

ENCODING RESISTANCE;  
*Graphic Design and Media Control In The Syrian Uprising*

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*By*

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ENCODING RESISTANCE;  
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INTERDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S IN ARTS, MEDIA AND DESIGN  
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## ABSTRACT

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*Encoding Resistance; Graphic Design and Media Control in The Syrian Uprising* re-envisioned graphic design as a critical praxis to observe the misinformation and control of media practices in the context of the Syrian uprising. The project used a reflexive design methodology that integrated elements of graphic design and journalism as visual means of resistance against media hegemony. The thesis aimed to form a space whereby graphic design could provide critical commentary on social and political conditions in Syria.

*Encoding Resistance* explored visual and material tactics to communicate fragments of a lived experience through the perspective of the control of public opinion. The visual exploration was an attempt at enacting theory through studio practice to highlight the author's design discipline as one form of citizenship and resistance.

**KEYWORDS:** Graphic design, Syrian uprising, media control, propaganda, press, resistance, self-reflexivity, encoding, critical practice.

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## DEDICATION

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*To all the brave Syrians of today, and the free Syrians of tomorrow.*

*To my parents who taught me to love home, away from home.*

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## PREFACE

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*There is a popular but wholly mistaken assumption that being exiled is to be totally cut off, isolated, hopelessly separated from your place of origin. Would that surgically clean separation were true, because then at least you could have the consolation of knowing that what you have left behind is, in a sense, unthinkable and completely irrecoverable.<sup>1</sup>—  
Edward W. Said*

As a Syrian citizen and graphic designer witnessing the ongoing unrest in my hometown, Homs, from afar, I live in a state of metaphorical in-between-ness. I learn to observe the ongoing incidents back home in opposition to my life as an immigrant citizen. There is a paradox in observing incidents away from home. On the one hand, my design practice drives me to respond to and reflect on social and political issues through visual narratives. On the other hand, my inability to be immersed in on-the-ground civil resistance positions me, as articulated by Edward Said, in a state of “intellectual exile.”<sup>2</sup> The intellectual in this state raises critical questions about his or her homeland's social struggles.

*Encoding Resistance; Graphic Design and Media Control In The Syrian Uprising* questions the graphic designer's responsibility in communicating issues of social injustice. Focusing on media practices throughout the Syrian uprising, this paper and the accompanying body of work aim to contribute to a larger discussion relating to graphic design as a potent social and cultural agent. Through a reflexive methodology and a practice that integrates elements of graphic design and journalism, the work attempts to form a visual platform whereby critical commentary on specific media constructs may exist. This thesis sets a way of interpreting my design practice as a form of citizenship and resistance.

## INTRODUCTION

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*The People Have Overthrown The Regime.*<sup>3</sup>

The Egyptian people were celebrating the overthrow of their dictator of thirty years, Hosni Mubarak, on February 12, 2011, when newspapers started circulating *Tahrir Square. Al Ahram*, the oldest government-owned newspaper in Cairo, was unique among other circulating papers that morning. For the first time in thirty years the headline was placed above the newspaper's masthead (the title of a newspaper at the head of the front page). The headline was also printed in red (*see fig. 1, 2*). Throughout *Al Ahram's* history, such radical appearances of a headline occurred during events such as the announcement of the 1967 war, President Jamal Abdunasser's decision to step down, and the assassination of President Anwar Sadat.<sup>4</sup> The headline stood out among other newspapers, as it was also the only headline that was scripted in Arabic calligraphy and signed by the calligrapher.

The decision to flip the headline over the newspaper's masthead carried significant implications for the public and the employees at *Al Ahram's* newsroom. On the eve of the revolution's victory, *Al Ahram's* journalists were rebelling against the paper's senior management, which had been appointed by the Egyptian state and loyal to President Hosni Mubarak. Sabah Hamamou, a deputy business editor at *Al Ahram*, had been a journalist for the paper for over 18 years. On February 17, during a BBC interview following Mubarak's overthrow, Hamamou called for the resignation of *Al Ahram's* senior management asserting, "if some editors really care about *Al Ahram* as part of Egypt, they should take an honorable

stand and resign."<sup>5</sup> Other journalists demanded changes that reflect some of the country's political developments, which included appointing a new board of directors and editorial council for a transitional period, followed by democratic elections for both bodies.<sup>6</sup> *Al Ahram* had issued an article earlier that week apologizing to its readers for what it referred to as "unprofessional and unethical coverage" of the uprising; it confessed that it had "failed to hear the thundering message of change."<sup>7</sup> Hamamou insisted that *Al Ahram's* internal revolution was going to be won by its employees, as the revolution in *Tahrir* Square was won by its people.<sup>8</sup>

The headline and its placement over the masthead symbolized an apologetic gesture to the Egyptian people. *Al Ahram* recognized that such a historical piece of news needed to be represented in a form that fit its magnitude and reinforced the paper's ultimate loyalty to its people. The paper's hand scripted headline, "*Al Sha'ab Asqat Al Nizaam*" (The People Have Overthrown The Regime), began with the word *Al Sha'ab* (the people), alluding to the people-led nature of the Egyptian revolution. *Al Ahram* linked itself to street-level resistance by not relying on a digital typesetting of the headline, rather relating to the handwritten signs of the protestors in *Tahrir* Square. *Al Ahram's* reliance on calligraphy, a practice that requires technical mastery, carried nuanced cultural reverence. The headline's emphasis on the cultural value of calligraphy in the region made a statement about the newspaper's loyalty to its regional heritage. In addition to paying homage to an important facet of Middle Eastern tradition, the newspaper reminded its readers of its history; *Al Ahram* is the oldest house of journalism in the country.

Traditional calligraphy in this context proved to be the best medium for representing such a message. The headline's radical displacement above the masthead marked a critical regional change in the form by which a message is circulated; the reconfiguration of a newspaper's design element acted as a critical commentary and retort against nationwide political suppression.

