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 emerging 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), a platform aimed at defining ethical principles for content production.[1] 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 media: their challenges, their strengths, and their weaknesses.

All quarterly reports are available at: https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/syrian-media-journalism-in-the-making

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 the 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.

Compared to the media studied in our first quarterly report (see Journalism in the Making no.1, March–April–May 2017), the quality of writing, editing, and proofreading has generally risen. However, there are substantial differences present between outlets.

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 emergent 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 <mark>main findings:</mark>

- **The coverage focuses overwhelmingly on the conflict.** Within our studied areas of political, social, and cultural news, emergent Syrian media focus almost exclusively on the conflict. The warfare on the ground, geopolitical issues, and the impact of the war on civilians make up almost 50 % of the coverage.

- **Emerging 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.

- **The coverage does not extend to all of Syria.** Instead, it tends to focus only on some regions—usually those that are contested or in opposition to the regime. Regime-administrated areas are largely overlooked.

- **Coverage tends to focus on groups rather than individuals.** This indicates a coverage that generally does not explore human stories or try to look closely at political events.

- **The most recurrent coverage focuses on actors 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.

- **Where coverage narrates more personal, in-depth stories, it shows a tendency to privilege actors not involved in the military side of the conflict.** The most recurrent individual actors are ordinary citizens, civil-society members, artists/intellectuals, teachers, and refugees.

- **Compared to previous monitoring, Kurdish actors are slightly more recurrent.** This is probably due to the specific relevance of the siege of al-Raqqa.

- **Emergent 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. Opposition armed groups and the Syrian political opposition are never portrayed positively. The only positive portrayals are those depicting Syrian civil society in its different forms.

- **Sources are a persistent problem.** There has been a rise in identified sources since the previous monitoring period. However, the majority of the sources are second-hand, and there are appreciable numbers of unnamed, unclear, or unidentified sources.

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- **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. Sources are mainly opposition groups and individuals.

- **While there has been a shift in coverage, women are almost absent** both as protagonists and sources. However, in contrast to the previous monitoring period, some women emerge in more active roles such as artists/intellectuals, civil society, lawyers, or teachers.

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—for example in-depth coverage and human stories. 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.

- **More attention could be given to areas generally out of opposition control,** such as those dominated by the regime or other actors such as the Kurds.

- **A wider range of actors could be covered.** The emerging Syrian media could, for example, include a stronger focus on Syrian civil-society organisations, media activists, and Kurdish actors.

Sample

Since March 2017, this media-monitoring project has focused on a selection of new 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.

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, 172 content items were analysed between June–August 2017.

Final Considerations

This report does not pretend to offer a complete picture of Syrian media coverage. Indeed, monitoring emerging 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 reports for other organisations such as radios or printed magazines.

Findings

We have chosen to present the data gathered between June–August 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 (June-August 2017)
In the period between June and August 2017, two main events took place. The battle for al-Raqqa (between SDF and IS) entered its final stages in June. In July, for the first time, SDF forces managed to enter the city centre.

The fifth round of the Astana negotiations began in July—resulting in the identification of two de-escalation areas, in eastern al-Ghouta and the northern countryside outside Homs. Subsequent to the identification of these areas, the regime was repeatedly accused of violating agreements and cease-fires in these and other areas like Deraa. Other less prominent but still relevant events also took place.

A group of Syrian refugees died at the hands of the Lebanese army following raids in Arsal, an area in Northeast Lebanon in which many refugees are located.

Over the course of July and August, Hezbollah, the SAA, and the Lebanese Army attacked IS and Tahrir al-Sham forces in Qalamoun. After the operation, a deal was reached enabling IS fighters to be peacefully evacuated to the Idlib's region as well as the Iraqi border. This deal provoked various negative regional and international reactions.

In August, news broke that the Syrian-Palestinian media activist Bassel Khartabil, detained by the regime since March 2012, had been killed while in detention. The news provoked intense international reactions.

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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 June–August 2017.

Section summary

- **While coverage has increased in diversity since the first monitoring period, the conflict is by far the most common topic.** Of 172 articles, 103 focused directly on the war.

- **Emerging 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.

- **New Syrian media focus 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.

- **The region of al-Raqqa receives more attention than has been the case in previous monitoring periods.** This is mainly due to the intensification of SDF's operations against IS in that region.

- **Emerging Syrian media appear 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.

- **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]

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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.'

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Narrating conflict: the main focus of emerging Syrian media

60 % of articles (103 out of 172) focused directly on the conflict. In this sense, the coverage does not appear very diversified (Graph/Table 1). Emerging 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. However, there is a tangible rise in topic variety when compared to the findings of the previous quarterly report.

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: new Syrian media as watchdog
Of the total of 172 articles, 26 % reported elements of the warfare on the ground, 10 % covered the international political dimension of the conflict, and 10 % explored the material impact of the war on civilians (Graph/Table 2).

