Reporting on the evacuation of Kefraya and Fu'aa:

Constructive journalism frames in the coverage of emerging Syrian media

An event-based study of the Syrian media sector

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Executive summary

Supporting independent media helps to fight polarisation and contributes to pluralism. A recent study by Free Press Unlimited highlighted that emerging independent media organisations have become essential to presenting a more neutral narration of events in Syria. In contrast, partisan media reporting about Syria tend to portray a polarising view.

Meanwhile, with the increasingly limited space for independent media in Syria maintaining the vitality of this still young and independent group of media organisations is a challenge of vital importance.

The neutrality in reporting by emerging independent[1] media outlets was shown in a study on the use of framing strategies in journalistic publications covering Syria. The study validates the mission of Free Press Unlimited, which is to support emerging media outlets in becoming vital, independent news sources for Syrian audiences.

This research was developed as a new approach towards Free Press Unlimited's monitoring of Syrian independent media outlets. The new approach allows the contextualisation of results, because it compares the reporting of different media organisations on one single event using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. By doing so this study presents a snapshot of the framing used in reporting on Syria. To ensure a diverse representation, the sample includes a selection of domestic (Syrian) and pan-Arab media organisations, whose alleged preferences towards the dominant parties in the Syrian conflict are mixed.

The findings of the research show that many partisan media demonstrate significant polarisation in their reporting. These media present biased, graphic and emotive images to their audiences. The black and white portrayal by these media dehumanises groups of people and has the potential to exacerbate tensions in Syria even further.

Independent outlets are noticeable for their neutrality in reporting. Also, these media outlets diverge in their use of framing; rather than acting as a mouthpiece for a political actor, they follow their individual organisation's editorial line.

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1. Independent media are media that are able to set their own editorial line, without influence from governments, political parties or other interest groups. They can be financially independent through business models that include paying subscribers and advertisers. In the Syrian context however such business models are not profitable. In practice therefore, independent Syrian media organisations receive funding from development organisations. Despite their independence, and particularly in conflict situations, independent media organisations can exhibit a leaning towards one political perspective. In the case of Syria, independent media tend to lean towards the side of the political opposition.

Introduction

Like all world citizens, Syrians need reliable information to make decisions that will affect their future. Bringing such news to audiences can pose a challenge to Syrian media professionals, who are working in an unsafe and unfree environment. How do independent Syrian media organisations perform in bringing unbiased news to their audiences, when compared to other media outlets reporting about Syria? To answer this question, Free Press Unlimited monitored 14 different media organisations in their coverage of an evacuation of two Syrian villages. This "event-based monitoring methodology" provides in-depth feedback on accuracy, pluralism and diversity in media reporting.

This study accepts as a given that each piece of information, regardless of whether it is from an independent source or not, is developed from a specific frame. A frame is the 'field of meaning' in which information is placed. Framing can be done for example by focusing on one dimension of a problem, such as the economic consequences of migration, or by emphasising specific facts, while ignoring others. Often framing is done by using a combination of such strategies. The result is an item that is 'slightly or very biased'.

Free Press Unlimited used the event-based media content monitoring study to understand the framing used by the independent media organisations. The study monitored the content of a representative sample of media organisations, which included, in addition to independent media, also pro-government and pro-opposition partisan media.

Below, this report introduces the Syrian media environment in more detail, followed by an in-depth explanation of the methodology of the research. This includes a description of the event that was selected in the study. The methodology section is followed by the findings, which are introduced per group of media organisations. Finally, the conclusion contextualises these findings further.

