



# **A Failure in the Failure? Accountability and the Role of Mass Media in the Aftermath of the Earthquake in Syria**

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## Introduction & Executive Summary

On 12<sup>th</sup> February 2023, after almost a week from the earthquake, Martin Griffiths, the under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator at the UN, wrote on his official Twitter account: “We have so far failed the people in north-west Syria” (fig.1).

This admission reveals the extent of the inadequacy of the international aid response in Syria. The UN was not, however, the only actor to be held accountable. China and Russia’s veto power at the Security Council allegedly delayed the opening of more crossing points between Syria and Turkey during the first week after the earthquake. Different local actors, such as the Syrian government, the National Salvation Government, and the Syrian Interim Government tried to exploit the disaster to improve their image at the international level and among local populations. The damage caused by the war deeply affected the local capacities to respond to the emergency. Political divisions on the ground hindered

aid distribution and mutual support between different areas.

This report is part of the Free Press Unlimited research activities aimed at investigating the relationship between media and accountability in Syria.

In this particular case, the report analyzed how international, regional, and national media covered the earthquake’s impact in Syria.

Natural disasters can reveal the complex intertwining of economic, political, and social factors of a society. They are also events that can be used by political actors to gain legitimacy, but that can also challenge their legitimacy if a timely and effective response is not put into place.

In this context, the role of mass media becomes especially relevant, as they are called to examine the event in relation to its political background, and identify specific responsibilities in terms of victims, damage to

Fig. 1



**Martin Griffiths**   
@UNReliefChief



At the [#Türkiye](#)-[#Syria](#) border today.  
We have so far failed the people in north-west Syria.  
They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn’t arrived.  
My duty and our obligation is to correct this failure as fast as we can.  
That’s my focus now.

10:27 AM · Feb 12, 2023 · 1M Views

infrastructures, and play a watchdog role in the response and reconstruction processes.

In addition, in the age of social media and growing disinformation, the role of mass media becomes, if possible, even more important.

The primary question this research analysis tries to answer is: were mass media able to play an effective role in identifying responsibilities during the earthquake in Syria?

Other main questions the report attempts to answer are:

1. Did mass media, and specifically international media, give enough space to the coverage of the earthquake in Syria and its consequences?
2. Was Syria neglected in comparison with the attention that Turkey received?
3. Which kind of coverage did mass media offer in terms of topics and journalistic formats?
4. Which actors did the mass media hold accountable, and did they support their claims with facts and credible sources?
5. Did the media offer appropriate historical context (as the consequences of the civil war on the population in the north-west)?
6. Which sources did the articles use? Did the media give enough voice to people on the ground, and to local NGOs, CSOs, and relief organizations?
7. Are there relevant differences between international, regional, and local media? And if yes, which ones?

## **Main Conclusions for international and regional media**

- Media coverage on the earthquake showed a strong disparity between Turkey and Syria. International media tended to focus overwhelmingly on Turkey. Only about 19% of the sampled articles covered Syria alone. It is also clear that, with very few exceptions, international reporters were stationed only in Turkey and did not cross into Syria.
- Similarly, Arab regional media dedicated to Syria alone only about 27% of the coverage.
- The attention of international media towards the earthquake tended to rapidly fade away, to the point of disappearing, already about three weeks after the first shockwave. This means international media were not there to check consequences of the earthquake on the local population, and how relief efforts were managed after the initial response period.
- Most of the coverage was constituted mainly by news reporting either of international aid activities (international media), or of the humanitarian situation (regional media), or a combination of both. Local aid activities received only marginal space, as other issues such as political and economic consequences of the disaster. Moreover, the coverage lacked in-depth reporting, analysis articles, or interviews with experts. Articles focusing on a local dimension were almost absent as media outlets preferred to examine the humanitarian situation at the national level (number of victims and displaced people) or the

logistical and political problems faced by international aid organizations.

- The international coverage relied mainly on official sources, first of all at the international level (with the UN dominating) but also at the national and local level (Syrian officials, or Syrian rebel leaders).
- Regional coverage is more diversified. However, in both cases local NGOs, despite their *crucial role* in the aftermath of the disaster, appeared quite marginalized and were mostly used as second-hand complementary sources.
- Refugees, IDPs and Syrian ordinary citizens were seldom given a voice, with the exception of the few articles produced by journalists who were able to report on the ground. Finally, expert sources were almost absent.
- Different responsibilities emerged in the coverage: the UN difficulties in delivering aid; the role of Russia and China's veto; the instrumentalization of aid by the Syrian government; the role of local actors, including rebels, in stopping the flow of aid supplies from one region to another. However, these responsibilities were never examined in detail, in order to allow the audience to properly assess their real impact. Rather, they were often barely mentioned, in general through sources either admitting these responsibilities (like the UN) or through sources launching accusations against certain actors.
- The lack of the necessary background information of expert sources, of

dedicated analytical or investigative pieces, and of well-informed local sources prevented international and regional media from offering a clear picture of the responsibilities involved and their consequences after the earthquake.

- Moreover, with *very few exceptions*, mass media did not take an explicit watchdog stance towards these responsibilities. In complex contexts like this, in other words, mass media should not limit themselves to offer bare facts, but should also provide their audiences with possible interpretations (and therefore accusations).

## Main Considerations

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- International and regional media appear to offer a good service in terms of reporting on the day-to-day humanitarian developments. The problems related to the international slow response also emerged, albeit in a superficial way. Some outlets offered in some pieces extensive coverage from inside, giving voice to Syrian refugees or northwest inhabitants in places like [al-Atarib](#), in [Idlib](#), [Jindires](#), [Aleppo](#) and [Jableh](#). However, international and regional coverage showed several limits in terms of continuity, in-depth reporting, and when it came to giving voice to local voices and their grievances.
- Even if some responsibilities in the coverage emerged, they were not analyzed with a dedicated coverage and an active watchdog stance. Given the complexity of the political context, mass media should have presented more context, data and explanations that would put the audience

in a better condition to assess where these responsibilities are, and why. In addition, some issues were completely ignored. It is quite significant, for example, that while bad building codes in Turkey were immediately subject to public scrutiny, international and regional media never looked at the provision of the Syrian code for earthquakes and its violation in Syria. Cases of theft and corruption in aid distribution were also completely overlooked, as was the [aid management](#) practices within government-controlled areas which led to question how and did the Syrian government try to use this aid to its own advantage?

- All these elements show that international and regional media cannot replace a well-functioning and independent Syrian media system. Only Syrian independent media provided with a proper level of resources can guarantee the continuity of the coverage, with the related follow-ups, and an in-depth coverage that are necessary ingredients for a journalism that can hold authorities, political actors, and private companies accountable in their specific context.

## **The Context**

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On the 6th of February 2023 an earthquake of 7.8 magnitude hit southern Turkey and north-west Syria.

It resulted in almost 60.000 victims between the two countries. In Syria alone, almost 9.000 people died and over 14.500 were injured. Over 5 million people have been displaced either because their buildings collapsed or were not fit anymore to be inhabited. Many vital infrastructures such as power plants, water

facilities, hospitals and schools were damaged.<sup>1</sup> As it always happens with natural disasters, the Turkey-Syrian earthquake also revealed a network of social, economic, and political factors of the affected societies.

Mass media play a relevant role not only in describing events as they unfold, but also in recognizing specific responsibilities and mismanagement, and exerting pressures in order to improve aid support and reconstruction processes during and after a catastrophe.

In this regard, the Global Investigative Journalism Network identified [a set of questions](#) journalists should try to answer when covering these topics, such as: Where did the relief money go? Was the disaster made worse by human actions? Was the death toll exacerbated by corruption and cronyism? What does the data say about problems at emergency management agencies, or about the disparities in disaster assistance? Who is exploiting the disaster?

When it comes to the consequences of the earthquake in north-west Syria, answering some of these questions is equally important, especially because of the complexity of the political situation and the precarious living conditions that characterized this area even before the disaster.

In particular, some issues emerged clearly during the weeks that followed the disaster:

- Slow international response, in particular by the UN, in part due to the closure of the potentially available crossing points between Turkey and Syria.
- The responsibility of China and Russia in keeping only the crossing of Bab el-Hawa open using their power in the UN security council.

- Instrumentalization of aid by the Syrian government and its allies, who pressured towards a cross-lines type of aid delivery instead of a cross-border approach, with the aim of concentrating aid resources into their hands.
- Political divisions that created obstacles for aid cargos to move smoothly between areas ruled by different actors.
- Consequences of the conflict in terms of displaced people, lack of personnel, lack of resources, and poor infrastructures, which made the impact of the disaster worse.
- Lack of proper organizational structures in the affected areas, and especially in those ruled by the National Salvation Government and by the Syrian Interim Government.
- Cases of corruption and theft of international aid at the local level.
- Poor quality of the buildings.

## **The sample and the methodology**

In this analysis we relied on two different samples of written articles from the following outlets: Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera, Al Watan, BBC English, Enab Baladi, France 24, Le Monde, The New York Times, Raseef 22, Rozana, Syrian Snack, The Guardian.

The first sample was constituted of 693 written articles published between the 13th and the 20th of February 2023. All the articles produced during this period were selected through a google search of the keywords “earthquake”,

“séisme”, “tremblement de terre” and الزلزال (the earthquake) for each single outlet.

The report focused on this period (about one week after the disaster) as mass media supposedly had enough material to draw more grounded conclusions about the earthquake’s impact on the population and the infrastructures, and, even more important, on how aid efforts were managed or mismanaged.

The 13th of February in this sense is a particularly relevant date, as other crossing points between Turkey and Syria re-opened, which at the same time created the opportunity to debate the timeliness of this decision, and the different responsibilities in its late implementation.

The second sample, on the other hand, focused on written articles published between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> (90 items), and between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> of February (62 items). For this second sample, while using the same keywords, we selected only the first three items for each day.

This second sample was selected with two purposes in mind: first, in order to have a look into the disparities between the coverage focusing on Turkey and the coverage focusing on Syria; second, to assess whether the media agenda started to turn away from the event about two weeks after the first shockwave.

