



Journalism in the making

Analysing the content of emerging Syrian media

Syrian Media Monitoring Quarterly Report

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About these quarterly reports

This report is part of an ongoing series of quarterly reviews produced by the Syrian Media-Monitoring Project financed and managed by Free Press Unlimited—a foundation based in Amsterdam and involved in media-development projects in 46 countries. Free Press Unlimited has been active in Syria since 2011.

In March 2014, Free Press Unlimited began regularly monitoring Syrian emerging media. The content produced by 21 emergent Syrian media outlets was analysed in conjunction with Internews—an international non-profit organisation involved in media development. This was the first phase of the media-monitoring project.

The decision to monitor Syrian media originates from three complementary objectives. First, to offer Syrian journalists a tool for improving their professional standards: in this context, the monitoring team has produced monthly reports that have been discussed with Syrian journalists. Second, to create a method by which organisations like Free Press Unlimited can evaluate the progress made by outlets involved in dedicated media-development programs. And thirdly: to consistently interrogate if and how grassroots media can

grow into functioning professional media despite a lack of professional education or experience.

Many of the media outlets monitored in these reports are signatories to the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media (ECSM)¹, a platform aimed at defining ethical principles for content production. For this reason, the methodology used in the first phase of monitoring was also aimed at measuring the extent to which content was aligned with ECSM principles.

The project's second phase began in March 2017. Recognising the relevance of analysing content produced by emerging Syrian media, Free Press Unlimited strengthened its methodological approach and outreach. A new methodology was incorporated, which was developed in January 2016 in collaboration with Osservatorio di Pavia (ODP, an Italian organisation with a strong tradition in monitoring media content).²

The quarterly reports represent one element of the second phase of Free Press Unlimited's media-monitoring project. They are an effort to make some of the results and data available to a larger public. In so doing, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of the production of emerging Syrian emerging media: their challenges, their strengths, and their weaknesses.

1 For more information, see: <http://almethaq-sy.org/en/>

2 For more information, see: <https://www.osservatorio.it/>

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Introduction

Emerging Syrian Media: Evolution of a Grassroots Movement

The Syrian popular uprising of 2011 quickly became one of most violent conflicts and humanitarian crises of the early 21st century. It was into this harsh environment that a new generation of media began to emerge. Single individuals and activist networks using social media, particularly YouTube and Facebook, created a grassroots journalism that allowed the Syrian story to be heard within and beyond the country's borders.

Hundreds of new Syrian media organisations mushroomed in this difficult soil: radio stations, printed newspapers and magazines, news websites, and news agencies. They grew from a recognition that networked media activism, relying mainly on social media and loose networks of single individuals, was not effective or credible enough to continue reporting the war. Organisation was going to be needed if the media were to create content that could help reconstruct the social tissue of a democratic Syria.

Despite sometimes non-existent levels of previous experience, these organisations helped to make the Syrian protests—and the regime's repressive response—visible to the world.

Intensified conflict and repression by the regime and extremist rebel groups has forced almost all of these new media organisations to close, or to move out of Syria. Today, many surviving Syrian media outlets are based in Turkey, between Istanbul and Gaziantep, while a few have moved further afield to European countries. They continue to rely on reporters and freelancers on the ground to obtain news and reports from inside Syria.

These media outlets potentially constitute the bricks of a new emerging media system characterised by freedom of expression and professional standards. They play a crucial role in delivering information on what is happening in Syria—especially since the country has been considered too dangerous to be covered by foreign journalists. And they shed a broader light on the dynamics of Syrian society. Whereas most of the international media focus almost exclusively on the war, emerging Syrian outlets give voice to a Syrian point of view on local, regional, and international affairs.

In short, they are an invaluable tool by which Syria and its future may be better understood.

The current challenges

The new Syrian media outlets that have managed to stay alive face serious challenges. The intensification of the war has had a strong impact on their ability to cover facts on the ground. Audiences have been fragmented by the violence. Moving abroad has translated into increased costs and a need for higher budgets.

The emerging Syrian media outlets are mainly supported either by international non-governmental organisations (Free Press Unlimited, International Media Support, Internews, and more) or by Western governments—for example, most of the radio stations are supported by Creative and IREX, private companies directly financed by the US Congress.

The new Syrian media organisations are keenly aware of the need to contextualise content and present it professionally. However, they must rely on whatever in-country reporting they can get. And they must present it as best they can despite the level of expense and danger associated with distributing print or using an FM signal inside Syria—which has proved so prohibitive that most audiences now access their reporting over the internet.

The journalists working for and with these new organisations have varying levels of experience. Some are improvised media activists. Some are qualified or experienced journalists (either people with journalistic experience or those who have studied journalism/graduated from a journalism course). Many are young—between 20 and 30 years of age—though journalists with longer experience in the field sometimes play a crucial role.

This lack of organisational resource and overall experience also affects the quality of writing, editing, and proofreading. Multiple syntax and grammar errors and/or typos were present in nearly half of the articles we evaluated.

Despite the challenges, emerging Syrian media are not only surviving, but also striving to evolve. The quality and craft of journalistic work promises to improve. What is harder to encourage, or predict, is the ability of the Syrian media to produce a mature journalism that delivers a balanced reading of Syria in all its facets. A journalism capable of encompassing the mutations of context in Syria and the wider region. And able to accurately interpret these contexts for its audience of young, engaged citizens.

Summary of **main findings:**

- **Emerging Syrian media are pro-opposition in their journalistic stance.** In particular, negative portrayals of the Syrian regime, Russia, ISIS, and the PYD are common.
- **Syrian media adopt a critical opinion of the majority of protagonists involved in the conflict.** The emerging Syrian media tend to negatively portray all armed groups and political protagonists, including opposition armed groups and the Syrian political opposition. The only positive portrayals are those depicting Syrian civil society in its different forms.
- **Syrian media seem to perceive their role as watchdog,** keeping an eye on the actions of politicians and political organisations, and reporting the civilian consequences of these actions.
- **Compared with other journalistic genres, the opinion piece is quite weak.** Opinion pieces often cite no sources, and are the most affected by unfair journalism and hate speech.
- **The coverage focuses overwhelmingly on the conflict.** Within our studied areas of political, social, and cultural news, Syrian media focuses almost exclusively on the conflict. Articles examine the warfare on the ground, the international political dimension, and the impact of the war on civilians.
- **The coverage does not extend to all of Syria.** Instead, it focuses only on some regions—usually those that are contested or in opposition to the regime. Regime-administrated areas are largely overlooked, as is the Kurdish experience in Rojava.
- **Coverage tends to focus on groups rather than individuals.** This indicates a coverage that does not explore human stories or try to look closely at political events.
- **The most recurrent coverage focuses on groups and individuals involved in the military side of the conflict.** Less attention is given to other actors such as civil-society groups, activists, social workers, and intellectuals. Also, Kurdish protagonists are almost absent.
- **Sources are a persistent problem.** On average, each article relies on two sources. The great majority of these sources are second-hand, and there are appreciable numbers of unnamed, unclear, or unidentified sources. Only a few sources are direct eyewitnesses, persons with a specific knowledge of the topic, or experts.

- **Women are almost absent**, both as protagonists and sources. Where women do appear, they are relegated to more passive roles. For example, very few female experts are present in the coverage, and the same is true for female representatives of civil-society organisations.
- **Kurdish actors are largely ignored**, though they have played a key role in the fight against ISIS in Rojava, and are likely to continue to play a key role in the shaping of Syria's future.

Summary of **key recommendations:**

- **Coverage shows a lack of diversification, which could be avoided.** An effort could be made to cover less-explored stories and aspects of the conflict. More space could be dedicated to constructive journalism and positive stories.
- **The number of unnamed, unclear, and unidentified sources could be reduced.**
- **More effort could be made to strategise the use of sources, even if this means changing the nature of coverage.** Local, first-hand sources should constitute a strategic asset for emerging Syrian media. However, within the articles we analysed only a few sources were direct eyewitnesses, persons with a specific knowledge of the topic, or experts.

Sample

Since March 2017, this media-monitoring project has focused on a selection of Syrian media: in total, 10 outlets. However, the number and the nature of the outlets has varied throughout the project. Outlets may be adopted or phased out of the project as situations change, or as their output becomes more or less relevant to the project's areas of interest.

Generally, all partners with which Free Press Unlimited collaborates are included. This is the case, for example, with Al-Ayyam, ANA Press, Enab Baladi, and ARTA FM.