## 1. GROUNDS: ESTABLISHING MOTIVES

Graphic design as a communication practice is directly tied to elements of mass media that focus on delivering news to a general or targeted public. These elements include newspapers, news magazines, online newspapers and news blogs on the Internet. Graphic design is involved in a significant part of shaping the form through which media is communicated. Through its role in producing messages graphic design contributes to the workings of the media and therefore, it deserves further scrutiny of the goals that the discipline achieves. Discussions that question the motives of design and its role in public discourse have long existed throughout graphic design's history and development. The following section will cover a brief timeline that highlights a few prominent attempts at establishing a shift in the way that graphic design is seen as a communication discipline.

### 1.1.1. FIRST THINGS FIRST (1964-2000)

In 1964, British graphic designer Ken Garland wrote and published the *First Things First Manifesto*. Its aim was to generate a discussion about the priorities of the graphic design profession in the realms of design press and design education. Garland called on graphic designers, visual artists and art directors to question the primary concerns of their practices (*see fig. 3*).

The manifesto expressed the need for a radicalization of the profession:

*Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.<sup>9</sup>*

Twenty-two visual communicators signed the call for a more worthwhile use of their skills.

The manifesto was later republished in 2000 in response to the increase in global commercial culture (see fig. 4).<sup>10</sup> Among the group of international designers that re-signed the manifesto was Dutch graphic designer and educator, Jan Van Toorn. In 1994, Van Toorn described the role of the contemporary graphic designer as a “practical intellectual”; one who is actively engaged in critical reflection about his or her process of making.<sup>11</sup> In the vein of the Manifesto’s objectives, he pointed to the importance of arriving at a mentality that makes it possible for designers to break new grounds of design and articulate their own views. In his essay, “And Justice for All...” Van Toorn states that the graphic design discipline has abandoned that mental space in which it reflected on its social role, and has therefore “lost the critical distance that determined its relation vis-a-vis the client’s brief.”<sup>12</sup> Losing that critical distance meant that designers accept the politics, values and moral codes of their clients. Designers’ critical positions must be made visible in their day-to-day practices. Van Toorn and his design predecessors stress the urgency for graphic design to establish a condition that grants the discipline critical freedom and independence in the public realm.

### 1.1.2. CRITICAL AUTONOMY

Graphic designer and curator of the Walker Art Center, Andrew Blauvelt, re-signed Garland's *First Things First Manifesto* as well. In his 2003 essay, "Critical Autonomy Or Can Graphic Design Save Itself?" Blauvelt claimed that the commodification of the goals of graphic design has continued to keep the discipline from becoming a discipline of "critical autonomy."<sup>13</sup> Similar to Van Toorn, Blauvelt argued that graphic design must perform as a discipline capable of generating meaning on its own terms. Blauvelt observed that graphic design activities "should demonstrate self-awareness and self-reflexivity; a capacity to manipulate the system of design for ends other than those imposed on the field from without."<sup>14</sup>

Critical design is dedicated to introspection and reflection on contexts in which design exists. Without the ability to critique and move beyond the preconceptions of graphic design as merely a problem-solving discipline, designers risk perpetuating a practice that is concerned with producing aestheticized commodities. *The First Things First Manifesto*, Van Toorn, and Blauvelt all call for a way out of the persistent oversimplification of the discipline by engaging a critical design practice.

## 1.2. GROUNDS: ESTABLISHING INTENT

*Encoding Resistance; Graphic Design and Media Control In The Syrian Uprising* observes the practice of graphic design as one that has the capacity to critique media control within the context of the Syrian uprising. The produced body of work is an attempt to respond to ongoing Syrian civil resistance against state attempts at misinformation and propaganda.

*Encoding Resistance* asks the questions:

1. What positions can graphic designers assume towards overt media control?
2. What visual practices can act as critical commentary on social issues in the context of the Syrian conflict?

This paper aims to establish a context for the accompanying body of visual work. It provides a way by which the visual practice can be interpreted through an elaboration on the theoretical framework and design strategy that inform the studio work.

The following chapters will outline the context of the thesis by uncovering a brief history of the Assad regime and the uprising, focusing on the press as a type of media practice in Syria. The sections following that will discuss the theoretical perspectives of Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall on media hegemony and message dissemination, which have informed this project's design methodology. Contextualized in the ongoing Syrian conflict, the project will prompt further questions regarding graphic design's ability to reflect, critique and distill critical issues in a social environment.



## CONTEXT: ESTABLISHING TERRITORY

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### 2.1. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ASSAD REGIME AND SYRIAN PRESS

#### 2.1.1. OVERVIEW OF THE REGIME

The Assad regime has been the ruling party in Syria since 1971. Hafez Al Assad, the founder of the regime and president of Syria for three decades, built a regime in which he controlled every political element with assistance from the socialist Ba'ath Party. Throughout its ruling, the Syrian political regime had drawn international criticism for repression of its people, particularly for ordering the 1982 Hama massacre and the 1980 Tadmor prison massacre during Hafez Al Assad's reign.<sup>15</sup> After the passing of Hafez, Bashar Al Assad, Syria's current president and Hafez's eldest son took control in July 2000.<sup>16</sup> Upon his inheritance of presidency, Bashar brought his family members into centers of state power, changing the regime from an autocratic system of individual authority to one of familial control.

#### 2.1.2. THE PRESS AND BASHAR AL ASSAD'S REIGN

During Bashar Al Assad's early presidency, the country underwent a period of *infatih* (opening), which allowed for the publishing of the first independent Syrian newspapers in 40 years.<sup>17</sup> These independent publications began to engage critical social issues. One of the independent weekly newspapers, *Ad-Doumari* (Lamplighter), published by Syrian cartoonist Ali Farzat, sold 25,000 first-run copies in a span of hours on the first day of its publication.<sup>18</sup> The consumption of such a newspaper was indicative of the Syrian people's eagerness to engage with journalism. However, the Syrian media *infatih* faced some impediments, as the

Syrian media law states that private presses have to be licensed in order to publish news.<sup>19</sup>

Private presses could lose their licenses and face heavy fines and imprisonment if they were to report on military affairs, incite revolt or imply any threat to the "national interest."<sup>20</sup>

The next chapter, "Content: Establishing Critique & Methods", will elaborate on the newspaper as a chosen medium for investigating information dissemination in Syrian media.