The articles tended to focus on the war on the ground—reporting on multiple fronts with the battle for Raqqa receiving most of the attention. The area of Homs also received plenty of coverage. Articles related to Homs covered not only the battles between the regime and ISIS, but also cease-fire violations.

The Qalamoun offensive of July–August 2017 received coverage, as did the victory of Tahrir al-Sham against Ahrar al-Sham in the Idlib's area. This latter victory, and its consequences at local and international level, were followed with some concern.

At the international and diplomatic level, Syrian emerging media followed the Astana negotiations—with a focus on the creation of de-escalation zones. The coverage of these zones is worthy of note. The monitored media appeared to look at this issue in a sceptical way. First, they monitored whether the cease-fires were respected. Second, they expressed concern that the creation of de-escalation zones could signal an irreversible division of Syria into disparate enclaves.

The monitored Syrian media took a critical stance towards the SDF, often highlighting US support of the force. In line with such a stance, the media also gave notable visibility to the anti-SDF operations undertaken by opposition Turkish and Syrian armed groups.

Many items detailed the count of civilian victims on the ground, the effects of the bombings on the civilians, and the continuous violations of the cease-fires.

It continues to be the case that the monitored Syrian media perceive their role as watchdogs, highlighting the actions of the different armed protagonists. This is especially true where those actions are carried out by the regime, Russia, the SDF, and the international coalition.

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Graph / Table 1: Main Topics

Main topics

Syrian conflict
Other topics

40%

60%
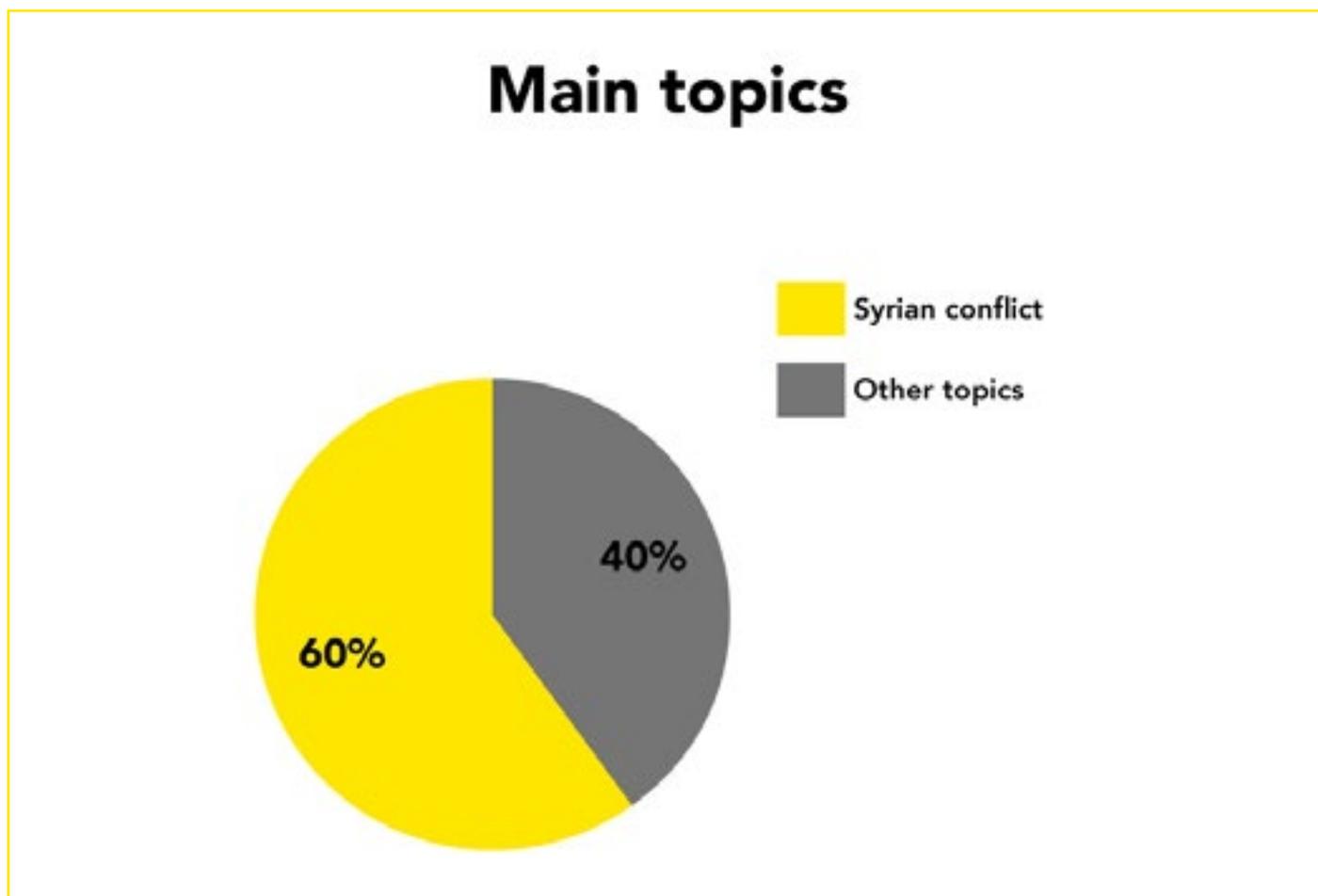
Graph / Table 2: Syrian conflict themes (top 10)