Only the articles focusing on Syria, or partially on Syria, and included in the first sample, were subject to a more in-depth analysis through a quantitative and qualitative standard methodology, for a total of 142 items<sup>1</sup>.

The methodology included an analysis of the

(1) For some precise data on the earthquake’s impact, see: <https://www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/2023-turkey-and-syria-earthquake-faqs#fast-facts>

following topics: the geographic focus, whether the article identified specific responsibilities, whether they identified (up to) three actors mentioned as responsible in relation to different issues (see the list in paragraph about the context above), whether these responsibilities were supported by facts and sources or not, whether the article presented background information and of which type. In addition, we analyzed the type of protagonists and sources each article displayed.

## **The Analysis**

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One earthquake, two countries, but north-west Syria remains in the shadow

For each article in the sample, we analyzed if it focused exclusively on Turkey, or Syria, or if it included news dedicated to both the countries.

A large disparity emerged, especially in the coverage of international media and, to a lesser extent, also in the coverage of regional media. In international media, Turkey received about four times the attention of Syria both in the 1st and 2<sup>nd</sup> sample. At the same time, Syria was

often mentioned or covered in articles covering the earthquake in the two countries. These articles represented a significant percentage in both the samples (respectively 22% and 32%). It is also worth mentioning that almost all the international reporters on the ground were based in Turkey and did not even reach Syria.

The disparity was less pronounced in the case of regional media. However, also in this case, and despite the fact that the analyzed media were all Arab outlets, Turkey still tended to receive more attention. Moreover, it has to be considered that Raseef 22 dedicated predominantly its coverage to Syria rather than Turkey, which means the disparity in the case of al Jazeera and al Arabiya was even more pronounced.

Quite predictably, Syrian media focused almost only on Syria, and articles dedicated exclusively on Turkey are almost absent. Enab Baladi appears to be the only one which decided to dedicate at least a part of the coverage to Turkey as well (20 articles in the first sample, and seven in the second one), which probably results from the fact they are operating there.

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(2) Audio files and photo reportages were excluded from the sample.

(3) France 24, albeit included in both the samples, and analyzed in relation to its focus on Syria and Turkey, was excluded by the in-depth analysis as it offered only daily summaries of the situation, which did not fit our analysis criteria.

## The data

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**Fig. 3** International Media (1st sample)

Focus	Turkey	Syria	Both	Neither	Total
Number of items	80	19	30	7	136
Percentage	59%	14%	22%	5%	100%

**Fig. 4** Regional Media (1st sample)

Focus	Turkey	Syria	Both	Neither	Total
Number of items	150	98	43	43	334
Percentage	45%	29%	13%	13%	100%

**Fig. 5** International Media (2nd sample)

Focus	Turkey	Syria	Both	Total
Number of items	27	9	17	53
Percentage	51%	17%	32%	100%

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**Fig. 5** International Media (2nd sample)

Focus	Turkey	Syria	Both	Total
Number of items	27	9	17	53
Percentage	51%	17%	32%	100%



**Fig. 6** Regional Media (2nd sample)

Focus	Turkey	Syria	Both	Total
Number of items	20	21	7	48
Percentage	42%	44%	14%	100%

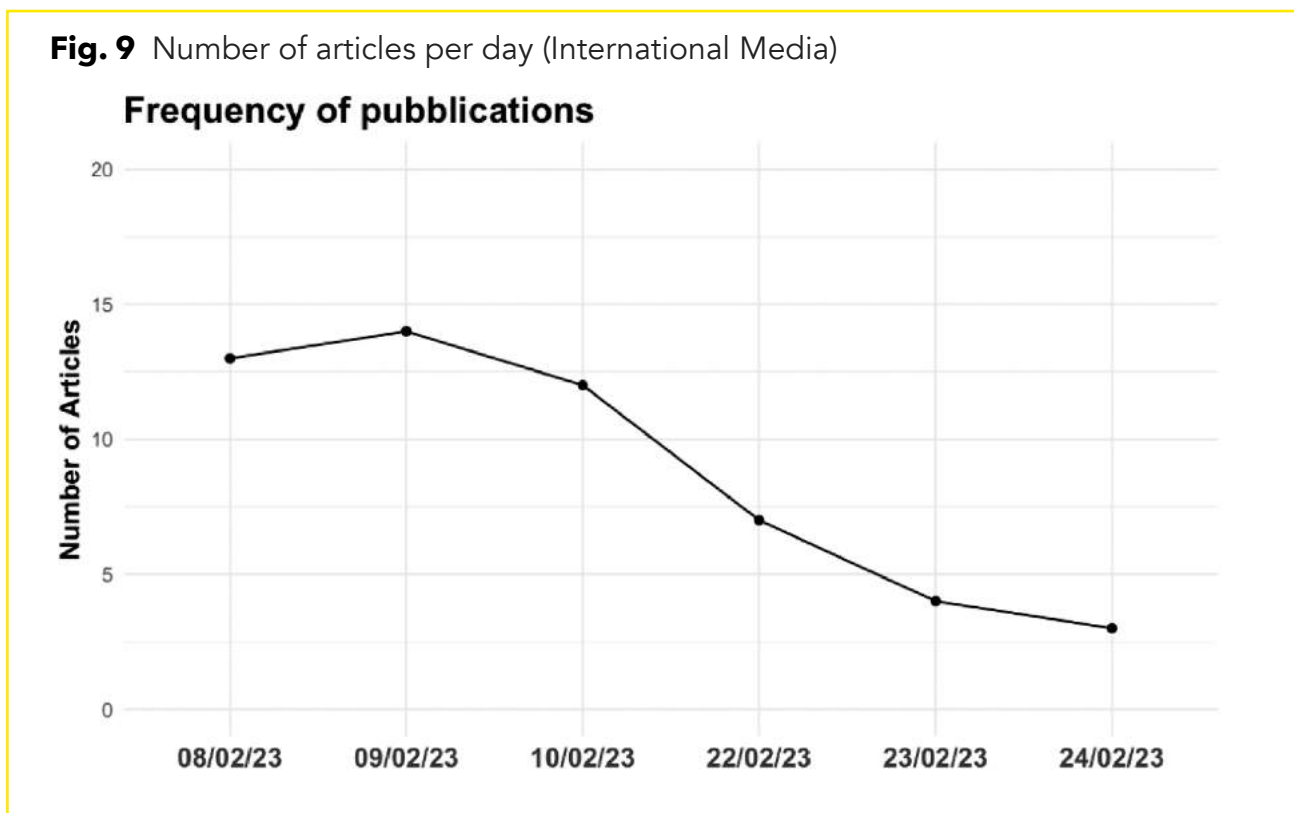
**Fig. 7** Syrian Media (1st sample)

Focus	Turkey	Syria	Both	Neither	Total
Number of items	11	177	24	11	223
Percentage	5%	79%	11%	5%	100%

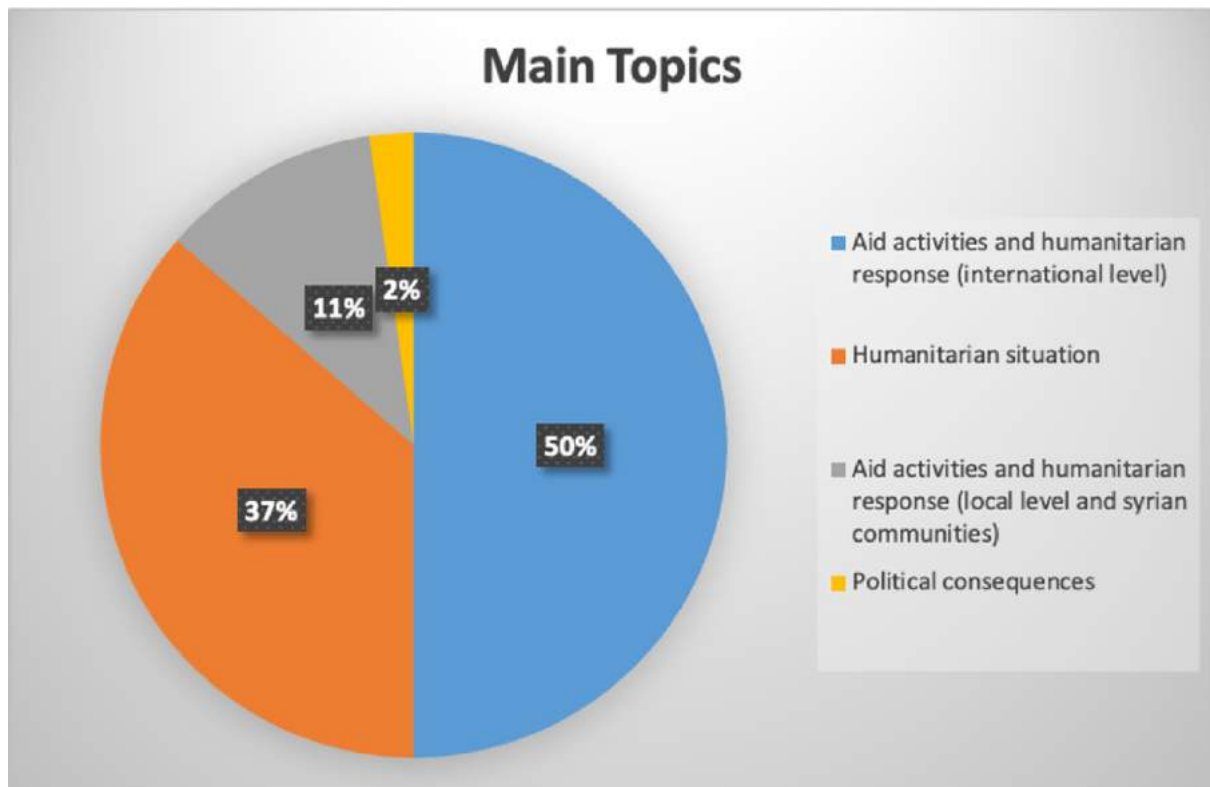
**Fig. 8** Syrian Media (2nd sample)

Focus	Turkey	Syria	Both	Total
Number of items	2	43	6	51
Percentage	4%	84%	12%	100%