### 2.1.3. NIZAR NAYYOUNG

Nizar Nayyoun, previous editor-in-chief of the monthly Syrian publication *Sawt Al-Democratiyya* (The Democratic Voice), was a leading member of the Independent Committees for the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria. He was arrested in January 1992 because he reported about human rights violations in Syria, and was not released until May 2001.<sup>21</sup> During his imprisonment, Nayyoun suffered from Hodgkin's disease, lymph cancer and partial paralysis. Treatment was only offered to him on the contingency that he admitted to creating untruthful declarations about human rights abuses in Syria, dispel the human rights declarations he had made, and refrain from any future political activity.<sup>22</sup> Similar detentions and other restrictions inflicted on Syrian journalists often resulted in self-imposed censorship.

### 2.2. THE SYRIAN UPRISING AND MEDIA HEGEMONY

In 1998, politician and prisoner in solitary confinement for 18 years, Riad Al Turk, declared, "Syria will no longer remain the kingdom of the mute."<sup>23</sup> Since March 15, 2011, street

protesters in the cities Dar'a, Edlib, Hama, Homs, Baba Amr, Latakia, and Dayr Azzawr have been calling for the overthrow of the Assad regime, for equal rights amongst ethnic and religious groups, and for broad political liberations: freedom of press, speech, and assembly.<sup>24</sup>

#### 2.2.1. PROPAGANDA AS A TOOL

The Syrian revolution's news media has displayed the use of propaganda as a tool leveraged by both establishment and anti-establishment movements. According to its basic definition, propaganda is a form of communication aimed at influencing the attitude of a community toward some cause or position.<sup>25</sup> Propaganda communicates messages and symbols that inform the general public and instills principles, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will assimilate individuals into the institutional structures of the larger society. The prominence of propaganda in "manufacturing" public consent has long been a key concept for understanding hegemonic political systems.<sup>26</sup>

#### 2.2.2. HEGEMONIC TENDENCIES

Gramsci defined hegemony as political leadership based on the consent of the people; a consent that is secured by the propagation of the ruling group's worldview. The way that hegemony manifests in a particular regime is based on a well-balanced combination of "force and consensus."<sup>27</sup> Gramsci postulated that hegemony lies precisely in the point of contact between consensus and force and that the two constituents are contingent upon one another. The acquisition of the public's consent must be consistently manufactured;

however, people's daily social experiences constantly remind them of the disadvantages of submission, in turn posing a threat to the dominant rule. Gramsci stated that sustaining people's consent is achieved through complete dominance over media. When a power structure wants to initiate a certain action, it creates the adequate public opinion to support that action through propaganda and hegemonic mass communication.

### 2.2.3. INTERPRETING HEGEMONIC CODES

Although Gramsci's model stresses key issues of the relationship between media and power, it falls short in highlighting the role of individuals in interpreting information passed on to them by their ruling system. Stuart Hall's hypothetical positions towards media reception adapted Gramsci's notion of hegemonic struggle, and proposed different positions of reading media messages. In his essay *Encoding/Decoding*, Hall describes "the moment of the production" of the message as "encoding" and "the moment of its reception" as "decoding."<sup>28</sup> He referred to this process as part of the "circuit of communication: production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction."<sup>29</sup> In this circuit the sender becomes a producer and the receiver a consumer linked by the conveyance of the message, the vehicle of meaning. Since there is no prescriptive correlation between the moment of production (encoding) and the moment of reception (decoding), the former can attempt to dictate but cannot guarantee that the intended communication will happen. Hall elaborated that the decoding will not necessarily follow the encoding's intended meaning, inferring that the audience is not a passive receiver of meaning.

Hall suggested three primary positions by which a reader interprets any text. The first position is the (hegemonic) reading, which entails that the reader fully accepts the reading's intended meaning. To the reader the text's code appears common, making it instinctively acceptable. In the second position, the "negotiated reading," the reader partly shares the text's code, generally accepting the intended reading.<sup>30</sup> However, the reader in this position might resist or modify the meaning in a way that reflects his or her own conditions. The third and final position is the "counter-hegemonic" reading.<sup>31</sup> The reader, whose social condition locates him or her in a directly oppositional relation to the encoded meaning, understands the intended reading but does not accept it. The meaning of a given message is thereby located between the message producer and the message reader.

#### 2.2.4. DESIGNER AS ENCODER

Hall's theory gives significant roles to both the encoder and the decoder. In light of his theory, the practice of critical design and its modes of production embody a form of encoding. Processes of critical design construct messages that carry a particular nuanced meaning. Derived from Hall's theory, one can expand the role of the critical designer to one that identifies him or her as a generator of content, an encoder of meaning. The critical designer here is positioned as the creator or producer of meaning, not just its form. Critical designers are mindful of their processes of making and critical of the rationales behind their formal tropes. The produced design work transcends stylistic formats and problem-solving approaches, and embodies communicative meaning that addresses social and cultural concerns. The work performs as a visual argument that conveys the designer's frame of

knowledge and his or her surrounding context. The produced outcome instills visual codes that communicate the designer's critical commentary as critical design entails introspective reflection on its processes and a deep understanding of the issues it investigates. Through their means of formal production, designers generate content that can be then discursively interpreted by the viewers. The designer as an encoder transmits his or her critical interpretation of a particular context to the audience, who in turn unpacks (decodes) this meaning based on their own frame of reference and interpretation.

Critical design hinges on the reflexive dialogue and negotiated reading of the public. Van Toorn observes critical design as a practice that addresses its audience as critical thinkers who engage in active interpretation of the communicated message. Hence, implicit in critical design's conveyance is an assumption that the audience does not passively accept the designed code rather it engages with it. Designers, as producers of visual codes, respond to the social and cultural order and translate their findings into visual outcomes that operate in the public sphere.

### 2.3. DECODING SYRIA'S PROPAGANDA

Hall's theory demonstrates the equal importance of the decoder's role in the communication circuit. Syrian activist and blogger, Razan Ghazzawi, has openly spoken out against the regime from inside Syria. Contributing to *Global Voices Online*, an international community of bloggers reporting on citizen media from around the world, Ghazzawi has fought for the rights of bloggers and activists arrested by the regime.<sup>32</sup> Her political stance exhibits Hall's third reader position: the oppositional, counter-hegemonic. Her anti-government positioning counters the intended hegemonic meaning and refutes government messages.

