



Journalism in the making

Analysing Syrian Emerging Media

Quarterly Report No. 3
September – October – November 2017

Cover photo by Jeppe Schilder

**FREE
PRESS
UNLIMITED**

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. Initially, 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. Secondly, 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 of 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 attempt to make some of the results and data available to a wider 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/>

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Introduction | 4 |
| Summary of main findings / Summary of key recommendations | 6 |
| Sample and Methodology | 8 |
| Findings | 12 |
| <i>Part 1: Topics</i> | 13 |
| We explore the data in terms of topics, looking at the focus of stories published by the monitored outlets during the analysed period. | |
| <i>Part 2: Protagonists</i> | 18 |
| We look at the protagonists appearing in monitored coverage, discovering the organisations and individuals at the heart of the stories. | |
| <i>Part 3: Sources</i> | 24 |
| We examine the use and presentation of sources in the monitored media. | |
| Concluding remarks | 33 |
| Glossary | 34 |

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 21 st 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 on 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 through 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 others) 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.

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.

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 **main findings:**

- **Most of the items are short news items, analysis pieces, and opinion articles.** Other journalistic genres, such as reportages or feature articles, are almost absent.
- **The coverage focuses overwhelmingly on the conflict.** The analysis confirms the trend of the past periods; Syrian emerging media focus primarily on the conflict (68 % of the coverage).
- **Emerging Syrian media seem to perceive their role as a watchdog,** keeping an eye on the actions of armed actors and political organisations, and reporting on the civilian consequences of these actions. Criticism of opposition groups, however, is less frequent.
- **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, to which Syrian emerging media have a more limited access, are largely overlooked.
- **Coverage tends to focus on collective actors rather than individuals.** This could indicate 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 either ordinary citizens or actors belonging to the Syrian opposition or civil society.** Representatives of specific professional backgrounds, such as businessmen, teachers, lawyers, etc. are less prevalent.
- **Compared to previous monitoring, civil society actors receive slightly more attention.** At the same time, Kurdish actors such as the PYD or the Rojava autonomous administration are almost completely ignored.
- **Emergent Syrian media adopt a critical opinion of the majority of protagonists involved in the conflict.** There is a tendency to portray all armed groups and political protagonists negatively. 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.

- **Ordinary citizens are predominantly portrayed sympathetically and as victims.**
- **Sources are a persistent problem.** The majority of the sources are second-hand, and there are appreciable numbers of unnamed, unclear, or unidentified sources.
- **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.
- **Women are almost absent** both as protagonists and sources. Also, they are mostly relegated to passive roles, both as protagonists and sources. Mostly emerging in the coverage as either ordinary citizens or refugees/IDPs.

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.
- **More effort could be made to produce more in-depth coverage such as investigative pieces, reportages, or feature articles.**
- **The number of unnamed, unclear, and unidentified sources could be reduced.**
- **More effort could be made to strategize 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 emerging and independent Syrian media. The number and the nature of the outlets have 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:

- ARA News, a news agency serving the region of Rojava and North Iraq (ceased to exist late 2017)
- Ayn al-Madina, a bi-monthly magazine focusing on Deir Azzour
- Radio Fresh, a local FM radio station based in Saraqeb, in the Idlib province
- Al-Gherbal, a magazine previously based in Idlib, which primarily focuses on cultural and social issues (discontinued production in 2017).
- Radio Nasaem, previously based in Aleppo and one of Syria's most popular radio stations in the years since the conflict began.
- Radio Rozana, a web radio based in Paris.
- Sada al-Sham, a weekly political newspaper
- 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.
- Souriatna, a weekly political newspaper

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/>



Enab Baladi

A newspaper founded in Daraya, 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/>



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/>



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 emerging from the coverage
- gender representation in the coverage.

In total, 121 content items were analysed between September–November 2017. By "item" we refer here to a single piece of content (a written article or a video). Of these, the majority were news items, followed by analysis or opinion pieces (Graph/Table 1). The number of feature articles, reportages, interviews and portraits is relatively small.

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.

Table 1: Genre of the items

| Genre of the item | Number of Items | % |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|----------|
| News Items | 68 | 56 |
| Editorials, Analysis and Opinions | 36 | 30 |
| Feature Articles | 7 | 6 |
| Portraits, Profiles | 6 | 5 |
| Reportages | 3 | 2 |
| Interviews | 1 | 1 |

Findings

We have chosen to present the data gathered between September–November 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 (September–November 2017)

The period between September and November 2017 is characterized mainly by the fight against ISIS in different war theatres.

Two main events took place. The SDF finalized their control over Raqqa in the beginning of October, while ISIS abandoned the city completely. In September the Syrian Army, helped by Russian aviation, began to drive ISIS away from Deir Ezzor and its surroundings.

This battle lasted until the beginning of November and ended with the expulsion of ISIS from the area. During both operations massacres of civilians, perpetrated specifically through air bombings, were reported by civil organisations and activists' networks. In the same period, Russia, Turkey and Iran reached an agreement to create a de-escalation zone in Idlib. Staffan De Mistura, the UN special envoy for Syria, released a statement saying, for the first time, that the Syrian opposition cannot win the war

against the regime. Also, a prominent Syrian activist, Ouraba Barakat, and her daughter, journalist Hala, were found dead in their apartment in Istanbul. Two suicide bombing attacks against police stations took place in Damascus in October.

The preparations for the Sochi conference began in November. The conference was criticized by the Syrian opposition for being a diversion from the path initiated during the Geneva talks. On the other hand, Russia threatened those who refuse to participate with marginalisation within the peace process.

Other minor events were: the football match between Syria and Iran to qualify for the World Cup, which became the subject of a heated political discussion; and the revelation by the BBC of an agreement that enabled hundreds of ISIS fighters to evacuate Raqqa with their families.