Other organisations that have been included in the sample are:

- Radio Fresh, a local FM radio station based in Saraqeb, in the Idlib province
- Radio Nasaem, previously based in Aleppo and one of Syria's most popular radio stations in the years since the conflict began
- SMART News Agency, which has one of the most extensive networks of reporters inside Syria—and which covers one the largest cross-sections of Syrian regions
- Ayn al-Madina, a bi-monthly magazine focusing on Deir Azzour
- ARA News, a news agency serving the region of Rojava and North Iraq (ceased to exist late 2017)
- Al-Gherbal, a magazine previously based in Idlib, which primarily focuses on cultural and social issues (discontinued production in 2017)

In this quarterly report we present findings from an analysis of content offered by four media organisations: two online newspapers and two news websites (see text box The media organisations). During the monitoring period, all four organisations offered a variety of news items (videos and articles), feature articles, and opinion pieces on a daily basis.

ANA Press

A news website launched in 2012. ANA Press focuses on Syrian politics in its local and international dimensions. Its office is currently in Gaziantep, Turkey. ANA Press is a collaborative partner of Free Press Unlimited and an ECSM signatory. It produces both written and video content.

<http://www.anapress.net/ar/>



Al-Ayyam



An online newspaper founded in 2012. The name is a homage to the official journal of the Syrian National Bloc under the French Mandate. Al-Ayyam mainly offers opinion articles covering a range of topics including politics, culture, and social issues. Its target audience is young people and refugees. The newspaper has a strong pro-revolution stance. It has no physical office and its staff is distributed across a number of countries. Al-Ayyam is a collaborative partner of Free Press Unlimited and an ECSM signatory. Al-Ayyam's content includes commissioned analysis and opinion pieces. Its content is often produced by freelance writers.

<http://ayyamsyria.net/>

Enab Baladi

A newspaper founded in Darayya, Damascus, in 2011. Enab Baladi publishes online content and distributes a weekly print version in Syria and Turkey. The newspaper offers news and other content with a particular focus on civil society and human rights violations. Its office is currently in Istanbul. Enab Baladi is a collaborative partner of Free Press Unlimited and an ECSM signatory. The paper is also a member of the Syrian Print Network.

<https://www.enabbaladi.net/>



Smart News Agency

A news website created by the Syrian Media Action Revolution Team (SMART) network in 2011. The platform offers mainly news on the ongoing conflict. Its main team is based in France and relies on a large network of reporters inside Syria. SMART News Agency produces both written and video content.

<https://smartnews-agency.com/>



Methodology

Our analysis looked at a selection of items focusing on Syrian political, social, and cultural affairs. Administrative issues and other news of local nature were also included. News of sport, technology, and other categories, unless relevant to Syrian politics and society, were excluded.

Three items were selected at a specific hour each day, during the first five working days of each month. This generated a monthly sample of around 15 items for each outlet. The items were generally picked up from the organisations' Facebook pages. This decision rested primarily on the consideration that most online traffic for Syrian journalism passes through social media. In addition, using Facebook allowed us to select items from a single source, rather than constantly adapting the search to the architectures of the outlets' web pages.

However, in March, April, and May 2017 articles were selected from the outlet's homepages. Al-Ayyam's articles are still selected from the homepage, with priority given to opinion articles over other genres.

Monitored content from selected media outlets was qualitatively and quantitatively analysed. A number of variables and factors were taken into account:

- journalistic standards of reporting (these included Fairness, Accuracy, Balance, and Use of Sources)
- the agenda of the media outlets
- the geographical focus of the coverage
- the protagonists and topics examined in the coverage
- gender representation in the coverage.

In total, 169 content items were analysed.

Final Considerations

This report does not pretend to offer a complete picture of Syrian media coverage. Indeed, monitoring Syrian media presents many challenges.

Most Syrian media outlets are facing harsh times. Sources of funding are dwindling. The changeable and violent circumstances of the war have made it difficult for the outlets to produce a consistent stream of coverage. This in turn makes it impossible to constantly monitor content for all media outlets examined in our analysis.

In choosing which organisations to analyse in any given quarterly report, we must be governed by the quantity of content we have been able to monitor. For this report, we have chosen to focus on the two online newspapers and two news websites identified in the Sample section. The choice reflects the amount of content available from these outlets during the sample period.

On the monitoring-team side, time and staff availability may change from period to period, which affects Free Press Unlimited's ability to monitor.

As mentioned at the top of this report, the primary aim of the Syrian media-monitoring project is journalistic empowerment. By sharing our findings with Syrian journalists, we provide a platform for continuous professional development—delivering the information they need to continue raising their awareness of journalistic standards.

In the future, we may produce separate quarterly reports for other organisations such as radios or printed magazines.

Findings

We have chosen to present the data gathered between March–May 2017 in three subsections: Topics (part 1), Protagonists (part 2), and Sources (Part 3). Each subsection follows a pattern appropriate to its subject, exploring themes including focus, impartiality, and gender.

Where appropriate, recommendations for improved journalistic practice are offered in section summaries and within the text.

Agenda-setting analysis

Before presenting our analysis, we feel it is important to describe some of the main events that occurred during the monitoring period. The box below contextualises our evaluation, laying out the key events so we can see how the coverage reported them.

The Syrian context (March–May 2017)

The period beginning in late February and ending in May was particularly full of political events.

On 28 February, Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution imposing sanctions on the Syrian regime for its alleged use of chemical weapons.

At the end of March, the ‘Four Towns Agreement’ (brokered by Qatar and Iran through the UN) began to be implemented. As a result, the Shi’ite cities of Al-Fou’aa and Kafrayain (in the northeast of Aleppo), and the cities of Madaya and al-Zabadani (in the Damascus governorate) were evacuated. In this context 126 people evacuating al-Fou’aa and Kafrayain on 26 April died in a bombing attack carried out by rebel Islamist groups.

Finally, the fourth round of the Astana talks took place in May. The creation of

four de-escalation zones was proposed.

4 April saw probably the most significant ground-warfare event: a chemical attack against the town of Khan Shaykhun, in the Idlib governorate. This attack killed at least 58 people. In response, the US launched cruise missiles against the Syrian military airport of al-Shayrat.

The other main event related to the war on the ground was the recapture of Palmyra from ISIS by the Syrian regime and Russia, at the beginning of March.

In general, ground clashes during the period were very intense. Notable events include the offensive launched by Tahrir al-Sham—the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda—on Hama; SDF advancement towards Raqqa (through the offensive against the town of Tabqa); and the bombing by ISIS, at the end of May, of the headquarters of Ahrar a-Sham (an Islamist organisation active in Idlib).

Part 1: Topics

This section gives an overview of the findings of the media-monitoring project as they relate to topics covered by outlets between March–May 2017.

Section summary

- **The conflict is by far the most common topic.** Of 169 articles, 132 focused on the war.
- **Syrian media seem to perceive their role as watchdog,** keeping an eye on the actions of politicians and political organisations, and reporting the civilian consequences of these actions.
- **Syrian media focuses locally and internationally, but not nationally.** There is a lack of content with a national dimension. This could be explained by the on-the-ground fragmentation of the country, but it may also indicate a general lack of belief that the regime or the Syrian opposition are making effective decisions.
- **Emerging Syrian media tend to cover the same topics as established regional and international media outlets.** These larger outlets have access to significantly more human and material resources. Essentially, the new Syrian media outlets are trying to offer the same coverage on a significantly smaller budget.
- **New Syrian journalism is partisan but fair.** While the emerging media organisations take a staunchly pro-opposition viewpoint, they generally adhere to principles of journalistic fairness.
- **Distinctions between fact and opinion are well drawn.** In the majority of cases, the emerging Syrian media kept facts and opinions clearly distinguished. This was less true of opinion pieces and some video dealing with controversial issues.
- **Coverage shows a lack of diversification, which could be avoided.** An effort could be made to cover less-explored stories and aspects of the conflict. More space could be dedicated to constructive journalism and positive stories.³

³ 'Constructive journalism' is defined at <https://www.constructivejournalism.org/> as 'rigorous, compelling reporting that includes positive and solution-focused elements in order to empower audiences and present a fuller picture of truth, while upholding journalism's core functions and ethics.'

Narrating conflict: the main focus of emerging Syrian media

79 % of articles (132 out of 169) focused on the conflict. In this sense, the coverage does not appear very diversified (Graph/Table 1). Syrian media appear to perceive their role primarily as conflict narrators, offering their point of view on the main political events and the warfare on the ground.