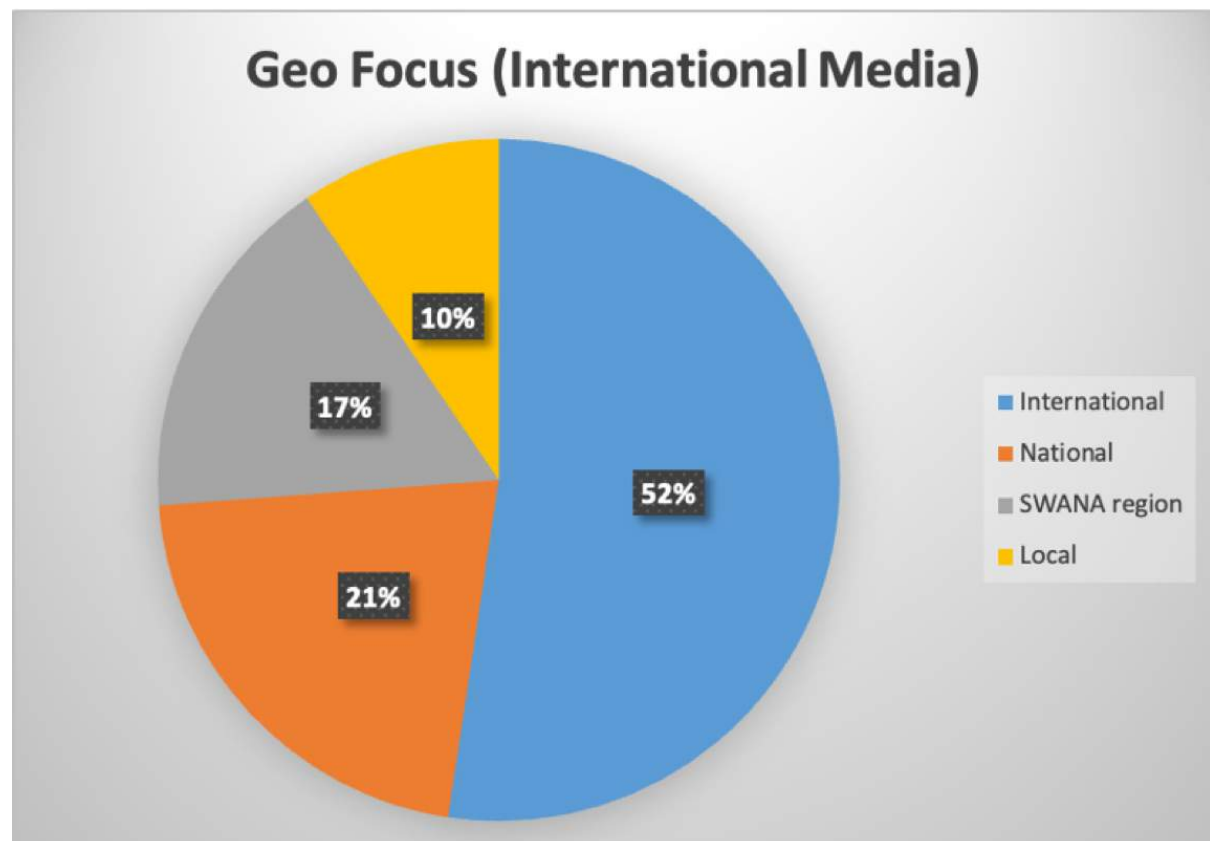
**Fig. 9** Number of articles per day (International Media)



**Fig. 10**



**Fig. 11**



## **After two weeks, international media turn their gaze away**

The second sample also showed how rapidly the attention of international media towards the earthquake faded. While on the 8th of February the five outlets considered in this study were publishing about three (and probably more) articles per day (for a total of 13), the number decreased steadily towards the end of the month. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the last day included in the sampling, only three articles in total were published (one each by The Guardian, Le Monde, and France 24).

It is not particularly surprising that international media were not able to maintain a stable focus on an event after three weeks from its inception. And yet, it remains very problematic. Not only because the coverage tends to be reduced to zero during the last days, and we can imagine it completely disappears later, but also because the consequences of the earthquake are far from being over. The need of journalism coverage to check on how distribution aid and development efforts are managed, the health and the conditions of those affected, and how reconstruction operations are going, is as needed as it was during the first days, and sometimes even more important follow up on the aftermath and accountability.

## **A shallow chronicle of a humanitarian catastrophe**

The coverage offered by international media focused mostly on the aid activities at the international level, followed by the humanitarian situation.

This is confirmed by the fact that the articles tended to focus on the international dimension. Most of the coverage, in fact, appeared to describe mainly the difficulties in aid support delivery by the UN and the

international community. However, almost as to counterbalance these difficulties, much space was given to fundraising initiatives by the UN, and the plea by actors of the international community “to do something”.

Particularly problematic is the fact that only little space was given to local aid activities which, in the north-west, carried out the most important operations in order to save lives during the first weeks. Also in this case, the geographical focus confirmed this international approach, as the content with a local focus was limited to 10% of the total.

Not very different was the coverage of regional media. In figure 12, it seems the coverage focused overwhelmingly on the humanitarian situation, while the international aid activities were covered as the main topic in 17% of the articles. Only 7% of the articles focused on local aid activities and the organizations caring for them.

The articles by regional media tended to focus more on the national and regional (SWANA) level rather than the international one, in line with the highlights on the humanitarian situation. Moreover, the local dimension found more space.

However, all the articles with a local dimension never focused on the local aid, but mostly on the humanitarian situation, confirming that these activities tended to be overlooked also in these media outlets.

The coverage was composed overwhelmingly of news-reports and news (88% for international media, and 78% for regional media). Analysis articles and feature stories were almost absent, denoting a certain lack of investment by the media into covering