Throughout the monitored period, the war in Al-Ghouta, in the area of Aleppo and other regions continued.

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 September–November 2017.

Section summary

- **The coverage focuses primarily on the conflict. An effort could be made to cover less explored stories and aspects of the conflict.** Of 121 articles, 82 focused directly on the war. However, Enab Baladi tends to offer a more diversified coverage. Generally, more space could be dedicated to constructive journalism and positive stories, which represent only 2% of the total.³
- **Emerging Syrian media seem to perceive their role as watchdog,** looking critically at political negotiations and the political actors involved and denouncing the impact of the war on civilians.
- **New Syrian media focus primarily on the local level.** In particular, the national level is less prominent than one would expect.
- **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 international media.** These larger outlets have access to significantly more human and material resources. An effort to cover more untold stories could be a strategic asset.

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

68% of the articles (82 out of 121) focused directly on the conflict. Consequently, the coverage does not appear very diversified (Graph/Table 2). Emerging Syrian media still appear to perceive their role primarily as conflict narrators, at the same time offering their point of view on relevant political issues. However, there are significant differences between the monitored outlets. Specifically, Enab Baladi offers more diversified coverage, dedicating about 49% of their items to non-conflict themes. Also, it should be noted that only 2% of the items use a constructive journalistic approach.

New Syrian media hold the protagonists of the war accountable

Of the total of 82 items focusing on the conflict, 21% reported on elements of the warfare on the ground, 18% covered the international political dimension of the conflict, and 11% explored the material impact of the war on civilians (Graph/Table 3).

In line with previous quarterly reports the monitored media tend to focus on warfare on the ground. Specifically, following the battle of Deir Ezzor closely while the battle of Raqqa, already covered more extensively in the previous months, receives less attention.

Meanwhile, a series of items closely follow minor events related to armed opposition groups and their leaders in different areas, such as Homs, Daraa, and Eastern Ghouta. Additionally, the attacks on police stations in

Damascus were also covered.

More attention than in the previous reports is focused on the diplomatic and international level. The monitored media follow the different negotiation processes, specifically at Astana and Sochi. Particularly focusing on the refusal of some sections of the Syrian Opposition to attend the Sochi conference and Russia's influence on them.

International dimension of the conflict

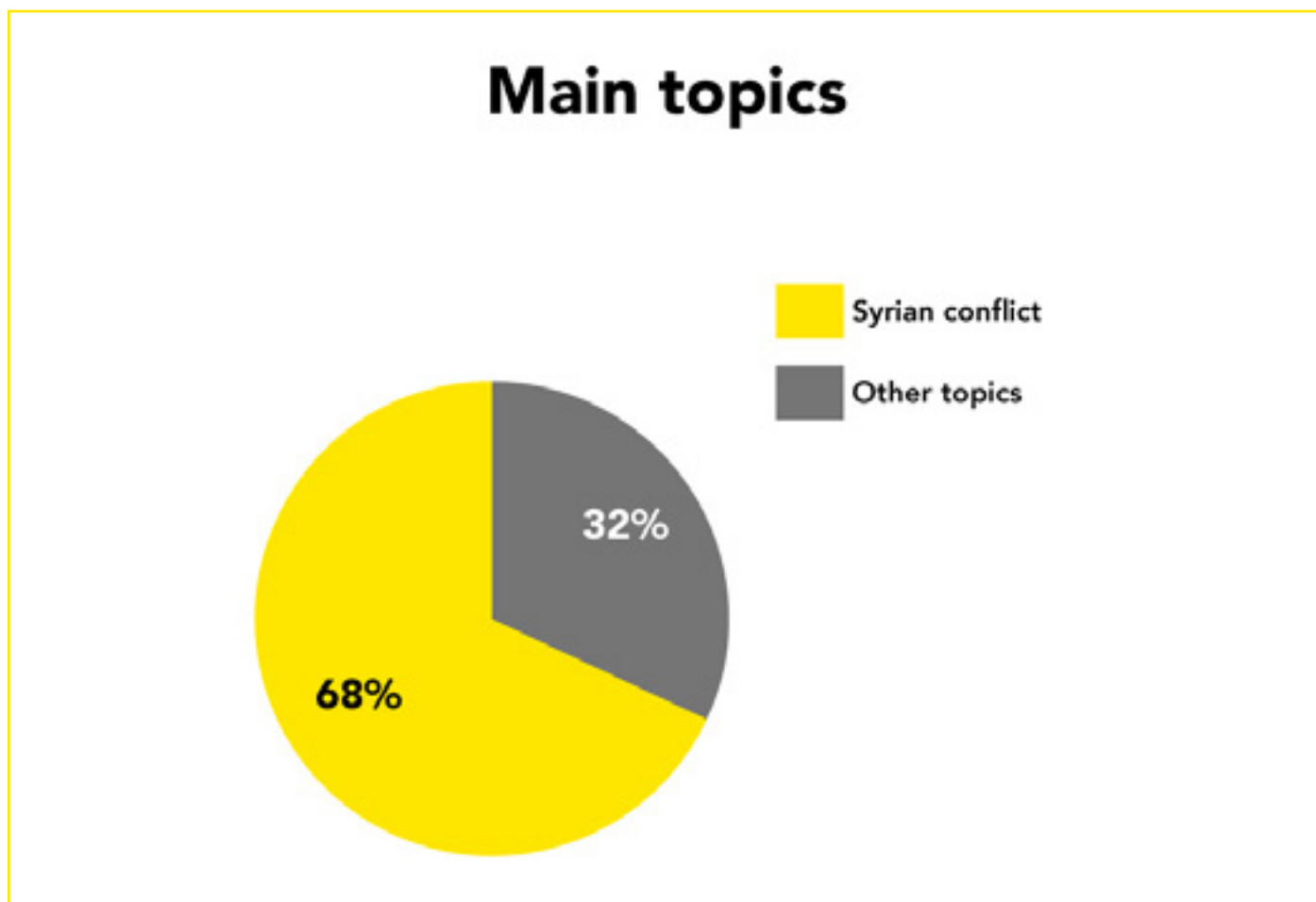
In general, Syrian emerging media took a critical stance towards Astana and Sochi, indicating that the Geneva process is a better alternative. In an opinion article published by ANA Press on the 6th of November, the outlet blamed Russia for rushing into Astana and Sochi because of their fear that a resolution in Geneva would bring the Syrian regime to an end.

