JOURNALISM IN CRISIS
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE EMERGING MEDIA SECTOR IN SYRIA

FUR DIE FREIHEIT
مؤسسة فريديش ناومان من أجل الحرية

FINAL REPORT 2018
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Foreword

"Are you also working on Syrian issues?" As a German, working for a German institution in Lebanon, this is one of the questions I am confronted with the most. A quick "Yes" would often suffice but both the analytical and responsible inner me hold me back from providing such a simplistic answer.

First and foremost, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) is a creative platform for innovation, with the aim of enhancing the values and goals of liberalism worldwide. Our activities target individuals who share our core principles on liberalism. We advise, motivate and inspire relevant stakeholders and create, shape and market solutions for tomorrow that are based on enhancing individual freedom and responsibility. We are – as I am especially proud to say – the creative think-tank of liberal politics in Lebanon and Syria.

In March 2018 the Syrian conflict enters its 8th year. This means seven years of suffering for too many Syrians, seven years of a growing tragedy in what has become the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, seven years of disturbing news headlines and eight years of heart-breaking images on the media. But at the same time this sad anniversary also indicates seven years of an expanding civil society, seven years of resilience, and seven years of continuous international support from humanitarian and civic NGOs alike.

In light of this misery, it is not easy to answer if the expertise of a global liberal think-tank is what is actually needed in a major conflict zone. After all, we do not supply blankets, food or water. But we must not be helpless bystanders either! On the contrary – the Syrian refugee community, the Syrian civil society, the Syrian media and many involved individuals in the Syrian community – over and over again urged us to engage even more. In the current Syrian conflict it is not enough to just supply food and shelter. While free voices inside Syria are more and more under threat, emerging media outlets found new ways to publish and take advantage of what digital media outlets offer. The longing for food for thought is high, the support for civil engagement is needed, and offering Syrian voices a platform to be heard internationally is more important than ever. FNF, the biggest liberal NGO worldwide with a comprehensive network of partners, experts and volunteers, must play a very vital role in this situation. As an open laboratory of freedom, we can facilitate the debate and provide the Syrian media with platforms for discussion and potential growth. In 2015, we focused on how the “Syrian story” is told to the international public through a discussion panel that gathered international journalists and reporters who worked on covering the Syrian conflict. In 2016, we discussed the future of Syria by living the actual Syrian story through the technology of virtual reality and by organizing a debate between journalists on issues of identity and politics in post-war Syria. And now, in 2017 and 2018, it is time to analyze the future of a Syrian media scene that is growing and able to reach out to the world through a content analysis of the emerging media sector.

The study you are holding in your hands has – in terms of scale and depth – never been done before. Researchers have weighed, categorized and analyzed more than 12,000 media pieces that were published over the course of six months. The result is a compendium not only to assess the quality of journalism after seven years of media content, but also to understand how the “Syrian story” was covered while considering the challenges for journalists and field reporters.

"Journalism in Crisis” provides you with facts to make decisions. With “Journalism in Crisis”, donor agencies can assess who to work with and where to allocate funds, media development agencies can find out what the priorities are and individual activists, academics and researchers get a much clearer view on the quality of the Syrian media based on this extensive research undertaken by “The Samir Kassir Foundation” and FNF. The preliminary results of this research were discussed with the public in October 2017 during a national conference held in Beirut, where journalists from various parts of the globe engaged in discussions with international media development agencies and Syrian journalists, and also shared their concerns and hopes for the future of journalism in Syria. Both the results of the study and the conference are now finally ready to be presented to a wider public through this report.

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom is very proud to have participated in the creation of this invaluable study, which not only brings us closer to the reality and the true story of Syria, but also underlines the fact that the work with Syrian media has not ended... it is a continuous process.
Introduction

The Samir Kassir Foundation has been following the state of Syrian media since before the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution in 2011. It has embraced a number of writers and journalists who often had been forced to leave Syria and publish their work in regional and international media outlets – most of them after having been detained for long periods of time.

When the spark of the popular uprising broke out in Syria in March 2011, government media outlets could not be relied upon to cover the popular demands for freedom and democracy, as they were an integral part of the regime’s toolbox and lacked the basic levels of independence to engage in free and professional reporting. In response, Syrian citizens from different regions took to filming and reporting on popular protests and daily realities in Syrian cities and rural areas in a way that was broadly similar to what had begun in Tunisia and Egypt. The international media also had to deal with local sources of information after Syrian security services closed the door on foreign reporters during the first phase of the conflict and after a number of international journalists were killed during their coverage of the battles in Homs in early 2012, not to mention the subsequent wave of kidnappings – by Al-Nusra Front, Daesh, pro-regime militias, and other armed factions – that targeted correspondents and photographers from different countries.