Topic	Number of articles	% (Total articles)
Warfare on the ground	45	26%
International dimension of the conflict	18	10%
Material impact on civilians	17	10%
National politics	7	4%
Human rights	6	3%
Regional politics	3	2%
Health	1	1%
International and humanitarian aid	1	1%
Other	1	1%

Looking beyond the conflict: a broad canvas

The remaining 69 articles covered a broad variety of non-conflict topics (Graph/Table 3). While cultural and economic issues were among the most covered, articles also explored administrative issues and education in rebel-controlled areas. Quite surprisingly, only a few articles were dedicated to issues of immigration and refugees.

Focusing locally and internationally: a media of regions

Geographically, the focus remains clear: 63 % of the articles focused on the local dimensions of reported events, while 21 % focused on international dimensions. The national dimension (i.e. all of Syria), was the least prominent by some way, highlighted by only 16 % of articles (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.

This data could indicate, in other words, that the emerging Syrian media frame the conflict as a proxy war, or an international war, rather than a civil war. Another reason could be the recognition that the Syrian territory is today fragmented into different political spaces.

Graph / Table 3: Non-conflict topics (top 5)

Topic	Number of articles	% (Total articles)
Culture, cinema, and arts	8	5%
Economy	7	4%
Administrative issues	6	3%
Education	6	3%
Immigration/refugees	6	3%

Graph / Table 4: Geographical focus

Geographical focus	Number of items	%
Focus on local dimension	108	63%
Focus on international dimension	36	21%
Focus on national dimension	28	16%
Total of news items	**172**	**100%**

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).

Comparative to the previous report, there is a rise in coverage of Al-Raqqa. The city receives considerable attention because of the offensive by the SDF.

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

Region	Number of items	%
Idlib	21	12%
Homs	17	10%
Al-Raqqa	13	8%
Aleppo	12	7%
Hama	10	6%
Total items covering Syrian regions	**108**	**63%**

Part 2: <mark>Protagonists</mark>

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 June–August 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 647 protagonists, 454 were groups. This may indicate a tendency to offer a more distanced, analytical coverage (as opposed to human stories or in-depth coverage).

- **Military protagonists are the most covered overall.** Coverage showed a strong focus on the main military actors in the conflict, especially where those actors were groups.

- **Overall, the coverage tended to ignore Syrian civil-society organisations and media activists.** Kurdish actors received more attention than during the previously analysed period, mainly as a result of the attention given to the battle for Raqqa.

- **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.

- **The Syrian opposition is portrayed only neutrally, and never positively or negatively.**

- **Women are barely covered.** Only 4 % of the main protagonists in the articles were female. However, in contrast to the previous monitoring period, some women emerge in more active roles such as artists/intellectuals, civil society, lawyers, or teachers.

- **Decision-makers involved in the Syrian conflict are treated with a certain level of distrust.** This includes the Syrian opposition.

Voicing organisations: collective protagonists outnumber single individuals

Coverage largely focused on collective protagonists, with 70 % of all articles mainly reporting on or about groups (Graph/Table 6). This may reflect a tendency for emergent Syrian media to offer general descriptions of events, rather than to narrate more in-depth or human stories related to individual protagonists.

Military protagonists are the most covered

With groups outweighing individuals, we find that a significant weighting is given to armed actors. Respectively, the most covered group protagonists were military and armed actors, while the most covered individual protagonists were members of civil society, artists/intellectuals, and

refugees. Ordinary citizens received a strong weighting in the coverage, both as individual or group protagonists (Graphs/Tables 7 and 8).

These coverage levels are probably due, in part, to the emergent Syrian media having easier access to these actors. They may also represent an effort to follow closely, and perhaps give a voice to, protagonists with whom the media sympathise.

In general, the levels of coverage seem to underline the repeated findings of the two media-monitoring reports to date. Namely, that emergent Syrian media perceive themselves in a watchdog role, and that they tend to produce coverage opposing armed groups. This latter observation also supports the theory that the monitored media feel a strong responsibility to represent unarmed citizens suffering the impact of the war.

Graph / Table 6: Main protagonists

Main protagonists	Number	%
Group	454	70%
Man	166	26%
Woman	27	4%
Total protagonists	**647**	**100%**

Graph / Table 7: Most recurrent single individual protagonists (top 10)

Individual protagonists	Number of occurrences	%
Ordinary citizens	32	17%
Artist / intellectual	17	9%
Russia	13	7%
Syrian NGOs and civil-society groups	12	6%
Refugees and IDPs	11	6%
Syrian president	11	6%
Military Syrian opposition	10	5%
US	10	5%
Teacher	9	5%
Syrian opposition	7	4%

Graph / Table 8: Most recurrent group protagonists (top 10)

Collective protagonists	Number of occurrences	%
Ordinary citizens	43	9%
Military Syrian opposition	41	9%
Russia	32	7%
ISIS and affiliates	32	7%
Regime army	31	7%
Government / regime officials	31	7%
Syrian NGOs and civil-society groups	20	4%
US	16	4%
International coalition	15	3%
Refugees and IDPs	15	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 and media activists (Graph/Table 9).