Also, some space was dedicated to the UN Special Envoy for Syria - Staffan de Mistura's role in the conflict. A video published on the 7th of September by ANA Press described Steffan de Mistura as no longer being a credible mediator for the resolution of the conflict.

Impact of the war on civilians

11% of the items looked at the direct consequences of the war on civilians. Syrian emerging media accused the Syrian regime and all international actors of ignoring civilian victims and their fate. Some attention was given to children and women in the war and to civil initiatives (such as campaigns or demonstrations) against the war. The international coalition's bombing of the city of al-Asharah and the village of Daranj, resulting in dozens of civilian victims, was also covered.

Graph / Table 2: Main Topics



Graph / Table 3: Syrian conflict themes (top 9)

| Topic | Number of items | % (Syrian conflict) |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|
| Warfare on the ground | 26 | 21% |
| International dimension of the conflict | 22 | 18% |
| Material impact on civilians | 13 | 11% |
| Human rights | 6 | 5% |
| War socio-economic impact on civilians | 5 | 4% |
| National political dimensions of the conflict | 3 | 2% |
| International and humanitarian aid | 3 | 2% |
| Regional political dimension of the conflict | 2 | 2% |
| Other | 2 | 2% |

Looking beyond the conflict: a broad canvas

Only 39 items focused on topics not directly related to the conflict (Graph/Table 4). Of these, 5 focused on civil society initiatives in Syria and around the world. Two items promoted activities launched by an organisation called “Syrian Union of Coordinators around the World”. Some items explored administrative issues in rebel-controlled areas or under the Autonomous Administration in Rojava. Three items focused on media and journalism issues. For example, on the 5th of September Al-Ayyam published an analysis piece about the negative role that mass media played in Idlib.

Geographical Focus

Geographically, 49% of the articles focused on the local dimensions of reported events. 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 national (i.e. all of Syria) and international dimensions constitute respectively 26% and 24% of the total items (Graph/Table 5). The international dimension appears to reflect the attention towards diplomatic and international processes, such as Astana and Sochi, but also issues related to refugees.

In line with previous reports, articles with a national dimension are fewer than one would expect. This is partly due to the focus on the conflict in its different theatres, but perhaps also to the new Syrian media’s lack of recognition of the Syrian State. Accordingly, there are few articles covering state administrative issues, laws and politics.

Graph / Table 4: Non-conflict topics (top 7)

| Topic | Number of items | % (total items) |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Civil society | 5 | 4% |
| Other | 5 | 4% |
| Administrative issues | 4 | 3% |
| Crime and corruption | 3 | 2% |
| Humanitarian aid | 3 | 2% |
| Media/ICT | 3 | 2% |
| Immigration/Refugees | 3 | 2% |

Graph / Table 5: Geographical focus

| Geographical focus | Number of items | % |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| Focus on local dimension | 59 | 49% |
| Focus on national dimension | 31 | 26% |
| Focus on international dimension | 29 | 24% |
| Not applicable | 2 | 1% |
| Total of news items | 121 | 100% |

If we look at locally dimensioned coverage alone, the top five most covered areas are those disputed or not controlled by the regime. In particular, Deir Ezzor received more attention than during the previous periods, because of the regime and Russia's campaign against ISIS (Graph/Table 6).

Graph / Table 6: Geographical focus (top 5 Syrian regions)

| Region | Number of items | % (region) |
|--|------------------------|-------------------|
| Deir Ezzor | 10 | 17% |
| Idlib | 9 | 15% |
| Homs | 7 | 12% |
| Aleppo | 6 | 10% |
| Hama | 4 | 7% |
| Total items covering Syrian regions | 59 | 100% |

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 September–November 2017. For each item, 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 437 protagonists, 308 were groups. This may indicate a tendency to offer a more distanced, analytical coverage (as opposed to human stories or in-depth coverage).
- **Military and political protagonists are the most covered overall.** Coverage showed a strong focus on the main military and political actors in the conflict, especially where those actors were groups.
- **Generally, the coverage tended to ignore Syrian civil society organisations and media activists.** However, there is a slight improvement if we make a comparison with the previous reports. Kurdish actors still tend to be ignored.
- **Positive coverage is uncommon.** Military protagonists, on all sides, were the most covered groups and their portrayal was the most unfavourable. Ordinary citizens and refugees/IDPs were portrayed sympathetically rather than positively, possibly an indication that they are viewed mainly as victims.
- **Women are barely covered.** Only 4 % of the main protagonists in the articles were female. Moreover, women are generally relegated to the role of passive victims, as ordinary citizens or refugees/IDPs.
- **Decision-makers involved in the Syrian conflict are treated with a certain level of distrust.** This includes the Syrian opposition and especially its armed groups.

Voicing organisations: collective protagonists outnumber single individuals

As in the previously monitored periods, coverage largely focused on collective protagonists, with 71% of all articles mainly reporting on or about groups (Graph/Table 7). 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.

