Journalism in the making

Analysing Syrian Emerging Media

Quarterly Report No. 4
December 2017–January–February 2018

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About these <mark>quarterly reports</mark>

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 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 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

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1 For more information, see: http://almethaq-sy.org/en/
2 For more information, see: https://www.osservatorio.it/

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Introduction

Emerging Syrian Media: Evolution of a Grassroots Movement

The Syrian popular uprising of 2011 quickly became one of most violent conflicts and humanitarian crises of the early 21st century. It was into this harsh environment that a new generation of media began to emerge. Single individuals and activist networks using social media, particularly YouTube and Facebook, created a grass-roots 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.

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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 radiostations 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.

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.** The analysis confirms the trend of the past periods in that emerging Syrian media focus primarily on the conflict (71% of the coverage).

- **Emerging Syrian media seem to perceive their role as a watchdog,** keeping an eye on the actions of politicians and political organisations, and reporting 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 concerned in warfare operations or under opposition control. Regime-administrated areas and Kurdish 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. However, there is an improvement compared to previously monitored periods.

- **Where coverage narrates more personal, in-depth stories,** it tends to privilege either ordinary citizens or actors belonging to the Syrian opposition (military and political) and civil society. Less relevant are representatives coming from specific professional backgrounds (businessmen, teachers, lawyers, etc.).

- **Compared to the third quarterly report, civil-society actors receive slightly more attention,** while Kurdish actors are almost ignored.

- **Emergent Syrian media adopt a critical opinion of the majority of protagonists involved in the conflict.** All armed groups and political protagonists tend to be portrayed negatively. Armed opposition 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 and refugees/IDPs 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. However, there has been an improvement in the number of 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. Most women who emerge in the coverage are either ordinary citizens or refugees/IDPs.

- **The role of watchdog is mainly focused on actors that the Syrian media evaluate as hostile or not in favour of the Syrian revolution (specifically the regime, Russia, Iran, and some Kurdish actors).** However, sometimes they are also capable of giving space to voices critical of the opposition. See section "A closer look" at the end of this report.

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 further 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 and eyewitnesses would be a strategic asset for emerging Syrian media.
- **More diversified, balanced sources could contribute to enhancing Syrian media's credibility.**
- **More attention could be given to areas generally out of opposition control,** such as those dominated by the regime or other actors, for instance 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.
- **Syrian media could make a better effort at observing and criticizing opposition actors.** A substantial contribution to the outlet's credibility could be made by keeping an eye on how the opposition administrates areas under its control and on the behaviour of armed opposition groups.
- **Women could receive more space both as protagonists and sources.** Also, women could be portrayed in more pro-active roles.

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 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 always 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).

- **Radio Rozana**, a web radio based in Paris.

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 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/

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/

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 architecture 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, 154 content items were analysed between December and February 2017/18. Of these, the majority were news items, followed by analysis or opinion pieces (Graph/Table 1).

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

As mentioned initially, 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.

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Table 1: Genre of the items

Genre of the item	Number of Items	%
News Items	102	66%
Editorials, analysis and opinions	22	14%
Feature articles	12	8%
Reportages	10	7%
Interviews	6	4%
Portraits / profiles	2	1%

Findings

We have chosen to present the data gathered between December and February 2017/18 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 analysis, laying out the key events so we can see how the coverage reported them.

**The Syrian context
(December/February 2017/18)**
The considered period was characterised by an armed escalation on different fronts.

In December the Syrian Army reinstated its military campaigns in the surroundings of both Idlib and Aleppo, regaining control of dozens of villages from different armed opposition groups, Tahrir al-Sham and ISIS. Thousands of civilians were forced to flee these areas in search of safer places. The campaign lasted until the beginning of February, ending with the total expulsion of ISIS from the region.

In January regime forces, with Russian support, began intense bombings against the rebel enclaves in Eastern Ghouta. Local activists and international organisations denounced massacres of hundreds of civilians and deliberate attacks on hospitals and civilian facilities. At the end of February chemical attacks were reported in Douma. This offensive lasted until April.

At the end of January, Turkey started an offensive against Afrin and other territories controlled by the PYD in the north of Syria, this operation lasted until March.

In December Putin announced that following ISIS's defeat Russia would start to withdraw its troops. Two weeks later, the Russian Defence Minister stated that Russia will keep its military presence only in Tartous and Latakia. Additionally, the 8th round of the Geneva talks began and Russia forced the regime to send a delegation, after its initial refusal to join.

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 December and February 2017/18.

Section summary

- **The coverage focuses primarily on the conflict.** Of 154 articles, 110 focused directly on the war in its different aspects. All the monitored outlets present the same tendency.

- **Emerging Syrian media seem to perceive their role as antagonistic to the main armed actors.** They initially denounce the consequences of the war on civilians, they also follow the various political negotiations sceptically.

- **Focus on the local level.** Even more than in previous periods, Syrian emerging media tend to produce content dedicated to single areas, rather than opting for a national or an international approach.

- **The regions concerned in the conflict are by far the most covered.**

- **With their focus on the conflict, monitored Syrian media appear to offer the same coverage as established international media.** An effort to cover more untold stories and human stories would be a strategic asset.

- **The content's lack of diversification 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, which represents only 2% of the total.[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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Syrian media focus primarily on the conflict

71% of articles (110 out of 154) focused directly on the conflict. In this sense, the coverage does not appear very diversified (Graph/Table 2). Emerging Syrian media still appear to perceive their role primarily as conflict narrators, simultaneously offering their point of view on relevant political issues. Given the escalation of the conflict during January and February 2018, the focus on warfare was even more pronounced than in the previous periods. In this regard, there were no substantial differences between the different monitored outlets.

Only 2% of the items (3 out of 154) have a constructive approach. Syrian media tend to cover the negative aspects of the conflict, giving less attention to stories of survival, resilience and creativity.

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.

Narrating the war and its impact on civilians

From 110 items focusing on the conflict, 21% reported elements of the warfare on the ground, 25% covered the material impact of the war on civilians, and 16% explored the international dimension of the conflict (Graph/Table 3).

These data appear to reflect the intensification of the war on several fronts and the attention focused on the military campaigns and their direct effect on civilians.

Primarily, Syrian media acted as conflict narrators, offering a quite detailed chronicle of the warfare in different areas, especially Southern and Eastern Ghouta. Interestingly, none of the examined items were dedicated to the Turkish siege of Afrin.