Believing that the voices of Syrians must reach all ears, and longing for the freedom that was absent from the Syrian public space, media work in Syria developed from forms of citizen journalism to more organized frameworks, and so through new media outlets that gradually emerged from pages on social networking platforms to establish online magazines and newspapers, print publications, and radio and television channels. The media revolution attracted the attention of international media development institutions and donors, which launched major programs to train Syrian journalists, provide media outlets with the necessary equipment, raise photography, writing, and editing skills, and encourage media codes of ethics through which the new Syrian media scene could commit to international quality standards and professional practices.

After the number of new media outlets reached around 300 in 2015, donors’ priorities changed as the military reality worsened, the scenario of rapid regime change in Syria receded, and the international community gave priority to the fight against violent extremism, only seen through the prism of fighting Daesh. This came at the expense of their previous commitment to supporting free and independent journalism. As a result, a number of new Syrian media outlets started to suffer from financial setbacks, which were accompanied by challenges associated with the migration of a number of their employees to safer countries, and the inability to plan anything due to the fluctuation in donors’ priorities. However, the work continued in many print and online publications, and new radio stations, which were – in parallel – striving to develop and sustain their editorial policy, administrative structure, and economic model.

After more than six years of post-revolutionary journalism, large amounts of money spent on training journalists and equipping media outlets, and many challenges facing the establishment of coordination frameworks between the international bodies and Syrian institutions involved with the sector, it was necessary to complete a study that looks in depth at what the new Syrian media has been publishing. This content analysis aims to complement existing audience research reports and other studies on the expectations of the Syrian public.

Methodology

This study focuses on print and online publications and looks into the issues covered in the articles, reports, and investigations, as well as into the relation between these topics and prominent political and security events. It also looks into the space dedicated to the issue of refugees, women, military and field developments, and the rest of Syrian citizens’ priorities. It qualitatively and quantitatively examines the sources on which the emerging Syrian media sector relied and the references it cited.

This study monitored all the material published on the websites of 17 Syrian media outlets in the period from January 1 to June 30, 2017 – those dates included. In case some content is missing and is provided at a later stage, SKF is ready to integrate it in the data and issue an updated version of the present report.

The media outlets included in the study are:

- Al-Jumhuriya – www.aljumhuriya.net
- Al-Gherbal – www.algherbal.com
- Tamaddon – www.tamaddon.com
- Hibr – www.hibrpress.com
- Syria Untold – www.syriauntold.com
- Zaman al-Wasl – www.zamanalwsl.net
- Zaiton – www.zaitonnag.com
- Souriatna – www.souriatnpress.net
- Shaam Network – www.shaam.org
- Sada al-Shaam – www.sadaalshaam.net
- Enab Baladi – www.enabbaladi.net
- Ayn al-Madina – www.ayn-almadina.com
- All Syrian (Kulluna Sourioum) – www.allsyrian.org
- Smart News Agency – www.smartnews-agency.com
- Qasioun – www.qasioun.net

The media outlets were selected on the following basis:

- They were still publishing content by January 1, 2017;
- They have published more than 80 issues; and
- They are not directly linked to a faction involved in the military battles in Syria.
A total of 12,076 items published during this period were entered in a database, which included the following information:

- Title;
- Date of publication;
- URL;
- Type of article: news brief; news report or feature story; opinion article; investigative report; interview;
- Main topics: military and field developments; political; social; economic; services and infrastructure; cultural; medical and health; child; women; educational; rights and humanitarian issues; environmental; sports; other topics (with the possibility of more than one topic per article);
- Link between the article and the issue of refugees;
- Number of sources;
- Nature of the sources: field activist; military; politician; official government source; ordinary citizens; correspondent; technical expert; jurist and rights activist; academic or researcher; international expert; economist; unspecified;
- Number of (non-person) references cited in the article;
- Nature of the references: international media outlet; regional media outlet; Syrian media outlet; Syrian official or governmental organization; non-Syrian official or governmental organization; United Nations agency; Syrian non-governmental organization; international non-governmental organization; non-Syrian non-governmental organization; academic institutions and think tanks; private company; social media platforms; military group; Daesh; other references;
- Noteworthy expressions.

We do not claim that this is a comprehensive evaluation of the entire Syrian emerging media sector. This study does not include external fact-checking of the information provided in the monitored articles. It does not trace sources nor does it include interviews with editors of and workers in the various media outlets to seek further details about their editorial process.