A recent article by *Doha Centre For Media Freedom* notes that on various Syrian radio stations, presenters call on local listeners to voice their opinions on the "foreign conspiracy" against Syria.<sup>33</sup> Listeners are regularly warned about being deceived by on-the-ground citizen videos sent to international news channels such as *Al Jazeera* and *BBC Arabiya* through message broadcasts in between radio music segments. These encoded broadcast messages must be decoded through a hegemonic reading by the recipients in order for the desired meaningful exchange to take place. For the Syrian rule, it appears that the hegemonic position of the reader would be the "ideal-typical" case of "a perfectly transparent communication," a meaning perception that appears commonsensical to the reader.<sup>34</sup>

### 2.3.1. VISUAL EVIDENCE OF RESISTANCE

Signs of resistance have marked the Syrian walls and signposts of the demonstrators.

Graffiti messages that read, "Your silence is killing us" filled the streets, targeting the people who assumed a neutral stance towards the uprising.<sup>35</sup> In the city of Homs, people gathered around the city center's clock tower to mobilize groups and organize protests. Army tanks and security forces, ready to stop any protester have since surrounded the clock tower. As a sign of solidarity, people in the nearby area of Al Khalidiyah have created a wooden replica of the Homs clock tower, staging a similar meeting point for the protestors in the area.<sup>36</sup> The creation of the replicated clock tower embodied a process of resistant encoding, countering a hegemonic restriction.

### 2.3.2. ORGANIC CRISES

The incidents of Homs and Al Khalidiyah illustrate what Gramsci referred to as "organic crises," crises that involve the totality of a "historical bloc."<sup>37</sup> During hegemonic crises, the public ceases to accept the words of its national leader and abandons the traditional political parties. The causal factor in an organic crisis can be attributed to the government's failure to govern by committing social injustices against its people. Gramsci suggested that by resisting these organic crises, the ruling system may resort to "all sorts of mystification: blaming the failure of the state on an opposition party or on ethnic and racial minorities, and conducting nationalist campaigns based on appeals to patriotic sentiment."<sup>38</sup> For civic struggle and resistance to be effective, revolutionary citizens ought to feel responsible for



changing the system that already exists. According to Gramsci, this essential change requires a level of critical self-reflexivity.

#### 2.4. REFLEXIVITY AS RESISTANCE

Gramsci's emphasis on self-reflexivity provides a context for the role of the contemporary graphic designer as a critical thinker and a social and cultural agent. Gramsci observed that resistance can be sustained through critical self-reflexivity of the state of a society and political structure. Social and cultural mobility can only exist through the formation of political will. It is a process, as put by Van Toorn, which is cultivated through an in-depth and continuous critical public dialogue.<sup>39</sup>

Van Toorn's reflexive design model works in tandem with Gramsci's advocacy for resisting hegemonic control. Van Toorn sees his personal and professional graphic design practice "in relation to social reality, in relation to the smaller and larger contexts of human activity."<sup>40</sup> He believes in adopting a mentality that brings about social and cultural mobility. Much like Garland's *First Things First Manifesto*, Van Toorn asserts that because designers "fail to reflect critically upon the conditions under which their own actions come about, their mediating role between private and public interest has been lost."<sup>41</sup> He proposes fostering a reflexive design practice that is based on a critical position. The practice aims to contribute to the developmental change of the social living environment.

In his essay *Design and Reflexivity*, Van Toorn explains,

*The essence of this [reflexive design] approach [...] is that through the critical orientation of its products, the reflexive mentality raises questions among the public that stimulate a more active way of dealing with reality. In this manner it may contribute to a process that allows us to formulate our own needs, interest, and desires and resist the fascination with the endless fragmented and aestheticized varieties created by the corporate culture of commerce, state, media, and "attendant" disciplines.<sup>42</sup>*

Van Toorn has often approached reflexive and critical design as a form of "visual journalism," investigating, reflecting and conveying his findings visually.<sup>43</sup> Grounded in Gramsci's call for self-criticality, his work addresses viewers as critical thinkers who take informed and skeptical interest in the conditions of their surrounding environments. In a social environment that is infiltrated by news media, designers need to have a keen political awareness of the meaning of the visual and textual messages around them. A critical stance on public opinion and the media is especially crucial for designers, as their profession determines the form by which the media is constructed.

Looking back at Hall's elaboration of the sender/receiver exchange in reference to critical design praxis, one can extrapolate that critical graphic design occupies the encoding/production space that Hall described. The work produced in this thesis takes a similar approach, exploring modalities of making to encode resistance against overt media control through subversive design tactics.

The next chapter will elaborate on the newspaper as a chosen media outlet for investigation.

Through a description of the restrictive nature of the newspaper's layout, the chapter will highlight redacting tendencies found in newspaper design.

## CONTENT: ESTABLISHING CRITIQUE AND METHODS

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### 3.1. MISINFORMATION, DESIGN AND THE NEWSPAPER AS MEDIUM

Harold Evans, editor of *The Sunday Times* from 1967 to 1981, stated that the newspaper's layout is an integral part of its communication process.<sup>44</sup> The newspaper's layout is comprised of a complex interplay between verbal and visual information. Readers are confronted with a large amount of text and visual data upon navigating through the front page of a newspaper. Starting with a blank sheet of newsprint, each page combines vertical or horizontal fields that package information (*see fig. 5*). News articles are organized in columns varying in lengths and widths. The nature of the pre-layout structure of the newspaper dictates that text is fitted into limited column spaces. This spatial limitation makes journalists' and editors' task a challenging one, as they assemble, redact and reword bodies of text to make text fit in columns while attempting to convey the essence of the text to the readers.

*Encoding Resistance; Graphic Design and Media Control In The Syrian Uprising* uses the newspaper as a medium of investigation and a platform for criticism of the Syrian media context. A major point of contrast between print and online news media is that print is static while online media is dynamic. News content on the Web is ever changing. Lines of code, written, edited, updated and re-edited to be generated instantly, form web pages. A printed news publication in its relative permanence has a life span of a day, making it a medium that encapsulates events of a certain period of time. The daily newspaper represents a cross-section of the society and its happenings at a particular time.