More attention than in previous periods (27 items) was dedicated to the impact of the war on civilians, and especially the victims of bombings in Eastern Ghouta and Idlib.

Finally, 16% of the articles focused on diplomatic and international issues. Of these, the majority follow the 8th round of negotiations in Geneva, and especially the initial refusal of the regime to join them. Some articles were also dedicated to the other negotiation process in Sochi, generally covered with a very critical eye.

Looking beyond the Conflict

Only 44 articles focused on topics not directly related to the conflict (below graph/table 2).

Of these, seven focused on civil-society initiatives in Syria and around the world (Graph/Table 4). In particular, two articles focused on demonstrations organised inside Syrian opposition areas against Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Another topic that received

Graph / Table 2: Main Topics

Main topics

Syrian conflict

Other topics

29%

71%
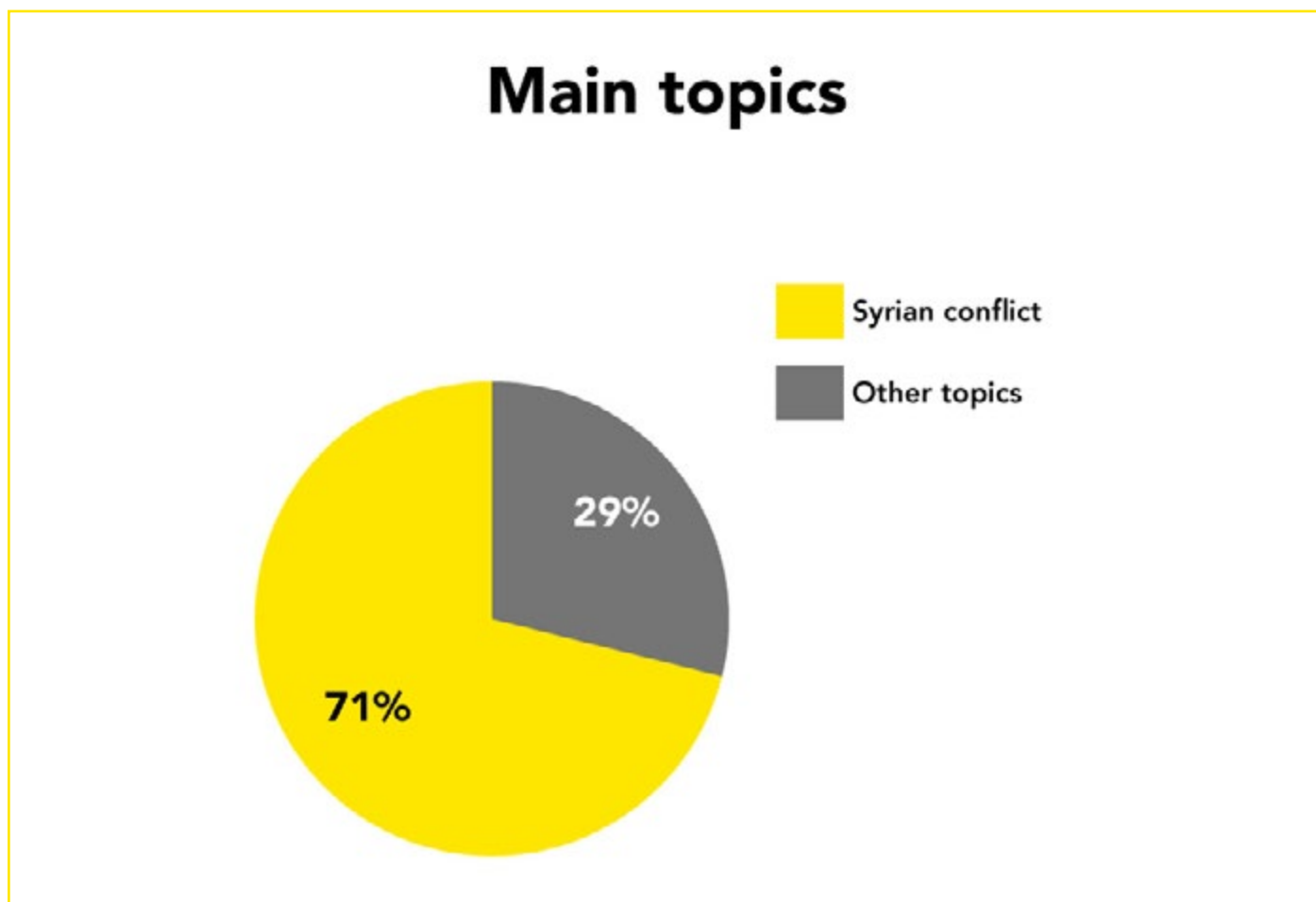
Graph / Table 3: Syrian conflict themes

Topic	Number of items	% (Syrian conflict)
Warfare on the ground	39	35%
Material impact on civilians	27	25%
International dimension of the conflict	17	16%
Human rights	7	6%
War socio-economic impact on civilians	6	5%
National political dimensions of the conflict	6	5%
International and humanitarian aid	4	4%
Regional political dimension of the conflict	2	2%
Economy	2	2%

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some attention was the kidnapping of the director of Aleppo's Free Education Directorate by the al-Noor al-Din Zenki Movement and the campaigns of solidarity with him.

Some articles follow the life of Syrian refugees in countries such as Lebanon, Germany and Libya.

ANA Press dedicates two articles[4] on the 6th of December to the case of "Adam Smith International", a British organisation that the BBC accused of indirectly financing Jihadists in Syria with funding from the Foreign Office. The Syrian outlet criticizes the BBC report of delivering false information. The BBC report was later subject to criticism by other international outlets. See for example: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/dec/03/bbc-syria-al-nusra-foreign-office

Geographical focus: primarily on local dimensions

Geographically, 63% of the articles focused on the local dimensions of reported events. The national and international dimensions constitute respectively 19% and 18% of the total items (Graph/Table 5).

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.