The study is a much needed still photography of key indicators for professional journalism that can serve as a basis for benchmarking, comparison over time, and international comparison. It is also a tool to help the emerging Syrian media sector in its effort to diversity its content, strengthen its editorial capacity, and address shortcomings it may have experienced.

Presentation of the Media Outlets

Al-Jumhuriya: A collection of studies, research pieces and long-form articles tackling Syrian, regional, Arab, and international affairs. It is run by a group of writers, academics and intellectuals. Established in 2011.

Al-Gherbal: An independent monthly magazine issued by Madad Suria lil-Thaqafa wal-I'lam from Kafranbel in the Idlib governorate. Its first edition was issued on January 15, 2013. Commitment to periodic issuance: 42%.

Tamaddon: A political, cultural, multi-topic weekly newspaper that was launched on June 15, 2013. It is based in Istanbul, Turkey. Commitment to periodic issuance: 37%.

Hibr: An independent political, economic, social, multi-topic weekly newspaper that is issued from Aleppo. Commitment to periodic issuance: 100%.

Syria Untold: A website that mainly aims to tell the lesser-known stories of the Syrian uprising and gather information around acts of civil resistance.

Hentah: An independent monthly magazine published by the Hentah Network for Studies and Publishing from the city of Salamiyah in the Hama governorate. It was founded by late journalist Naji al-Jarf, but its work has been suspended since March 2017. Commitment to periodic issuance until the last edition: 80%.

Zaman al-Wasl: An electronic Syrian newspaper that was founded in 2005 in the city of Homs by its current Editor-in-Chief Fathi Ibrahim Bayoud al-Tamimi. It was close to the Syrian regime in the beginning, but its editorial line changed after the Syrian Revolution to lean towards the opposition.

Zaiton: An intellectual, cultural, bi-monthly magazine that is issued by young people from Idlib and its countryside. It was launched on January 1, 2013. Commitment to periodic issuance: 96%.

Souriatna: An independent weekly civic newspaper directed at all of Syria that was launched in September 2011. Commitment to periodic issuance: 96%.

Shaam Network: A news network specialized in the dissemination of facts and daily developments in Syria since the outbreak of the Revolution in 2011. It was incorporated in the United States on July 6, 2011.

Sada al-Shaam: An independent political, social, multi-topic magazine that was founded on July 29, 2013. Local partner of Al-Araby al-Jadeed pan-Arab newspaper. Commitment to periodic issuance: 92%.
Freedom Raise: An independent political, cultural, social, economic, multi-topic bi-monthly magazine; the first edition was issued on February 26, 2012. It is registered in Canada as a non-profit organization called “Towards Democracy.” The magazine has ceased publication in March 2017. Prior to that, commitment to periodic issuance: 46%.

Enab Baladi: An independent political, social, cultural newspaper that was founded in 2011 in Darayya near Damascus. The team moved abroad due to the security and military situation. Commitment to periodic issuance: 100%.

Ayn al-Madina: An independent political and social bi-monthly magazine. Commitment to periodic issuance: 92%.

All Syrian: A bi-monthly political and cultural newspaper; the first issue was published on February 15, 2014. Commitment to periodic issuance: 83%.

Smart News Agency: A Syrian news agency that covers breaking news and publishes photos and videos of the most important events and developments in Syria. It started its work in 2013.

Qasioun Agency: It was established on October 10, 2014 in the Turkish city of Gaziantep with official authorization from the Turkish Government. The Agency provides its services in Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, and English.

Major Events during the Monitoring Period

During the first half of 2017, which was the period during which the study was conducted, a series of pivotal events in the Syrian conflict were reflected in the media, mostly around military and field developments.

The first example is the frequent news and extensive reports about the battles of “Operation Euphrates Shield” and “Operation Wrath of Euphrates,” both of which were launched at the end of 2016 against Daesh; the former in the Aleppo countryside, ending in March 2017, and the latter in the Syrian Al-Hasakah Governorate, still continuing to the date of the preparation of this study. The two battles received heavy coverage, and the number of articles published depended on the media outlets’ political orientation: those close to the Turkish government focused on “Operation Euphrates Shield” in which Turkish forces participated, while the rest focused on the battles of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which fought in “Operation Wrath of Euphrates.” Kurdish forces constitute the largest part of the SDF.

The study documented 131 titles bearing the expression “Euphrates Shield,” while 21 titles mentioned “Wrath of Euphrates.” Meanwhile, the SDF Arabic abbreviation (Qasad – ﻗﺴﺪ: ﻗﻮﺍﺕ ﺳﻮﺭﻳﺎ ﺍﻟﺪﻳﻤﻘﺮﺍﻁﻴﺔ) figured in 532 titles out of 12,076 monitored items.