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. In fact, these groups are almost always covered as individuals, and not groups.

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.

Kurdish actors appeared more frequently during coverage monitored between June–August than they did between March and May. This attention is likely to be a side-effect of the relevance of the battle for Raqqa — an event that the monitored media could not have ignored.

Graph / Table 9: Other relevant protagonists

Other protagonists	Number of occurrences	%
Syrian civil-society groups, media activists, and local anti-regime administration	29	6%
Kurdish actors (PYD, KNC, KDPS, SDF, YPG, and other Kurdish political actors)	25	5%

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 of 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 101 appearances by regime actors, 57 were negative portrayals.[4] No

portrayals of regime actors were positive or sympathetic. The Syrian regime was often portrayed as 'criminal'.

Kurdish actors were portrayed more negatively than positively: from a total of 25 portrayals Kurdish actors were portrayed negatively eight times, and neutrally 17 times.[5]

IS, an organisation often labelled as 'terrorist', was negatively portrayed 15 times over 33 total occurrences, and never positively.

Russia was portrayed negatively in 16 times out of 46 instances. Russia was often described as an 'occupying force'.

Interestingly, the US was also portrayed negatively (nine times out of 26 instances).

The Syrian opposition was almost always portrayed neutrally, underlining a fairly cold stance taken by the monitored media towards this group. The only exceptions to this neutral portrayal were three negative instances and two sympathetic instances.

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

sympathetic portrayals out of 17 total occurrences).

Finally, it is interesting to note that ordinary citizens were portrayed sympathetically in 30 out of 75 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.

All these elements indicate a certain level of distrust towards all the decision-makers involved in the Syrian conflict, including the Syrian opposition. The monitored media outlets appear to identify with the idea that the Syrian revolution has failed: and that the movement has been hijacked or defeated by other political forces.

Focus for the future: gender representation
Gender representation was very skewed in the articles we analysed. Of the 193 instances of focus on individuals, only 27 (4 % of the total 647 protagonists) were women (see Table 6 at the top of this section).

Most male protagonists were ordinary citizens, members of civil-society groups, and various political actors (Graph/Table 10).

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4 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.

5 For the aggregation of Kurdish actors, see Table 9.

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

Male protagonists (individuals)	Number of occurrences	%
Ordinary citizens	25	15%
Russia	13	8%
National NGOs and civil-society groups	12	7%
Syrian president	11	7%
Military Syrian opposition	10	6%
US	10	6%
Refugees and IDPs	10	6%
Artist / intellectual	10	6%
Syrian opposition	7	5%
Teacher	6	4%

The most recurrent female protagonists were also ordinary citizens—including artists/ intellectuals and teachers (Graph/Table 11). This inclusion may be seen as evidence of a small qualitative shift when compared with data from the period March–May 2017.

Graph / Table 11: Most recurrent female protagonists (top 4)

Female protagonists (individuals)	Number of occurrences	%
Ordinary citizens	7	26%
Artist / intellectual	7	26%
Germany	3	11%
Teacher	3	11%

Part 3: <mark>Sources</mark>

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

Section summary:

- **There is a lack of precision in the use of sources.** Of 436 sources, only 42 % 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 8 % of the sources were women, while 47 % 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, first-hand sources should constitute a strategic asset for emerging Syrian media.

- **Compared to the previous monitoring period, there has been a rise in the use of sources such as eyewitnesses, persons of interest, and experts.**

- **There could be a substantial increase in the use of outlets' own field reporters.** These reporters constitute only 4 % of sources. It must be noted, however, that conditions of war do not always make it possible for reporting to be done in the field.

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 436 sources were mentioned by monitored Syrian news outlets during the period examined by this report. This amounts to a rough average of two sources per article over a total of 172 articles (Graph/Table 12).

Unnamed/unclear sources amounted to 8 %. Of the 92 % that were Identified sources, 42 % were precise, i.e. identified with a specific name and other identification details. The majority of the sources (about 48 %) were generic, which means they were identified by profession, geographic location, gender, etc, but not by name. 9 % 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 13). 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 often used in a way that made it 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 12: Identified vs unnamed / unclear sources

Source type	Number	%
Identified sources	403	92%
Unnamed / unclear sources	33	8%
Total	**436**	**100%**