Media available to Syrians

Historically, Syria had a closed media environment. Even before the uprising that started in 2011, Syrian media were largely in the hands of the government or their direct affiliates. Their function then was to "guide the public opinion" towards supporting the government's activities.[2] Many of these media are still active today. In areas under control of the Syrian government, the media consumption of Syrians is still very much restricted to these media organisations.[3]

Syrians outside of government-controlled areas, inside and outside Syria, have access to a more diverse media landscape. In

2. Daher, 2017
3. Issa as cited in Daher, 2017

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this landscape the average Syrian is able to consume Syrian government media, pan-Arab media and independent media. Especially the pan-Arab media enjoy a high consumption rate among Syrians. Generally, pan-Arab media show a clear pro- or anti-government stance.[4] Conversely, the uprising opened a space for the emergence of independent Syrian media. These emerging media have witnessed a true transformation. In the early days of the uprising they consisted mainly of citizen journalists who were more activists than media professionals.[5] Today these media are showing more professionalism and adherence to ethical standards.[6]

4. Trombetta et al, 2019
5. Issa, 2016
6. Trombetta et al, 2019

Methodology

Frames in reporting

As illustrated above, there are many different types of media organisations covering Syria. In this research we have studied the different ways these media organisations report about Syria from the perspective of framing. Many different components make up a frame: aspects of a story that are emphasised or omitted, information sources that are used, the language that is used to describe something or someone, photos or videos selected, and comparisons or contrasts that are drawn.

Framing is natural and inevitable: no media organisation is exempt from framing. It can be a deliberate strategy but is also often a more or less unconscious act. Frames do however influence how a story is investigated and reported. They are the consequence of choices made by an individual journalist or by a medium's editorial line. The result is a 'slightly or very biased' piece of information.

Event-based media monitoring

The method used to understand the framing employed by different media outlets in this study is media content monitoring. In content monitoring, an item published by a media platform is assessed with the help of several pre-defined variables. These variables help to map trends in reporting about a subject. For example, a media content monitoring study concluding that European media reporting about military battles in Syria tend to introduce the Islamic State group as a terrorist organisation.
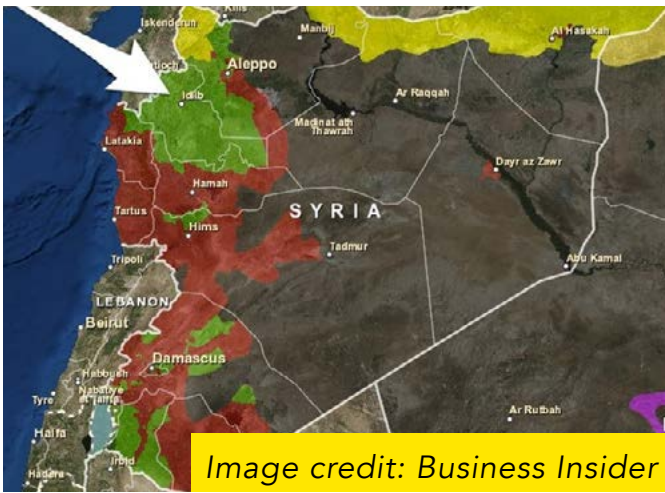
Unlike scientific research, this media content monitoring study used a methodological approach in line with social sciences /

humanities, as is common in media studies. Rather than testing a thesis and proving or disproving its validity, the study set out to explore to what extent emerging independent media presents a neutral portrayal of events in their coverage.

Media content monitoring is applied somewhat differently in this research than it is in most content monitoring studies. In fact, this study focuses on one 'incident', one event of importance that has taken place in Syria. Only by focusing on one event can the researcher(s) gain a comprehensive understanding of all aspects in the coverage of different media organisations. This is vital so that the researcher can compare and contrast this coverage. Also, it allows for an analysis of aspects that may have been omitted in reporting. As such, this event-based media monitoring methodology is designed to provide in-depth feedback on accuracy, pluralism and diversity in media reporting.

The event

The event selected for this research is the evacuation of Kafraya and Fu'aa on 18-19 July 2018. At the time that all the data for this study was collected, in August 2018, this event had recently ended. This was important because when an event is still ongoing, the situation can be fluid. For the researcher however, it was important to understand which facts were fully verified and which facts were contested. Below, a short and basic factual description is given of the evacuation of Kafraya and Fu'aa. The portrayal of this event by different media is illustrated in the findings section of this report.