Remarkably, the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime forces in the town of Khan Shaykhun on April 4, 2017, pushed the name of the town to appear on only 152 titles during the monitoring period. The American strike on the Shuayrat Airbase in the Homs province on April 7, 2017 made the name of the airbase appear in 44 titles.

With regard to field developments, the displacement of residents from Al-Waar neighborhood in Homs was one of the most important events, for it is the second operation in which the Russian forces were directly involved. It was linked to the so-called “national reconciliation” operations and civilians were evacuated from their neighborhoods. Nevertheless, and despite the long period of negotiations prior to the agreement that was only reached in late May 2017, the name of the neighborhood did not appear in more than 292 titles.

Moving to the political front, the focus was on the Geneva 4-5-6 talks and the four rounds of the Astana peace negotiations. The Geneva talks appeared in 308 titles. Other articles and reports discussed the Geneva talks too but as a secondary story or as part of the daily news report, or within political analysis articles or opinion pieces in many different publications. The Geneva negotiations did not, however, lead to a large number of stories. This may be due to the hopelessness regarding the results of these talks, which have not made any significant progress. This shy interest also extended to the four rounds of Astana talks, which appeared in only 306 titles.
International news regarding the Syrian conflict – be it from the position of Turkey, Iran, the U.S., or Russia – received much wider attention in the titles of articles and reports than negotiations to end the conflict.

Human rights barely even appeared at all, even though Amnesty International published its report entitled “Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison.” The name “Saydnaya” was found in a meager 41 titles, and the organization’s coined phrase “Human Slaughterhouse” in only three titles. This indicates that not enough attention was paid to human rights, despite the importance of the issue and its foundational role in the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution. In view of all the articles and reports published during the monitoring period, it turns out that human rights issues only rarely appear, except in articles that re-publish reports issued by human rights organizations in the form of news articles or short briefs.

Data Analysis

The monitoring process covered a set of quantitative and qualitative criteria. The fact that we gathered 12,076 news items is just an indicator of the size of the monitoring operation. This study is based on essential journalistic criteria such as sources and references cited in articles and reports, their number and nature. The study examines the extent of media coverage of refugee issues as compared to other topics such as military and field developments, social issues, women and children, among others.

The study also identified some noteworthy expressions and terminology – be they negative or positive – that appeared in those articles and reports, as well as the type of language used in each media outlet to identify potential hate speech.

Size of the Data

During the monitoring period, 17.9 percent of the items included in this study were published by Qasioun Agency. This is a logical number for a news agency that updates news in real time with a network of correspondents inside and outside Syria.

The online newspaper Zaman al-Wasl provided 17.8 percent of the data. This is an indicator of the newspaper’s activity, not necessarily of the quality of its published articles. In third place came Shaam Network with 12.6 percent. In the early stages of the Syrian Revolution, it ranked first due to its consistent publishing. It is followed by Smart News Agency with 12.2 percent, taking into account that the agency specializes in video production and is also part of a group that includes radio broadcasting.

When it comes to newspapers and magazines, it is normal to expect less frequent publishing than news agencies that are updated in real time. Examples of such newspapers are Tamaddon with 9.9 percent of the monitored data. Next comes Souriatna with 8 percent of this study’s items, followed by Sada al-Shaam with 6 percent, Zaiton with 4 percent, All Syrian with 3.1 percent, Enab Baladi with 2.7 percent, Hibr with 2.2 percent, Ayn al-Madina with 1.4 percent, Al-Jumhuriya with 0.8 percent, Al-Gherbal with 0.5 percent, and finally Syria Untold. As for the two magazines Freedom Raise (with 0.3 percent of the data) and Hentah (with 0.2 percent), they ceased publication in the middle of the monitoring period.
The 12,076 items were broken down according to their type. 76.2 percent were news briefs. This high percentage is understandable given the fast moving nature of Syria-related political statements and military and field developments on the Syrian territory. Then came news reports and feature stories with 14 percent of the data, followed by opinion pieces with 7.6 percent, investigative reports with 1.3 percent, and finally interviews with 0.9 percent.
News briefs represent the largest proportion of the content in 9 out of the 17 monitored media outlets. More specifically, they figured mostly in each of Tamaddon and Qasioun (92.3 percent of the total content in both outlets), Souriatna (89.6 percent), Smart (88.8 percent), Shaam Network (88.4 percent), Zaman al-Wasl (79 percent), Zaiton (62.9 percent), Enab Baladi (51.7 percent), and Sada al-Shaam (46.5 percent).