Fig. 12

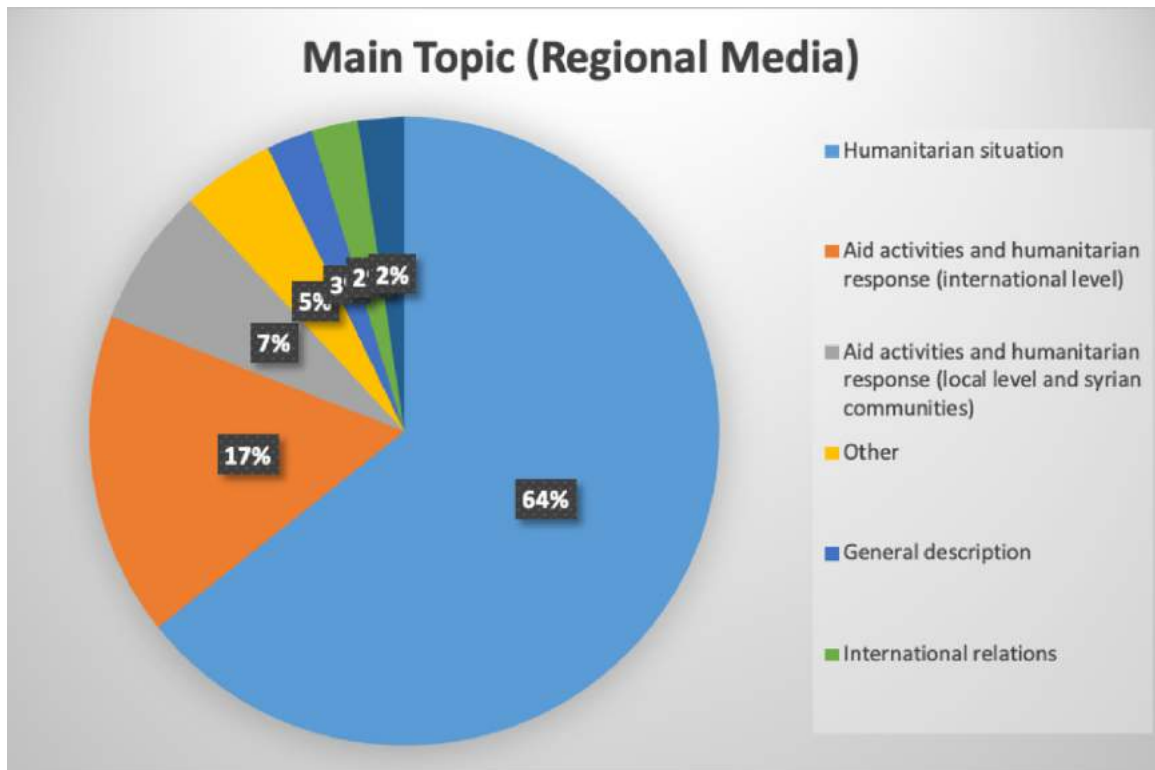
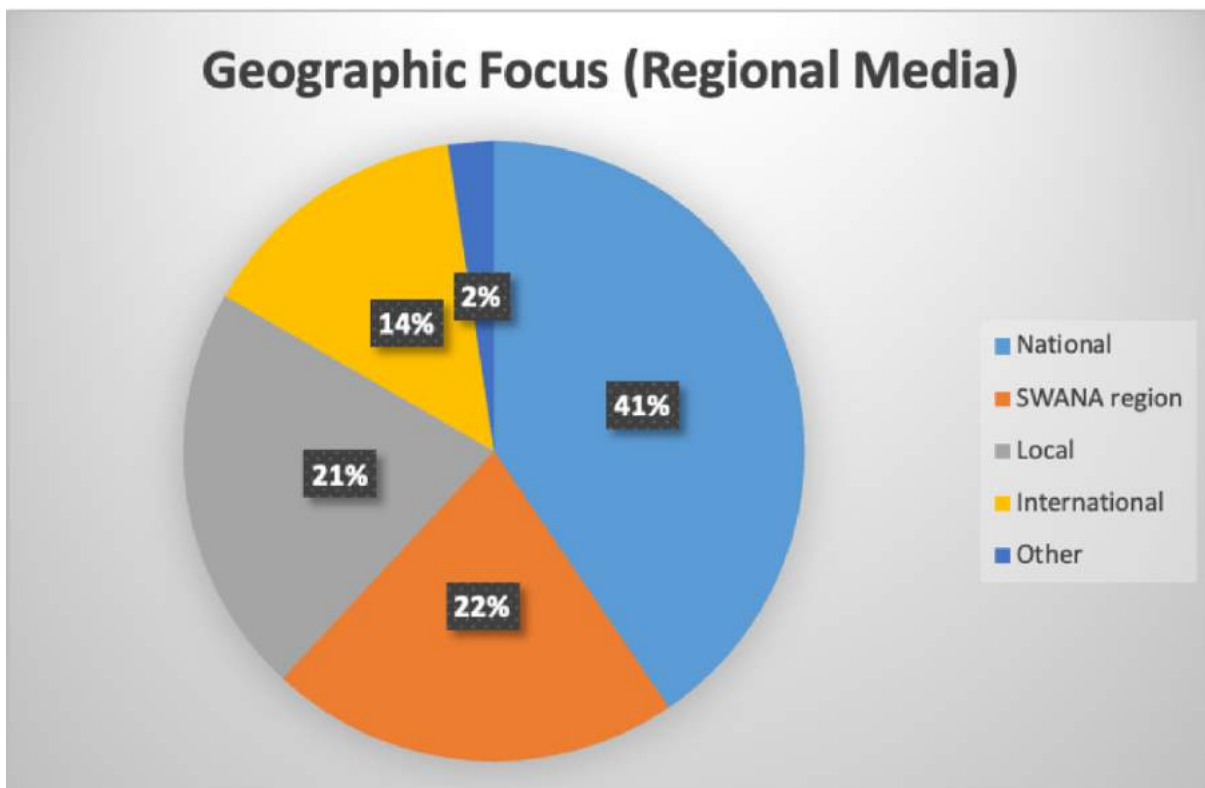
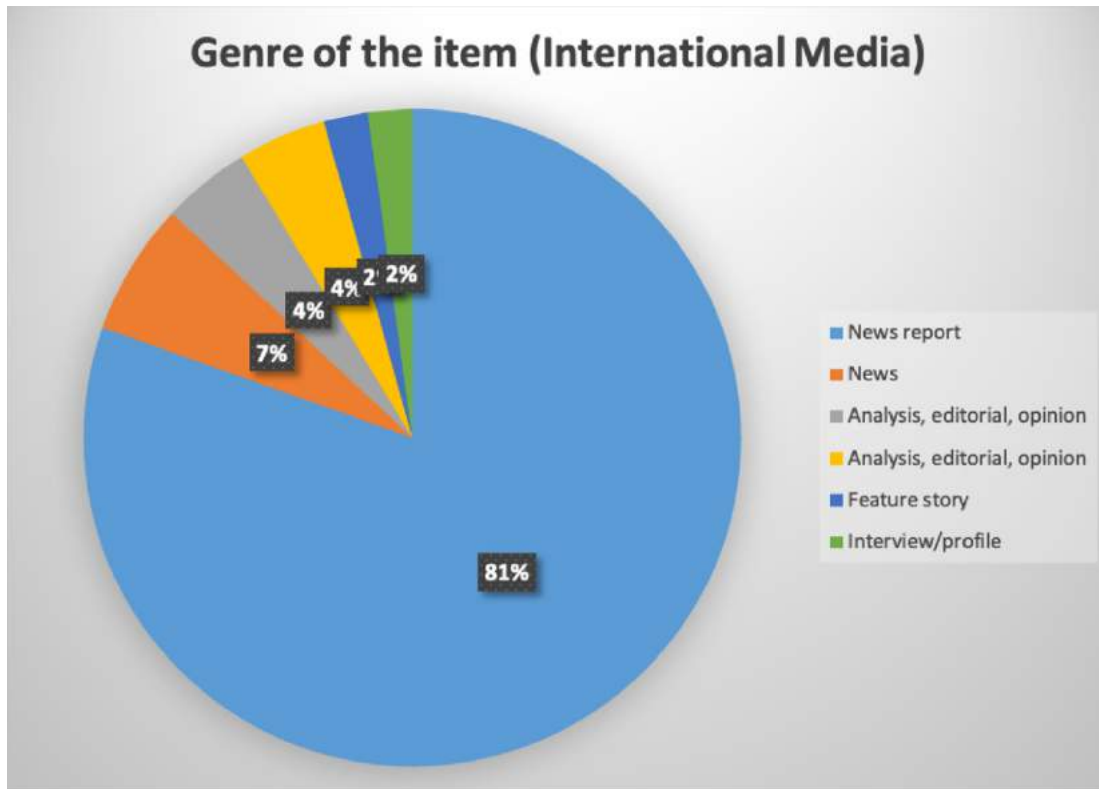


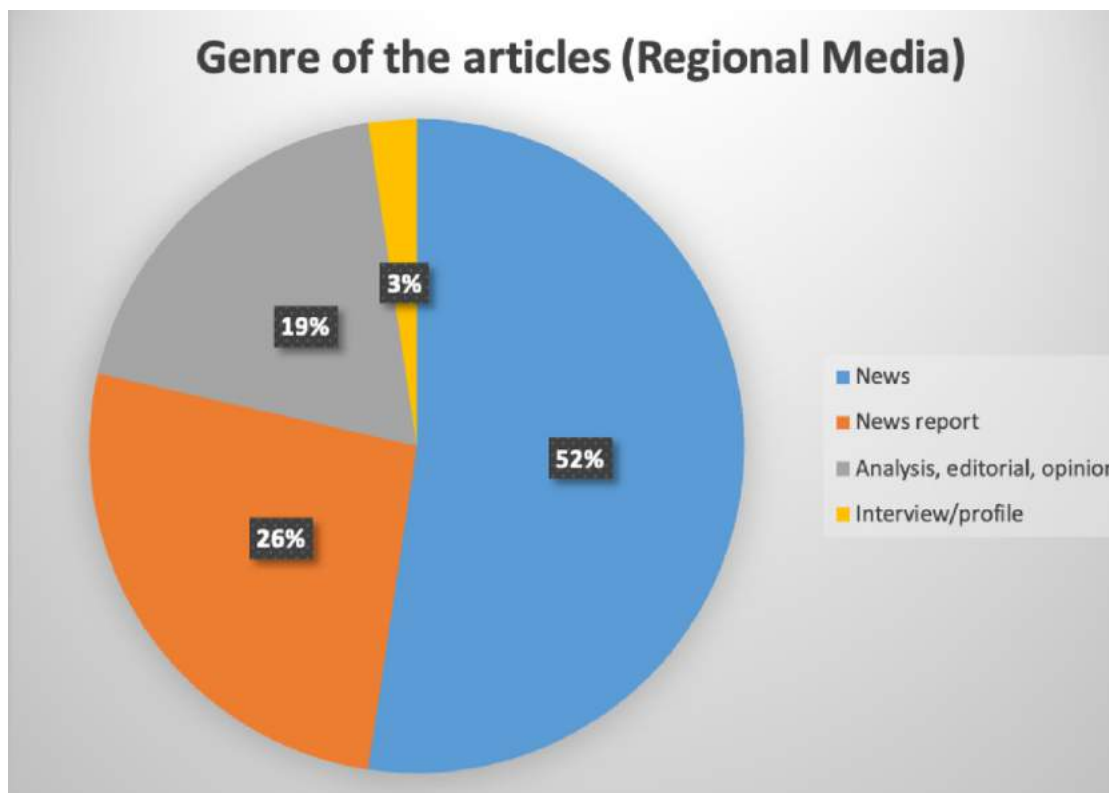
Fig. 13



**Fig. 14**



**Fig. 15**



the earthquake in Syria with a more in-depth approach.

### **An earthquake through the eyes of officials**

In line with what we said about the topics, international media tended to privilege official voices instead of local NGOs', ordinary citizens', or refugees.

The UN in this sense constituted a specific case, as 25% of the total sources were UN affiliated. Often the organization was mentioned in relation to the number of dead and wounded, but some of its members, and specifically Martin Griffiths, the Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, and António Guterres, the Secretary General, alongside other representatives, were often given a voice in relation to the state of aid operations.

If we sum UN to other official sources such as international States, the Syrian State, and the rebel organizations and institutions, the total of official sources reaches about 50% of the total.

On the other hand, local NGOs and CSOs were only mentioned as sources in 21 cases (12% of the total). If we consider the role that local relief organizations played in the aftermath of the earthquake, and their supposed knowledge of the situation on the ground, the choice to put their voices to the margin appears quite problematic. In addition, out of these 21 occurrences, 11 were sources affiliated with the White Helmets, which therefore appears as the only local organization to have acquired a certain level of international prominence. Finally, it has to be noted that there was a difference among international media, as Le Monde, for example, gave voice to these organizations only 2 times out of total

31 occurrences (around 6%), and BBC 9 times out of 47 (about 20%).

In the same way, the space given to refugees and IDPs or ordinary citizens appeared also as quite marginal (respectively 10% and 6% of the total).

All these elements confirm a tendency of international media to go for a coverage that tends to privilege official voices, both at the international and local level.

Regional media tended to have a more diversified use of sources. UN and official foreign sources were not so prominent, and the same for Syrian official ones.

In this context, even if national NGOs and CSOs voices were still not prominent (13% of the total), at least they did not disappear in comparison with official ones.

Moreover, in the case of regional media, local voices were not limited to the White Helmets only. Rather, different others were mentioned as well: the Kurdish Red Crescent, the Emergency Response Coordinators, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Bayt Warak, the Association to raise health and social standards in Aleppo, among the others.

Another significant difference with international media was the choice to give voices to categories such as Syrian artists/intellectuals (around 6%) and researchers (around 4%).

### **A missing historical context**

Did the articles offer some background information about Syria in relation to the earthquake?