As already registered in previous reports, Syrian emerging media focus more on the local level than on the national and international dimension. In the monitored

Graph / Table 4: Non-conflict topics (top 9)

Topic	Number of articles	% (total articles)
Civil society	7	5%
Immigration / refugees	5	3%
Education	4	3%
Administrative issues	4	3%
Media / ICT	4	3%
Cinema / culture / arts	4	3%
Crime and corruption	3	2%
Economy	3	2%
International affairs	3	2%

4 "The West supports terrorism, that is what the BBC says", ANA Press, 6 December 2018: http://bit.ly/2lhzXG8; "Civil Society Vs Media", ANA Press, 6 December 2018: http://bit.ly/2Cb3SGm

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period, this tendency appears even more pronounced, probably because of the intensification of the conflict. They tend to follow hyper-local daily issues, such as small skirmishes between rebel groups or between them and the regime; giving updates on the state of relations between different armed opposition factions.

If we look at locally dimensioned coverage alone, the first three most covered regions were those more violently hit by the conflict (Eastern Ghouta and, to a lesser extent, Deraa), and those still controlled by opposition forces (Idlib). Areas under the regime control, such as those along the coast and the capital Damascus, receive almost no attention.

Graph / Table 5: Geographical focus

Geographical focus	Number of items	%
Focus on local dimension	97	63%
Focus on national dimension	30	19%
Focus on international dimension	27	18%
Total of news items	**154**	**100%**

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

Region	Number of items	%
Idlib	21	22%
Damascus countryside	20	21%
Daraa	9	9%
Damascus	7	7%
Homs	7	7%
Aleppo	6	6%
Hama	4	4%
Total items covering Syrian regions	**97**	**100%**

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 December and February 2017/18. 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 covered more than individuals.** From a total of 576 protagonists, 394 were groups (about 69%). 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,** together with ordinary citizens and refugees/IDPs. Coverage showed a strong focus on the conflict, its military protagonists, and its victims.

- **There is a slight improvement in giving attention to Syrian civil-society groups.** However, these groups were still quite marginal if compared to prominent political and military groups.

- **Positive coverage is uncommon.** The most covered groups (military protagonists on all sides) received the most unfavourable coverage. Ordinary citizens and refugees were portrayed sympathetically rather than positively, which may be 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 mainly 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.

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Collective protagonists outnumber single individuals

As in the previously monitored periods, coverage largely focused on collective protagonists, with 69% 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.

Military protagonists are the most covered

Group protagonists, as in the previous quarterly reports, constituted the majority and were mainly international actors, such as the Syrian regime, Russia, and armed opposition groups (Graph/Table 8). Additionally, ordinary citizens had considerable weight. This reflected the focus of Syrian emerging media on the conflict and its impact on civilians while simultaneously holding armed groups accountable for their actions. Syrian civil-society groups, with only 19 occurrences, were still a bit underrepresented in the coverage.

Focusing on individual protagonists

Not only do Syrian emerging media tend to focus on ordinary citizens, but they also focus on people belonging to the Syrian opposition and civil society (Graph/Table 9). In general, the choice of individual protagonists can be explained in two different ways. 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 choose to give visibility to actors who better represent their point of view.

UN members also emerged as prominent protagonists. Staffan De Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, appeared frequently as a protagonist in the Geneva and Sochi negotiations. Additionally, UN representatives appeared as individual protagonists (and sources) in relation to relevant issues such as refugees and chemical weapons investigations.

Graph / Table 7: Main protagonists

Main protagonists	Number	% (interviewed sources)
Groups	394	69%
Men	155	27%
Women	25	4%
Indeterminable	2	0%
Total protagonists	**576**	**100%**

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

Collective protagonists	Number of occurrences	%
Regime army	55	14%
Ordinary citizens	47	12%
Syrian military opposition	31	8%
Russia	27	7%
Syrian NGOs and civil society groups	19	5%
Syrian government officials	17	4%
Refugees / IDPs	16	4%
Local anti-regime administration	13	3%
Jabhat Fateh al-Sham	13	3%
Pro-regime militias	11	3%

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

Individual protagonists	Number of occurrences	% (individual protagonists)
Ordinary citizens	26	14%
Military Syrian opposition	14	8%
Local anti-regime administration	12	7%
UN	12	7%
Syrian NGOs and civil-society groups	11	6%
Syrian opposition	11	6%
Syrian government / Officials	10	6%
Refugees / IDP	9	5%
Syrian president	6	3%
US	6	3%

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Graph / Table 10: Other relevant protagonists

Other protagonists	Number of occurrences	%
Syrian civil-society groups, media activists, local anti-regime administration, grassroots opposition	56	10%
Kurdish actors (PYD, KNC, KDPS, SDF, YPG, and other Kurdish political actors)	13	2%

Almost absent protagonists

It should also be noted that some actors were almost absent as protagonists in the coverage within the sample. (Graph/Table 10).

There is an improvement in giving visibility to actors belonging to grassroots opposition and civil-society movements. The monitored media, and in particular Enab Baladi and Smart News, dedicate a certain amount of attention to how opposition held areas are administrated. See the section "A closer look".

Kurdish actors, on the contrary, are almost completely ignored by the monitored media, and constitute only 2% of the total protagonists.

Linking tone to coverage

Our analysis also evaluates the tone of journalistic coverage. Coverage that endorses or refers positively 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 were, not surprisingly, portrayed more negatively while some armed opposition groups also tended to receive a negative portrayal.

Out of 107 appearances by regime actors, 52 (49%) included a negative portrayal. 5 The Syrian regime was often portrayed as 'criminal' and 'corrupt'.

Russia was portrayed negatively 15 times out of 29 instances. Russia is generally considered as the main partner of the regime's crimes and was often described as an 'occupying force'.

Kurdish actors were portrayed negatively 3 times out of 13 occurrences, and never positively, 6 as already seen previously.

ISIS, an organisation often labelled as 'terrorist', was portrayed negatively 4 times out of 11 total occurrences, and never positively.

The US was also portrayed negatively (4 times out of 15 instances), and never positively.

The UN was portrayed negatively twice out of 20 instances, and never positively. This confirms a certain level of distrust by Syrian emerging media towards the international actors involved in the conflict on all sides.

Finally, the Syrian armed opposition was portrayed negatively 3 times out of 45, once sympathetically, and once positively.

As registered in the previous reports, the only actors who were sometimes portrayed positively are various actors belonging to the Syrian civil society (Graph/Table 10). In this case, we find 5 positive and 3 sym-pathetic portrayals out of 56 instances.