Note: it is important to remember that the article sample is not random: we do not analyse items covering issues such as sport or business.

Watching over the civilian population: Syrian media as watchdog

Of the 132 articles covering the conflict, 37 % reported elements of the warfare on the ground, 22 % covered the international political dimension of the conflict, and 17 % explored the material impact of the war on civilians (Graph/Table 2).

The war on the ground was followed on multiple fronts—with some elements more closely scrutinised than others. The conquest

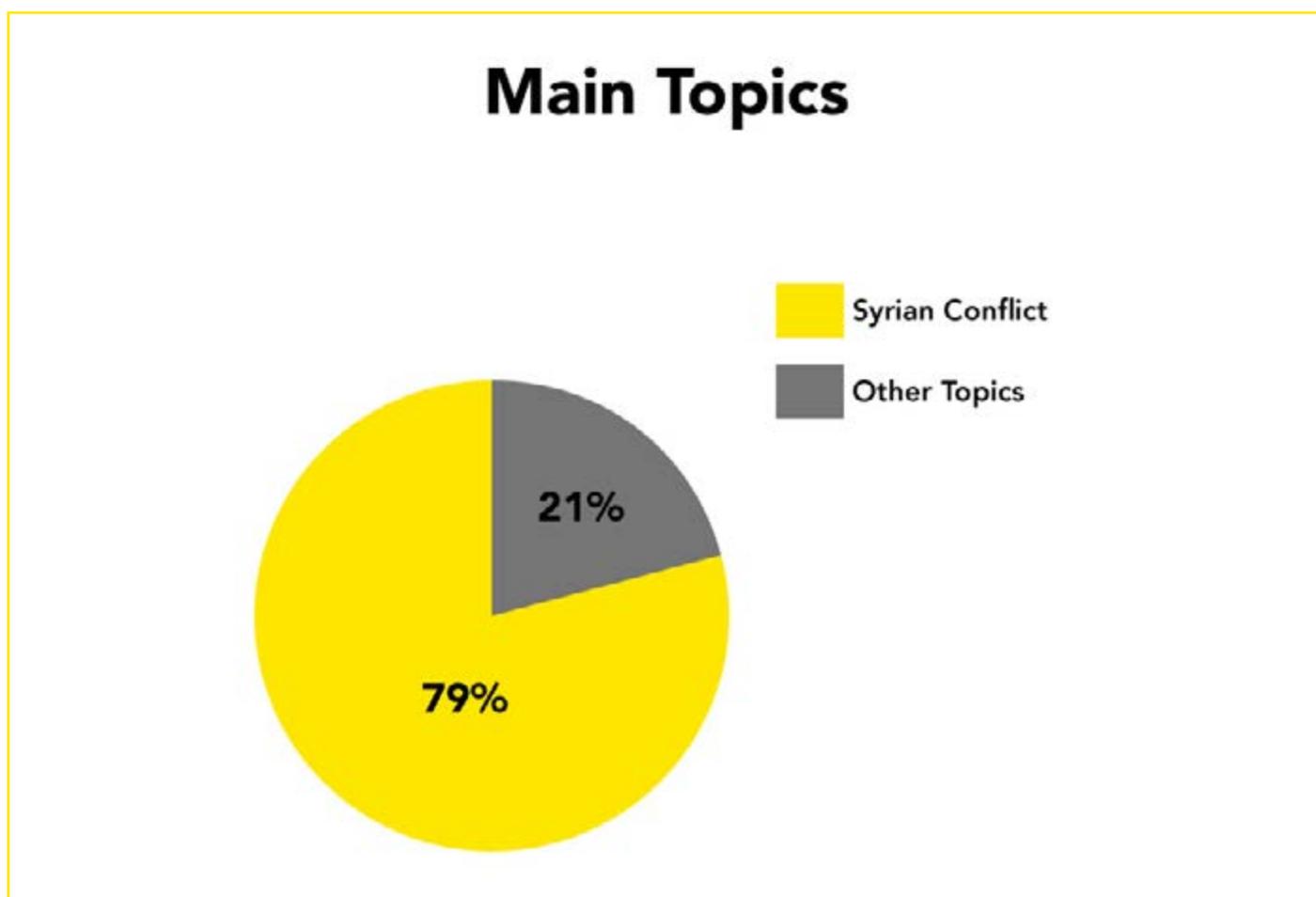
of Palmyra by the Syrian regime, for example, received particular attention. While few articles were dedicated to the seizing of al-Tabaqah by the SDF.

Internationally, the focus was mainly on Russia and China's veto at the UN—always with a very critical stance. Reactions to the Khan Shaykhoun chemical attack were extensively reported. Some (generally negative) attention was also given to the creation of the de-escalation zones. A similar level of coverage was given to the resumption of the Astana talks.

Coverage of civilian impact focused on the victims of the International Coalition bombings in Raqqa, and on the victims of the regime in different areas. One article was dedicated to a bombing attack carried out by ISIS in Syrian Democratic Forces-controlled areas, which resulted in the death of many civilians.

Within their role as conflict narrators, Syrian media appear to perceive a mission to act as watchdog of war crimes against civilians. This is especially true where those acts are committed by the regime or by foreign actors.

Graph / Table 1: Main Topics



Graph / Table 2: Syrian conflict themes (top 8)

Topic	Number of articles	Percentage in relation to Syrian conflict topics
Warfare on the Ground	49	37%
International Dimension of the Conflict	29	22%
War Material Impact on Civilians ⁴	22	17%
Human Rights	6	5%
National Politics	6	4%
Regional Politics	6	4%
Non-Traditional violence against civilians	4	3%
War socio-economic impact on civilians	3	2%

⁴ 'Non-traditional violence against civilians' includes all kinds of attacks generally understood as 'terrorism', but also strategies such as sieges, deprivation of food, etc.

Looking beyond the conflict: crime, corruption, and migration

The remaining 37 articles covered a variety of non-conflict-related topics. 17 % of these articles reported on crime and corruption. Another 17 % covered immigration and refugees. 14 % looked at civil-society issues (Graph/Table 3).

The remaining coverage of non-conflict-related items, while largest in percentage terms, focused on an extremely broad variety of subjects. This Other Topics category includes: administrative issues, culture issues, economy, education, health, human interest stories, human rights, humanitarian aid, international affairs, media issues, and items focusing on the Syrian revolution. Each of these topics was covered by a maximum of one or two articles.

Focusing locally and internationally: a media of regions

Geographically, the focus is clear: 58 % of the articles focused on local dimensions of reported events, and 30 % focused on the international dimensions. While only 12 % looked at the national (i.e. all of Syria) dimension of events (Graph/Table 4).

An article was defined as focusing on local dimensions when it either reported on single Syrian regions, or named multiple Syrian