Opinion articles had the largest proportion of content in 5 out of the 17 monitored media outlets. They figured mostly in Freedom Raise (84.8 percent of the content), Hibr (73.3 percent), Al-Jumhuriya (65.3 percent), Hentah (52.6 percent), and All Syrian (43.4 percent).

News reports and feature stories came first in the publications of each of Ayn al-Madina (with 46 percent of the content) and Al-Gherbal (39.1 percent).

Syria Untold was alone in giving the largest space to investigative reports, with 52.5 percent of the content.

As media outlets specialized in reports and long form pieces, news briefs were absent from Al-Jumhuriya and Syria Untold. On the other hand, investigative reports were absent from Smart, Shaam Network, Zaman al-Wasl, and Freedom Raise. During the monitoring period, Qasioun published only one investigative report.

During the monitored period, Smart did not publish any interview or opinion piece, and interviews were also absent from the publications of Al-Gherbal and Hentah.

Themes of the Articles

Military and field development issues were mentioned in the largest proportion of items in the monitored media outlets, i.e. in 6,500 items out of the 12,076 articles we monitored, (53.8 percent of the published material). Political issues followed in 4,191 articles (34.7 percent of the content); 1,480 articles (12.2 percent) covered social affairs; 854 articles (7.1 percent) covered economic affairs; and 628 articles (5.2 percent) covered services and infrastructure.

As for cultural, medical, and educational themes, as well as issues related to women and children, they figured in less than 5 percent of the articles, while human rights and humanitarian topics figured in a meager 0.8 percent of monitored material.

It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one topic.
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Military and field developments represented the main topic in the largest proportion of articles and reports in the publications of 11 of the 17 monitored media outlets. More specifically, they represented 55.4 percent of the content in Smart, 51.6 percent in Sada al-Shaam, 46.9 percent in Tamaddon, 42.5 percent in Shaam Network, 44.1 percent in Qasioun, 40.5 percent in Zaman al-Wasl, 38.4 percent in Enab Baladi, 36.3 percent in Souriatna, 36.1 percent in Zaiton, 35 percent in Ayn al-Madina, and 24.2 percent in Al-Gherbal.

The political topic was first in the publications of 5 of the monitored media outlets: in Freedom Raise with 60.9 percent of the content, Syria Untold with 36.6 percent, Al-Jumhuriya with 35.6 percent, Hentah with 35.5 percent, and Hibr with 29.5 percent.

As for All Syrian, it was alone in publishing the highest relative proportion (22.7 percent) of cultural topics. The likelihood of reading articles that cover cultural issues is relatively higher, compared to other outlets (more than 20 percent of the content) in each of Al-Jumhuriya, Syria Untold, Hentah, and Freedom Raise.

Al-Gherbal and Zaiton have dedicated a relatively large space (more than 18 percent of the content) to human rights and humanitarian issues. As for women’s issues, they only figured in a range of 5 to 10 percent of the content in Hibr, Al-Gherbal, and All Syrian.

The issue of refugees was largely absent from the media outlets that were monitored. It was only covered in 9.15 percent of the overall content, and it was absent from 90.85 percent of the content, despite the presence of over 4 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. The largest number of refugees is settled in Turkey, where most of the monitored media outlets have their headquarters.
Seven of the 17 monitored media outlets gave a higher-than-average (more than 9.15 percent of their content) to the issue of refugees: Souriatna (16 percent of the content), Qasioun (15.9 percent), Syria Untold (12.5 percent), Hentah (10.5 percent), All Syrian (10.3 percent), Al-Jumhuriya (10.2 percent), and Ayn al-Madina (9.2 percent).
To assess the approach of media outlets to sources, this study excluded opinion articles and interviews, bringing the total number of news briefs, news reports and feature stories, and investigative reports down to 11,051 articles. In these 11,051 articles and reports, 10,923 sources were cited, i.e. an average of 0.99 source per article. The main reason behind such a low number was the fact that most articles released by Qasioun — which supplied this study with the largest number of articles and reports — did not mention any source. The average number of sources in Qasioun is 0.24.

The highest rate of sources per article was in Syria Untold, with 6.56 sources per article. Next came Al-Gherbal (3.26 sources per article), Al-Jumhuriya (2.78), Hibr (2.12), and Hentah (an average of 2 sources per article).

Other than Qasioun Agency (with a rate of 0.24 source per article), the outlets whose average number of sources per article is lower than one are Sada al-Shaam (0.97), All Syrian (0.87), Freedom Raise (0.75), and Tamaddon (0.2).