As seen before, ordinary citizens tended to be covered sympathetically (23 times out of 73 instances), and never positively. Also, 28 times they were clearly framed as "victims". In only three cases, the portrayal was negative. Not surprisingly, refugees and IDPs received a sympathetic portrayal

18 out of 25 times and were framed as victims 6 times.

Gender representation
Gender representation was very skewed in the articles we analysed. Of the 180 instances of focus on individuals, only 25 (4% of the total 576 protagonists) were women (see Table 7 at the top of this section). Additionally, the coverage of women is even more problematic if we compare the type of male and female protagonists.

As we can see from the table below (Graph/Table 11), male protagonists were characterised mainly by active roles at the political, social and military levels. Male protagonists appeared mainly as representatives or members of political and military bodies both from the Syrian opposition and the regime alike. Men also represented Syrian civil-society organisations and, to a lesser extent, international actors, such as Turkey or the US.

The coverage of female protagonists was very different (Graph/Table 12). Most fe-male protagonists were ordinary citizens and refugees or IDPs (Graph/Table 12), as seen previously. Other women represented were: a Lebanese actress from the Belgian film "In-siryated"; two artists presenting their work in Jisr al-Shoughour (Idlib); a journalist, Wa'ad al-Khatib, receiving a prize for her coverage in Aleppo; and a British journalist accused of fabricating news for a BBC report.

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5 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, regime public administration, and regime security forces.

6 For the aggregation of Kurdish actors, see Table 10.

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

Male protagonists (individuals)	Number of occurrences	% (only men)
Ordinary citizens	19	12%
Syrian military opposition	14	9%
Local anti-regime administration	12	8%
Syrian civil society groups	11	7%
Syrian opposition	11	7%
Syrian government/officials	9	6%
Syrian President	6	4%
Religious personalities	5	3%
Teachers	4	3%
Turkey	4	3%
US	4	3%

Graph / Table 12: Female protagonists

Female protagonists (individuals)	Number of occurrences	% (women only)
Ordinary citizens	7	28%
Refugee and IDPs	6	24%
Artist/intellectual	3	12%
US	2	9%
International journalists	2	9%
Syrian government officials	1	3%
Syrian journalist	1	3%
PYD/Autonomous Authority	1	3%
UN	1	3%
US	1	3%
Other	1	3%

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 December and February 2017/18. All sources mentioned have been considered.

Section summary:

- **There are some issues relating to how sources are identified and presented.** From 451 sources, only 39% were precisely identified by name, profession, and other relevant information. Also, 11% were unidentified. However, there is an improvement in the presence of unnamed/unclear sources (only 3%).

- **Anonymous and unidentified sources may be conflated.** This represents a problem with the presentation of sources.

- **Second-hand sources predominate.** Syrian emerging media, due to their limited resources, mainly rely on second-hand sources. An effort to extend the use of first-hand sources could be made.

- **Ordinary citizens, civil-society and opposition groups are the most common sources** (as seen in previous reports).

- **Women are poorly represented as sources.** Only 6% of the sources were women, while 46% were men. Also, half of the female sources were represented by ordinary citizens and refugees/IDPs while male sources were represented by civil-society actors, opposition groups, and journalists on the ground, among others. Furthermore only 12% of the authors of the articles were women, while 45% were men.

- **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 the conditions of war do not always make it possible for reporting to be done in the field.

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Sources: a lack of precision

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

Identified Sources

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

Unnamed / unclear 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'. In cases like these, it is not even possible to identify the category to which the source belongs. A total of 451 sources were mentioned by the monitored Syrian news outlets during the period examined by this report. Of these, 3% were unnamed/unclear (Graph/Table 13).

Identification of the sources

Of the total sources, 39% were precise, i.e. identified by a specific name and other identification details (Graph/Table 14). The majority of the sources (49%) were generic, they were identified by profession, geographic location, gender, and other elements, but not by a specific name. 11% were unidentified, which means they were not presented in a sufficiently accurate way (see also Anonymous vs Unidentified, below). Two classic examples: when the article reported that a country expressed

a certain position without specifying which body or person voiced that position; or when a source is presented as "local activists" or "special sources".

Anonymous vs unidentified

Only 1% of the sources were 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 unidentified Syrian sources were also under this kind of protection.
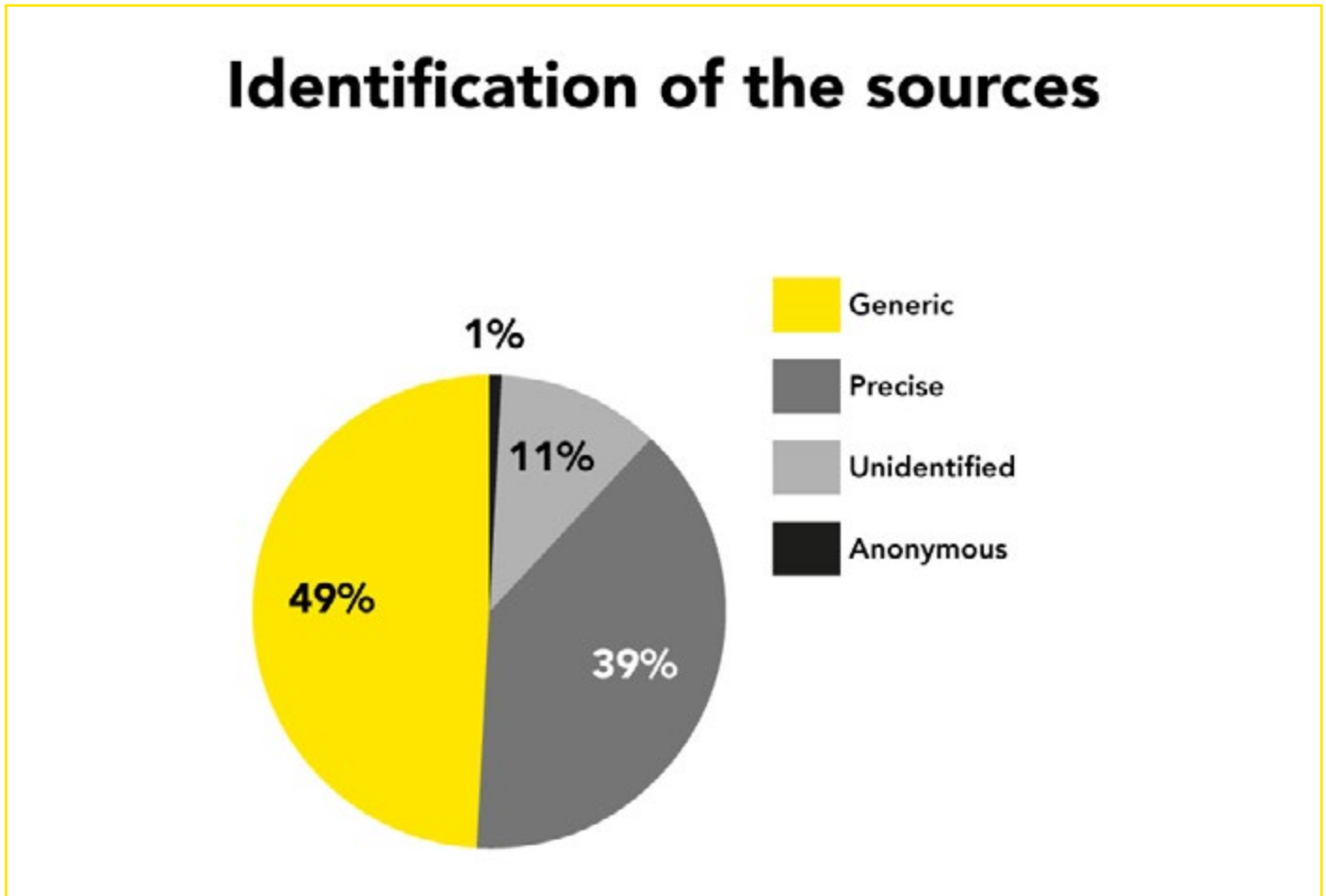
The amount of unidentified sources (11%) may depend on different factors. They are either unnamed/unclear sources, or sources that are not sufficiently identified such as "Russia said" or "some media activists said". In the Syrian context the access to sources can be very difficult and often media outlets 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 the emerging Syrian media rely. More effort to use credible and clear sources could be made and sometimes they 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 procedures are particularly crucial for an emerging media that need to build up a credible image.