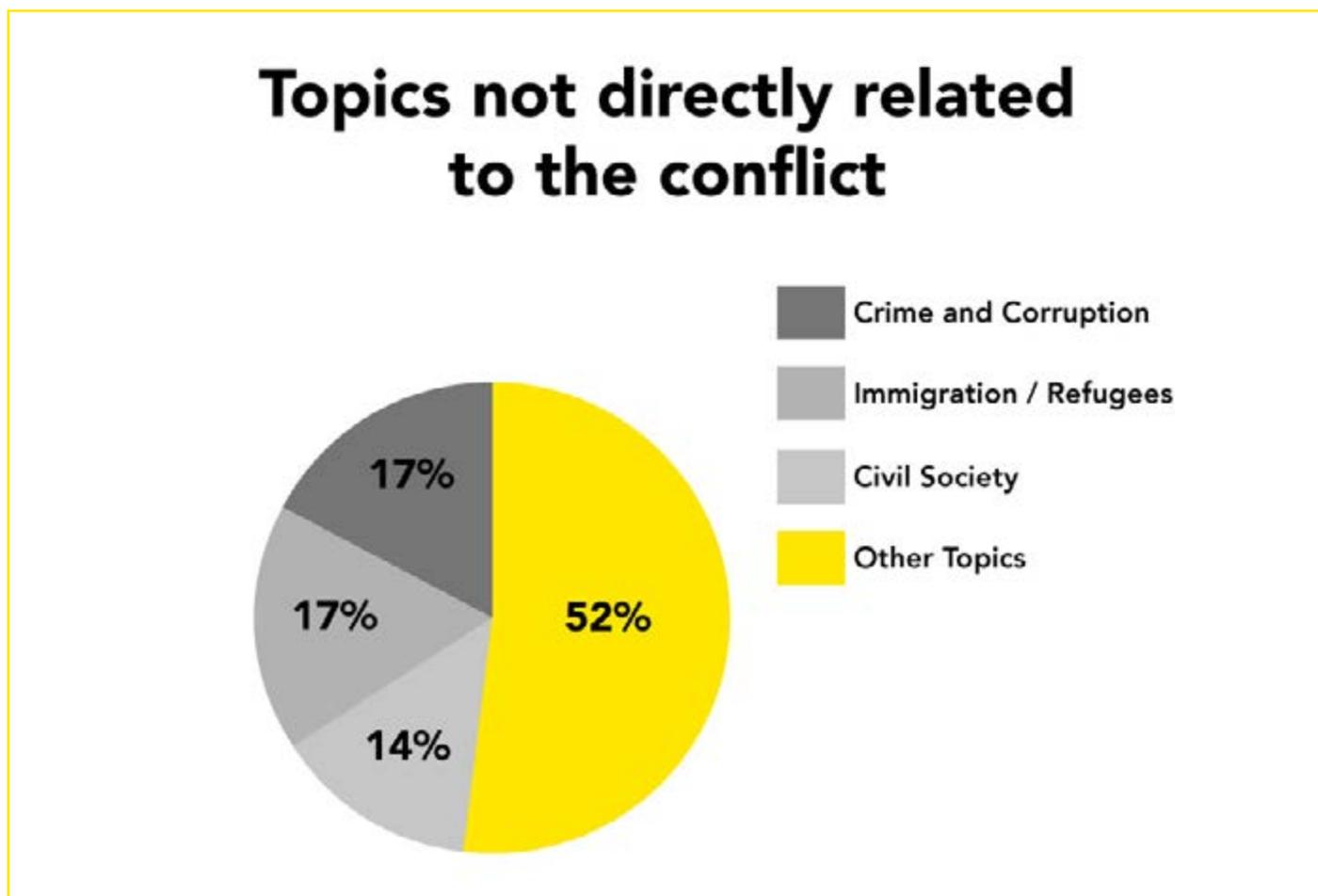
regions but did not apply its focus to Syria as a whole entity. These results reflect the weight of coverage given to the warfare on the ground, and the impact of the violence on civilians.

The extremely low focus on the national dimensions of reported events seems to underline a specific perception of national Syrian protagonists. It may be the case that Syrian emerging media do not cover national actors extensively because they view actions and decisions taken on a national level as ineffective.

If we look at locally dimensioned coverage alone, we find a clear and unsurprising pattern. The top five areas most covered were those that are neither disputed nor controlled by the regime. These are also the regions more affected by the material impact of the conflict (Graph/Table 5).

Khan Shaykhun, location of a chemical attack on 4 April that killed 58 people, is in Idlib: this has certainly contributed to Idlib's position at number one on the list of most-covered regions. Similarly, the Homs region takes second spot because it includes Palmyra. (Palmyra was recaptured from ISIS by the Syrian regime and Russia at the beginning of March).

Graph / Table 3: Topics not directly related to the conflict (37 articles out of 169)



Graph / Table 4: Geographical focus

Geographical Focus	Number of items	%
Focus on Local Dimension	107	58%
Focus on International Dimension	44	30%
Focus on National Dimension	18	12%
Total of news items	169	100%

In general, we have to consider that Syrian emerging media have more access to sources in these regions than in the areas controlled by the regime. Also, they generally target a public that is more concentrated in rebel areas.

We also see signs of an emergent stance taken by Syrian media when covering—or not covering—events that impact on Kurdish protagonists. Despite the intensification of battles between SDF and ISIS in al-Raqqa, this city and all the Kurdish regions were given only 4 % of the total news coverage.

A partisan but fair journalism

The independent media organisations analysed in this report are not neutral. Their partisanship emerges clearly from our analysis. About 33 % of the total articles presented a clear political stance. Political actors such as Russia, the PYD, Iran, and ISIS were portrayed in a negative way in most of the coverage. The Syrian opposition, Islamist

armed groups, and other international actors were generally portrayed less critically, but also not positively.

Expressions such as ‘liberated areas’ (to identify the regions out of the regime’s control) and ‘Revolution’ (to define the 2011 uprising) occurred commonly in all of the coverage. International actors such as Russia and Iran were usually framed as ‘occupiers’. ISIS was almost always labelled as a ‘terrorist’ group—as, sometimes, was the PYD, because of its affiliation with the PKK.

At the same time, as Graph/Table 6 shows, the level of impartiality tends to differ from one platform to another. Since Al-Ayyam focuses on opinion pieces, it is not surprising that it emerges as by far the most partisan outlet. More interesting are the figures relating to Enab Baladi, which does not focus only on news and yet clearly makes an effort to produce a more impartial coverage.

Graph / Table 5: Geographical focus of the news (top 5 Syrian regions)

Region	Number of items	%
Idlib	19	11%
Homs	18	9%
Damascus Countryside	11	7%
Aleppo	10	6%
Hama	8	5%
Total of the items covering Syrian regions	107	58%

Graph / Table 6: Level of impartiality

Organisation	Number of impartial items	Amount of impartial items	Amount of partial items
Smart News Agency	35	76%	24%
Enab Baladi	38	83%	17%
Al-Ayyam	18	47%	53%
ANA Press	25	59%	41%

Even more importantly, Syrian media tend to adhere to basic principle of journalistic fairness. Only 5 % of the articles we analysed presented serious breaches of fairness. These articles were often opinion articles, in which the author accused an individual or a political actor without enough evidence and without providing right of reply.

We also saw cases in which news items did not provide a balance of points of view on controversial issues. For example, Syrian media tended not to mention that the Syrian regime denied responsibility for the chemical attacks that took place in Khan Shaykhun on 4 April. However, cases of unfair journalism remained relatively low, especially in the light of the outlets' staunchly pro-opposition stance.

Cases of hate speech against specific ethnic or religious groups were practically absent, as were cases of offensive language. In fact, we identified use of offensive language in

only 4 % of the items.

We believe these results to be worthy of note. Such generally professional journalistic standards are laudable in emergent organisations working under difficult conditions—particularly when considered next to the journalistic standards of the Arab region as a whole.

A clear distinction between fact and opinion

It is impressive that, within the context of a journalism characterised by a clear political stance, Syrian media demonstrate a clear effort to maintain basic professional standards (Graph/Table 7).

Emerging Syrian media tended to keep opinions and facts clearly separated in most of the items we analysed. Less clarity of distinction arose when we looked at opinion pieces. There was also a lack of clarity in ANA Press's short videos on controversial issues.

Graph / Table 7: Mix between facts and opinions

Organisation	Number of items mixing opinions and facts	Amount of items mixing opinions with facts	Amount of items having a clear distinction between facts and opinions
Smart News Agency	1	1%	99%
Enab Baladi	2	5%	95%
ANA Press	11	26%	74%
Al-Ayyam	12	34%	66%

Part 2: Protagonists

This section gives an overview of the findings of the media-monitoring project as they relate to protagonists. Protagonists are the organisations and individuals that became the main focus of stories published between March–May 2017. For each article, only the main protagonists are identified. This means that not all the groups or individuals mentioned in an article are necessarily coded.

Section summary

- **Groups are more covered than individuals.** From a total of 606 protagonists, 429 were groups.
- **Military protagonists are the most covered overall.** When group and individual coverage was aggregated, it focused most strongly on the main military actors in the conflict.
- **Notably absent are Syrian civil-society organisations and Kurdish interests.** Overall, the coverage ignored Syrian civil-society organisations and media activists. It also failed strongly to focus on Kurdish actors, despite their role in the current conflict with ISIS and their probable future role in shaping Syria.
- **Positive coverage is uncommon.** The most-covered groups (military protagonists on all sides) were the least flatteringly covered. Ordinary citizens were portrayed sympathetically rather than positively, which may be an indication that they are viewed mainly as victims.
- **Women are barely covered.** Only 2 % of the main protagonists in the articles were female. With a significant portion of these women portrayed in inactive roles, it seems that emerging Syrian media could do more to give visibility to women.

Voicing organisations: collective protagonists outnumber single individuals

Coverage largely focused on collective protagonists, with 71 % of all articles mainly reporting on or about groups (Graph/Table 8). This may reflect a tendency for Syrian media to offer general descriptions of events, rather than to narrate more in-depth stories related to individual protagonists.

