figure 5 below).

To obtain information about current events in Syria, **the most trusted platform was reported to be Facebook**, by 58 per cent of key informants. YouTube was the second most reported trusted social media platform, having been reported by only 9 per cent of key informants.

The concern of **encountering a fake account** (cited by 24 per cent of key informants) was mainly cited in the context of wanting to share sensitive information using a social media platform. As such the ability to call via the social media platform was important. Key informants reported that being able to hear the voice of their contact using Facebook Messenger application was important to prevent being in contact with fake accounts.

Figure 5: Level of trust regarding reports posted on social media platforms per age group



CONCLUSION

The prevalent use of **internet based applications** was reported by key informants with regards to their communities in Syria. With 4 million refugees in neighbouring countries and six and a half million Internally Displaced Persons within Syria, communication tools have become critical for the Syrian population to **maintain contact with their family and friends both inside and outside the country**. The costs associated with phone calls and internet communication are relatively high, indicating that maintaining communication channels with family and friends is a priority regardless of the associated costs.

In addition to the high costs related to communication and social media use, **electricity** remained a critical barrier to internet access. **Batteries and internet cafes** were the main coping measures used; however these could be costly and not always readily available. Another barrier to the use of social media platforms was **privacy protection concerns** related to both the reliability of privacy settings of one's personal account and publications, which might limit the usage of social media platform to communicate sensitive information. Nonetheless, **information published on all social media platforms was reported to be trusted** by a large majority of key informants.

¹⁰ United States Institute of Peace, [Social Media Reporting and the Syrian Civil War](#), June 2013.