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Image credit: Business Insider

The evacuation of Kafraya and Fu'aa

Kafraya and Fu'aa are two agricultural villages in the northwest of Syria, just north of the city Idlib and close to the Turkish border. The villages stand out for their predominantly Shia Muslim population in the Sunni Muslim dominated Idlib Governorate.

After opposition forces captured the nearby city of Idlib in March 2015 they also besieged Kafraya and Fu'aa. The forces blocked the supply of food and medicines to the villages. At the time of besiegement both civilians and an unknown number of Hezbollah fighters and local militias were based in the villages. In the course of the siege the two towns were subjected regularly to bombardments and attacks by opposition forces. Many died as a result of these attacks as well as from shortages in supplies.

In negotiations for the evacuation of Kafraya and Fu'aa the villages became linked to Madaya and Zabadani. Madaya and Zabadani are two Sunni villages located near Damascus, to which the Syrian government and Hezbollah laid siege in July 2015. On several occasions ceasefire agreements were negotiated for these four villages, but all of these agreements collapsed due to violations by one or multiple parties. Then, in March 2017, the "four towns agreement" was reached. In this agreement Kafraya and Fu'aa would be evacuated in return for the safe passage of residents from Madaya and Zabadani. Unfortunately, this agreement also failed; a convoy from Kafraya and Fu'aa was targeted by a suicide bomber. This attack resulted in the deaths of over 120 people, of which at least 60 were children.

On 17 July 2018 news organisations reported that a new deal for the evacuation of the remaining inhabitants of Kafraya and Fu'aa had been reached. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – the main besieging party – also agreed to release approximately 400 detainees that had been held since 2015. In return, the Syrian government would release 1,500 detainees. On 18-19 July between 6,500 and 7,000 individuals were evacuated from Kafraya and Fu'aa, bringing the siege of the two towns to an end.

Selection of benchmark

Due to the comparative nature of the study, there was a need to select a reference point for the purposes of coding and analysis. Initially, the research design included focus group discussions with informants who were physically present at the event in order to compare narratives. This would allow researchers to obtain the most factual, objective version of events for the study. Holding focus groups however did not prove feasible, since it was impossible to locate informants who were willing to participate. None of the media houses had journalists or sources present on the ground either, which meant alternative criteria needed to be formulated to set a benchmark.

After careful consideration, the output of the BBC and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights were selected for this purpose. Though neither had any informants present on the ground at the time of the event, they presented the most well-rounded portrayal. The selection of the benchmark proved useful to make a comparative analysis, but it is important to note that there are some limitations to this choice. The BBC and the Syrian Observatory were selected by taking into account who had made the most effort to get a full picture of the event. Just like any other outlet, however, their coverage cannot be seen as entirely objective, since, as noted previously, all media outlets use framing to some degree, albeit some more than others.

Sample of media organisations
The portrayal of the evacuation of Kafraya and Fu'aa was analysed using event-based content monitoring of a representative sample of media organisations reporting on Syria. In this sample three main groups are represented: independent media, pro-government partisan media and pro-opposition partisan media. Included are, where possible, both domestic (Syrian) and international media organisations as well as different types of media (online, television and radio).

Pro-government partisan media
Partisan media are outlets that are (allegedly) funded by a government, political party or other interest group. The pro-government partisan media reporting about Syria have a clear affiliation to the Syrian government. In this study four different media organisations belong to this group.

These outlets are either directly linked to the Syrian government, or directly linked to Iran or Russia, which are both allies of the Syrian government. Together, the pro-government partisan media published 61 items about the evacuation of Kafraya and Fu'aa.

Pro-opposition partisan media
The pro-opposition partisan media reporting on Syria is clearly supportive of the Syrian opposition These media include organisations funded by governments or people that oppose the Syrian government. In total, the pro-opposition partisan media published 56 items about the evacuation of Kafraya and Fu'aa, comparable to the 61 items produced by pro-government partisan media. The bulk – a total of 27 – of the 56 items were reports from Orient News. Nevertheless, the number of reports produced by the remaining outlets in this sample is still sufficient to identify trends for the group as a whole. In addition, general conclusions can be drawn on how the individual media organisations reported this event.