Graph / Table 13: Source identification

Identification of the sources

Legend:
- Generic
- Precise
- Unidentified
- Anonymous

1%
9%
48%
42%
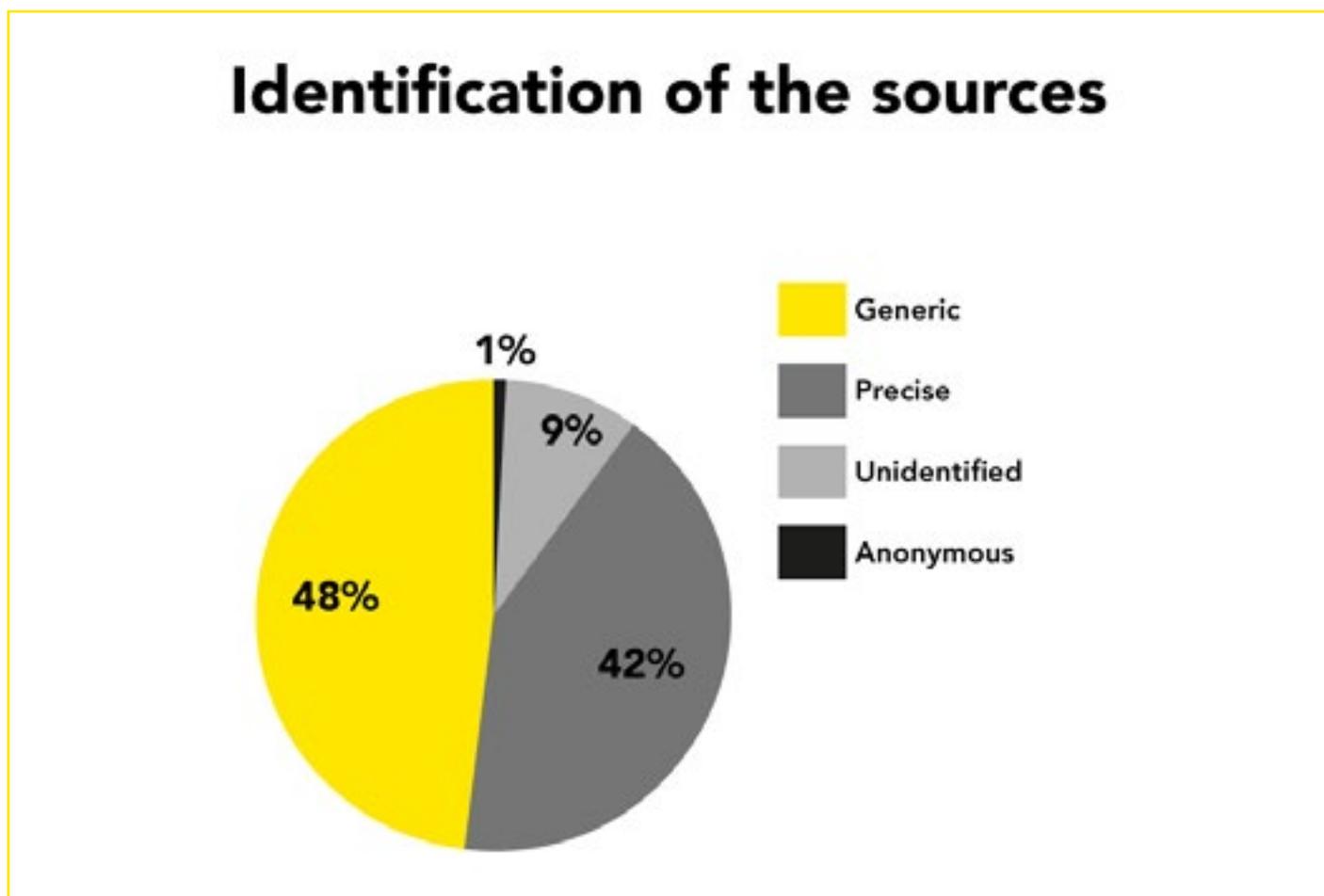
Staying relevant: sources are mainly relevant to the theme of the articles

11 % of sources were evaluated as not having the authority to offer credible information in the context of an article's theme (Graph/Table 14). With 89 % of sources interpreted as relevant, emerging Syrian media outlets can be seen as doing a good job of contextualising their articles. That said, reducing the number of irrelevant or not directly relevant sources would be seen as an asset in future coverage.

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

The majority of sources cited were second-hand (Graph/Table 15). Since emerging 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 a key area on which new Syrian media outlets need to focus—even if this means changing the nature of their coverage. For example, social media (user-generated content [UGC]) coverage was only at 5 % during the period June–August 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.

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 direct access to useful sources.

Graph / Table 14: Source relevance

Is the source relevant?