Providing this type of information is particularly

**Fig. 16** Sources International Media

Name of the source	Occurrences	Percentage on the total
UN	43	25%
National NGOs and CSOs	21	12%
Refugees and IDPs	18	10%
Official foreign sources (aggregated)	16	9%
Syrian government and officials (aggregated)	14	8%
Rebel Actors	14	8%
Ordinary citizens	11	6%
Health workers	10	6%
International NGOS and CSOs	6	4%
Other Sources	21	12%
Total sources	174	100%

**Fig. 17** Regional Media

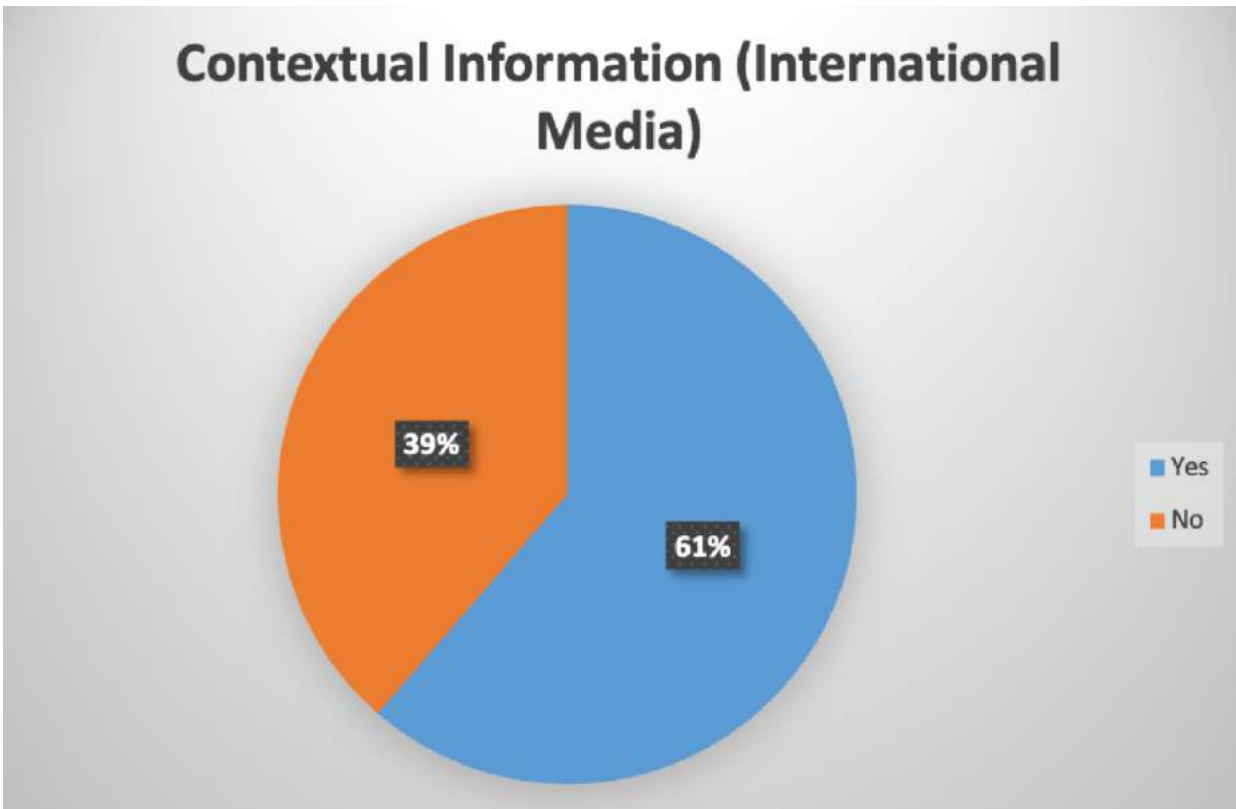
Name of the source	Occurrences	Percentage on the total
UN	28	15%
National NGOs and CSOs	24	13%
Ordinary Citizens	20	10%
Artists and intellectuals	12	6%
Refugees and IDPs	11	5%
Official Sources (aggregated)	11	5%
Researchers and Academics	9	4%
International NGOs and CSOs	6	3%
Health Workers	5	3%
Rebel actors (aggregated)	5	3%
Syrian government and officials (aggregated)	4	3%
Other sources	57	30%
Total	192	100%

important as it enables the readers to better understand the impact of the natural disaster, but also to identify in a clearer way the responsibilities that made this impact even worse for the population.

Particularly relevant aspects that should have been highlighted are: the effects of the civil

war in terms of displaced people; lack of infrastructures and of specialized personnel; the geopolitical fragmentation that affected the flow of aid supplies inside the country; the economic crisis including shortages of electricity and fuel and the international sanctions; the dependence on aid even before the disaster; the weak health system and

**Fig. 18**



connected to this, the cholera epidemic that struck the country in 2022.

About 61% of the articles (27 out of 44) in international media offered at least some contextual information.

The New York Times in particular provided that information in almost all the articles, while Le Monde did it only in one article out of three. All these articles mentioned, albeit sometimes briefly, that a civil war happened. This was often used as an explanation (or justification) for the "difficulties" in providing aid to the affected areas.

Other elements however were mentioned less often. For example, the reasons behind the closure of most of the crossing points between Turkey and Syria were explained in only two articles.

Only 11 articles mentioned the fact that many people in the north-west were already displaced, that infrastructures were already damaged, and that these elements affected the response capacity and made the earthquake impact even worse.

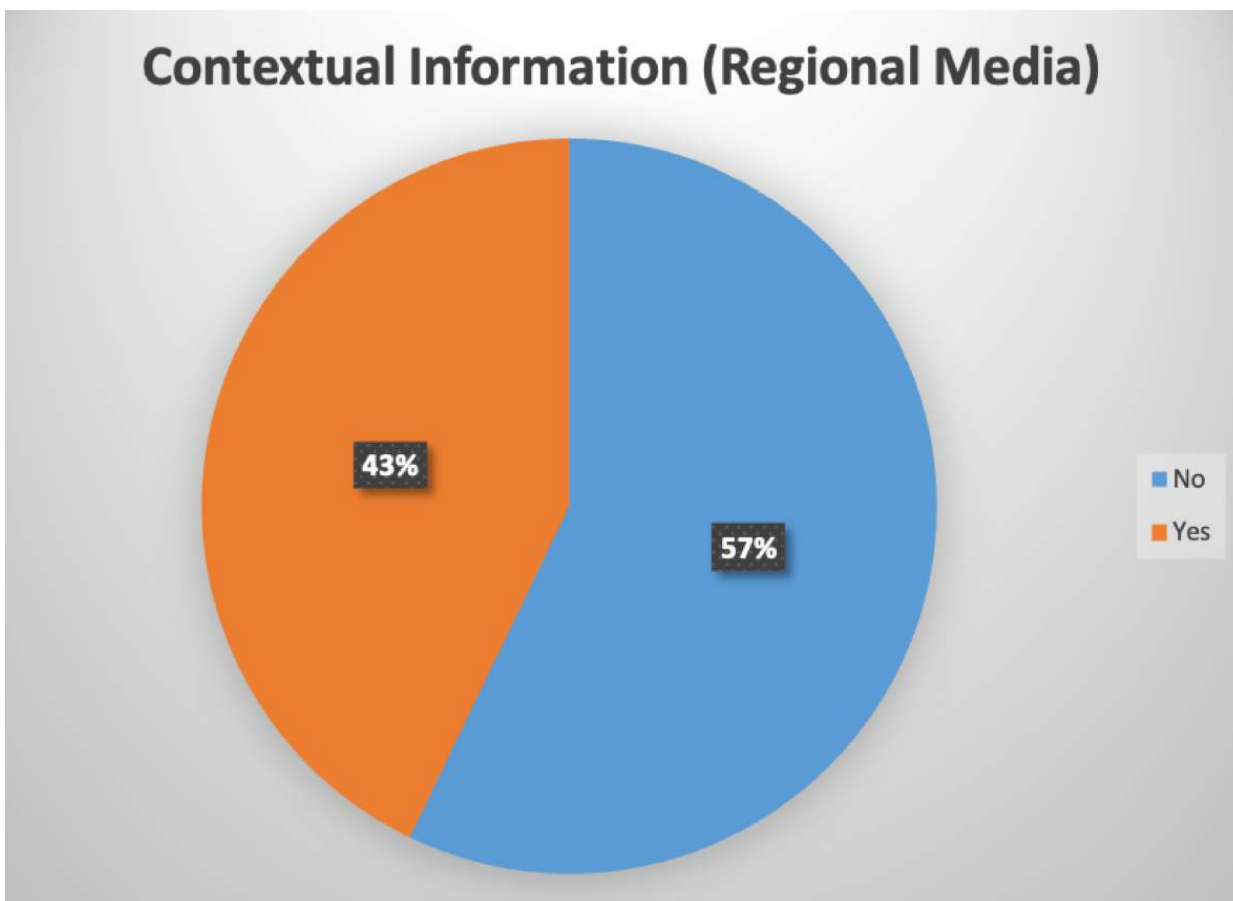
The economic crisis was mentioned in only four articles. The fact that millions of people were already dependent on foreign aid was mentioned in five articles.

Finally, the cholera epidemic was mentioned in only three articles.

Regional media did not do better under this aspect. Only 43% of the articles (18 out of 42) include contextual information. In this regard, al Jazeera and al Arabiya tend to offer less information, while Raseef 22 does it in 61% of the articles.



Fig. 19



As in the previous case, all these articles mention the civil war.

Of these, only seven go a bit deeper to mention the existence of displaced people. Three articles mention that the population was already dependent on foreign aid. Two articles mention economic problems, including shortages of electricity and fuel. One article contextualizes the situation of children in particular, and another one the fragility of the health system. The political context behind the closure of the crossing points is never mentioned, as it is not mentioned the cholera epidemic.

In conclusion, the coverage of both international and regional media did not generally provide enough background information in order to

better understand the situation on the ground, including specific responsibilities in terms of slow aid response or mismanagement.

Mentioning the civil war and the political complexity, without providing further details, appears almost as a justification to the problems international aid organizations were facing, as they were often attributed to "political divisions" in the country.

Also other important issues, such as the legal and political status of the crossing points between Turkey and Syria, were generally not explained in detail, preventing the audience from fully understanding who should be blamed for the failure of the aid support efforts.

## **A superficial identification of responsibilities**

As we mentioned in the introduction, as in all natural disasters, the Turkey-Syria earthquake also revealed a network of clear responsibilities by political actors.

But did the mass media really hold these actors accountable? And how?