Graph / Table 13: Identified vs unnamed / unclear sources

Source type	Number	%
Identified sources	437	97%
Unnamed / unclear sources	14	3%
Total	**451**	**100%**

Graph / Table 14: Identification of the Sources

Identification of the sources

Legend:
- Generic (yellow)
- Precise (dark grey)
- Unidentified (light grey)
- Anonymous (black)

1%
11%
49%
39%

Relevance of the sources

12% of sources were evaluated as not having the authority to offer credible information in the context of an article's theme (Graph/Table 15). The non-relevance of a source is mostly related to problems of identification or lack of clarity. However, in a few cases, a source presented as expert in a certain field delivered information not related to that field (for example, an economist is called to deliver information on strategic matters).

With 88% of sources interpreted as relevant, emerging Syrian media outlets appear to be doing a good job of contextualising their articles. That said, reducing the number of irrelevant or not directly relevant sources would be an asset in future coverage.

Graph / Table 15: Source relevance

Relevance of the sources

Yes

No

12%

88%
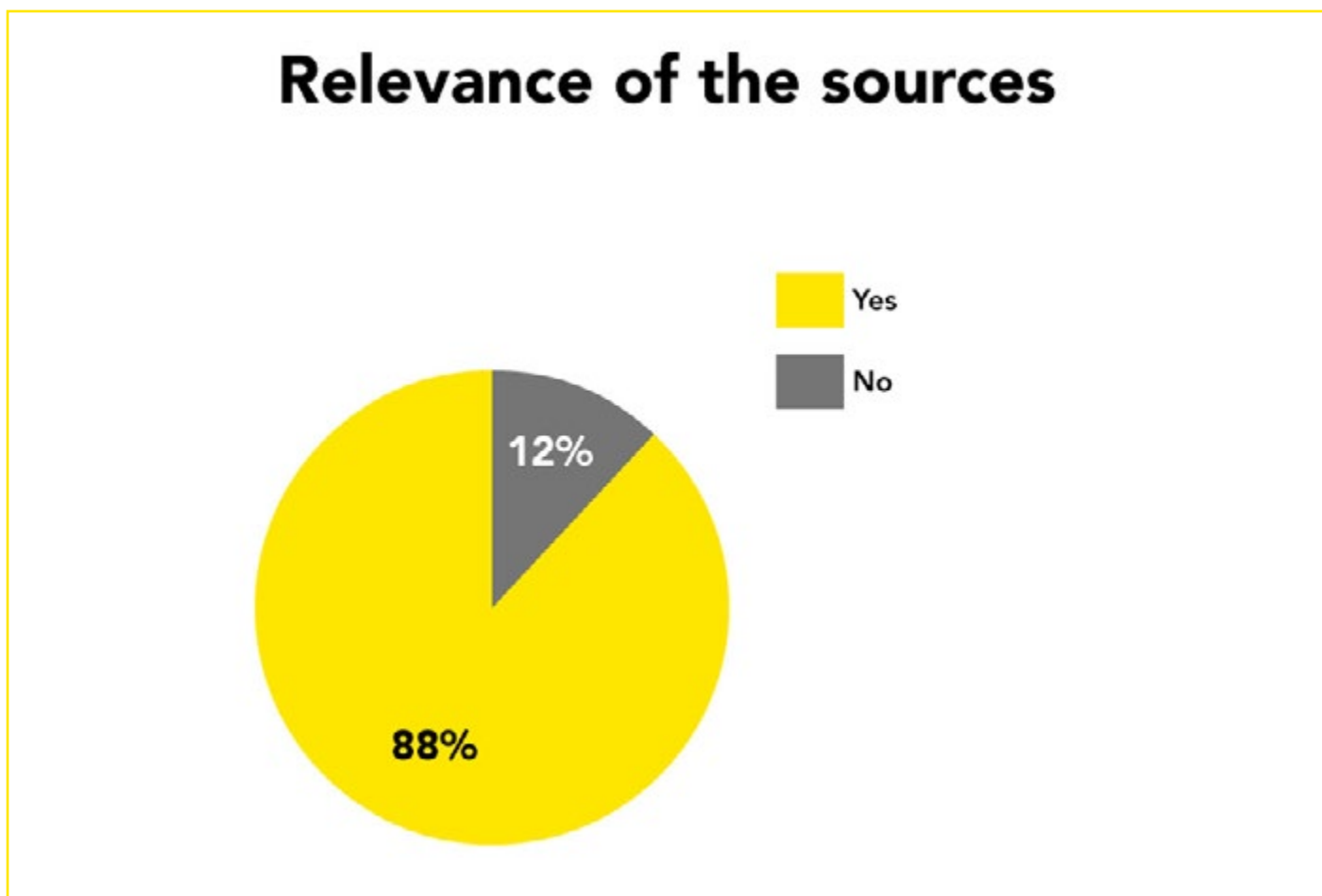
Graph / Table 16: Type of source

Source type	Number	%
First-hand sources	151	33%
Second-hand sources	270	60%
UGC	30	7%