Looking at individual and collective protagonists

With regard to individual protagonists the main focus is on ordinary citizens and people belonging to the (military) Syrian opposition and civil society (Graph/Table 8). Military Syrian opposition members acquire significant coverage, due to the attention

that Syrian emerging media dedicate to the stories of local armed groups and their leaders (See above in the Topics' section). There are six occurrences of international journalists as protagonists, but all take place in one article, published by ANA Press on the 2nd of October, about the rise in violations against journalists in different countries.

In general, there are two main reasons that explain the choice of the individual protagonists. On the one hand, Syrian emerging media have easier access to ordinary citizens and pro-opposition members than regime or international officials.

On the other hand, they probably choose to give visibility to actors who better represent their point of view.

Graph / Table 7: Main protagonists

| Main protagonists | Number of occurrences | % |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Groups | 308 | 71% |
| Men | 110 | 25% |
| Women | 18 | 4% |
| Non-determinable | 1 | 0% |
| Total protagonists | 437 | 100% |

Graph / Table 8: Most recurrent single individual protagonists (top 8)

| Individual protagonists | Number of occurrences | % (individual protagonists) |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Ordinary citizens | 21 | 16% |
| Military Syrian opposition | 10 | 8% |
| Syrian NGOs and civil-society groups | 10 | 8% |
| Syrian opposition | 10 | 8% |
| International journalist | 6 | 5% |
| Syrian government / official | 5 | 4% |
| Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and affiliate | 5 | 4% |
| Refugee and IDP | 5 | 4% |

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

| Collective protagonists | Number of occurrences | % |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------|
| Russia | 37 | 12% |
| Ordinary citizens | 35 | 11% |
| Regime army | 18 | 6% |
| Pro-regime militia | 15 | 5% |
| Syrian NGOs and civil society groups | 14 | 5% |
| ISIS and affiliates | 13 | 4% |
| Military Syrian opposition | 12 | 4% |
| Refugees and IDPs | 12 | 4% |
| Syrian opposition | 11 | 4% |
| US | 9 | 3% |

The group protagonists, as also seen in the previous quarterly reports, focus mainly on international actors such as Russia, the Syrian regime and its militias, and armed opposition groups (Graph/Table 9). Ordinary citizens also have considerable weight. This reflects the focus of Syrian emerging media on the conflict and its impact on civilians, while at the same time holding armed groups accountable for their actions.

Absent and marginal protagonists

It should also be noted that some actors were almost absent as protagonists within the considered sample. This is specifically true of Kurdish actors like the SDF and the PYD (Graph/Table 10). There seems to be an improvement in giving more visibility

to actors belonging to Syrian civil society, media activists and the independent Syrian opposition (7 % of the group and individual protagonists). However, these actors remain still very marginal if compared to armed and international actors. Seeing as Syrian emerging media themselves are part of Syrian civil society, an effort to give more visibility to civil society actors could be made.

However, the decision to favour actors with a more powerful political weight also reflects the decision of the monitored media to tend to reproduce the same coverage as international media, instead of trying to experiment with different topics and protagonists.

Graph / Table 10: Other relevant protagonists

| Other protagonists (individuals and groups) | Number of occurrences | % |
|---|------------------------------|----------|
| Syrian civil society groups, media activists, and local anti-regime administration, Grassroots opposition | 32 | 7% |
| Kurdish actors (PYD, KNC, KDPS, SDF, YPG, and other Kurdish political actors) | 7 | 1% |

Linking tone to coverage

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.

Syrian emerging media tend to portray critically all the political actors fighting in the conflict. The Syrian regime and its allies are, not surprisingly, portrayed more negatively. At the same time, opposition armed groups also tend not to receive a positive portrayal.

Out of 72 appearances by regime actors, 32 (44 %) were negative portrayals.⁴ No portrayals of regime actors were positive or sympathetic. The Syrian regime was often portrayed as 'criminal' and 'corrupted'.

Russia was portrayed negatively 18 times out of 41 instances. Russia is generally considered as the main partner of the regime's crimes and was often described as an 'occupying force'.

In line with previous reports Kurdish actors were portrayed negatively twice, neutrally 5 times, and never positively.⁵

ISIS, an organisation often labelled as 'terrorist', was negatively portrayed 5 times out of 13 total occurrences, and never positively.

The US was also portrayed negatively (3 times out of 10) and never positively, which confirms the level of distrust of Syrian emerging media in the international actors involved in the conflict on all sides.

The Syrian opposition was portrayed negatively twice out of 21 instances, once sympathetically, and never positively.

Finally, the Syrian armed opposition was portrayed negatively 6 times out of 22, only once sympathetically, and never positively.

As registered in the previous reports, the only actors who were portrayed more positively are those belonging to the Syrian civil society. In this case, we find 9 positive portrayals out of 22 instances. Only one article, published on the 29th of October by Enab Baladi, portrays the anti-regime administration in Idlib negatively because of the pollution of the water in that area.

Ordinary citizens tend to be covered sympathetically (27 times out of 56 instances). Also, 24 times they were clearly portrayed as "victims".

Gender representation is very unbalanced

Gender representation was very skewed in the articles we analysed. Of the 128 instances of focus on individuals, only 18 (4 % of the total 437 protagonists) were women (see Table 7 at the top of this section).

Even more problematic is the coverage of women if we compare the nature of women and men protagonists.

As we can see from the Table below (Graph/ Table 11), male protagonists are characterised mainly by active roles at the political, social and military levels. Men also emerge as researchers, artists, intellectuals, and journalists.

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 10.