- Yes
- No

11%
89%
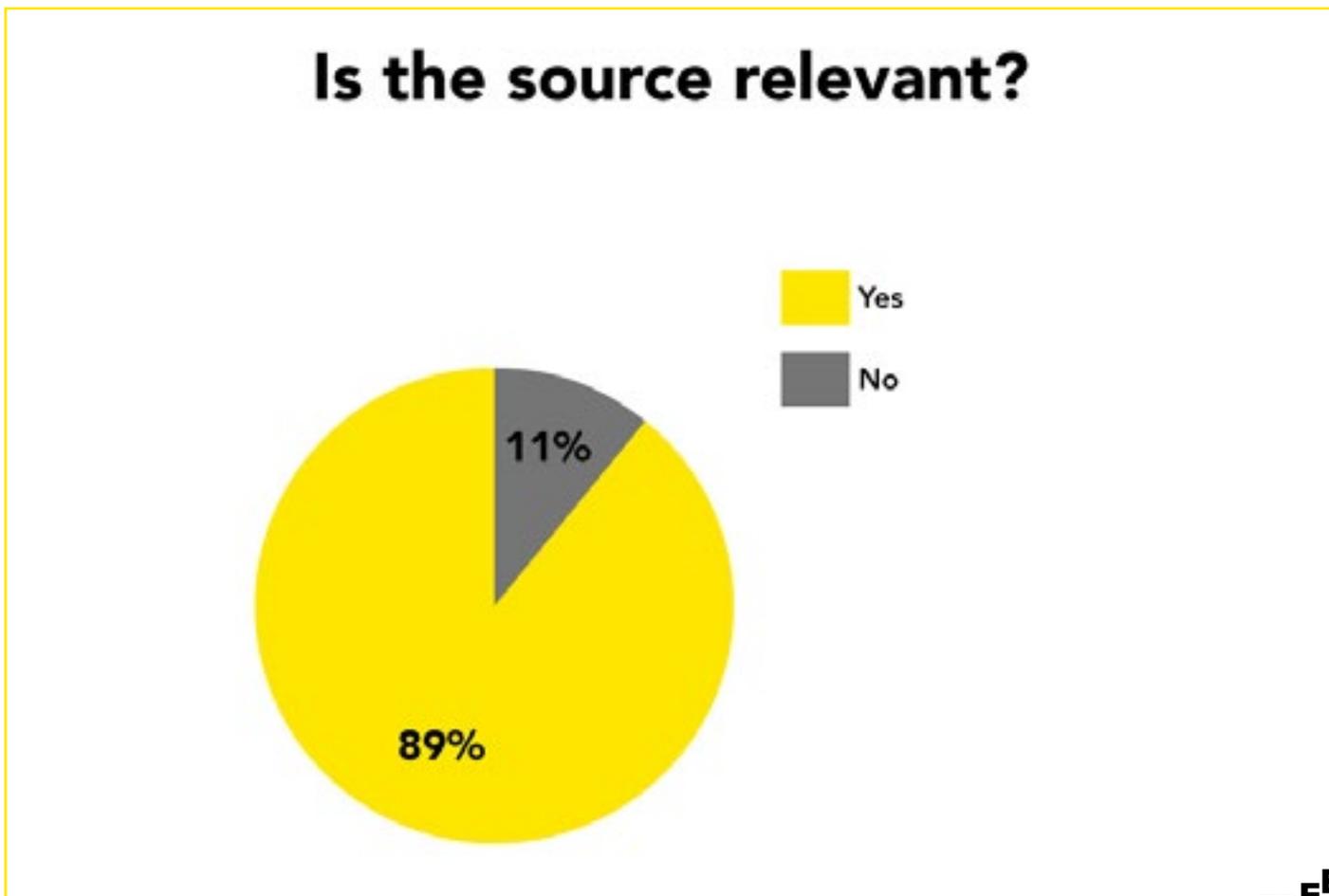
Graph / Table 15: Type of source

Source type	Number	%
First-hand sources	153	35%
Second-hand sources	260	60%
UGC	23	5%

Rising use of eyewitnesses

43 % of the sources cited are spokespersons or representatives of organisations (Graph/Table 16). This is not surprising in a media whose coverage mainly focuses on the conflict, and on political actors with a certain military weight.

When contrasted with our previous report (March–May 2017), we see an increase in the use of eyewitnesses/persons of interest and expert commentators/persons with direct knowledge of reported events.