Much room for misinformation is possible in the process of copyediting a newspaper page due to the fact that a significant part of the editing process is dependent on the restrictions of page numbers, column widths and word count. The reasons for these restrictions are varied between limitations of pre-layout structures, image space, information graphics and advertising space (see fig. 6, 7). The newspaper's layout lends itself to modification directed by the power group's hegemonic control in order to instill a particular consent through the news.

The reconfiguration of the masthead on *Al Ahrām's* front page, seen through this paper's extrapolation of Hall's encoding/decoding theory, exhibited a critical design tactic and a subversive code. *Al Ahrām's* encoded message performed political opposition in an effort to push the limits of communicating a lived experience to affect political change.

### 3.2. CASE STUDY I: REDACTED, WOVEN AND STITCHED

Using the newspaper as a site for formal investigation, several methods of redaction are deployed in the work to render news misinformation evident in current Syrian government-run newspapers. The thesis deploys material practices as modes of making within the discipline of graphic design. The visual exploration utilizes design approaches and tactics that reinforce a physical and metaphorical form of interference. These tactics include paper-weaving and cross-stitching. The process of combining paper-weaving and cross-stitching conceals and distorts text, transforming its original form into unreadable content. The resulting formal language encodes a perplexing message, subverting the original content.

Exploring craft and materiality within the context of graphic design opens possibilities for modes of expression that evoke human engagement. Stitching and weaving are techniques that require attention to detail and a certain level of mastery. Both techniques embody cultural and domestic nuances that relate to the Syrian household, and a culture of resistance evident in emerging Syrian grassroots communities. Stitching and weaving are time consuming processes that require careful contemplation of every step. There is a delicacy in working with tactile material, as the process often generates unplanned results. In the stitching process a needle may puncture an unintended hole in the paper, an act that could not be simply undone as is the case through digital technology. The deliberate act of punching holes with a needle and thread is a form of mental as well as physical labor. The process of form making throughout the thesis, therefore, carries as much significance as the visual outcome of the produced work.

### 3.2.1. PAPER-WEAVING

Weaving is a traditional method of fabric production in which two distinct sets of thread are interlaced at right angles to form a pattern. The project uses paper stripped and interwoven on the front page of a newspaper, forming a systematic pattern (*see fig. 8*). Weaving pays homage to the pit-treadle loom, which is one of the main craft devices that first appeared in Syria during the Islamic Golden Age.<sup>45</sup> The paper weaves perform as visual codes to convey a system of disassembling information. The interwoven newsprint subverts the text and messes with its layout. Though the newsprint weaves are created through a physical interweaving of one strip of paper with another, the paper maintains an overall flat appearance, making the manipulated content more nuanced. At close inspection the text under interference appears redacted, broken and disassembled. The grid structure of the newspaper is rejigged in the areas where the paper-weave interventions take place. This interference with the newspaper's original structure connotes the resulted visual codes' subversion. Paper-weaving newspaper columns signify a form of chaos within structure, a sort of strategic disassembling of information.

### 3.2.2. CROSS-STITCHING

Cross-stitching is a form of embroidery in which X-shaped stitches in a tiled pixel-like pattern are used to form a visual composition. The thread is normally used as a connection tool that weaves parts of fabric to each other. Traditionally, cross-stitching is used decoratively to embellish household linens in Syria. The embodiment of the Syrian household in cross-stitching hints at bottom-up grassroots resistance. The X-shaped cross-stitches resemble

target marks and are stitched through the newspaper's front page, suggesting a denied right for expression of opinion in the press. Cross-stitches also act as X-marks imposed over text – literally crossing out words when intricately stitched over text (*see fig. 9*). The cross-stitches obscure text by covering the space between four points (holes), consistently generating a stitched pattern. The integration of paper-weaves and cross-stitches on a newspaper's front page fragments text, encoding distorted meanings and generating a type of visual and physical tension (*see fig. 10,11*). The resulting formal language is altered through various compositions to visually interpret different scales of misinformation. In the vein of Van Toorn's reflexive approach, the visual actions performed on the newspaper's front page require spectators to further engage with the visual messages and decode their meanings.

Redacted, Woven and Stitched offers an entry point towards understanding the depth of misrepresentation of disseminated information in a hegemonic media system. The formal investigation generates an argument that, in Van Toorn's terms, begins to manifest itself "explicitly in the message, in relation to the conditions under which it was produced and under which it is disseminated."<sup>46</sup> The series of newspaper front pages proposes a number of resistant visual codes that highlight the failing of controlled press to lead the readers to a truthful account of events.



### 3.3. CASE STUDY II: AL WATAN SEQUENCE

The *Al Watan* newspaper is a Syrian state-run newspaper and the newspaper of choice for visual investigation as it provides context for an interpretation of the government's coverage of the uprising. The series of eight newspapers focuses on the reader's interpretation of the author's interference with the newspaper through the design codes employed as forms of visual resistance. Through assemblage, cross-stitching and paper-weaving, the series questions the role of *Al Watan* as a reliable source of news. The series also puts subversive design tactics into operation as a process of nuanced encoding of the designer's oppositional interpretation of a particular media context.

The cross-stitching in the series introduces the floss thread as a foreign tactile material to the newspaper. Sewn through the paper, the threaded needle punctures the newsprint on one side and comes through the other. The stitches are sewn over headlines, subheadings and particular segments of text, selectively redacting content. At times allowing some visibility of the text underneath, the stitches are mediated to achieve a gradual progression of concealment and oppositional encoding. The blocks of craft and black fine art paper superimpose imagery and columns of text, completely obliterating content. Read from right to left, the sequence makes evident an increase in the interference elucidating the fact that encoding, and likewise sustaining, a form of resistance is a time-based process. The last piece of the series distorts and blocks all imagery, text and headlines, making the newspaper obsolete (*see fig. 15*).

*Al Watan* Sequence has a dual purpose: it displays processes of encoding that enable designers to communicate their oppositional interpretations; yet it also sheds light on the working process of editorial design in the pressroom. The visual interventions explicitly outline elements of graphic design used in editorial design: the grid, the bounding box and the image placeholder as sites for critical contemplation. Seen through Van Toorn's reflexive model, the series calls on designers to reflect on the activities that the practice embodies and what these activities contribute to in the grand scheme of media and information dissemination.