Graph / Table 11: Most recurrent male protagonists (top 10)

| Male protagonists (individuals) | Number of occurrences | % (male protagonists) |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Military Syrian opposition | 10 | 9% |
| National NGOs and civil-society groups | 10 | 9% |
| Syrian opposition | 10 | 9% |
| Ordinary citizen | 8 | 7% |
| Syrian government/official | 5 | 5% |
| International journalist | 5 | 5% |
| Jabhet Fateh al-Sham | 5 | 5% |
| Artist/Intellectual | 4 | 4% |
| Russia | 4 | 4% |
| Researcher/Academic/Analyst | 4 | 4% |
| Total male protagonists | 110 | 100% |

The situation of female protagonists is very different (Graph/Table 12). Most of the women covered are ordinary citizens who, as seen before, are mainly portrayed in passive roles. Women are also represented as refugees/IDPs. If we look at the other female protagonists, we find a Sudanese journalist who was beaten because of her work; a judge working for the regime and portrayed negatively; and a young woman who produces content for Youtube. The latter is the only case in which a woman is portrayed at the same time positively *and* in an active role.

Graph / Table 12: Female protagonists

| Female protagonists (individuals) | Number of occurrences | % (female protagonists) |
|--|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Ordinary citizen | 13 | 73% |
| Refugee and IDP | 2 | 12% |
| International journalist | 1 | 5% |
| Regime judiciary | 1 | 5% |
| Other | 1 | 5% |
| Total female protagonists | 18 | 100% |

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 September-November 2017. All sources mentioned have been considered.

Section summary:

- **There is a lack of precision in the use of sources.** Of 334 sources, only 37 % were identified precisely by name, profession, and other relevant information.
- **Anonymous and unidentified sources may be conflated.** Sometimes, Syrian media appear to not specify that a source cannot be revealed for security reasons.
- **Second-hand sources predominate.** Due to limited resources and the nature of the topics, Syrian emerging media mainly rely on second-hand sources. An effort in extending the use of first-hand sources could be made.
- **Ordinary citizens, civil society and opposition groups are the most common sources and expert sources have validation problems.** Expert sources, such as analysts and researchers, amount to about 11%. See the end the section: a closer look at the experts.
- **Women are poorly represented as sources.** Only 7 % of the sources were female, while 45 % were male. Also, female sources were mostly represented by ordinary citizens and refugees/IDPs while male sources were represented by civil society actors, experts, and journalists. Finally, only 6 % of the named authors of the articles were women, while 45 % were men.
- **More effort could be made to strategize the use of sources, even if this means changing the nature of coverage.** Local, diversified, first-hand sources should constitute a strategic asset for emerging Syrian media.
- **There could be a substantial increase in the use of the 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).

Anonymous vs unnamed

Less than 1% of the sources (only 1 occurrence out of 334) was presented as anonymous. The anonymous classification is quite understandable in the Syrian context, where some sources have to be protected. Additionally, it is probably the case that some of the Syrian sources presented as unidentified were also under this kind of protection.

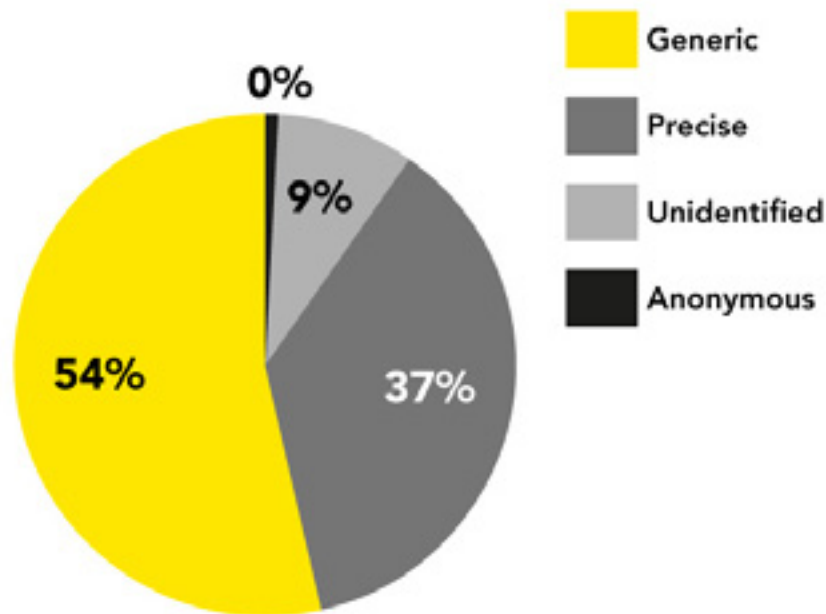
A problem with identification

The number of unnamed/unclear sources may depend on different factors. In the Syrian context access to sources can be very difficult and often media outlets are forced to rely on statements from vague sources such as “activists” or “local sources”. This difficulty does not completely justify the amount of unidentified or vague sources on which Syrian emerging media rely. More effort in using credible and clear sources could be made and sometimes the sources could be presented in a better way. For example, the monitored media could state clearly when for security reasons a full name could not be disclosed. In other cases, they could add some details about the source that make it clearer to the reader why that source is relevant and well-informed about the related facts. All these points are particularly crucial for the emerging media who need to gradually reinforce their credibility as sources of reliable information.

Graph / Table 13: Identified vs unnamed / unclear sources

| Source type | Number | % |
|---------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Identified sources | 309 | 93% |
| Unnamed / unclear sources | 25 | 7% |
| Total | 334 | 100% |

Identification of the sources



Relevance of the sources

9% of sources were evaluated as not having the authority to offer credible information in the context of an article's theme (Graph/ Table 15). With 91 % 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.