Graph / Table 16: Role of the sources
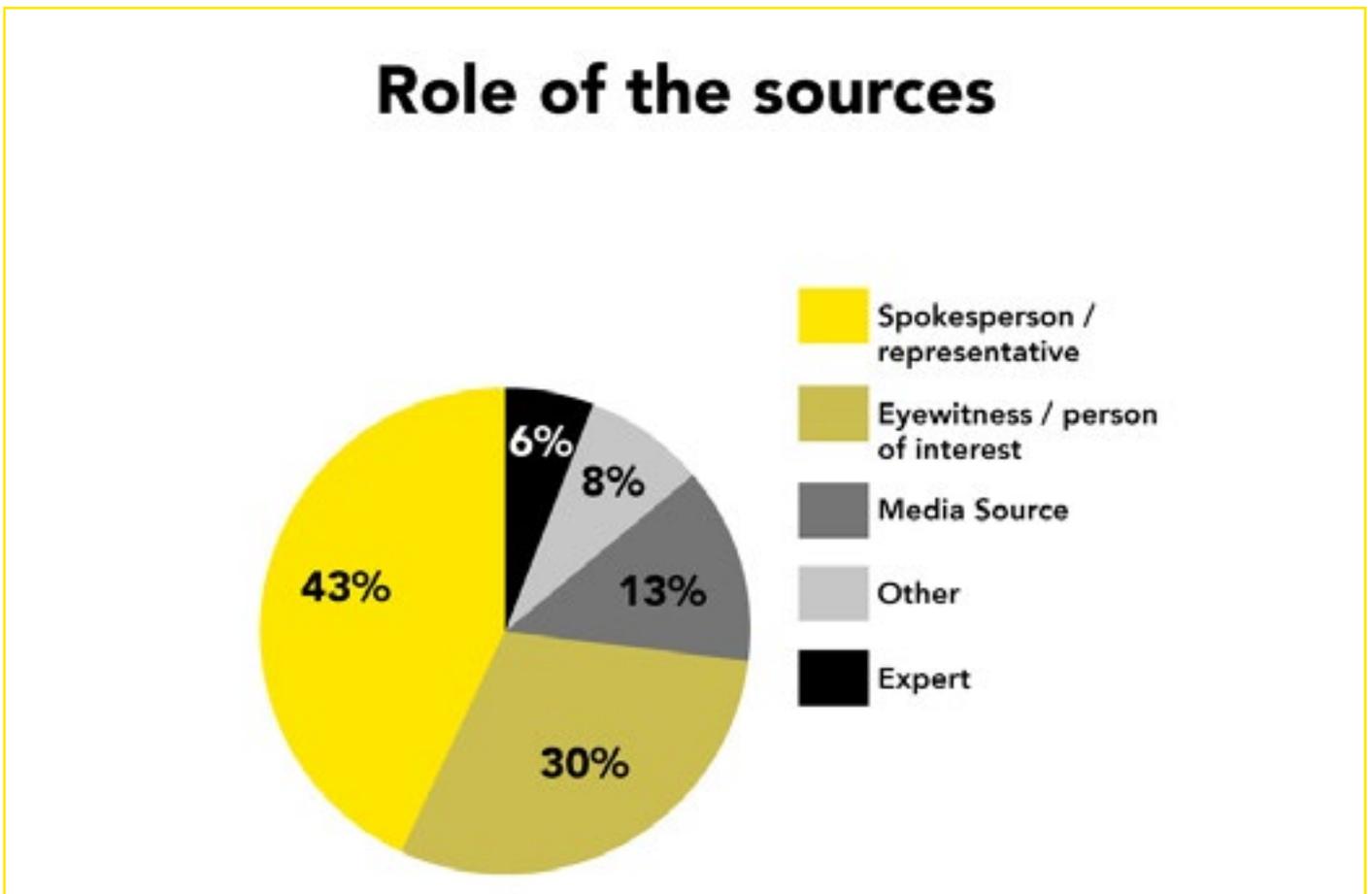
Relying on civil-society groups

A key finding of this report is that emergent 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 17 shows that emergent Syrian media mainly rely on national NGOs, Syrian civil-society groups, and ordinary citizens. Armed groups and relevant political actors such as the Syrian regime, Russia, or the US are less used as sources.

It is interesting to see ordinary citizens finding a voice—despite the articles seeming to view the ordinary citizen as a passive victim of the conflict. Of course emerging 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.

The outlet's own field reporters constituted just 4 % of the sources: future increase in this number would be an asset.

Graph / Table 17: Frequently cited sources (top 10)

Source type	Number of articles	%
National NGOs and civil society groups	47	11%
Ordinary citizens	46	11%
Military Syrian oppostition	21	5%
Russia	20	5%
US	18	4%
Outlets' own reporters	16	4%
Local anti-regime administration	14	3%
Researcher / academic / analyst	13	3%
Syrian opposition	13	3%
International / foreign news agency	13	3%