Independent media

Independent media are media that are able to set their own editorial line, without influence from governments, political parties or other interest groups. Often independent media are financially independent through business models that include paying subscribers and advertisers. In the Syrian context however, such business models are not profitable. In practice therefore, independent Syrian media organisations receive funding from development organisations.

The funding independent media organisations receive is generally limited. This limited budget is reflected in the human resource capacities of these outlets. As a result, independent Syrian media outlets often publish fewer items per day than other media organisations. The limited reporting capacity of the independent Syrian media is visible in this research as well: the five media organisations in this group published a combined 30 items about the evacuation of Kafraya and Fu'aa. These are considerably fewer compared to the 56 and 61 items published by the other two groups included in this study. However, the number of items is still sufficient to identify trends. General conclusions could be drawn about only a few of the independent media outlets with respect to how the individual media organisations reported on this event.

In spite of their independence, and particularly in conflict situations, independent media organisations can exhibit a leaning towards one political perspective. This is visible through the framing of such organisations. In the case of Syria, independent media tend to lean towards the side of the political opposition.

Findings

The results of the monitoring research demonstrate a few key points:

- Pro-government partisan media provide a consistent and polarised representation of the event.

- Pro-opposition partisan media downplay the role of the Syrian government in their reporting, except insofar as they emphasise the wrongdoings of the government.

Most outlets in the group are very polarising in their reporting. The exceptions are Al-Jazeera media outlet and Al-Arabiya, whose reports are quite balanced and factual. Independent media exhibit a clear leaning

المسلحون "يعفّشون" بلدتي الفوعة وكفريا المنكوبتين شمالي سوريا

Reuters Alaa Al-Marjani

This Reuters picture, used by Russia Today, shows looting in Hujaira in November 2013 and is unrelated to the Kafraya and Fu'aa evacuation.

towards the opposition. However, they present a good level of neutrality and a clear effort to provide contextualisation. This section describes these points in more detail and is followed by a conclusion that discusses the implications of these findings.

Pro-government partisan media

Pro-government partisan media are very consistent in their presentation of the Kafraya and Fu'aa event. They report mainly from a humanitarian, civilian and terrorism perspectives. Within these 'frames' the outlets use emotive language resulting in a polarised representation of affairs.

In particular, Russia Today and Al-Mayadeen employ a black and white portrayal of actors. Without any nuance, all opposition groups are portrayed as terrorists and criminals. Al-Mayadeen, for example, frequently refers in its reporting to the suicide bombing on the evacuation convoy in 2017 and focuses in its footage on damage to the current evacuation convoy caused by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Both tactics present the opposition as terrorists and spark fear in the audience. Russia Today emphasises looting by opposition forces after the evacuation. It falsely supports these claims using archived Reuters photos from different events.

In sharp contrast to the image of the "aggressive terrorist" opposition, stands the portrayal of civilians and the government. The civilian frame is used to emphasise that the inhabitants of the two villages are innocent civilians, mainly women and children. In particular, SANA

presents emotive stories of the suffering of the inhabitants during the siege. The government is also portrayed very positively, mainly by presenting the follow-up to the evacuation from a humanitarian angle. SANA, for instance, aired many images of village inhabitants receiving humanitarian aid or medical care in hospitals.

The image of the government is juxtaposed with that of the opposition. Whereas, the government is presented as providing

safety and order to maintain the unity of the country, the opposition is portrayed as lawless, chaotic and promoting demographic redistribution. Al-Watan uses a particularly noticeable strategy in this regard. The outlet provides the story with ample contextual details which serve merely to emphasise the division and in-fighting of the opposition.