Looking through the 154 monitored investigative reports, the breakdown of number of sources per report was as follows: 3.2 percent of the articles did not cite any source; 6.5 percent were based on one source and 12.3 percent were based on two sources. 48 percent of investigative reports cited 5 sources or more and 13% of investigative reports cited 10 sources or more. The average number of sources in investigative reports is 4.9 sources per article.
In the 1,692 monitored news reports and feature stories, approximately 28.2 percent of the articles did not cite any source and 29.3 percent relied on one source only, which means that more than 57.5 percent of all news reports and feature stories relied on one or less source of information. If the articles that mentioned two sources (18.2 percent) or three sources (12.1 percent) are added to that number, the proportion of news reports and feature stories that cited less than three sources reaches 87.8 percent of the total. The average number of sources in news reports and feature stories is 1.6 source per article.

The lack of reliance on sources seems more flagrant in news briefs; a total of 9,205 items. No sources were cited in 40.2 percent of the items and 43.3 percent of items cited just one source. Only 3.5 percent of the total number of monitored news briefs cited three or more sources. The average number of sources turned out to be 0.8 source per item.
The monitored news briefs, news reports and feature stories, and investigative reports relied heavily on field activists as sources of information in 2,281 articles, i.e. 29.1 percent of the total number of articles we analyzed. Military sources come next with citations in 1,496 articles, i.e. 19.1 percent, followed directly by politicians in 18.8 percent of the articles, then official government sources in 10.8 percent (government sources meaning people working for state institutions, Syrian or non-Syrian). Ordinary citizens come next in 6.3 percent of the articles, and then the own correspondents of the media outlets presented as sources in 5.2 percent of the articles.

Reliance on professional sources (technical experts, medical sources, legal experts, academics and researchers, economic experts, etc., be they Syrian or non-Syrian) was limited to 10.3 percent of 11,051 articles.
### Breakdown of source affiliation per media outlet

**Chart 13**

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**JOURNALISM IN CRISIS**
Ordinary citizens were the most relied upon source of information in articles and reports published by Ayn al-Madina (in 45.8 percent of articles), Al-Jumhuriya (45 percent), All Syrian (36.8 percent), and Hibr (28.9 percent). Freedom Raise mentioned ordinary citizens as sources in 50 percent of its articles and political sources in 50 percent as well.

Field activists were the most frequent source in articles published by Tamaddon (in 60.6 percent of articles), Sada al-Shaam (41.8 percent), Smart News Agency (41.6 percent), Syria Untold (31.9 percent), and Zaiton (25.9 percent).

In addition to Freedom Raise, political sources were also most prominently cited in articles published by Shaam Network (in 29.9 percent of the articles), Souriatna (27.85 percent), Enab Baladi (27.2 percent), and Zaman al-Wasl (26.7 percent).

Qasioun was the only one to mainly depend on its own correspondents as – relatively – the primary source of information in 30.4 percent of its articles. The percentage of sources that are either field activists, or military, or political figures was equally distributed among articles published by Hentah, with 22.2 percent for each of the three categories.

During the monitoring period 107 interviews were published. 46.6 percent of them were with politicians, 17.8 percent with military figures, 13.7 percent with researchers and academics, and 11 percent with field activists. Only 6.9 percent of the interviews were conducted with ordinary citizens and people with technical expertise appeared in 4.1 percent of the interviews.

References

Reliance on external references (organizations and institutions) was also relatively weak. Only 4,215 out of 11,051 news briefs, news reports and feature stories, and investigative reports mentioned references to reports, statements, or data. Therefore, 61.9 percent of the monitored content did not include references to the information that was provided.
In the instances where references were cited, more than 90 percent of the articles did not include a link or picture or any form of evidence that authenticates or confirms the cited reference, which reduces the ability to validate the accuracy of the referenced information.

Only 405 articles and reports included a picture or a link, i.e. 9.6 percent of the 4,215 items that included references, and a meager 3.7 percent of the total number (11,051) of news briefs, news reports and feature stories, and investigative reports.
Only Syria Untold included links and/or visual evidence for every reference it cited in 100 percent of its articles and reports during the monitoring period, followed by Al-Jumhuriya that included such evidence for the cited references in 92.3 percent of the articles and reports. Zaiton published links and/or visual evidence for references in 48.9 percent of its articles and reports, and Enab Baladi did so in 28.6 percent of its articles and reports.