Military protagonists are the most covered

When group and individual coverage is aggregated, we see the coverage focused most strongly on the main military protagonists. Ordinary citizens also received

a strong weighting in the coverage—representing 8 % of individual coverage and 13 % of collective coverage (Graphs/Tables 9 and 10 respectively).

Notable differences existed between the coverage of opposition and regime protagonists. In terms of individual focus, coverage was most strongly interested in opposition fighters or activists involved in the administration of the ‘liberated areas’. While regime actors such as the army and political officials were given more prominence as collective actors. This may reflect a simple fact of access: Syrian media have more access to individual opposition figures than they do to individual regime figures. It may also be an indication of media intent to portray opposition protagonists more personally.

Graph / Table 8: Main protagonists

Main Protagonists	Number	%
Groups	429	71%
Man	162	27%
Woman	11	2%
Total Actors	602	100%

Graph / Table 9: Most recurrent single individual protagonists (top 10)

Individual Protagonists	Number of Occurrences	%
Military Syrian Opposition	15	9%
Ordinary Citizens	14	8%
Local anti-regime administration	13	8%
US	13	8%
Russia	12	7%
Refugees and IDPs	12	6%
Government/Regime Officials	9	5%
Syrian President	9	5%
Regime Army	8	5%
Syrian Opposition	8	5%

Graph / Table 10: Most recurrent group protagonists (top 10)

Category (Collective Actors)	Number of Occurrences	%
Ordinary Citizens	55	13%
Regime Army	54	13%
Military Syrian Opposition	42	10%
Government/Regime Officials	33	8%
Russia	30	7%
ISIS and affiliates	20	5%
US	19	4%
Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and affiliates	15	3%
Turkey	14	3%
Local anti-regime administration	11	3%

Absent protagonists: civil-society groups, media activists, Kurdish interests

It should also be noted that some actors were almost absent as protagonists in the coverage within the considered sample. This is specifically true of Syrian civil-society groups, media activists, and Kurdish protagonists in general (Graph/Table 11).

There seems to be a clear tendency for emerging Syrian media to give salience to powerful political groups directly involved in the military confrontation, rather than trying to raise the visibility of Syrian civil society and its components. This is quite surprising, as civil society and media activists played, and still play, a relevant role both in the uprising and in the organisation of social and political activities on the ground. It is even more surprising when we consider that

the new Syrian media outlets are themselves a component of civil society. Indeed, this leads to one of the main findings of this report, which is that emerging Syrian media tend to rely on civil-society organisations to produce their coverage, while at the same time tending to ignore them as protagonists within that coverage.

Illustrating another emergent theme in the analysis, we found that Kurdish actors were almost absent as protagonists in the coverage. This lack of attention seems to gloss over the extremely relevant role these actors play in the battle with ISIS. Moreover, it seems to indicate a choice to ignore the experience of Rojava, and the role Kurdish actors and their grievances will probably play in the future of Syria.

Graph / Table 11: Other relevant protagonists

Category	Number of Occurrences	%
Syrian civil society groups + Media Activists	20	3%
Kurdish actors (PYD+KNC and KDPS+ SDF + YPG)	15	2%

Linking tone to coverage: portraying political and military organisations in a negative light

Our analysis also evaluates the tone of journalistic coverage. Coverage that endorses or positively refers to its protagonists is deemed to be positive. Coverage that takes an opposite stance to, or condemns the actions of, its subjects is

deemed to be negative. Where no opinion is apparent, the coverage is seen as neutral. Finally, sympathetic coverage is defined as articles that take a sympathetic view to their protagonists without actively endorsing their actions.

Not surprisingly, the Syrian regime in all its forms was generally covered in a negative

way. Out of 125 appearances by regime actors, 65 were negative portrayals—that is to say 55 % of the total occurrences.⁵ No portrayals of regime actors were positive or sympathetic.

Kurdish actors were portrayed more negatively than positively: from a total of 15 portrayals Kurdish actors were portrayed negatively 7 times, neutrally six times, and positively only twice. Articles with a negative portrayal described the SDF as ‘separatists’, the PYD as an ‘authoritarian force’, and the YPG as ‘terrorists’ (because of their affiliation with the PKK).

ISIS, an organisation often labelled as ‘terrorist’, was negatively portrayed 10 times over 23 total occurrences.

Russia was portrayed negatively in 38 % of its mentions (16 times out of 42 instances). Russia was often described as an ‘occupying force’.

The EU, while mentioned only five times, was portrayed negatively twice. One article criticised EU policies towards refugees, and another criticised a European MP for inviting the Syrian Vice-President to the European Parliament.

In general, it is interesting to note that a positive portrayal of the main political actors was almost absent in the coverage—including the Syrian political opposition or countries considered ‘friendly’ (like Turkey).

Syrian civil-society groups and individuals were never negatively portrayed (and

received three positive and three sympathetic portrayals out of 17 total occurrences).

Overall, the most-covered groups (armed groups and political actors) were also those portrayed most negatively.

Finally, it is interesting to note that ordinary citizens were portrayed sympathetically in 64 % of occurrences, and never positively. This seems to indicate a portrayal of Syrian citizens mainly as victims of the conflict, and less as pro-active citizens.

Focus for the future: gender representation

Gender representation was very skewed in the articles we analysed. Of the 173 instances of focus on individuals, only 11 (2 % of the total 606 protagonists) were women (see Table 8 at the top of this section).

Most male protagonists were members of armed opposition groups, activists working in ‘liberated areas’, and ordinary citizens (Graph/Table 12). Male spokespersons or representatives of political organisations such as Russia, the US, the Syrian regime, and the Syrian opposition were also fairly visible.

The most recurrent female protagonists were ordinary citizens, or representatives/spokespersons of the US and Russia (Graph/Table 13). This does not characterise a specific gender policy of emerging Syrian media, as of course in all cases they simply gave voice to a political representative whose gender was a given.

⁵ In particular, this data refers to the aggregated data of the following categories: Government/Regime officials, Syrian President, Pro-regime militias, Regime army, Regime judiciary, the Ba’ath party, and regime security forces

Graph / Table 12: Most recurrent male protagonists (top 10)

Individual Protagonists	Number of Occurrences	%
Military Syrian Opposition	15	9%
Ordinary Citizens	13	8%
Local anti-regime administration	11	7%
US	11	7%
Russia	10	6%
Refugees and IDPs	9	6%
Government/Regime Officials	9	6%
Syrian President	9	6%
Regime Army	8	5%
Syrian Opposition	8	5%

However, it must be noted that beyond these representational capacities, women were only present as ordinary citizens or refugees, and never in more active roles. This, coupled with the lack of overall coverage of women, seems to point to a lack of effort by Syrian media in giving women visibility.

Graph / Table 13: Most recurrent female protagonists

Category (individuals)	Number of Occurrences	%
Ordinary citizens	3	27%
US	3	27%
Refugees and IDPs	2	19%
Russia	1	9%
SDF and affiliates	1	9%
Other	1	9%

Part 3: Sources

This section gives an overview of the findings of the media-monitoring project as they relate to organisations and individuals cited as sources between March–May 2017. All sources mentioned have been considered.

Section summary:

- **There is a lack of precision in the use of sources.** Of 384 identified sources, only 33 % were precisely identified with name, profession, and other relevant information.
- **Anonymous and unidentified sources may be conflated.** This represents a problem with the presentation of sources.
- **Second hand sources predominate.** Specifically, social media represented a very small percentage of the overall sources—despite its relevance to the conflict and the ongoing Syrian story.
- **Civil-society groups are the most common source.** NGOs and civil-society groups topped the list of recurring sources, despite a lack of coverage focusing on these kinds of groups.
- **Women are poorly represented as sources.** Only 3 % of the sources were women, while 45 % were male.
- **When different points of view emerge, the balance of sources remains usually in favour of pro-revolution stances.** Opposition groups accused of unethical behaviour were more easily granted a right of reply, or a platform for an alternative point of view, than other political actors such as the regime, the PYD, and ISIS.
- **The number of unnamed, unclear, and unidentified sources could be reduced.**
- **More effort could be made to strategise the use of sources, even if this means changing the nature of coverage.** Local, firsthand sources should constitute a strategic asset for emerging Syrian media. However, within the articles we analysed only a few sources were direct eyewitnesses, persons with a specific knowledge of the topic, or experts.

Sources: a lack of precision

There are two types of source identified in the news items monitored by this report:

Identified Sources

Sources that are named by the monitored media outlet in one of a number of ways: these sources could be specifically named, given precise identification details such as job title or area of expertise, or generically located (identified, for example, by social, professional, or political category alone).