First-hand and second-hand sources

A total of 60% of sources cited were second-hand (Graph/Table 16). Since emerging Syrian media aim to produce daily updates on the conflict, this is hardly surprising. 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, and a coverage more focused on social and cultural issues, would enable Syrian emerging media to use more first-hand sources. Also, social media (user-generated content [UGC]) coverage was only at 7% during the period between

December and February 2017/18. 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.
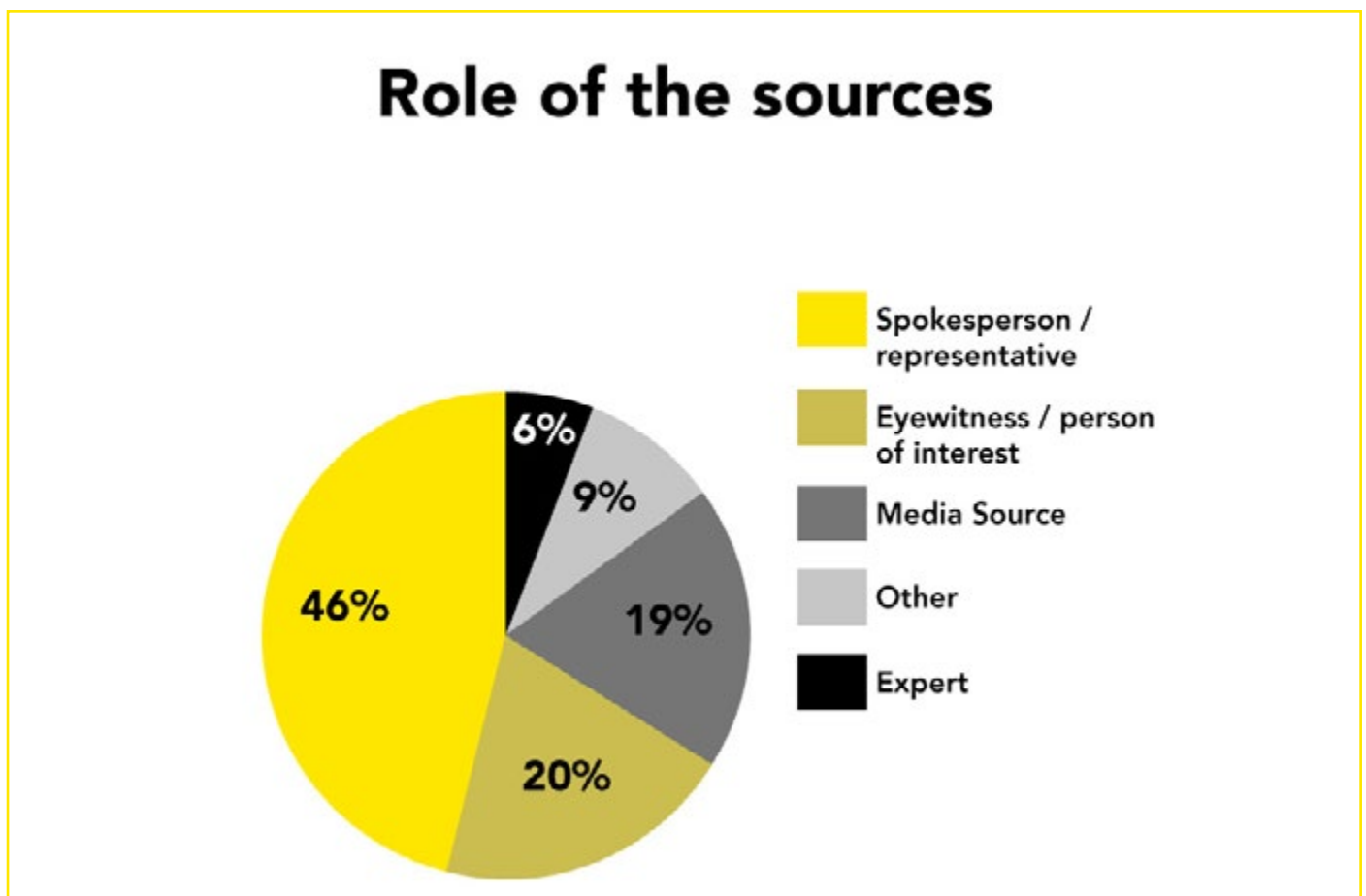
Role of the sources
46% of the sources mentioned are spokespersons or representatives of organisations (Graph/Table 17). This is not surprising in a media whose coverage mainly focuses on the conflict, and on political actors with a certain military and political weight.

Only 20% of the sources were eyewitnesses or people who supposedly have direct knowledge of the narrated facts. Also, only 6% were experts (on the experts as sources, see the section "A closer look at the experts" in the third quarterly report). The role of the sources reflects the tendency to focus primarily on the conflict and relevant political, or armed actors. More variety in the use of sources, specifically increasing the use of eyewitnesses and people who have direct knowledge of the facts, could be a crucial asset in enhancing Syrian media's credibility.

Graph / Table 17: Role of the sources

Role of the sources

- Spokesperson / representative — 46%
- Eyewitness / person of interest — 20%
- Media Source — 19%
- Other — 9%
- Expert — 6%

Who are the main sources?

Graph/Table 18 shows that emergent Syrian media mainly relied on Syrian NGOs or civil-society groups, opposition groups and ordinary citizens. International actors, apart from the UN, are less relevant sources. Both local and international media also appear as prominent sources of information.