On the other end of the spectrum, Al-Gherbal, Tamaddon, Hibr, Hentah, and Freedom Raise did not include any links and/or visual evidence for any of the cited references.
Military groups topped the list of references cited by articles and reports, appearing in 19.5 percent of the 4,215 items that included references. This percentage makes sense given the prevalence of stories related to military and field developments. Other media sources were presented as references in 44.5 percent of the cases, broken down as follows: 19.2 percent citing international media outlets as references, 17 percent citing regional media outlets, and 8.4 percent citing other Syrian media outlets. These numbers reveal a major professional weakness as media outlets – in most cases – should not be used as a reference for data and information that another media outlet publishes.

When references were cited, independent institutions (NGOs, academic institutions and think tanks) were cited in 20.6 percent of the articles and reports, broken down between Syrian NGOs (14.2 percent), international NGOs (3.1 percent), non-Syrian non-governmental organizations, i.e. those registered in neighboring countries to Syria (1.8 percent), and academic institutions and think tanks (1.5 percent).

The monitored media outlets cited United Nations agencies in 4.9 percent of the articles and reports that included references, Syrian official or governmental bodies in 7.4 percent of the items, and non-Syrian official or governmental bodies in 9.4 percent of the items.

It is worth noting that social media only appeared as a reference in 1.9 percent of the articles, which is a low percentage. This indicates that Syrian media institutions are aware that social media platforms cannot be taken as credible references, while noting that Daesh only appeared as a reference in 1.6 percent of articles.
Noteworthy Expressions

This study would like to underline the high level of professional language used in the monitored media outlets. The overwhelming majority of articles and reports abide by quality standards, are devoid of libel and slander and do not promote sectarianism or incite hate and violence.

Nonetheless, there were some exceptions, especially in opinion pieces where authors are given the freedom to use expressions such as “militias of sectarian hatred,” “the animal’s government,” or “the Wailing Wall in Tartus,” referring to the wall on which are hung photos of dead regime soldiers, most of whom are from the Alawite community. In some other cases, we noted misuse of terminology pertaining to gender and people with special needs.

The following list highlights some of the improper language that was used. We reiterate that these cases only represent a small proportion of the total content we gathered but should be mentioned in order to avoid such mistakes moving forward.

- Animal terminology to refer to the Assad regime and its supporters or the Kurdish community.
- Unfounded rumors such as the publication in one outlet of what was supposed to be the farewell speech to be delivered by President Assad before leaving the presidential palace.
- Misleading titles to attract more clicks, even when the content of the pieces contradicted what was implied in the titles. For example: “Russia sets time for the end of its military operations in Syria.” This eye-catching title for many Syrian citizens and observers of the Syrian conflict tops a news brief that cites a Russian military commander explaining that his country’s military operations will end when all armed militants of Daesh and Al-Nusra Front are eliminated.
- Conspiracy theories associated with the Kurdish involvement in the fight against Daesh, and the use of “we all know that…” and “everybody knows that…” without presenting any evidence.
- Sectarian stereotypes equating all Alawites with the Assad regime and associating all Shiites, referred to in some cases as Safavids, with Iran’s expansionist agenda.

But apart from these few examples of hate speech and sectarian rhetoric, most articles and reports published in locally distributed newspapers and magazines mainly used neutral language. Publications with a stronger connection to the ground, inside Syria, often carried a message appealing for national unity, dealing with the war as a temporary reality, and insisting on the importance of thinking about the future with all the challenges it holds – especially that of national reconciliation among the different Syrian factions, sects, and communities.

There were some articles that revealed a deep understanding of how daily tragedies are connected to international geopolitical interests, as seen in the following excerpt:

“The major problem is that the Syrian Revolution does not have the luxury to give itself the time to bring these factions to justice. Time is of essence; time is blood, and the internal and external circumstances—especially after the debacle in Aleppo and the emergence of a trend in the West willing to lend a hand to dictatorship—force us to pick our battles and choose either to return to the central principle and purpose of the Revolution, or to go to what lies beyond the battle of Idlib...”

In the same vein, many articles discuss the deep and fundamental issues underlying the Syrian conflict:

“In the Syrian homeland (these days), the issue of a unifying national identity arises: what is its significance? What is its importance? (...) How long will the world remain plunged in silence while cheap tyrants execute cold-blooded murder?”

As for the relationship with the other, especially members of the Alawite community, we read the following:

“No one knows what lies in store for the Alawites in Syria, for they are caught between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand they face the fire they did not think to extinguish when they tied their fate to an individual who sees them—and the rest of Syrians—as slaves in his farm, and on the other hand a project trying to force them to change their sectarian and community identity.”

There are also articles that deal with the issue of Islamic Sunni extremism and the need for an overhaul in Islamic teaching at the educational level.