Unnamed/Unclear Sources

Unidentified sources: these may be entirely unspecified, as in the expression 'rumours say'—or they may be more specifically located but still without substance, as in the phrase 'local sources say'.

A total of 415 sources were mentioned by monitored Syrian news outlets during the period examined by this report. This amounts to a rough average of 2 sources per article over a total of 169 articles (Graph/ Table 14).

Unnamed/Unclear sources amounted to 7%. Of the 93% that were Identified sources, only 33% were precise, i.e. identified with a specific name and other identification details. The majority of the sources (about 53%) were generic. 13% were unidentified, which means they were not presented in a sufficiently accurate way (see also Anonymous vs Unnamed, below). A classic

example: when the article reported that a country expressed a certain position without specifying which body or person specifically voiced that position.

Anonymous vs unnamed: a problem with identification

Only 1% of the sources were presented as anonymous (Graph/Table 15). The anonymous classification is quite understandable in the Syrian context, where some sources have to be protected. However it is probably the case that some of the unidentified Syrian sources were also under this kind of protection.

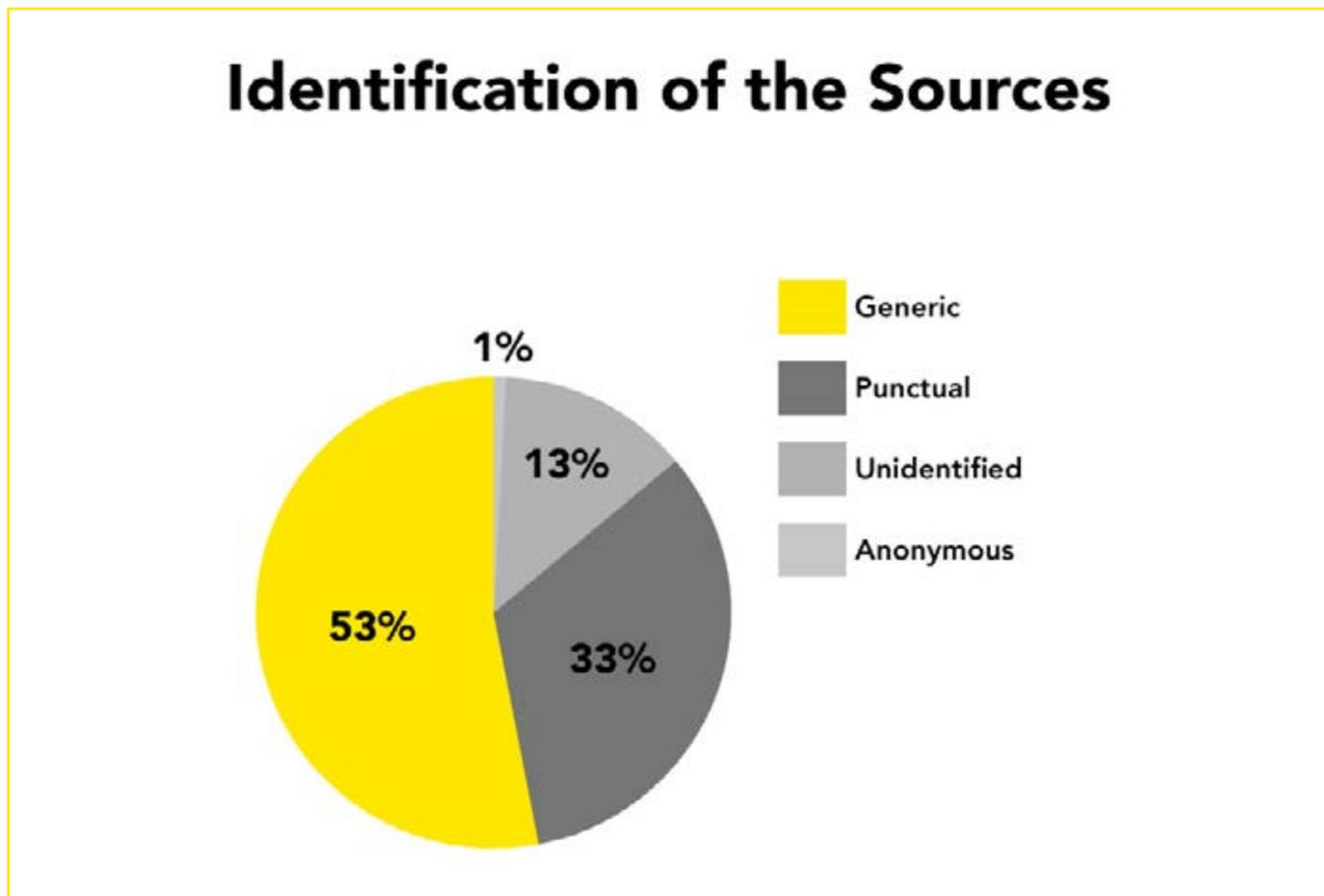
If the emerging Syrian media organisations are not always specifying that they cannot reveal the identity of such a source, there is a problem with source identification. This presents difficulties not only for the analyst, but also for the article's intended audience. Good source identification bolsters the perceived trustworthiness of an article, and gives the audience proper context for the piece. Standards could be raised in this area.

Another problem is a lack of validation of the media's access to its sources. Even when it seemed clear that a source had been directly interviewed by an organisation, this was not stated in a transparent way. Compounding this issue, quotation marks were used in a way that made difficult for the reader to understand whether the source was first-hand or second-hand, and whether the author or the source were speaking.

Graph / Table 14: Identified vs unnamed / unclear sources

Identified Sources	384	93%
Unnamed/Unclear Sources	31	7%
Total	415	100%

Graph / Table 15: Source identification



Staying relevant: sources are mainly relevant to the theme of the articles

13 % of sources were evaluated as not having the authority to offer credible information in the context of an article’s them (Graph/Table 16). With 87 % relevant sources, emerging Syrian media outlets can be seen as doing a good job of contextualising their articles.

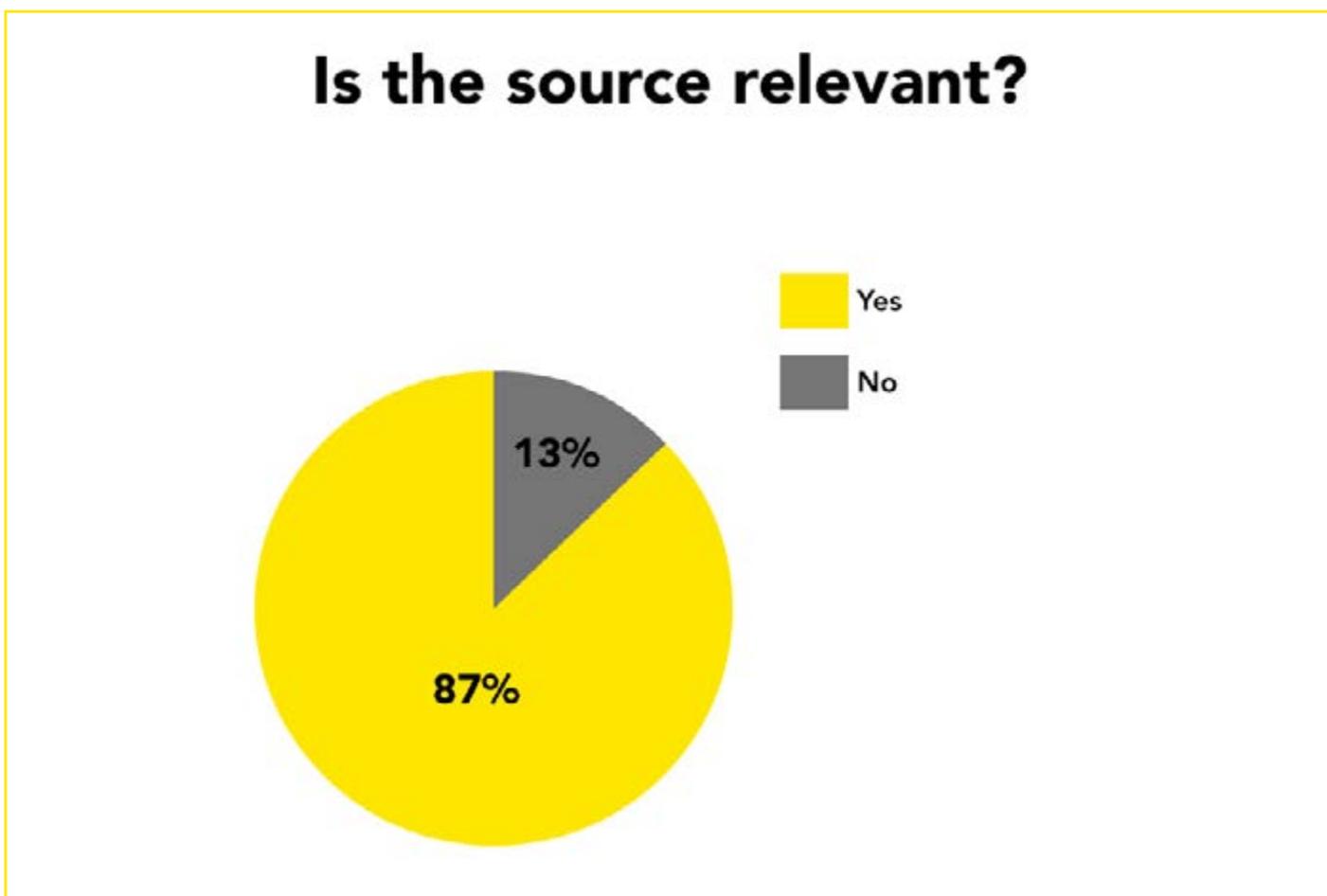
A new strategy is needed for making the most of local, first-hand sources

