



Syrian Audience Research Report

Executive Summary

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Free Press Unlimited (FPU) and Jouri worked together in Fall 2020 to design and conduct a comprehensive audience research study to provide **insights** into media consumption patterns and the information needs of Syrian audiences.

The research was conducted over the whole of Syria and the diaspora (Turkey). The Jouri team's data collection approach applied diverse social science based research methods including:

- 110 recruitment interviews to identify people to **participate** in the clinics, diaries and interviews
- 44 diaries to record individual's 7-day personal media consumption habits
- 44 clinics to examine participants who consumed and commented on eight different media products such as news stories and news reports
- 1063 surveys that assessed the Syrians' needs, expectations, experience, and perceptions of local, national and regional media
- 22 In-depth interviews where Syrians discussed their consumption of media and information
- 20 in-depth interviews with media professional and experts on the Syrian media context discussing the wider media landscape in Syria

The data of the six research methods were collected by local Syrian researchers who lived in the communities of interest and all had prior experience in data collection. To ensure data quality, Jouri team members completed a ethics and **safety trainings** and were closely monitored by Jouri managers to ensure their safety and data quality assurance. The findings from each of the six data sets were triangulated to gain deeper insights into Syrian media consumption patterns and perceptions of independent media and the role of media in society. Specifically, the research design was interested in the relationships among age, gender, geographic region and education on media consumption patterns and needs.

Based on the triangulated data, Jouri discerned the following overarching insights into trends around media use, information needs, and perceptions of media independence, quality and its role in society.

Syrian audiences are moving online and want more than news alone.

Insight: Syrian media consumption is **moving online** with an emphasis on **local** and regional news that covers political and security issues. Online news is accessed largely on social media platforms because of the diversity of sources available. Since the emergence of smartphones enabled ease of access to digital media, the use of digital platforms by Syrians to access and consume news and information has increased.

Insight: Syrians want more than "just hard news stories". While there is interest in local security, political and economic "hard news", respondents also reported that **they want content about culture, arts, health and other types of societal topics.**

Syrian audiences want more choices of trusted news content and value human interest stories.

Insight: Syrians are **savvy media consumers** who make choices based on the quality and credibility of media content. Syrians seek out a variety of media outlets looking to confirm news and information. They select media outlets based on perceptions of **reliability** and credibility.

Insight: Syrians can identify misinformation, bias and partisanship in Syrian, regional and international media outlets. Syrian audiences generally **enact a deliberative approach to media by checking multiple online sources** and not taking one story from a single outlet at face value.

Insight: A **widespread lack of trust** in Syrian media outlets and the content they produce is synonymous with the distinct lack of satisfaction Syrians have with the choices on offer inside the country. The desire of Syrians across the country for a plurality of news sources is, to a great extent, a clear indication of their skepticism and concern with the current Syrian context and media landscape.

Insight: Syrian audiences are keen for both **non-partisan and balanced news and information** to be part of their daily media consumption, and are tired of partisan or unilateral content. Respondents reported that they have **changed their consumption preferences** in the past based on perceived bias or hate speech in Syrian media outlets.

Insight: media organisations partnering with Free Press Unlimited are perceived to provide high quality content. **Free Press Unlimited's 'Ethical Journalism for Syrian Media' program's impact on the Syrian media landscape** was confirmed by the reported high levels of **engagement** with content from the partners. Although Syrians recognized that the partners were based in different regions, study participants observed that their content was generally neutral and unbiased.

Insight: Syrians **seek and value a more humanistic approach to news content**. Human interest stories are greatly valued. They appreciate stories that show how Syrians in other parts of the country are living and coping with the conflict.

Location, gender, age and education influence Syrian audiences' news and information needs.

Insight: Geographic location influences news and information needs, consumption patterns and levels of trust. Syrians report that they need **local and regional news**. The most sought-after topics were **political and security news** (incl. military operations), as well as **economic news and news related to basic needs** (food, water, shelter, etc.).

Insight: Those living inside IDPs valued media reporting that combined news, analysis and opinion along with accurate and credible news and content that was popular and familiar. Those living in Syria and Refugee groups valued breaking news and **accurate** and credible news.

Insight: Many Syrians, especially those who are younger, more educated and living outside of Damascus, are moving beyond broadcast television as their main news source. Digital news platforms far outperform traditional news on television, print and radio. **When TV is the preferred choice of**

medium for news and information, respondents, who are often older and less educated, seem to be less critical and less likely to seek out more information.

Insight: In addition to their interest in local news about their country **younger women** reported a preference for content focusing on **family, education and health**. **Older men** reported a preference for content focused on the **economy, politics and worldwide news**.

Insight: Syrians under 34 years old are more likely to seek non-Syrian sources. When television viewing preferences were disaggregated by age, Al-Hadath is the **most popular with under-34s**, whereas **Al-Jazeera remains most popular with over-34s**.

Independent media means freedom and autonomy over the content they produce and it has a role to play supporting peace-building and reconciliation.

Insight: Syrians define independent media as having **freedom** and being autonomous from forces within and beyond their institutions. Freedom means the autonomy to produce a wide range of uncensored content with a critical eye.

Insight: Syrian audiences value independent media but feel it is severely insufficient in the Syrian media landscape.

Insight: Syrians have very few formal ways to discuss political, social and other news topics. Media have the potential to provide an **opportunity to talk about news and information**. Through social media and messaging apps, Syrians are sharing news and information with others. The findings suggest that **messaging apps** may provide a way to begin safe **civil society** discussions amongst members in close social networks. Encrypted messaging apps are valuable because they also enable women to have a safe space through which to share and discuss the news.

Conclusions

<p>1. Neutral news matters. There is a desire for balanced news. The old adage, “if you create it, people will come” is a popular perception. Balanced news items will be influential in how Syrians understand their world.</p>	<p>2. There is a general perception that independent media can bring peace and help to unify the Syrian people across multiple dividing lines.</p>
<p>3. There is a need for more support for independent media. Working to build Independent media (emphasizing freedom from government and/or politics control) is highly valued, with a specific emphasis on the production of non-partisan and nuanced information. While media professionals and experts agree that funding and training from media development organisations has been conducive to strengthening independent media, there is a general acknowledgement that more assistance and development in the sector is needed.</p>	<p>4. The clearest indicator of Free Press Unlimited’s program contribution to the independent media sector is the popularity and quality of the partners’ content in the Syrian media landscape, notably that of Einab Baladi, Rozana and ARTA FM. Clinic participants rated stories by Einab Baladi, Halab Today, France 24 Arabic and Syria Snack as neutral, unbiased, and transparent by the clinic participants. Nearly half of the clinic participants identified the content from Einad Baladi as their favourite content of the eight stories viewed.</p>