## CONCLUSION

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*We need to imagine a historical language of design that transcends styles and is embedded in the continuity of discourse. This requires more than what currently passes for graphic design history – a tiresome parade of images devoid of analysis and packaged like seasonal trends from Pottery Barn.<sup>47</sup> – Andrew Blauvelt*

*Al Ahram's* headline might have been an announcement of the Egyptian people's victory, but it was also a call for a different kind of revolution. It was a call for a regional graphic design revolution that puts into action critical reflexivity and re-radicalization of the profession. Revolutionizing design's role in the region demands a reframing of the discipline and a broader development of its goals. Contemporary graphic designers in the Middle East need to grant themselves the capacity to make their social, cultural and political agendas visible in their day-to-day practice. These designers have been participating in protests, vigils or awareness campaigns as activists and citizens. The ongoing political changes are a call for cultivating informed and active citizen-designers, facilitators of change for the public's social concern. Design's significance should be located in the circumstances of social and political contexts in which the discipline finds itself.

The body of work that constitutes the visual part of this thesis aims to showcase a critical design practice as not merely a practice of mediating content, but rather as a practice that is able to resist a particular order through a process of encoding meaning. Integrating material practices, the work generates nuanced content that speaks of the designer's experience of physically interfering with, interpreting, and opposing the existing media construct.

Using tactile materials as tools of encoding challenges the preconceptions of graphic design's reliance on digital and technological facilities. In addition, honing handmade crafts and skillful techniques lends itself to potential grassroots design collective initiatives. Such collaborative approaches of making re-envision graphic design as a practice rooted in a labor of production, yet it has the capacity to foster social mobility and instigate change by leveraging collaborative efforts.

Using a reflexive approach, the critical design practice deployed in this thesis reflects on its ongoing processes of making. It continuously questions design methodologies relating to the designed outcome's performance in the public realm. The critical designer as an encoder treats the viewers as critical thinkers who challenge and engage with the visual arguments implicit in the work. Designers as encoders question the way they not only mediate, but also generate communicative structures, and invite the readers to question the way that they, as receivers, deal with such structures.

Resistance and critique of overt media control in particular becomes a responsibility for critical thinking designers. To sustain a critical practice, designers should challenge, question and problematize the media operations in which their work resides. Through continuous reflection and reframing of the aims of their practice, designers pursue critical freedom. In revolutionary and post-revolutionary times, critical freedom becomes in itself a form of resistance.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Akoum, Caroline. "The Al-Assad's Syria: A History of Violence." *Asharq Alawsat Newspaper*. 17 Mar. 2012. Web. 23 Mar. 2012.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> "Syrian Arab Republic Press, Media, TV, Radio, Newspapers." *Press Reference*. Web. 23 Mar. 2012.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> According to decree 50, the Syrian media law states that private presses have to be licensed.
- <sup>20</sup> Hanano, Amal. "Framing Syria." *Jadaliyya*. 20 Nov. 2011, 23 Mar. 2012. Web.  
Jadaliyya is an independent e-zine produced by the Arab Studies Institute, the umbrella organization that produces Arab Studies Journal ([www.ArabStudiesJournal.org](http://www.ArabStudiesJournal.org)) and runs the Documentary Film Collective, Quilting Point. In an article on *Jadaliyyah* titled *Framing Syria*, writer Amal Hanano explained that the Syrian media law accords the Council of Ministers, which is dominated by the Ba'ath Party, the right to give licenses to newspapers. The political parties law, in addition, grants the right to a committee led by the Ba'athist Interior Minister to license each political party.
- <sup>21</sup> "Syrian Arab Republic Press, Media, TV, Radio, Newspapers." *Press Reference*. Web. 23 Mar. 2012.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 27
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APPENDIX



Fig 1. Crop from *Al Ahram* newspaper front page from Agfa, Kodak. "Al Ahram Frontpage." *Flickr*. 26 Jan. 2011. Web. 07 Apr. 2012.



Fig 2. *Al Ahram* newspaper front page from Shehab, Bahia, and Deebi, Aissa. "The People Want To Overthrow The Regime." Khtt Foundation. Mar. 2011. Web. 23 Mar.2012.



Fig 3. *First Things First Manifesto* (1964) from "First Things First Manifesto: 1964 and 2000." Patrick St. John. Web. 07 Apr. 2012.

EMIGRE NO. 51 SUMMER 1999 PRICE \$7.95

FIRST THINGS FIRST MANIFESTO 2000

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators who have been raised in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents. Many design teachers and mentors promote this belief; the market rewards it; a tide of books and publications reinforces it.

Encouraged in this direction, designers then apply their skill and imagination to sell dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles. Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what *graphic designers do*. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design. The profession's time and energy is used up manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best.

Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.

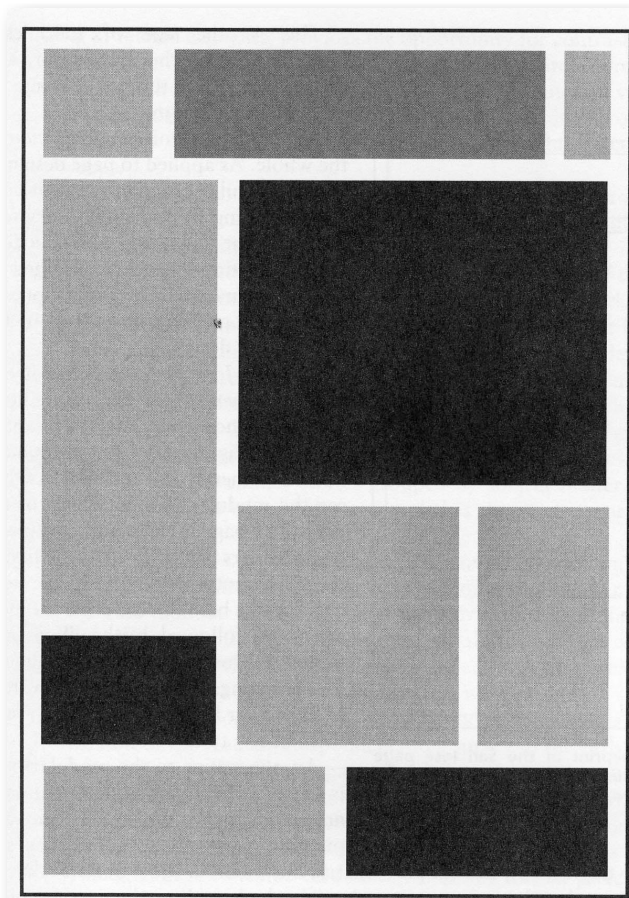
There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.

We propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication - a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning. The scope of debate is shrinking; it must expand. Consumerism is running uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design.

In 1964, 22 visual communicators signed the original call for our skills to be put to worthwhile use. With the explosive growth of global commercial culture, their message has only grown more urgent. Today, we renew their manifesto in expectation that no more decades will pass before it is taken to heart.

Jonathan Barnbrook Nick Bell Andrew Blauvelt Hans Bocking Irma Boom Sheila Levrant de Bretteville  
Max Bruinsma Siân Cook Linda van Deursen Chris Dixon William Drenttel Gert Dumbar Simon Esterson Vince Frost  
Ken Garland Milton Glaser Jessica Helfand Steven Heller Andrew Howard Tibor Kalman Jeffrey Keedy  
Zuzana Licko Ellen Lupton Katherine McCoy Armand Keviss J. Abbott Miller Rick Paynor Lucienne Roberts  
Erik Spiekermann Jan van Toorn Teal Triggs Rudy VanderLans Bob Wilkinson

Fig 4. *First Things First Manifesto* (2000) from "First Things First Manifesto 2000." *Émigré No.51* 1999. Print.



4.1 Modules are rectangles or squares. When you work in modular layout, each package sits in the same module. That is, you can draw a box around it, and all the related elements would be inside the box. Weights vary among modules because of pictures, white space and headline sizes.

Fig 5. Layout modules from Moen, Daryl R. "Laying out Pages." *Newspaper Layout & Design: A Team Approach*. 4th ed. Iowa: Iowa State UP/ Ames, 2000. 28-29. Print.

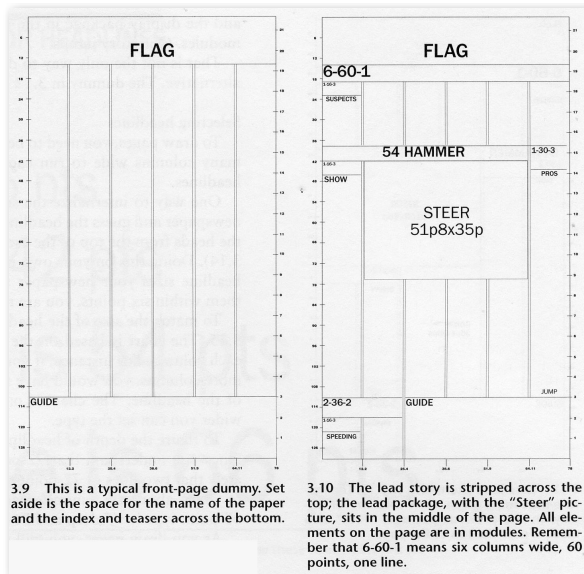


Fig 6. Front-page pre-layout sample from Moen, Daryl R. "Laying out Pages." *Newspaper Layout & Design: A Team Approach*. 4th ed. Iowa: Iowa State UP/ Ames, 2000. 28-29. Print.

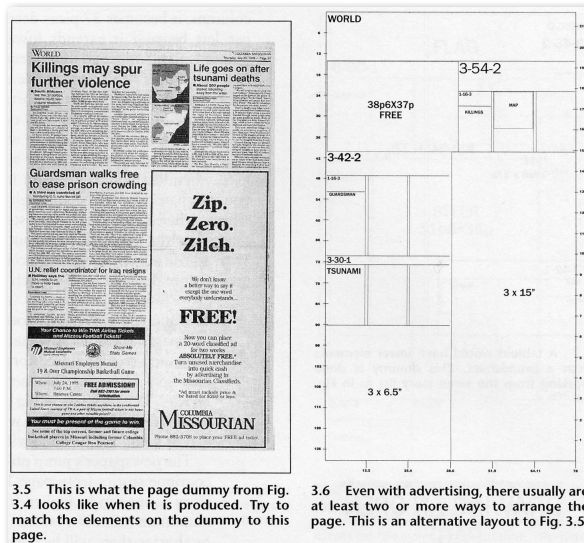


Fig 7. Newspaper page space restrictions from Moen, Daryl R. "Laying out Pages." *Newspaper Layout & Design: A Team Approach*. 4th ed. Iowa: Iowa State UP/ Ames, 2000. 28-29. Print.







Fig 9. Studio exploration: paper-weaving newsprint 11 v 17"