The majority of sources cited were second-hand (Graph/Table 17). Since Syrian media have the ambition to produce daily updates

on the conflict, this is hardly surprising. They do not have the resources to cover international and local news at this frequency, using their own reporters.

In our opinion, strategic improvement of sourcing is key area on which Syrian media outlets need to focus—even if this means changing the nature of their coverage. For example, social media (user-generated content [UGC]) was only at 8 % during the period March–May 2017. Given the relevant role that social media continue to play in the Syrian conflict, this would seem to be a fruitful area to pursue.

Graph / Table 16: Source relevance



Of course, to use social media as a source, Syrian outlets would need to use efficient and ethical techniques in order to verify information. The fact remains, however, that in the Syrian context UGC could provide a direct access to useful sources.

Graph / Table 17: Type of source

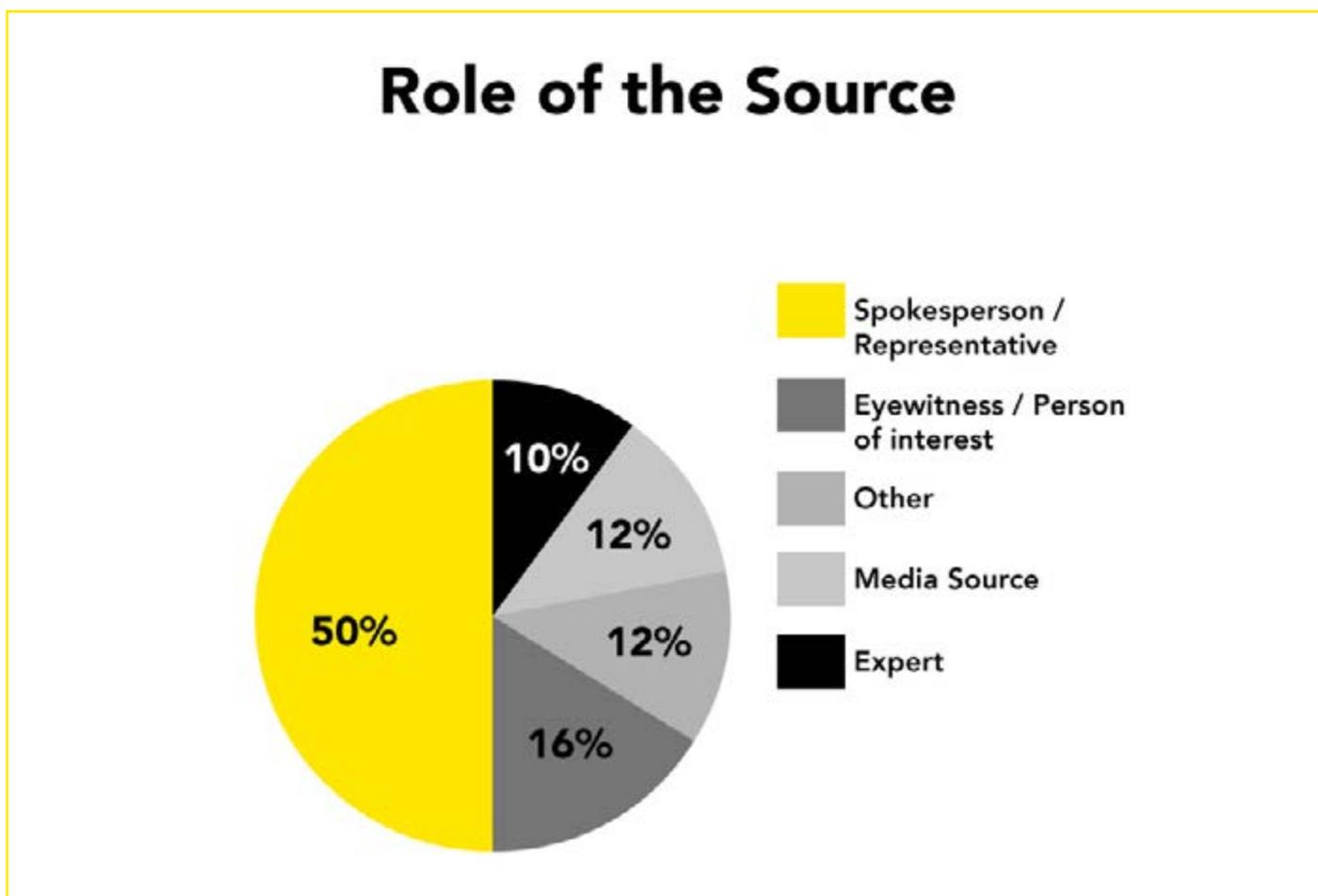
First-Hand Sources	24%
Second-Hand Sources	68%
UGC	8%

Eyewitnesses are few

50 % of the sources cited are spokespersons or representatives of organisations (Graph/ Table 18). This is not surprising in a media whose coverage mainly focuses on the conflict, and on political actors with a certain military weight.

The slim showing for eyewitness or persons of interest, though, fails to balance this out. As the media outlets are local, grassroots organisations, we expected the 16 % represented by eyewitnesses or persons with a direct knowledge of covered events to be much higher.

Graph / Table 18: Role of sources



Relying on civil-society groups

A key finding of this report is that Syrian media tend to rely on civil society to produce their coverage, while at the same time ignoring them as actors on the ground.

Graph/Table 19 shows that Syrian media mainly rely on national NGOs, Syrian civil-society groups, opposition armed groups, and local anti-regime activists. Health workers, ordinary citizens, and Syrian opposition representatives also appear among the 10 most recurrent sources.

