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Region: Worldwide

'This experience has sadly only confirmed my feelings regarding the often superficial coverage of the Middle East and the pervasiveness of new forms of liberal Orientalism.' –

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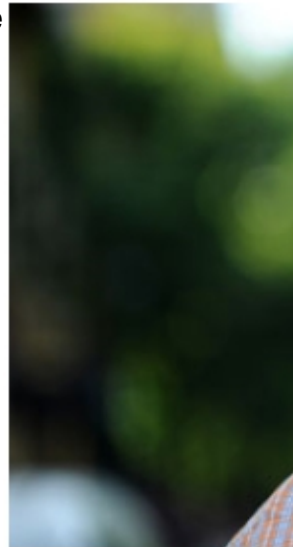
Tom MacMaster, infamous for his 'Amina hoax'.

When Tom MacMaster set down to write his blog, 'A Gay Girl In Damascus' he might have had best intentions: raising awareness of the oppressed LGBT population in Damascus, and giving them a voice and platform in the Western media; what he did is exactly the opposite. By pretending to be 'Amina Arraf' - a gay girl from Damascus - MacMaster, and the people who helped him and thought that the hoax was a such a great idea, endangered the whole LGBT community in Syria, as though they didn't already have enough problems.

The Syrian government couldn't have expected better propaganda from the Western media. Now they can reassure their public that there are no lesbians in Syria, that no-one has been abducted, and that the evil Western powers and their henchmen in the media have lied about what's happening in the country.

As the impact of social media increases, there is a greater need for journalists to check the information they derive from these sources. Bloggers and so-called 'citizen journalists' do not necessarily obey the rules of journalism. Many feel there is no need to. If they think about such things at all, they often believe that the world of new media is self-policing. Some will even argue that the Gay Girl blog was exposed as a hoax thanks to other bloggers.

That's true to some extent. There was certainly a lot of activity on Twitter and in the



Tom MacMaster
revealed: *'I never*

blogosphere when the truth about Amina began to creep out in early June. Most of this emerged from mainstream journalists who began to have doubts about the Gay Girl's authenticity when a Croatian woman called Jelena Lecic, living in London, discovered that her image had been copied from Facebook to decorate Amina's blog. The British newspaper, the Guardian, had led the media pack in early May in embracing the Gay Girl blog. Amina was 'an unlikely hero of revolt in a conservative country,' said the Guardian. 'Female, gay and half-American, Amina ... is capturing the imagination of the Syrian opposition....' Then Jelena Lecic appeared and soon the world knew the truth - Amina Arraf had never existed.

It would be harsh to blame the newspapers and broadcasters for their failure to check the facts. After all, who in the media could resist the idea of a feisty young woman unafraid to speak truth to power? With revolutions breaking out across the Middle East, the media are desperate to find voices from the region - and here was one that came across loud and clear. Amina Arraf was too good not to exist.

And yet traditional journalism is changing. As ['Brave new worlds'](#) - a recent report from the International Press Institute - argues, the journalist is becoming less of a fact-finder and more of a fact-checker - a gatekeeper for truth, filtering, analysing and contextualising the information he or she is increasingly being fed by bloggers, tweeters, social network users, and anyone with a camera-equipped mobile phone.

The temptation to cut corners is difficult to resist. Most people don't go around the internet pretending to be someone they're not. Why mistrust someone when their story is so good? Of course, that's exactly when it's most important to bring a little suspicion to bear, because many people do lie online - just like Tom MacMaster - and the better they are at it, the harder it is to see the artifice. This is a lesson that ought to have been learned by now - that the internet is a comfortable home for false identities, frauds and fakery - but it was ignored because the media wanted Amina Arraf to exist.

Of course, MacMaster carries a large part of the responsibility for this fiasco, if only because it is difficult to see any other reason to pretend that you are 'A Gay Girl In Damascus' while you are an American in Scotland, apart from a desire for the media spotlight and five minutes of glory, even if they are enjoyed by proxy. And yet one should not blame Tom MacMaster for the sin of hubris. After all, it is a fault he shares with many mainstream journalists. To judge MacMaster too harshly would be hypocrisy.

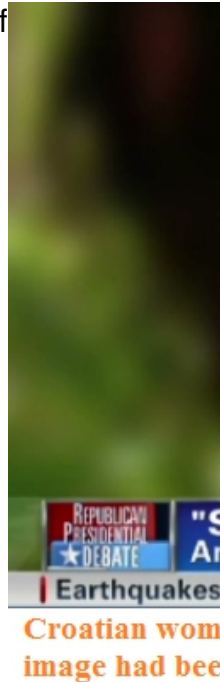
It may be that a lack of common sense, and an inability or unwillingness to foresee the effects of his blog are MacMaster's principle mistakes. Common sense would certainly have cautioned a would-be hoaxer to avoid inventing a gay blogger who uses her own name and image to spread dissenting views in a country where homosexuality is illegal, and the government has a record of viciously attacking gay communities, especially lesbian ones, and is currently engaged in the brutal suppression of dissent. But if MacMaster's common sense disappeared under the weight of his own fantasies, what was it that infected the media? Surely the fog of revolution was not too thick to see the outline of reality. Or were the journalists so obsessed with the idea of a young, attractive sexually explicit woman that they forgot truth and accuracy for romance and glamour? How easy it was to dupe the media and how easy it was for the media to dupe the world.

In an online interview to a Guardian correspondent from Damascus Tom MacMaster, still pretending to be Amina, said:

'I consider myself a believer and a Muslim: I pray five times a day, fast at Ramadan and even covered for a decade...I believe God made me as I am and I refuse to believe God makes

mistakes.' Amina/MacMaster also planned to write a book 'in the hope that a revolution will bring more freedoms, both sexual and political...I have to believe that, sooner or later, we will prevail.' Sounds convincing, doesn't it?

It's too easy to be wise after the event, and there's no doubt that the story of Amina Arraf



touched a chord with a large number of people. But that doesn't make it less depressing to realise how our media failed us, and it doesn't make it less worrying that, in the end, minorities will suffer. Every time a hoaxer pretends to speak for the dispossessed or the oppressed, and every time the media spread the untruth, wittingly or not, it chips away at the trust on which good journalism stands.

What Tom MacMaster did, regardless of his intentions, was wrong, but as he is finally in the media spotlight, it would be even more shameful if he find ways to profit from the story - by writing a book, selling interviews to media, or even going to Hollywood.

This is what Tom MacMaster had to say in his defence, after the whole Amina hoax was revealed:

'I never expected this level of attention. While the narrative voice may have been fictional, the facts on this blog are true and not misleading as to the situation on the ground. I do not believe that I have harmed anyone — I feel that I have created an important voice for issues that I feel strongly about. I only hope that people pay as much attention to the people of the Middle East and their struggles in this year of revolutions. The events there are being shaped by the people living them on a daily basis. I have only tried to illuminate them for a western audience.'

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'However, I have been deeply touched by the reactions of readers.'

Pedja Urosevic & [Gary Herman](#) for Media Diversity Institute