The analysis highlights that these responsibilities were mentioned in different articles, but not in a systematic way and without the necessary watchdog stance to exert pressures on political actors and therefore hold them accountable.

International media mentioned responsibilities in 27 out of 44 articles. In addition, in 14 of these articles they mentioned more than one responsibility. However, these responsibilities were only clearly identified in 19 of these articles. Therefore, we have cases in which even if a problem is mentioned and its probable responsibility also identified, the two are not clearly connected in the article and the "accusation" is blurred. This happened often, for example, in articles mentioning the UN difficulties in bringing aid into Syria, but attributing them to political divisions, or to the poor state of the roads, or to the decisions of other actors such as Russia and China.

The responsibility of the UN was mentioned in 15 articles. The role of China and Russia at the Security Council was highlighted in nine articles, while the responsibility of the Syrian State was also mentioned nine times. All these actors were most of the time connected in the coverage, as they were all involved in the problem related to the crossing points between Turkey and Syria. This issue, therefore, constituted the main one on which international media focused. At the same time, the Syrian government was sometimes accused in a clearer way to [weaponize aid](#) to

its own advantage or to engage with ["disaster diplomacy"](#).

Syrian opposition organizations were mentioned seven times, mainly reminding that the National Salvation Government refused to accept aid from the Syrian State. The international community was mentioned in six articles. In these cases, there was a general accusation, [often through Syrian local sources](#), alluding to the fact that the international community did not do enough. Finally, Turkey was mentioned three times in relation to the double standards used against Syrian refugees in the country.

Regional media's coverage included less mentions of responsibilities than international ones. The Syrian State appeared as the most frequent (six mentions) in relation to its general responsibilities during the war, but also for its alleged [bombing of the surrounding of al-Attareb](#) during rescue operations, which was almost completely ignored elsewhere. An article by al Jazeera also gave voice to Syrian NGOs accusing the government [of exploiting aid](#) to its own advantage. Raseef 22 is the only platform that mentions the alleged responsibility of the AANES in relation to [the blocking of aid supplies](#) towards rebel areas.

In light of the above, we can say that some responsibilities emerged indeed in the media coverage: the failure of the UN, the responsibilities of the Syrian government, Russia and China in relation to the closure of the passages between Turkey and Syria, and sometimes those of rebel organizations or the AANES in blocking the aid.

However, these responsibilities emerged very superficially and, in most of the cases, almost coincidentally.

The case of the UN in international media is from this point of view quite exemplary. The organization's responsibility emerged mostly because, as mentioned earlier in this report, international media mainly relied on official sources, many of them from the UN itself. Moreover, it was the UN, through representatives such as Griffiths and Guterres, that admitted its failure in Syria, and the need for more to be done.

In other words, the media simply tended to report these statements, without investigating them.

Similarly, the role of the Syrian government, Russia and China in keeping only Bab el- Hawa open was most of the time briefly mentioned without fully assessing this responsibility and its impact in terms of human lives. In fact, the direct connection between the responsibility of an actor, when clearly identified, and its impact on human lives was almost never clearly mentioned.

In order to assess how actors are held accountable by mass media, we need to look at the larger picture. If it is true, as we have seen, that some responsibilities emerged, it is the type of coverage that poses limits when it comes to holding the involved actors accountable.

These limits are related to the type of coverage we presented in this dossier, and can be summarized in the following points:

- Accountable journalism needs articles that dedicate more space to assess responsibilities and present more data and facts in order to clarify them, such as investigative reports, reportages, and analysis pieces. In other words, accountable journalism needs in-depth stories that

enable the audience to fully understand where responsibilities can be placed and who is to be blamed, for what and why. **As we have seen, however, the coverage by international and regional media focused mainly on reporting on news (see Figures 14 and 15 above).**

- Accountable journalism needs expert sources that can explain better complex contexts like this one, and sources on the ground who can offer valuable information (such as local CSOs and witnesses) that can support effectively the identification of specific responsibilities. However, as we have seen, the coverage of both international and regional media overwhelmingly relied on official sources. If these sources sometimes point to specific responsibilities (either by their own admission or accusing other actors), their claims should be journalistically verified either by the journalists themselves or by other credible, and possibly impartial/expert, sources.
- Accountable journalism needs background information that can help situate the current events in the larger context. In this specific case, it is not possible to properly assess single responsibilities if the content does not explain the history of the conflict, the political fragmentation on the ground, the state of the economy, the state of the health system and the infrastructures, or the political and legal context that prevented the international community to deliver aid supplies in a timely and effective way. Whereas, international and regional coverage tended, for the most part, to barely mention the civil war, the existence of displaced people in the north-west, and the bad state of the economy.

- Accountable journalism needs to assume an active watchdog role. This means the authors should take a position, after having presented the data, and demand explicitly for these responsibilities to be accounted for. International and regional media tended not to do that. Rather, they let other sources deliver these accusations, without investigating them and taking a clear position that would help the audience navigate through too many and sometimes contradictory statements.

A clear example here is again the way the closure of the crossing points between Turkey and Syria was handled. Could the UN do something about it? Or were the Syrian government, Russia, and China the only ones responsible for it? These questions went generally unanswered in the coverage.

An exception to the above is an [editorial](#) by The Guardian in which the outlet took an active stance, and mentioned explicitly that “the UN and western States should explore legal ways of circumventing the security council”.

## **A look into Syrian Media**

We included in the analysis five Syrian media outlets. Al Watan and Syrian Snack are operating in government-controlled areas, while Arta FM, Enab Baladi, and Rozana are independent outlets established after 2011.[1] The main difference with international and regional media that can be immediately tracked is that Syrian media outlets privileged Syria over Turkey (see fig. 7 and 8 above). Actually, with the exception of Enab Baladi, the Syrian media almost completely ignored Turkey.

Syrian media, however, similarly to international and regional media, during the last week

of February started showing a decrease in the earthquake coverage, even if not as pronounced.

### **A Syrian perspective on the earthquake**

In terms of articles’ genres, Syrian media produced a coverage similar to international and regional media. As 90% of the articles were constituted either by news or news reports, they only had a very limited number of opinion or analysis pieces, and only two interviews.

The main difference emerged with the topics. Syrian media dedicated much more attention to local aid activities (around 30% of the total articles). International aid activities, on the other hand, were less relevant, and constituted only 22% of the total.

This is quite significant as it gives prominence to actors operating on the ground which, as we have seen, played a crucial role in the aftermath of the earthquake, and were quite overlooked by international and regional media. This includes positive initiatives such as collecting funding by Syrian organizations and communities.

The coverage was also a bit more diverse, as some articles presented coverage of the impact of the earthquake on specific fields such as [culture](#), [economy](#), and [education](#).

In general, the tendency towards the local is confirmed if we look at the geographic focus: the great majority of the articles had a national or local dimension, while the international dimension was extremely limited (only 9% of the articles).

While local media focused more on coverage from a local perspective, this research further analyzes what specific topics and actors were addressed in their content?

**Fig. 20** International Media

Actor	Main Responsibility	Second Responsibility	Third Responsibility	Total
UN	11	2	2	15
Syrian State	3	4	2	9
Russia and China	5	1	2	9
Syrian opposition/rebels	1	3	3	7
International Community	3	3	0	6
Turkey	3	0	0	3
Political Divisions	1	0	0	1
No one or not applicable	17	31	35	-
Total	44	44	44	-

**Fig. 21** Regional Media

Actor	Main Responsibility	Second Responsibility	Third Responsibility	Total
Syrian State	5	1	0	6
UN	2	1	0	2
International Community	2	0	0	2
Turkey	1	1	0	2
Syrian Opposition/Rebels	0	1	1	2
Autonomous Administration	0	0	1	1
Russia	0	0	1	1
No one/Not Applicable	31	38	39	-
Total	42	42	42	-

First, the articles covering local aid activities appeared to focus both on institutional actors (the Syrian government and its local bodies, or the National Salvation Army) and NGOs or CSOs on the ground. Al Watan gives much more space to governmental organizations than independent media.

This element was also reflected in the sources, which were dominated by local ones: national NGOs and CSOs (17%), and institutional ones (government ones in particular reached around

13%, and opposition ones around 9%). Voices of ordinary citizens and refugees, however, similarly to international and regional media, were more marginal (respectively 8% and 3%) The UN and official foreign sources constituted together only 10% of the total, once more confirming that Syrian outlets, both independent or operating in governmental areas, chose to give more voice to local actors than international ones.