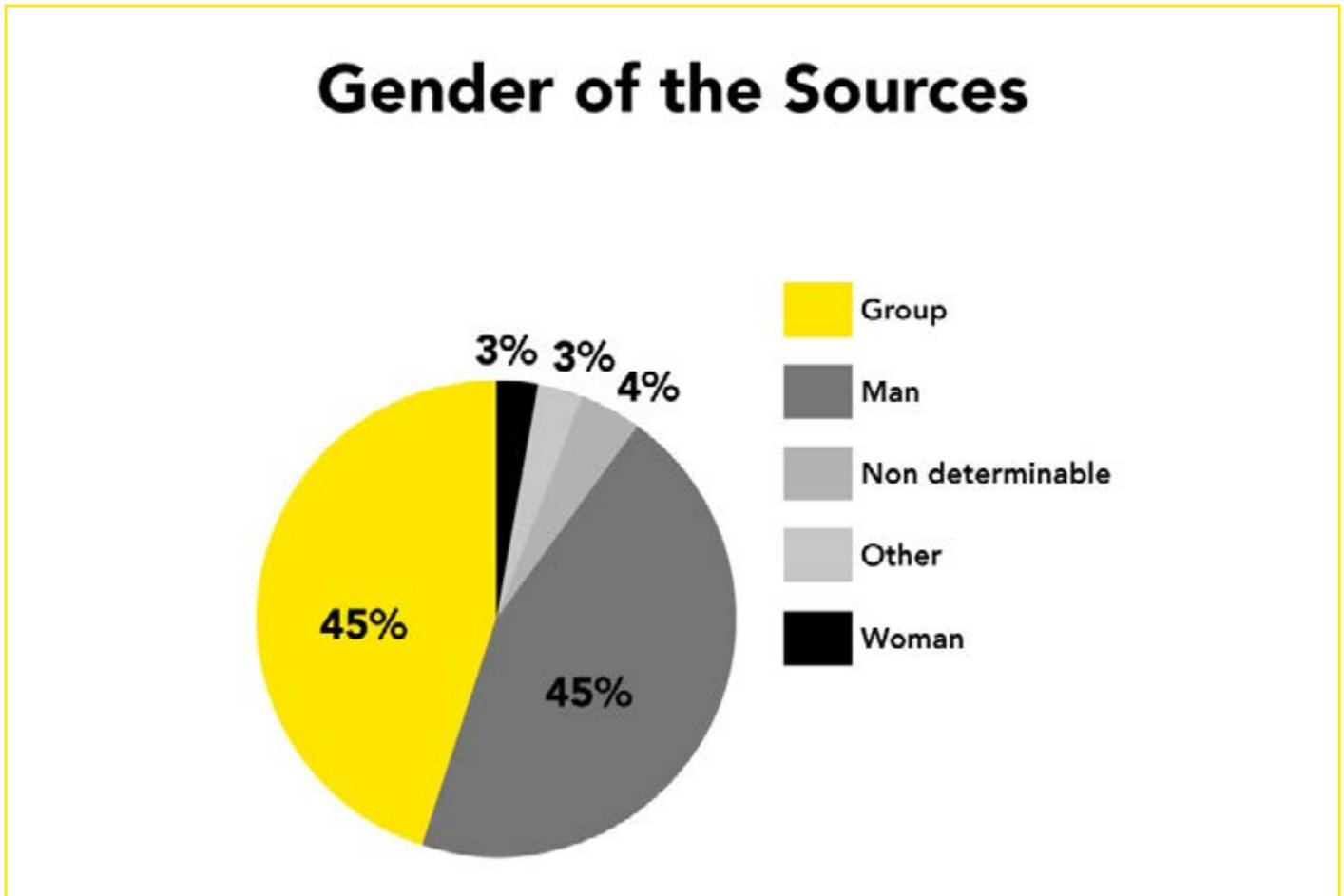
The shift in perspective evident in the focus of the articles is reversed when we look at the sources. The articles produced between March–May 2017 focused on individual Syrian regions, or groups of Syrian regions: while the top source for those articles was a collection of national groups. Here, too,

ordinary citizens find a voice—despite the focus of the articles seeming to view the ordinary citizen as a passive victim of the conflict.

Of course Syrian media have more access to these sources than to the regime side, ISIS, or other international actors. It is also important to remember that local pro-opposition sources offer a point of view that is very close to the editorial policy of the outlets we analysed. When different points of view emerge, the balance of sources remains usually in favour of pro-revolution stances. For example, if opposition groups are accused of unethical behaviour, they are more easily granted a right of reply or alternative points of view than other political actors such as the regime, the PYD, and ISIS.

Graph / Table 19: Frequently cited sources (top 10)

Source type	Number of articles	Percentage of the total
National NGOs and Civil Society Groups	37	9%
Military Syrian Opposition	33	8%
Local Anti-regime administration	26	6%
US	25	6%
Government/Regime Officials	20	5%
Russia	19	5%
Health Workers	17	4%
Ordinary Citizens	16	4%
Syrian Opposition	15	4%
Turkey	14	3%



In the articles we analysed, men represented about 45 % of the sources and women only 3 %. In other words: Syrian independent media barely rely on women as sources (Graph/Tables 20, 21, and 22 respectively).

Male sources were quite diversified (Graph/ Table 21). The most recurrent sources came from pro-opposition groups: we also heard from experts and activists from local NGOs or civil-society groups.

Female sources, however, were mostly

spokespeople and representatives of international players such as the US, Russia, and Germany (Graph/Table 22). Only one source came from a local NGO group. The source coded as 'other' was a female Twitter-user from Saudi Arabia.

Overall, emerging Syrian media have failed to give women voice and visibility. It may be unrealistic to try to find female sources within armed groups, but their absence as experts or representatives of civil-society groups could certainly be avoided.

Graph / Table 21: Most recurrent male sources (top 10)

Sources (male)	Number of Occurrences	%
Military Syrian Opposition	16	9%
Local anti-regime administration	15	8%
US	14	8%
Syrian Opposition	13	7%
Researcher/Academic/Analyst	10	5%
Government Officials	9	5%
National NGOs/Civil Society Groups	9	5%
Ordinary Citizens	9	5%
Russia	9	5%
Turkey	8	4%

Graph / Table 22: Most recurrent female sources

Sources (female)	Number of Occurrences	%
US	4	36%
Ordinary Citizens	2	19%
Russia	1	9%
SDF and affiliates	1	9%
Syrian NGO/Civil Society Group	1	9%
Germany	1	9%
Other	1	9%

Concluding remarks

This report has examined a snapshot of the coverage offered by emerging Syrian media outlets between March–May 2017. The conclusions drawn by our analysis, and the recommendations drawn out of those conclusions, mark important steps in these outlets' journey toward professionalisation.

The information contained in this report is based on monthly detailed reports used by the single organisation for their own work. The quarterly report intended to help them find new and creative ways to leverage their existing resources. Finally, it is hoped that this report will tell the story of emerging Syrian media, illustrating both their successes and areas of future improvement. While celebrating a phenomenon that continues to unfold despite the war.

Glossary

ECSM	Ethical Charter for Syrian Media
Free Press Unlimited	Free Press Unlimited
KDPS	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria
KNC	Kurdish National Council
ODP	Osservatorio di Pavia
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SEM	Syrian Emerging Media
SMART	Syrian Media Action Revolution Team
SNA	Smart News Agency
SPN	Syrian Print Network
UGC	User Generated Content
YPG	People's Protection Units

The Media Monitoring Team

Enrico De Angelis

Enrico De Angelis holds a PhD in Political Communication from the University of Salerno. His post-doctoral work was undertaken at CEDEJ, Cairo, between 2012 and 2014. It analysed the networked public sphere in Egypt.

Enrico's work is mainly concerned with new media and the public sphere in Syria and Egypt—but he also studies grassroots media, political communication, and journalism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Enrico is one of the co-founders of the media platform SyriaUntold. He currently works as a media researcher at Free Press Unlimited, and has undertaken consultancies for UNESCO, International Media Support, Hivos, Deutsche Welle, and Canal France International. He has held teaching positions at the American University of Cairo, as well as the Roberto Ruffilli Faculty and Political Science Faculty at the University of Bologna.

Enrico's published work includes a monograph on media and conflict and several articles on media in the MENA region. He is particularly interested in critical approaches to internet studies and the networked public sphere in the Arab world.

Enrico lives in Berlin.

Reyan Menzalji

Reyan Menzalji holds a BA in Political Science with an emphasis on International Relations and Arab Studies from the Université du Québec in Montréal (UQÀM), and a degree in Law with an emphasis on Business Law from the Université Panthéon Assas in Paris.

Reyan is a freelance consultant, who has worked in media analysis since 2015. His first project was with Internews: he came on board as a Media Monitoring Officer on their Syria Project in partnership with Free Press Unlimited. In February 2016, Reyan joined Free Press Unlimited's Ethical Journalism for Syrian Media (EJSM) programme as part of the research and Monitoring team.

The EJSM programme aims to empower Syrian media organisations through capacity-building activities: Reyan has contributed to this process with his involvement in the design of a new methodology for media analysis. He also helped develop an enhanced version of the codebook used during phase one of the project. His current focus is the monitoring and analysis of the media output of partners in the EJSM project.

Maysa Shawwa

Maysa Shawwa holds a BA in Communication Arts with an emphasis on journalism, and a Master's degree in Sociology, both from the American University of Beirut. She contributed to several research projects as a graduate

assistant in the Media Studies department at the American University of Beirut. She participated in the Multimedia, Journalism, and Stereotypes exchange programme at the Danish School of Media and Journalism, and also took part in a reporting programme run by BBC Media Action.

Maysa has worked at the Arab Thought Foundation as a social media officer, during which time she was a contributor to the International Journalists' Network's Arabic site. She also worked on the Freedom House report Freedom on the Net (2013–2014), mapping digital media in Lebanon.

Maysa's current role as a media analyst sees her working on Free Press Unlimited's Ethical Journalism for Syrian Media (EJSM) programme, as part of the Research and Monitoring team.