

International House New York

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***Bringing The Road To The World: Multiplatform and Mobile Reporting in Za'atari Village
Jordan***

The crisis in Syria has been called the “worst humanitarian crisis of our time” by Amnesty International. In Jordan, 83,000 of the 636,000 Syrian refugees that have entered through the northern border in the last six years now reside in the Za’atari refugee camp. Located 6.2 miles east of Mafraq in Jordan’s northern desert region, the Za’atari Village has grown from a temporary camp set up in 2011 by the Jordanian government and international agencies to the fourth largest village in Jordan. According to the UNHCR, the camp’s population has unexpectedly exploded in the last six years, making it difficult for refugees to obtain access to basic services like health care and education. Additionally, social issues such as sexual assault and early marriages make it difficult for women and girls to navigate the camp freely. The situation is further complicated by rising economic and social tensions between Syrians and Jordanians, which points to a long and difficult road ahead for a country already struggling to absorb and support human lives faster than it can organize the resources necessary to do so. According to veteran Jordanian journalist Hada Sarhan, the Za’atari camp is an information desert, without a single source of professional media or news entering the camp, further isolating the residents from the rest of the world.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

While most refugees in the Za’atari Village use mobile phones and text messages to communicate with family and friends still in Syria, the camp itself exists in an information vacuum that is separate from the outside world. While the UNHCR¹ currently uses Facebook, Twitter, and mass text messages to communicate important information to refugees, there is no efficient way to communicate journalism to the rest of the world from inside the village. *The Road* magazine is a revolutionary step toward sustainable, long-term coverage of the refugee crisis by Syrian refugees in the Za’atari camp. Many foreign journalists have covered various refugee communities from an outside perspective, but *The Road* tells stories that outsiders are not capable of reporting due to the limited scope of their understanding.

As journalists, we understand that good reporting is an essential component of peacebuilding in any region. In the context of Za’atari, we want to assist refugee journalists at *The Road* in boosting their audience and fully utilizing online platforms to bridge the information and empathy gap between Syrians and Jordanians. *The Road* is currently a print magazine publication, but a video production company called *In Transit* was also established in 2015 and exists as part of *The Road Media Company*. We see these two entities as highly promising agents of peacebuilding and understanding and we hope to work toward both sustaining and expanding the presence of the Road Media Company both within the camp and outside of it. We will do this through supplying *The Road* with the equipment, gear, and support necessary to sustain and advance an online audience both within the camp and around the world.

PROPOSED ACTIVITIES

The Road Media Company currently consists of 120 Syrian refugee journalists, all of whom work as volunteers. The publication was founded three years ago and is funded by the Japanese non-profit organization JEN, as well as UNICEF. Currently, the magazine operates out of a tent and caravan. The magazine is directed by Hada Sarhan, a veteran Jordanian journalist of thirty years. Sarhan makes the one-hour commute to and from the the camp every day from Amman. Currently, she and her volunteer journalists work on two Toshiba laptops, one of which is her own personal computer. *The Road* staff shares one professional camera and one small amateur camera and the entire staff has to schedule allotted times to type up articles in the tent throughout the week.

If we were to receive the grant, we would spend one month with Sarhan and the rest of *The Road* staff developing and implementing an online social media strategy to boost the reach of the magazine. During our time in the camp, we would hold workshops on how to use social media to boost an audience and build a global brand. We would use tools such as Tweetdeck and Dataminr to assist the staff in this process, and map out a Google analytics tracking system so that the staff can accurately monitor readership. Additionally, utilizing platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram, we will hold workshops on mobile reporting, based on our knowledge that mobile phones are the main source of communication among refugees and their families and friends back home. According to Sarhan, “mobile phones are more important than bread” to these people and their families. Secondly, in addition to holding workshops within the camp, we would work out of Amman to build relationships with Jordanian and American publications. We could help refugee journalists working at *The Road* to freelance their work to other publications outside the camp. Because we are both journalists as well, we could report and write on the work that *The Road* is doing and pitch it to other media outlets to help garner support and build notoriety for *The Road*. Thirdly, we would help *The Road* expand its content to multiple Jordanian platforms using audio recording kits and virtual technology to depict life in the camp. We would hold training sessions on how to use this technology. The media company currently exists in print and *In Transit* creates video content, but we would hope to teach radio reporting skills and collaborate with local Jordanian radio stations such as *Play 99.6* in Amman and *Sawt El-Ghad* 101.5 so that audio stories could be shared to wider audiences, and virtual reality and Facebook Live videos could be shared with global publications.

RESULTS OR GOALS YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE

On a macro level, we hope to boost *The Road's* online audience both in Jordan and globally in order to bridge the information gap between the camp and the rest of the world. This project is about utilizing quality journalism to connect Jordanians and Syrians and support sustainable coverage of the refugee crisis in a way that has not been done before.

On a micro level, we hope to equip *The Road* staff with the equipment and technology they so desperately need to sustain and advance the good work they are already doing with very limited resources. By the end of our time in Jordan, we hope to have built bridges between local Jordanian news outlets and *The Road*. Our hope is that, if more Jordanians hear about what is going on in Za'atari, there will be a greater level of empathy, understanding, and peace between refugee residents and the Jordanian community at large.

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

We will utilize business model tools and online analytics such as the SWOT analysis (strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and strengths) to measure and compare the progress of the magazine from the start of our project implementation to the finish. We will use Wordpress and Google analytics to measure the growth of the audience size. We would consider any major increase a success, but would hope to at least triple the size of the online social media audiences. We would also consider our implementation a success if local Jordanian publications mention and use magazine's articles on a regular basis. Finally, an increase in technological tools will hopefully yield a higher volume of work that the magazine is able to produce. While the magazine publishes on a monthly basis, utilizing social media platforms and mobile reporting will enable the reporters to produce more work on a frequent basis.

It is inspiring to know that high quality journalism is being reported and produced in such dire circumstances at the Za'atari refugee camp. It would be our privilege to assist in the growth and sustainability of this remarkable endeavor.