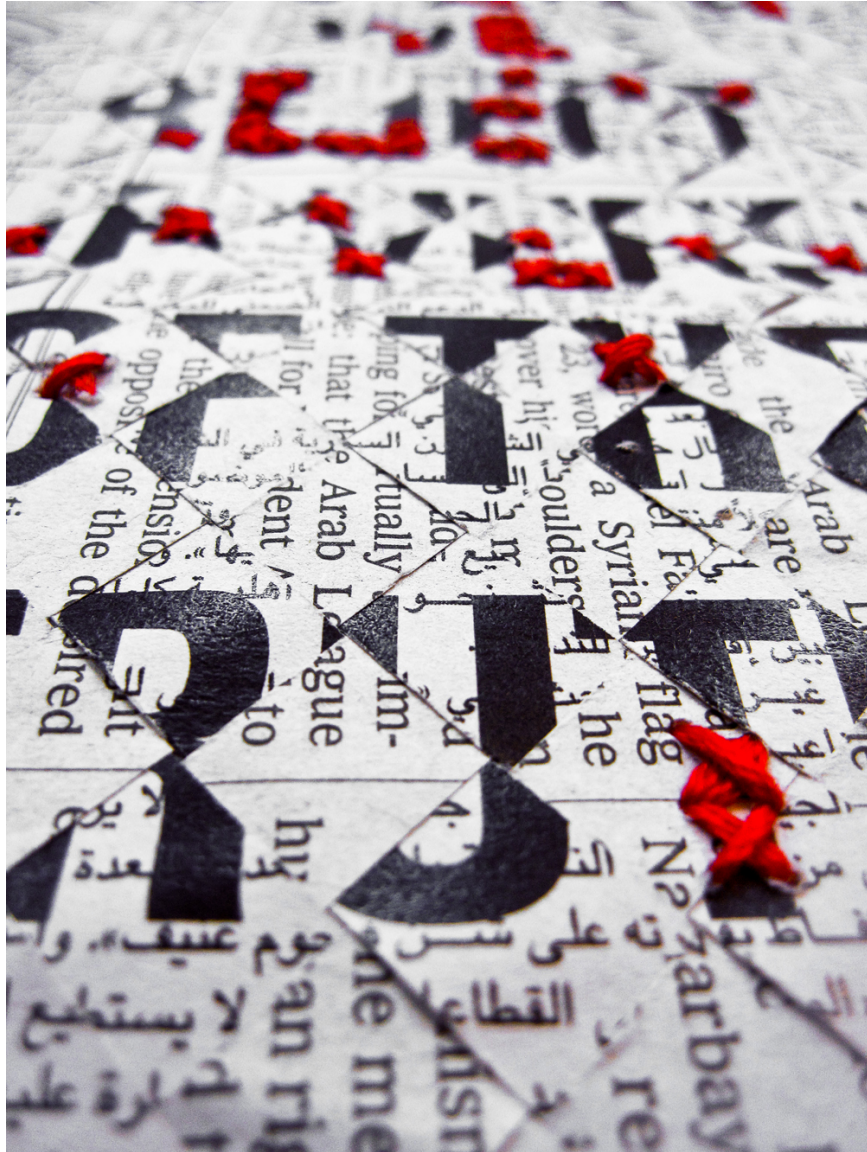


Fig 11. Studio exploration: detail of cross-stitch and paper-weave



Fig 12. Opening reception of *Encoding Resistance*, April 27 2012 at Beit Zatoun, Toronto  
 All photography taken by Yasin Dusoruth ([www.yasindusoruth.com](http://www.yasindusoruth.com))



Fig 13. Details of work displayed at *Encoding Resistance* exhibition.



Fig 14. Details of work displayed at *Encoding Resistance* exhibition.

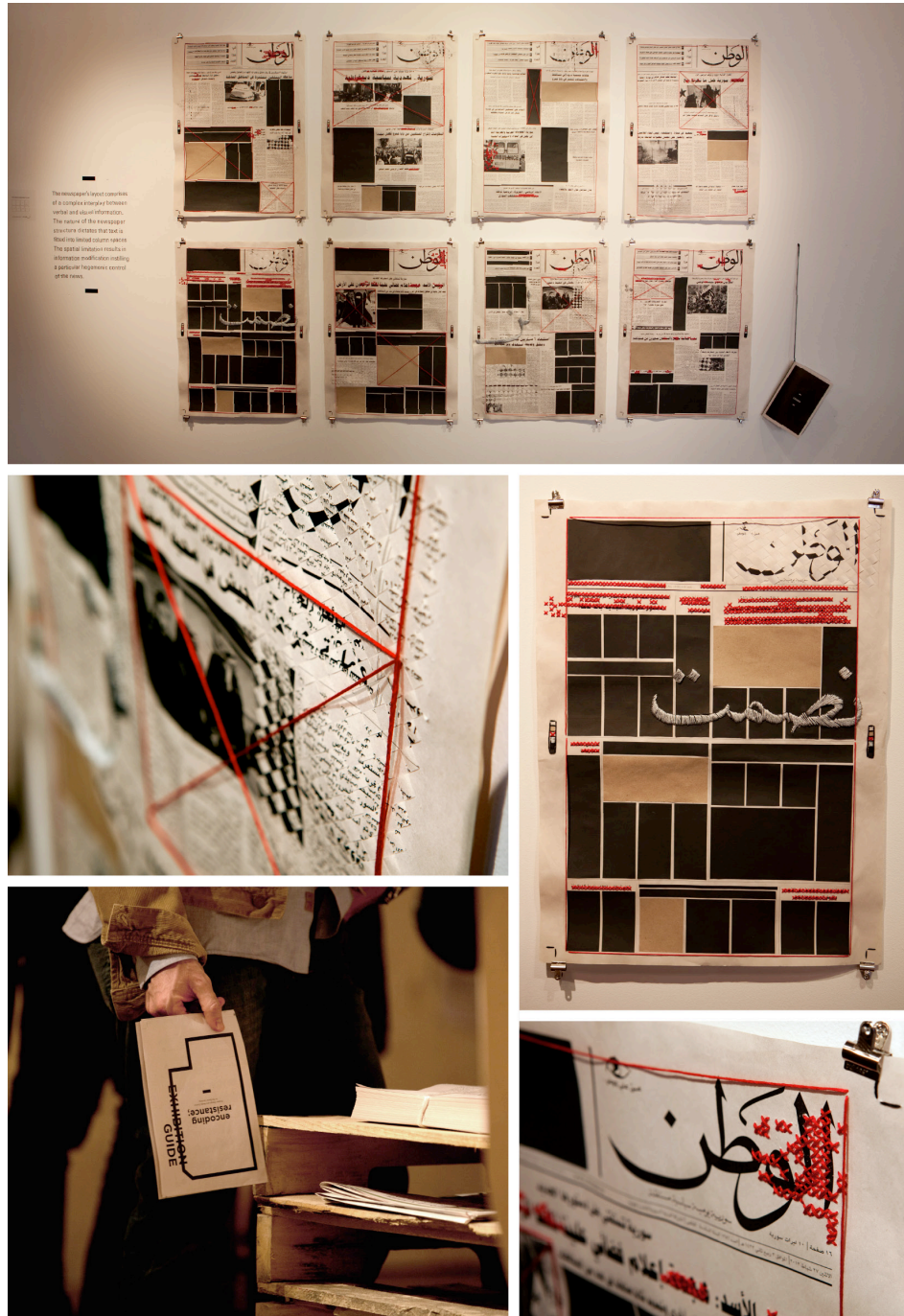


Fig 15. Details of *AI Watan* Sequence at *Encoding Resistance* exhibition.