The choice of sources probably relies on two main points. Firstly, the monitored media have an easier and often direct access to pro-opposition groups and ordinary citizens than, for example, the regime, ISIS or officials of international actors. Secondly, local pro-opposition sources offer a point of view that is very close to the editorial policy of the outlets we analysed.

In fact, when we look at the interviewed sources (181 out of 451), i.e. sources that are directly quoted in the item, we discover that they predominantly belonged to ordinary citizens, civil society, and opposition groups (Graph/Table 19).

The outlet's own field reporters constituted just 4% of the sources, confirming their difficulty in keeping a stable and extended network of reporters on the ground. However, a better effort could also be made to validate those who are available.

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

Source type	Number of occurrences	%
Syrian NGOs and civil-society groups	53	12%
Ordinary citizen	34	8%
Local anti-regime administration	29	6%
UN	20	4%
Military Syrian opposition	19	4%
Syrian government officials	18	4%
Outlets' own reporters	17	4%
Syrian opposition	17	4%
International media	15	3%
Syrian media	14	3%

Graph / Table 19: Interviewed sources (top 6)

Source type	Number of articles	%
Ordinary citizens	24	13%
Syrian NGOs and civil-society groups	11	6%
Local anti-regime administration	11	6%
Syrian opposition	10	6%
US	10	6%
Syrian government officials	10	6%

**A look at the gender of the sources: a lack of voice for women**

In the articles we analysed, men represented about 46% of the sources and women only 6%. In other words: Syrian independent media hardly relied on women as sources (Graph/Table 20).

Male sources were quite diversified (Graph/Table 21). The most recurrent sources came from pro-opposition groups: members of local anti-regime administration, activists from Syrian civil-society groups and members of the political and military opposition. Also, when relying on ordinary citizens, Syrian emerging media tends to speak to men more than women (19 vs. 8 occurrences respectively). Finally, 7% of male sources were represented by the outlets' journalists on the ground. As already stated, journalists on the ground are always men.

Female sources were less diversified. About 50% 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. Whereas, it is understandable that in covering the war female protagonists emerge as less prominent, more effort in giving a voice to women in more active social, cultural and political positions could be made. Among female sources with a different background, we found Rasha Shahbaz, a lawyer from Damascus; Boutheina Shaaban, a regime's spokeswoman; and Sydra Mohamed, a media activist based in Eastern Ghouta.

Interestingly 77% of female sources were interviewed, as opposed to only 44% of male sources. This could reflect the fact that female sources are mostly refugees and ordinary citizens, and thus more accessible than prominent political or military actors.

Graph 20: Gender of the Sources

Gender of the sources

- Group
- Man
- Woman
- Non determinable
- Other

2% 2% 6% 46% 44%
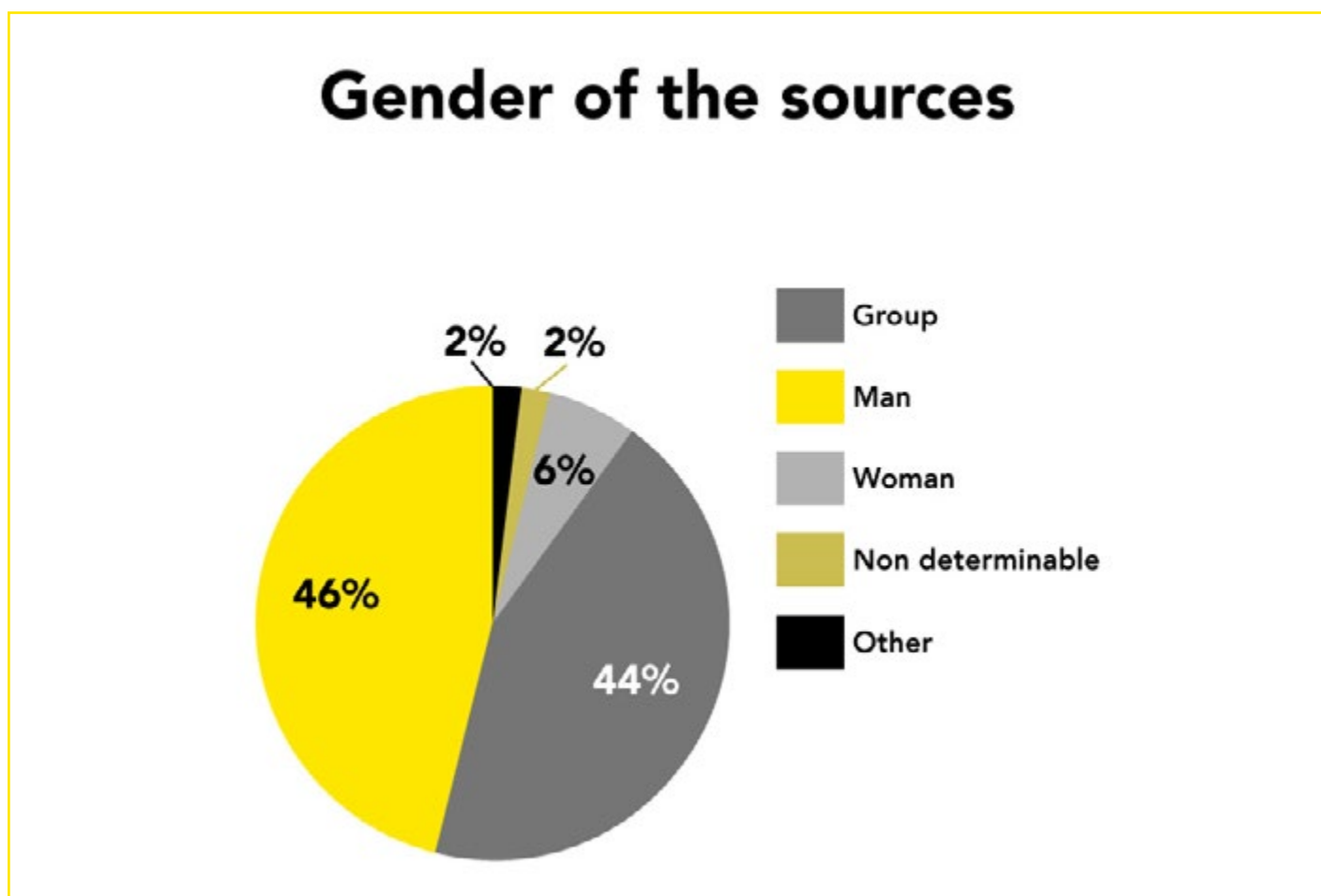
Graph / Table 21: Most recurrent male sources (top 10)