Gender of the sources

Man
Group
Woman
Non determinable
Other

8% 1%
3%
41%
47%
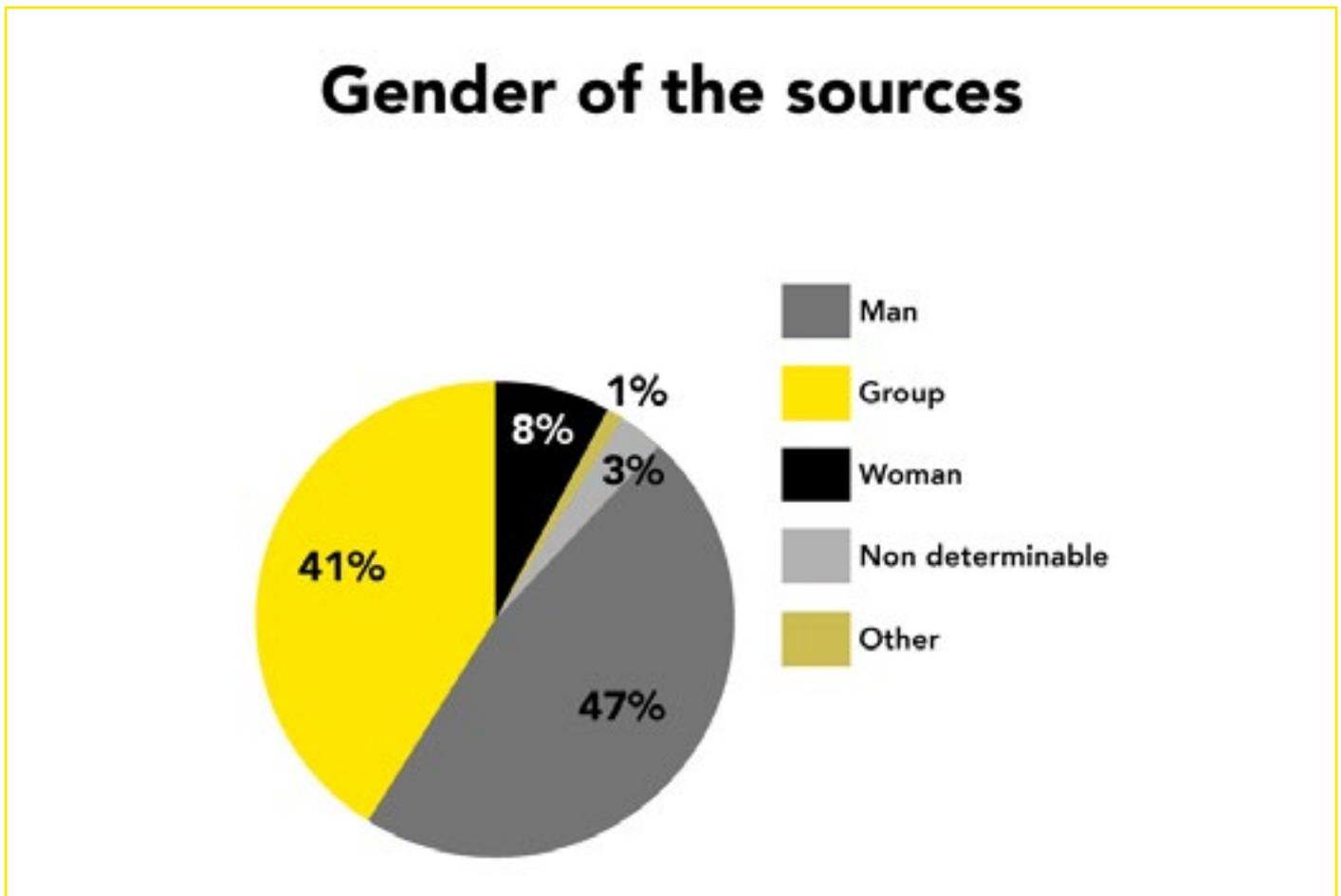
A lack of voice for women

In the articles we analysed, men represented about 47 % of the sources and women only 8 %. In other words: Syrian independent media barely rely on women as sources (Graphs/Tables 18, 19, and 20 respectively). There is, however, a slight rise in female sources comparative to the previous monitoring period.

Male sources were quite diversified (Graph/Table 19). The most recurrent sources came from pro-opposition groups: we also heard from experts and activists from local NGOs or civil-society groups. It is also worth noting that the outlets' reporters in the field tend to be male, and are not represented as female sources (Graph/Table 20).

Female sources included figures such as artists/intellectuals, representatives of civil-society groups, teachers, and lawyers (Graph/Table 20). This constitutes a slight rise when compared with source data from March–May 2017). Overall, however, the weighting given to female sources appears still too slight.

Graph / Table 19: Most recurrent male sources (top 10)

Sources (male)	Number of occurrences	%
Ordinary citizens	28	14%
National NGO / civil-society groups	16	8%
Military Syrian opposition	15	7%
Outlet's own reporter	14	7%
Refugees and IDPs	11	5%
Local anti-regime administration	11	5%
Russia	11	5%
US	10	5%
Researcher / academic / analyst	10	5%
Syrian opposition	9	4%

Graph / Table 20: Most recurrent female sources (top 7)

Sources (female)	Number of occurrences	%
Ordinary citizens	8	24%
Artist / intellectual	4	12%
Syrian NGO / civil society group	3	9%
Germany	3	9%
Teacher	3	9%
EU	2	6%
Lawyer	2	6%

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Concluding remarks

This report has examined a snapshot of the coverage offered by emerging Syrian media outlets between June–August 2017. The conclusions drawn by our analysis, and the recommendations drawn out of those conclusions, mark important steps in the evolution of these outlets' journalistic practices.

The information contained in this report is intended to help the remarkable young media organisations created in the Syrian conflict apply ever more rigorous journalistic standards to their work. It is also 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
IDPs	Internally Displaced People
IREX	International Research and Exchanges Board
IS	Islamic State
KDPS	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria
KNC	Kurdish National Council
ODP	Osservatorio di Pavia
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SMART	Syrian Media Action Revolution Team
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.