The national NGOs that were given a voice,

Fig. 22

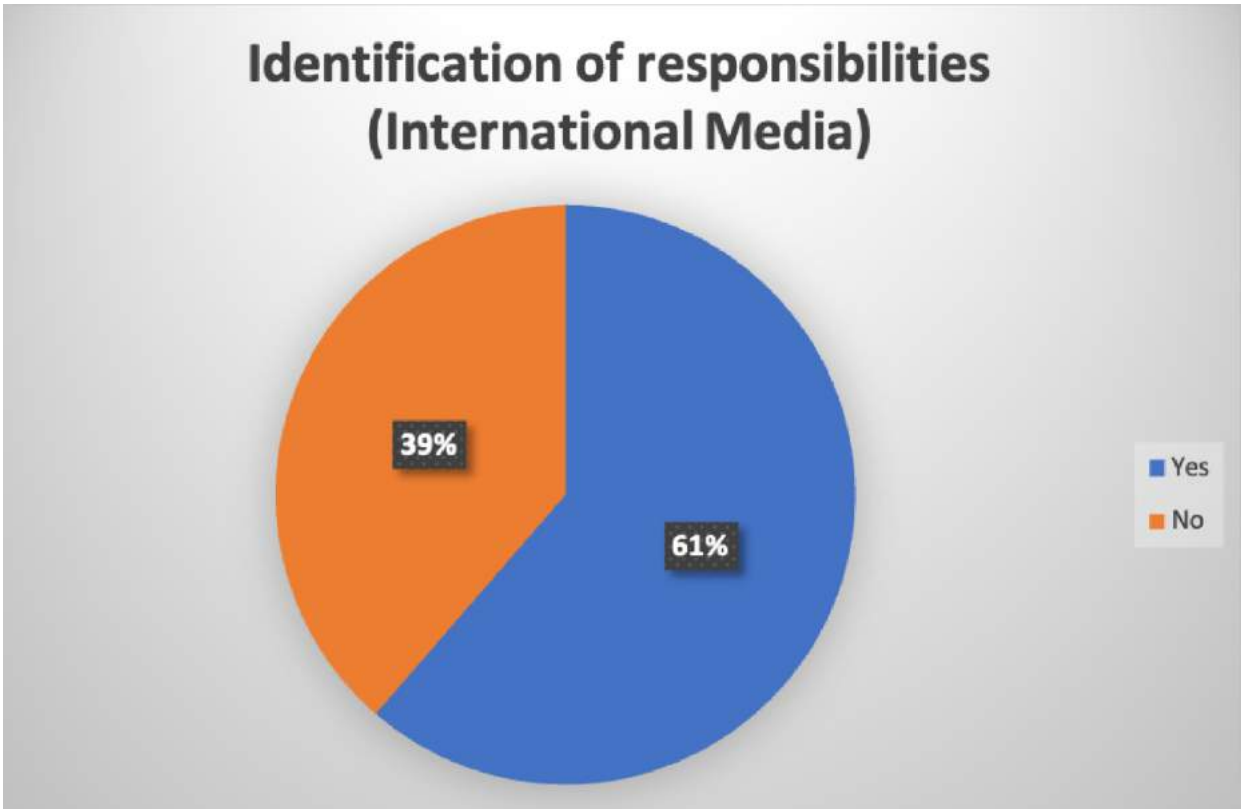
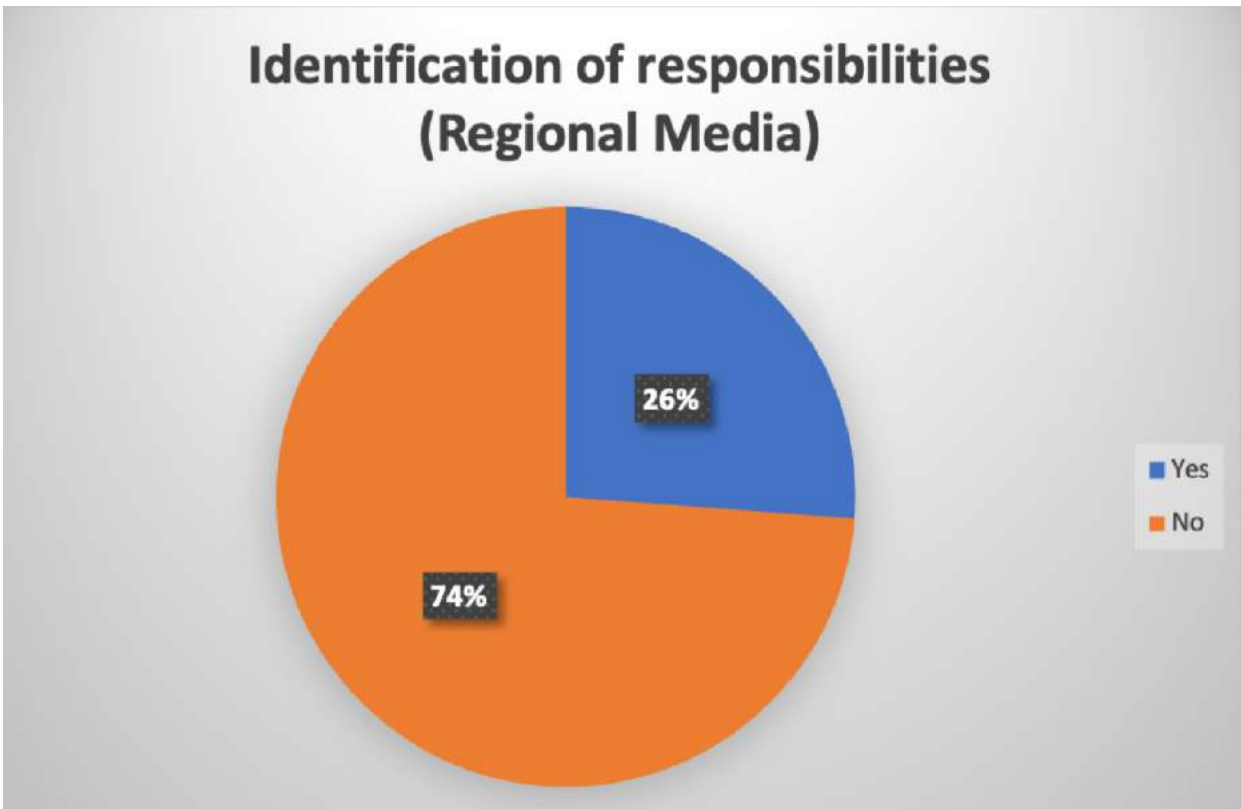
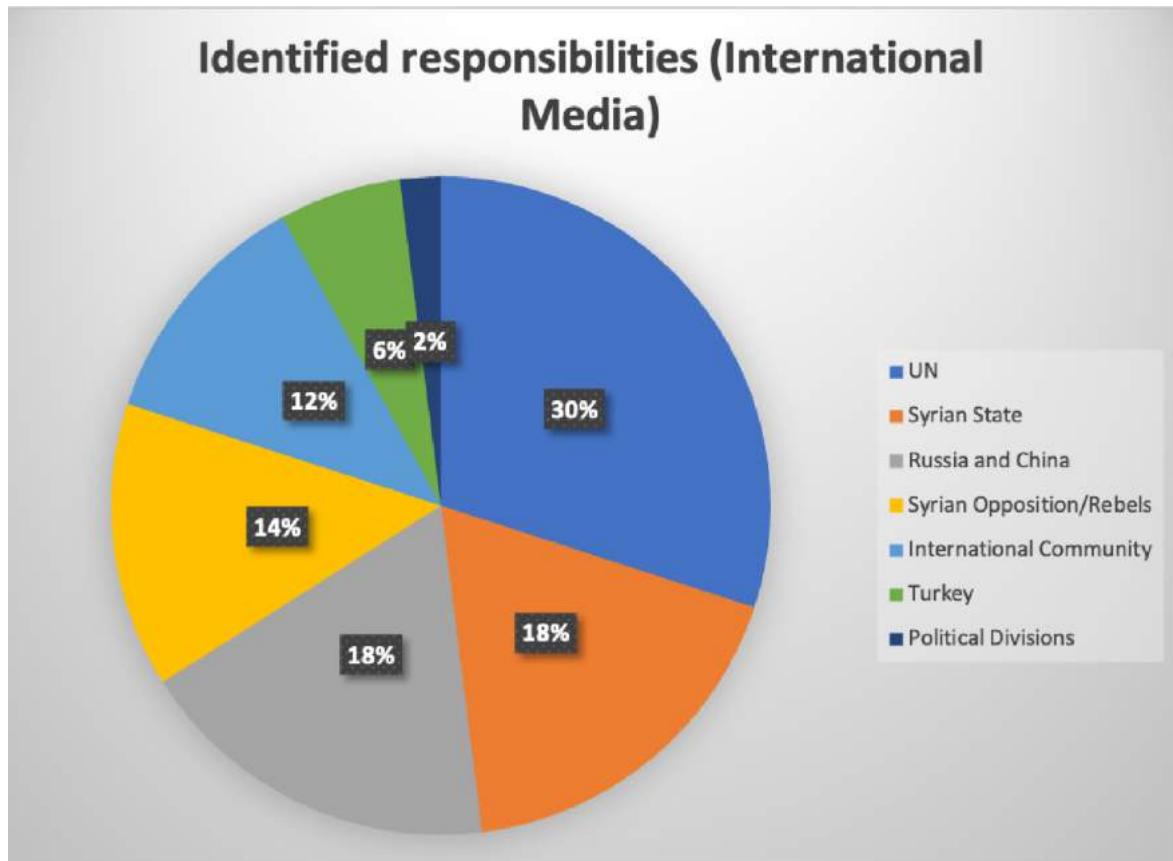