Pro-government partisan media reports are also consistently similar in their avoidance of particular frames and aspects of the story. Sectarian affiliations of the actors involved in the evacuation of the two villages are not mentioned. This is in line with the Syrian government's portrayal of itself as a protector of minorities in the country. Also, foreign influence is downplayed to emphasise the sovereignty of the Syrian state. An exception to these trends is the reporting of Al-Mayadeen. The Lebanese based television channel emphasises the heroic role of Hezbollah, deviating from the

Still from an Al-Mayadeen video report. The accompanying headline reads: "Popular reception of the six Hezbollah resistance fighters after their return from Kafraya and Fu'aa"

لبنان
استقبالات شعبية للمقاومين الستة في حزب الله بعد عودتهم من كفريا والفوعة

-2:19

trend of presenting Syria solely as sovereign state.

Pro-opposition partisan media

The framing used by pro-opposition partisan media is clearly very different from that of the pro-government partisan media. Pro-opposition media hardly employ the humanitarian or terrorism frames in their reporting. Instead these media give prominence to the specific terms of the prisoners' exchange deal. Syria TV, for example, claimed that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham used the deal to secure the release of their militiamen, rather than true prisoners of conscience.

Pro-opposition partisan media also tend to report from a foreign involvement frame in which the Syrian government is presented as a puppet of Iran. Zaman al-Wasl, for instance, claims that the "mercenaries" of Kafraya and Fu'aa had only agreed to an evacuation after being pressured by Tehran. Syria TV similarly reports that Iran had declined an offer from the opposition to allow the villages' inhabitants "to leave peacefully". (Syria TV link: bit. ly/2P2LiuB) The channel even stated that the government was excluded from later stages of the negotiation altogether. (Syria TV link: bit.ly/2JxGW8C)

Aside from the aforementioned trends in reporting, the pro-opposition partisan media are not consistent in their presentation of the evacuation of Kafraya and Fu'aa. Their generally clear pro-opposition view is presented using differing framing strategies.

يبدو أن بلدتي "كفريا" و"الفوعة" ستكونان عما قريب بلدتين فارغتين تماما من مقاتلي المليشيات الطائفية وذويهم، بموجب اتفاق ينص على "إخلاء" جميع من هاتين البلدتين، اللتين شكلتا منذ بداية الثورة في 2011 قاعدة تمركز وانطلاق لمهاجمة البلدات المجاورة، وخزانا بشريا يرفد النظام وإيران بما يحتاجه من مرتزقة.

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Orient TV and Zaman al-Wasl are very polarising in their reporting. Both media organisations make claims they cannot substantiate. The language and imagery in the items of these media are biased, graphic and emotive. Zaman al-Wasl glorifies the revolution and demonises the "mercenaries" of the two villages. The Kafraya and Fu'aa residents are described as "loyalist" or "Shia militias". The extent to which the emphasis is put on these sectarian characteristics, makes it difficult to distinguish them from civilian identities.

Orient TV relies heavily on archived footage. The outlet shows photos from the Cesar Photograph Collection - portraying atrocities committed against government-held detainees - without indicating that these images are unrelated to the event.

Still from an Orient News video report which discusses the release of prisoners by the Syrian government

Syria TV shows a bias in the terminology used in its reporting. Both the government and Islamist opposition groups, mainly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, are presented using negative vocabulary. In sharp contrast, is the image of the self-proclaimed interim government or Free Syrian Army, moderate bodies which are portrayed very positively.

The reporting style of both Al-Jazeera media outlet and Al-Arabiya are notable in the group of pro-opposition partisan media. These two pan-Arab media outlets provide quite balanced and factual reporting. Nevertheless, Al-Jazeera portrays the villages' inhabitants as "regime fighters and their families" and uniquely presents the agreement as a victory for the opposition. Al-Arabiya's bias in the presentation of this story is mainly visible through the list of commentators they invited, who are without exception pro-opposition figures.

Independent media
The independent media monitored for this study all show a slight bias towards the opposition. This is mainly visible in three framing elements: emphasis on, or omission of certain aspects of the story, the use of one-sided sources, and political bias in the tone of reporting. These framing strategies are also present in the reporting of the partisan media group. There is little consistency in the framing used by independent media: rather, the media appear to follow their own organisation's editorial lines.