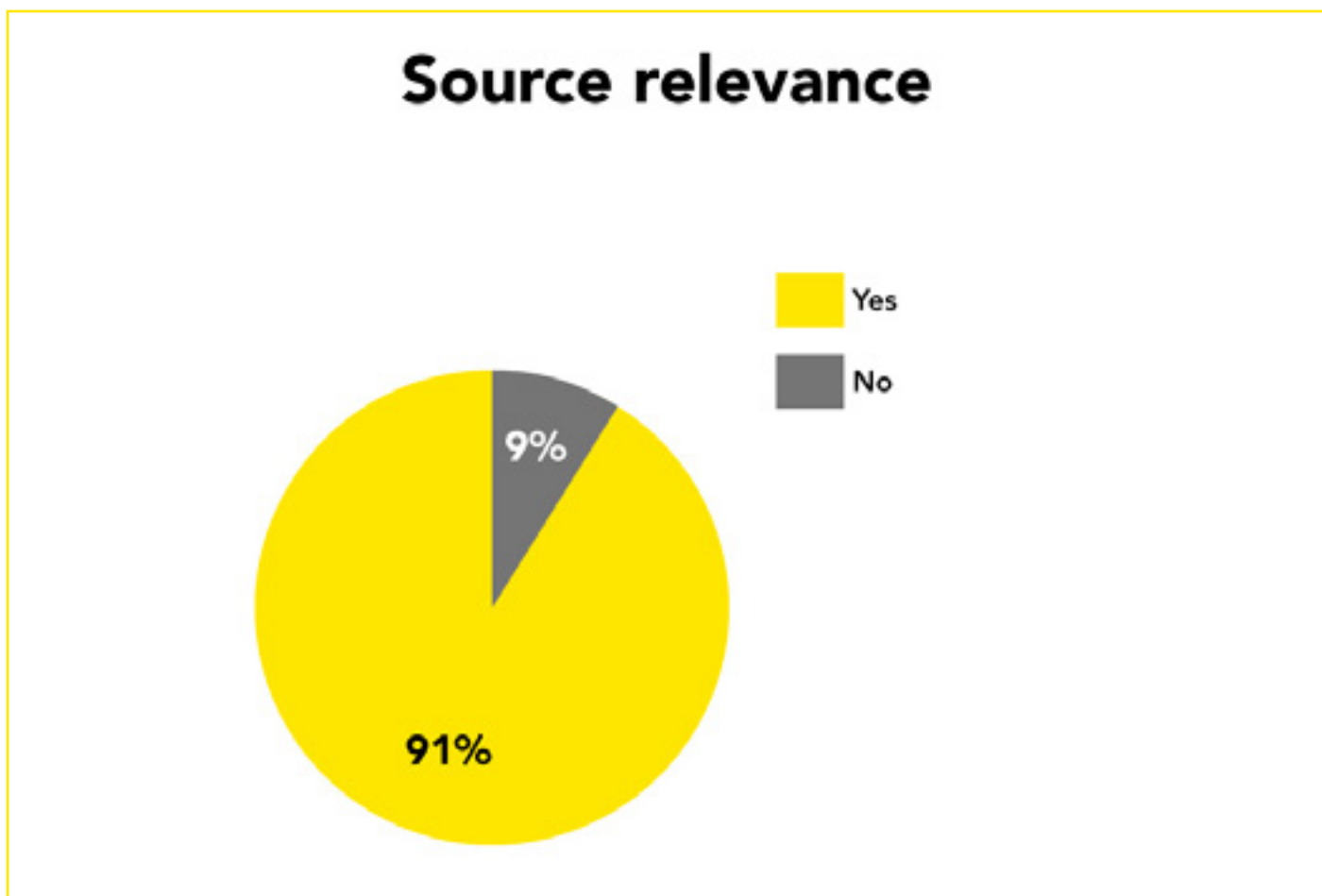
A new strategy is needed for making the most of local, first-hand sources

62% of sources cited were second-hand (Graph/Table 16). This is hardly surprising since emerging Syrian media aim to produce daily updates on the conflict. They do not have the resources, using their own

reporters, to cover international and local news at this frequency.

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. Producing more human-centred stories, more focused on grassroots politics or social and cultural issues, would enable Syrian emerging media to use more first-hand sources. For example, social media (user-generated content [UGC]) coverage was only at 6 % during the period September–November 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 15: Source relevance



Graph / Table 16: Type of source

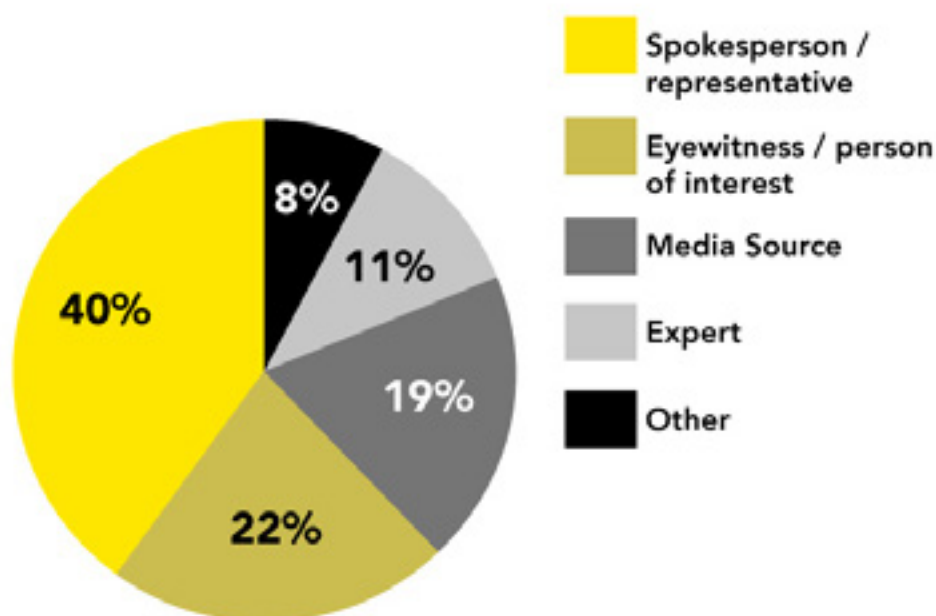
| Source type | Number | % |
|---------------------|--------|------|
| First-hand sources | 107 | 32% |
| Second-hand sources | 207 | 62% |
| UGC | 20 | 6% |
| Total | 334 | 100% |

Role of the sources

40 % of the sources cited are spokespersons or representatives of organisations (Graph/ Table 17). This is not surprising in a media whose coverage mainly focuses on the conflict, and on political actors with a certain military weight.