Sources (male)	Number of occurrences	% (only men)
Local anti-regime administration	21	10%
Ordinary citizens	19	9%
Outlets' own journalist	15	7%
Syrian opposition	14	7%
Syrian military opposition	14	7%
Syrian civil society groups	14	7%
UN	11	5%
US	7	3%
Researcher/academic/analyst	7	3%
Syrian government officials	7	3%

Graph / Table 22: Most recurrent female sources

Sources (female)	Number of occurrences	% (female sources)
Ordinary citizens	8	31%
Refugees and IDPs	5	19%
Artist/Intellectual	3	12%
International journalists	2	7%
US	2	7%
Syrian government officials	1	4%
Lawyers	1	4%
Media activists	1	4%
PYD/Autonomous authority	1	4%
Russia	1	4%
UN	1	4%

A Closer Look
Do Syrian emerging media also perform as watchdogs over opposition groups?

Syrian emerging media tend to be very severe when it comes to revealing the negative actions of political actors in the conflict (as mentioned earlier). This criticism is not limited to the Syrian regime and its allies but is often addressed directly to other actors such as the US, the UN, or Turkey.

However, what about criticism of political actors with whom they are more aligned?

As we examine the portrayal of opposition groups (grassroots opposition, local anti-regime administration, media activists, military and political opposition, civil-society groups), we find only 3 negative portrayals and 7 positive portrayals out of 121 occurrences. Significantly, all the negative portrayals concern armed groups and specifically extremist groups, such as Tahrir al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham.

In two articles published on the 4 th of December, Smart News and ANA Press[7] gave visibility to the campaign, launched by different education directorates in Idlib, Hama and Aleppo, demanding the release of Mohammed Mustafa, the director of the Aleppo free directorate of education.

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7 Ayham al-Barbour, "A solidarity stand in the city of Kfarnabel with Aleppo's Education Director", Smart News Agency, 4 December 2017: http://smrt.co/Q4K3vT; Ahmad Orabi, "In the context of the abduction of the Director of Education.. A strike in the education section in Syria", ANA Press, 4 December 2017: http://bit.ly/2DqWWF5

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Mustafa was kidnapped in November by the "Nur al-Din al-Zanki" movement who accused him of being "corrupt" and "a traitor". In another article published by Smart on the 4th of January, the displacement of thousands of people between Hama and Idlib was directly linked to the clashes between the FSA and Tahrir al-Sham.[8]

In general, Syrian emerging media tend to avoid criticising opposition groups directly. This is hardly surprising in the context of a conflict in which they clearly sympathise with one of the two sides.

However, criticism appears to emerge more in two different scenarios. Firstly, when it is directed towards armed groups and especially radical Islamist militias, such as Tahrir al-Sham or the "Nur al-Din al-Zanki" movement.

Secondly, when the criticism towards opposition actors comes from other opposition actors, then it is more probable that they give it visibility. Although in this situation, criticism of civil-society actors or anti-regime administration bodies emerges less often than in the abovementioned scenario.

In this context, Syrian emerging media seem to be content with describing current affairs without performing the role of a watchdog. In many items, the monitored outlets tend to give voice to civil-society or opposition actors without hearing from other sources and then presenting more diversified, and more nuanced, points of view.

An example is an article published by Smart on the 7th of December covering the decision of the Local Council of Nua, a village close to Daraa, to regulate the activities of humanitarian organisations. Only sources from the council were heard, without any chance for the organisations involved to express their point of view.[9]

Similarly, an article published by ANA Press on the 5th of February covering the difficulties of the education system in "liberated areas", mainly relied on an interview with Abd al-'Aziz al-Daghim, the minister of Higher Education in the Syrian interim government. As in the previous case, it would have been interesting to explore other points of view, perhaps also look critically at how the opposition managed these issues.[10]

However, in a few cases Syrian emerging media also hosted voices critical of

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8 Abdallah Darwish, "75,000 displaced people from eastern Hama and southern Idlib as a result of the advancement of the regime forces", Smart News Agency, 4 January 2018: http://bit.ly/2DADVUL

9 Hiba Debbas, "The Local City Council of Nawa in Daraa forbids the work of organisations that do not coordinate with it", Smart News Agency, 7 December 2017: http://bit.ly/2o7BJxf

10 Aya Ahmed, "7 challenges faced by Higher Education in liberated areas", ANA Press, 5 February 2018: http://bit.ly/2o9PXLD

opposition administrations. An example was an article published by Enab Baladi on the 1st of January that gives voice to normal citizens condemning the decision of the Idlib administration to clean the streets of street vendors.[11]

Another article, published by Al-Ayyam on the 6th of February, shed light on the difficulties in the education system in the Hama countryside. Even though the author only blamed the regime for the situation, at the same time they also demanded that local opposition authorities intervene in order to resolve some of the issues.[12]

All these considerations reveal that, despite the challenges on the ground and the conflict situation, Syrian emerging media can manage, although still infrequently, to give space to voices critical of opposition actors, and specifically armed groups.

Concluding remarks

This report has examined a snapshot of the coverage offered by emerging Syrian media outlets between December and February 2017/18. The conclusions drawn by our analysis, and the recommendations emerging from these 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 the emerging Syrian media, illustrating both their successes and areas for future improvement. While it celebrates a phenomenon that continues to unfold despite the war.

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11 "Idlib's Municipality begins removing illegal stalls from the city's sidewalks", Enab Baladi, 1 January 2018: http://bit.ly/2CFUYAO

12 Ahmad Ibrahim al-Hassan, "The reality of education in the countryside of Hama .. Difficulties and challenges", Al-Ayyam, 6 February 2018: http://bit.ly/2Gk52B3

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Glossary

ECSM	Ethical Charter for Syrian Media
IDPs	Internally Displaced People
IREX	International Research and Exchanges Board
ISIS	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

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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.

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Maysa Shawwa holds a BA in Communication Arts with an emphasis on journalism at the Lebanese American University of Beirut and a Master's degree in Sociology 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), and on a project mapping digital media in Lebanon for Open Society Foundation. 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.

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