Independent media clearly distinguish themselves from partisan media in two ways. Their reporting exhibits notable neutrality, avoiding value-laden terms. Only a few items written by independent media contain polarising language. Also, independent media make a clear effort to provide an accurate account of the affiliations and origins of the different groups involved in the evacuation. For example, ANA Press elaborated in one item on the relationships between the different armed groups. These

دخلت عدة حافلات إلى بلدتي كفريا والفوعة بريف إدلب لإجلاء المقاتلين منها مع عائلاتهم، بموجب الاتفاق الذي توصلت إليه "هيئة تحرير الشام" وإيران.

are aspects to the story that were rarely mentioned in other items about the deal.

Similar to the partisan pro-opposition media, independent media emphasise the role of foreign actors in the evacuation deal. However, the foreign influencers mentioned do not focus on Iran, as in the coverage of the pro-opposition media. Although Iran remains the most mentioned actor, there is more equal mention of different foreign influencers. These include Russia, Hezbollah (Lebanon), Turkey and Qatar.

The media organisations in this group avoid using sectarian framing. An exception to this is the highlighted Shia identity and presence of Shia militia. In most cases mentions of the Shia sect are linked to the involvement of Hezbollah as foreign influencer. However, SMART News introduced the sectarian frame in a more suggestive manner. One SMART News item shows first the footage of Shia prayer tablets and slogans, followed immediately by an interview that discusses population redistribution by the Syrian government.

Independent media focus on the military and political dimensions of the event. In their focus on the military dimension, it is noteworthy that independent media tend to report negatively about the military factions of the opposition. The reporting angles used by these media lead to a tendency to minimise the role of the civilians in the

villages, as opposed to some other outlets which highlighted the role and demands of civilians in relation to the deal. As such, independent media organisations reported similarly to the partisan pro-opposition media. Enab Baladi, for example, described the villagers as "militias and their families".

The omission of specific facts from reporting was an item of consistent concern in the reporting of independent media. Very few items mention the looting of the towns. Similarly, no mention was made, in the reports, of the Alawite detainees that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham released. In other cases, specific editorial strategies meant the event was less prominently covered and there was more reliance on second-hand sources. ARTA FM, for instance, only had two brief items related to the event, due to the fact that their editorial policy delineated their specific focus on local news from north-eastern Syria. Rather than an omission, the brevity of their coverage is based on a strategic decision made by this outlet to provide local news on a specific region of Syria.

Conclusion

This research confirms that all media organisations use framing. However, the majority of the partisan media included in this study exhibit a deliberate and polarising framing strategy in their news reporting. This black and white portrayal dehumanises groups of people, and demonises certain parties and players – be it civilians, military or national governments. As such the representation offered by these media has the potential to further exacerbate tensions in Syria.

Syrian independent media offer an alternative to the polarising views of most partisan media. In this sense, the independent media tend more towards constructive journalism. In constructive journalism, media professionals attempt to not simply report about a problem, but also contribute to its solution.

Several working beliefs held by Free Press Unlimited come into focus in this study. The first of these is that the neutrality in reporting shown by independent media is essential in a conflict environment. Secondly, neutral reporting allows the reader to form their own opinion about an event, or an actor.

Given these factors, the study validates that supporting these independent, reporting-neutral organisations is important: they offer an alternative to the highly biased and dangerously polarising reporting of many other media organisations. While emerging independent media have further room for strengthening their work, a professional driven debate is needed to make the Syrian media at large less polarised.

The future outlook for the continued existence of independent Syrian media is bleak. They face continuous dangers to their lives and freedoms. With the growing span of the Syrian government's control of the media and civic space, these media organisations will be further forced into exile and the voices that aspire to more freedom and change that remain inside will be muted.

Support from the (media) development community for these emerging outlets is increasingly urgent and will continue to be imperative. The lack of reliable information for Syrian citizens affects not only those in Syria, but the world at large as the situation in Syria continues to be a global crisis.

Colophon