Only 22 % of the sources are eyewitnesses or people who supposedly have direct knowledge of the narrated facts. Also, only 11 % are experts. The role of the sources reflects the tendency to focus primarily on the conflict and relevant political, or armed actors.

Role of the sources



Relying on civil-society groups

Graph/Table 18 shows that emergent Syrian media mainly rely on national NGOs, Syrian civil society groups, opposition groups and ordinary citizens. Armed groups and relevant political actors such as the Syrian regime, Russia, or the US are used less as sources.

Also, in the monitored period Syrian emerging media tend to rely more than previously on experts and analysts as sources (7 % of the total). However, this is sometimes problematic, as these sources are not always presented properly. For example, a description of the institute or university the “expert” comes from is often omitted (see section below: a closer look at the experts). It is important to see that ordinary citizens are 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 sources of the regime, 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/anti-regime stances. In fact, when we look at the interviewed sources (151 out of 334), we discover that they predominantly belong to ordinary citizens, civil society, and opposition groups (Graph/Table 19).

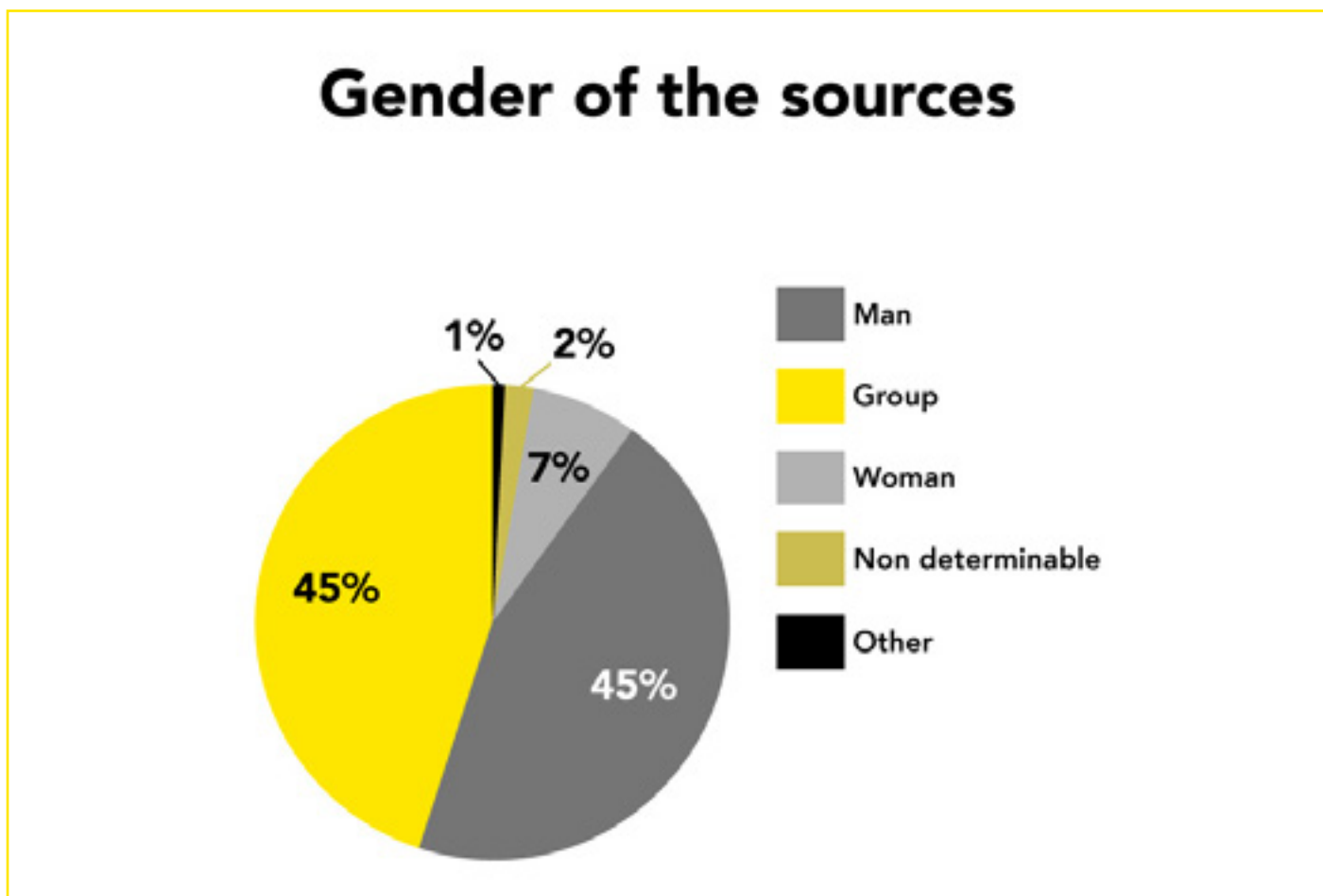
The outlet’s own field reporters constituted just 4% of the sources. This testifies to the difficulty of keeping a stable and extended network of reporters on the ground. However, a bigger effort could be made to valorize those who are available.