Our analysis reveals two narratives, with a vast gap between them. The first, though not widespread, supports violence, revenge, and hatred. The second, on the other hand, is aiming for peace, justice, accountability, and the restoration of the national dimension of the Syrian Revolution, as eloquently put in this last excerpt:

“I do not wish for anyone to live what I lived through. I do not want anyone to experience even a glimpse of what I experienced. I never would have believed that humans could sink into such depths of depravity, sectarian hatred, and cruelty. I will keep telling my story, awaiting the justice that will bring my children back to life. I will keep the memory of the massacre alive as long as I live... for victims cannot move on.”
Findings and Recommendations

This study reveals that:

• News briefs are the most commonly found type of pieces published in the emerging Syrian media sector. Together, news briefs, news reports and feature stories constitute 90 percent of what was published during the monitoring period. Investigative reports were very rare.

• News briefs were not only the most common in news agencies and electronic newspapers but also in a large number of online and print magazines.

• Military and field developments as well as political issues were the most frequent topics that the Syrian media covered.

• Services and infrastructure, social, and rights-related topics had limited coverage in the Syrian media during the monitoring period.

• The issue of refugees also had limited coverage in the articles and reports published by the Syrian media during the monitoring period.

• One of the main structural weaknesses in Syrian media outlets is the very low number of sources that are cited in news briefs, news reports and feature stories – the overall average number of sources was less than one per article.

• The same problem exists in the weak tendency of Syrian media outlets to cite references for data they provide, whether studies, reports, or figures issued by third parties. References were absent from the majority of published articles and reports, and, when present, they were cited without a link to or picture of what was referenced. This prevents the reader from checking the accuracy of the information or going deeper into research.

• The most frequently cited references were military factions and other media outlets, which shows a major weakness in approaching references. By definition, references are supposed to add credibility to the information a media outlet produces. Therefore, groups that have military or field interests or other media outlets, while they could be cited as sources, are not valid references.

• In spite of the aforementioned weaknesses, the language used in the emerging Syrian media sector is – in the overwhelming majority of cases – mostly elegant, not vulgar, and respectful of the professional and moral standards of journalistic writing. This reflects an effort in training the staff and a will to provide quality journalism.

Based on these observations, this study recommends the following:

• Conducting more training in investigative journalism and having donors and people in charge of financial affairs within Syrian media organizations provide more support to both training and subsequent investigative efforts.

Carrying out an in-depth, periodic review at every media outlet in order to determine the primary target audience and, accordingly, the type of articles most suitable for the identified audience. News agencies primarily target other media outlets, which explains why they first and foremost publish news briefs. Weekly magazines, however, could prefer other types of articles, such as detailed reports, feature stories, investigations, or interviews. Some other outlets do not conceal their research, quasi-academic nature; and the fact that they target an audience of highly educated individuals and professionals explains why they focus on long reports and investigations. The discrepancy occurs when the published material does not fit the expectations and habits of the target audience.

Taking advantage of this review to segment the categories of readers and provide each category with material that aligns most closely with its centers of interest. Field developments and military topics are essential for many people, but there are no studies that confirm that the Syrian readers rely on the emerging media outlets included in this study as a source of information on field developments, in comparison with what they can find on social media platforms and through phone-messaging updates.

Encouraging donors, international training and media development institutions, and the Syrian media to increase the number of quantitative and qualitative audience research studies to understand the public’s expectations and its interaction with what is published.

Relying on credible sources and references in all published articles. When credibility cannot be ascertained, the information should be attributed to its source. When the source requests anonymity, its wishes must be respected, but it must be mentioned that the information came from a source that did not wish to be identified. When no sources are mentioned, this decreases the reader’s trust in the article and encourages the phenomenon of fake news, which affects citizens’ trust in the media in general – especially in cases where military and political forces are actively spreading propaganda and conspiracy theories that they plant into the readers’ minds.

Setting clear editorial standards for opinion pieces to avoid turning them into a pathway for hate speech and incitement under the pretext of freedom of expression, and to also avoid structural contradictions within the media outlet between professionally written news, reports, and investigations on the one hand, and opinion articles that go off in the completely opposite direction on the other hand. This tarnishes the media outlet’s image and undermines its credibility, whatever the level of professionalism of its other articles.

Periodically conducting content monitoring and analysis and using the findings constructively to provide the media with recommendations for content development, and securing the necessary budget, training, and capacity to complete these studies.

Focusing on building the management capacity of emerging media leaders to help make their outlets more sustainable, be it at the financial level or regarding the selection and improvement of published material. This enhances the outlet’s ability to attract readers and, consequently, reap economic benefits.