Graph / Table 18: Frequently cited sources (top 10)

| Source type | Number of articles | % |
|--|--------------------|----|
| Syrian NGO/Civil society groups | 30 | 9% |
| Ordinary citizen | 30 | 9% |
| Researcher/Academic/Analyst | 24 | 7% |
| Russia | 17 | 5% |
| Syrian opposition | 15 | 4% |
| Outlets' own reporters | 15 | 4% |
| International NGO/Civil society group/Activist | 11 | 3% |
| Military Syrian opposition | 11 | 3% |
| International/foreign news agency | 11 | 3% |
| Syrian press | 11 | 3% |

Graph / Table 19: Interviewed sources (top 5)

| Source type | Number of articles | % (interviewed sources) |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Ordinary citizen | 25 | 16% |
| Researcher/Academic/Analyst | 16 | 10% |
| Syrian NGO and civil society group | 15 | 10% |
| Syrian opposition | 10 | 6% |
| Syrian military opposition | 8 | 5% |



A lack of voice for women

In the articles we analysed, men represented about 45 % of the sources and women only 7 %. In other words: Syrian independent media hardly use women as sources (Graphs/Tables 20, 21, and 22 respectively).

Male sources were quite diversified (Graph/ Table 21). The most recurrent sources came from pro-opposition groups: activists from Syrian civil society groups, but also the political and military opposition. Notably, experts, analysts and academics alone constituted 12 % of the total male sources. Finally, 8 % of the sources were represented by the outlets' journalists on the ground, who are always men. (Graph/Table 21 22).

Female sources were less diversified. About 76 % of female sources were ordinary citizens or refugees (Graph/Table 22). This appears to highlight a tendency to reduce women's voices to those of victims. Although it is understandable that in covering the war female protagonists are less prominent, more effort in giving a voice to women in active social, cultural and political positions could be made. Interestingly all female sources were interviewed, as opposed to only 66% of male sources.

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

| Sources (male) | Number of occurrences | % (male sources) |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Researcher/Academic/ Analyst | 18 | 12% |
| National NGO / civil society group | 17 | 11% |
| Outlets' own journalist | 12 | 8% |
| Syrian opposition | 11 | 7% |
| Military Syrian opposition | 9 | 6% |
| Ordinary citizen | 8 | 5% |
| Russia | 7 | 5% |
| Local anti-regime administration | 7 | 5% |
| Syrian government/Official | 5 | 3% |
| Small businessman | 5 | 3% |
| Total male sources | 151 | 100% |

Graph / Table 22: Most recurrent female sources (top 7)

| Sources (female) | Number of occurrences | % (female sources) |
|--|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Ordinary citizens | 14 | 62% |
| Refugee and IDP | 3 | 14% |
| International NGO/Civil society group | 1 | 4% |
| Syrian NGO/Civil society group | 1 | 4% |
| Health worker | 1 | 4% |
| Teacher | 1 | 4% |
| Researcher/Academic | 1 | 4% |
| SDF and affiliate | 1 | 4% |
| Total female sources | 23 | 100% |

A closer look at the experts

In the monitored period, Syrian media relied on researchers/academics/analysts 24 times, this was about 7 % of the total sources. All the experts were considered relevant, which means that their expertise was clearly related to the subject on which they provided information. Notably, among the selected outlets, ANA Press relied on experts as sources far more than the others (20 occurrences). Enab Baladi relied on experts 3 times, and Al-Ayyam only once. 21% of the experts were groups. Groups can refer to research centers (*or centres*) or institutions, for example mentioning specific reports that they produce. Syrian emerging media rarely decide to use this type of source. When they do, there is often a problem with references, as they tend not to provide links or other additional information other than the institution's name. Most of the times, Syrian emerging media relied on single individuals, and especially men (18 occurrences). Only one of the experts was a woman. The individual experts are almost always (15 out of 19 occurrences) first-hand sources.

Who are the expert sources?

They are all Arabs and most of them Syrians. During the monitored period, no individual foreign expert source emerged in the coverage. Many of these sources are recurrent and interviewed extensively in more than one article. In most of the items the experts are simply presented by expressions such as "political analyst", "military expert", "economic expert", or "writer".

Validation of the experts

The outlets do not generally offer additional information, for example on the research institutions the experts work for, or other

information that could confirm their level of expertise. This is not always strictly necessary. When quite well-known academics such as Asad Abou Khalil or Mahmoud al-Hamza are mentioned, the average reader probably knows them already or can find information on them easily on the internet.

However, mostly this lack of data is quite problematic, as it affects the credibility of the experts and therefore of the information they provide. In most of the cases the experts, in fact, are made out to be just opinion makers who write on different platforms or appear as guests in television talk shows in the Arab world. As in the case of Adeeb al-'Aliawi, a former Syrian colonel presented by ANA Press as just a "strategic expert". Syrian emerging media could mention which institution or media outlet the experts work for and add links to articles they have written or to their professional profile.

Well-known foreign experts as an option

Relying more on well-known foreign experts, even as second-hand sources, could be another option in order to increase the value of the content. In this case, quotations from experts should always include the required references. In an article in Al-Ayyam, for example, a quotation from Asad Abou Khalil did not actually include the title or link to the original publication. Experts may represent a crucial strategic asset for Syrian emerging media, providing credibility to the information and relevant insights. However, more attention on how experts are selected and presented is definitely required.

Concluding remarks

This report has examined a snapshot of the coverage offered by emerging Syrian media outlets between September–November 2017. The conclusions drawn by our analysis, and the recommendations drawn from 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 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.

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.