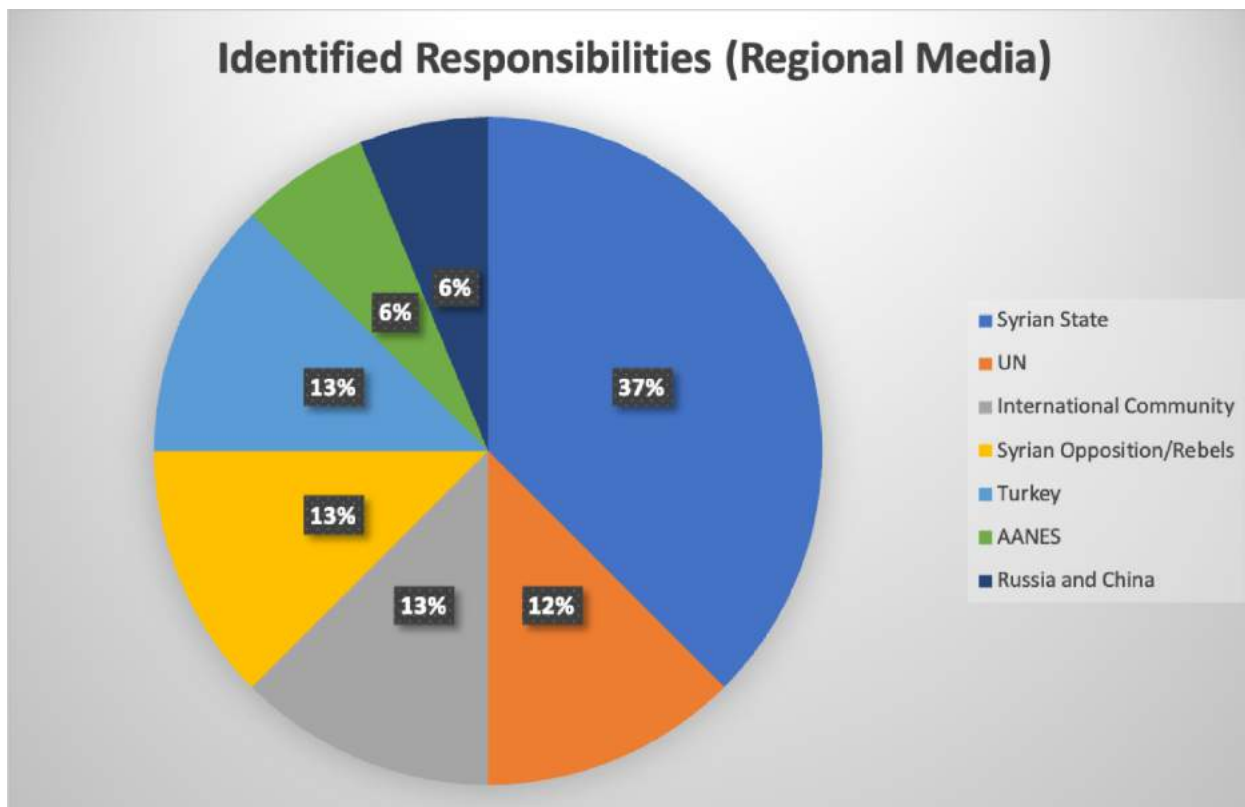
Fig. 23



**Fig. 24**

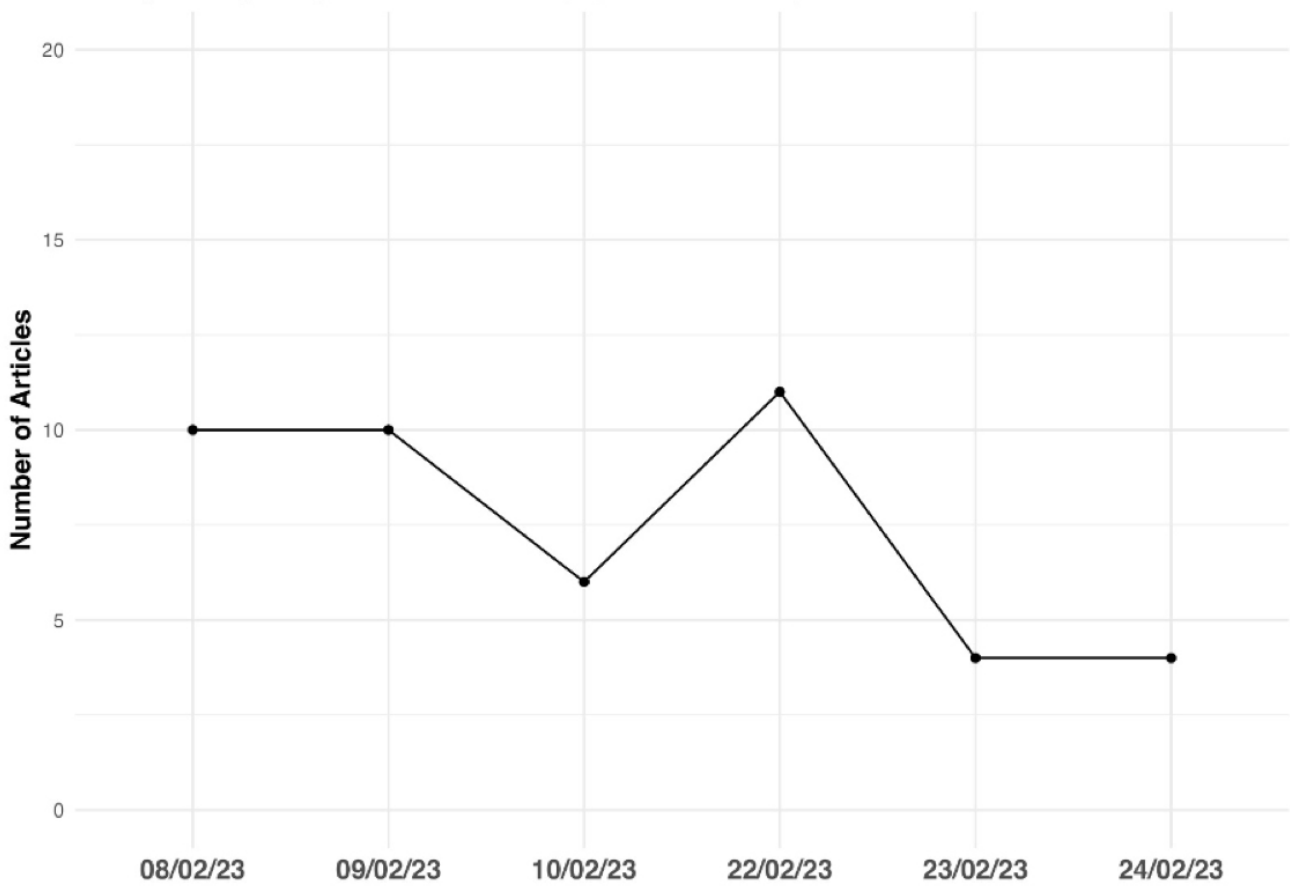


**Fig. 25**



**Fig. 25**

**Frequency of publications (Syrian Media)**



were not particularly diverse. The White Helmets were by far the most prominent, other organizations mentioned were the [Molham Team](#), the Syrian Red Crescent, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and the Syrian Response Coordinators. At the same time, almost all these organizations were mentioned through second-hand sources, which means Syrian media did not search for a direct contact with them.

Other NGOs and CSOs or groups of activists emerged in relation to funding initiatives which, as we have mentioned before, constituted one of the issues highlighted by Syrian media that did not find much space elsewhere.

**Responsibilities**

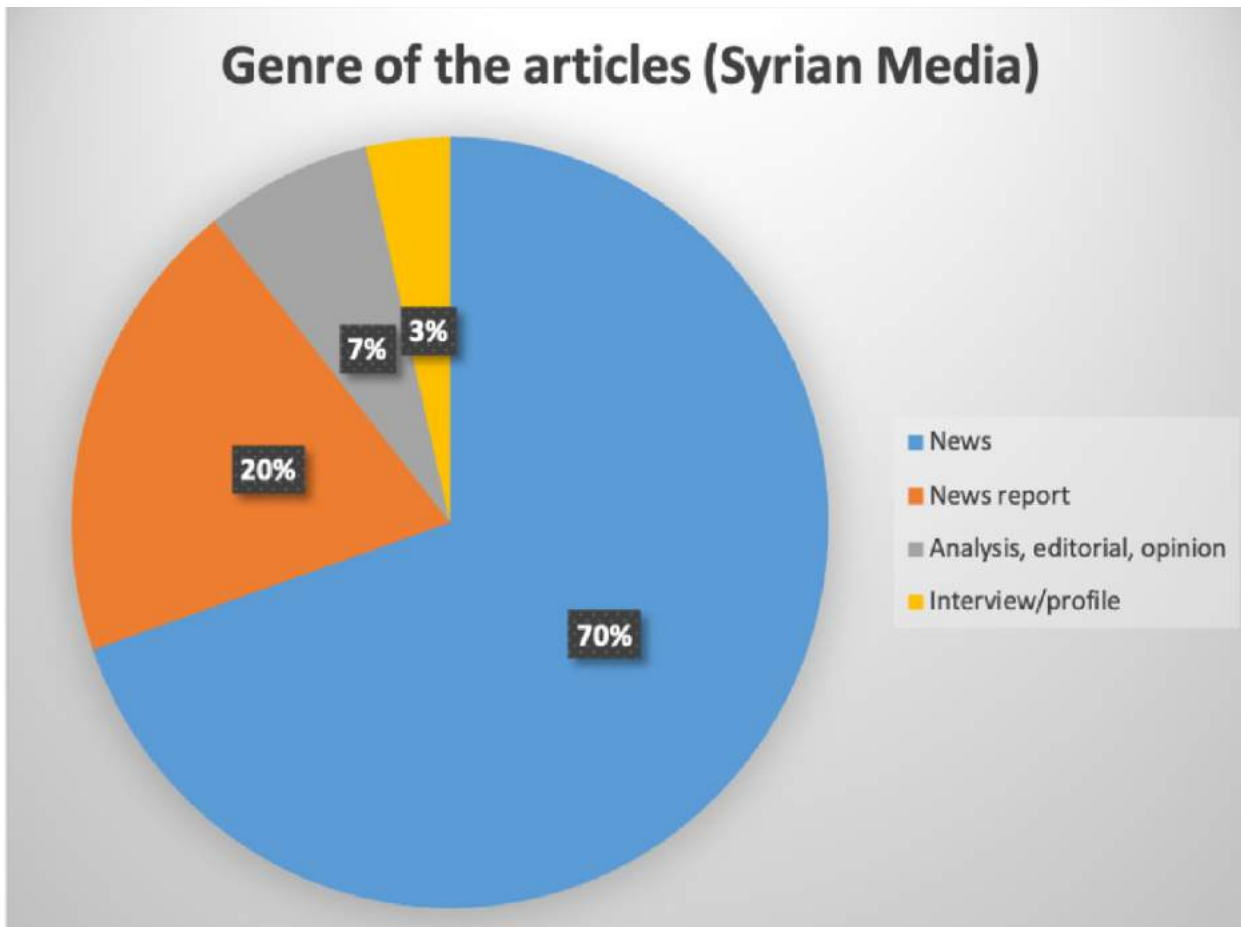
Syrian media identified clear responsibilities in about 36% of the articles (20 out of 56 articles). In this sense, they appeared to have made a certain effort in holding some actors accountable.

Both the independent media and those operating under the government offered this type of coverage. However, the actors held responsible were predictably different.

Independent media tended to accuse the Syrian State of [having displaced people](#) during the war, of [delaying the aid](#), or of [weaponizing it](#). Al Watan and Syrian Snack, on the other hand, tended to avoid criticizing the State



**Fig. 27** Genre of the articles (Syrian Media)



directly, except for an article where Syrian Snack accused indirectly the government of justifying the raising prices in the country without doing enough to fight inflation.

Other responsibilities found space in both the groups. *Al Watan* and *Rozana*, for example, accused Syrian rebels of preventing aid from arriving in Idlib. Similarly to international and regional media coverage, the UN and the International community's responsibilities in not providing enough aid emerged in the coverage by Syrian media.

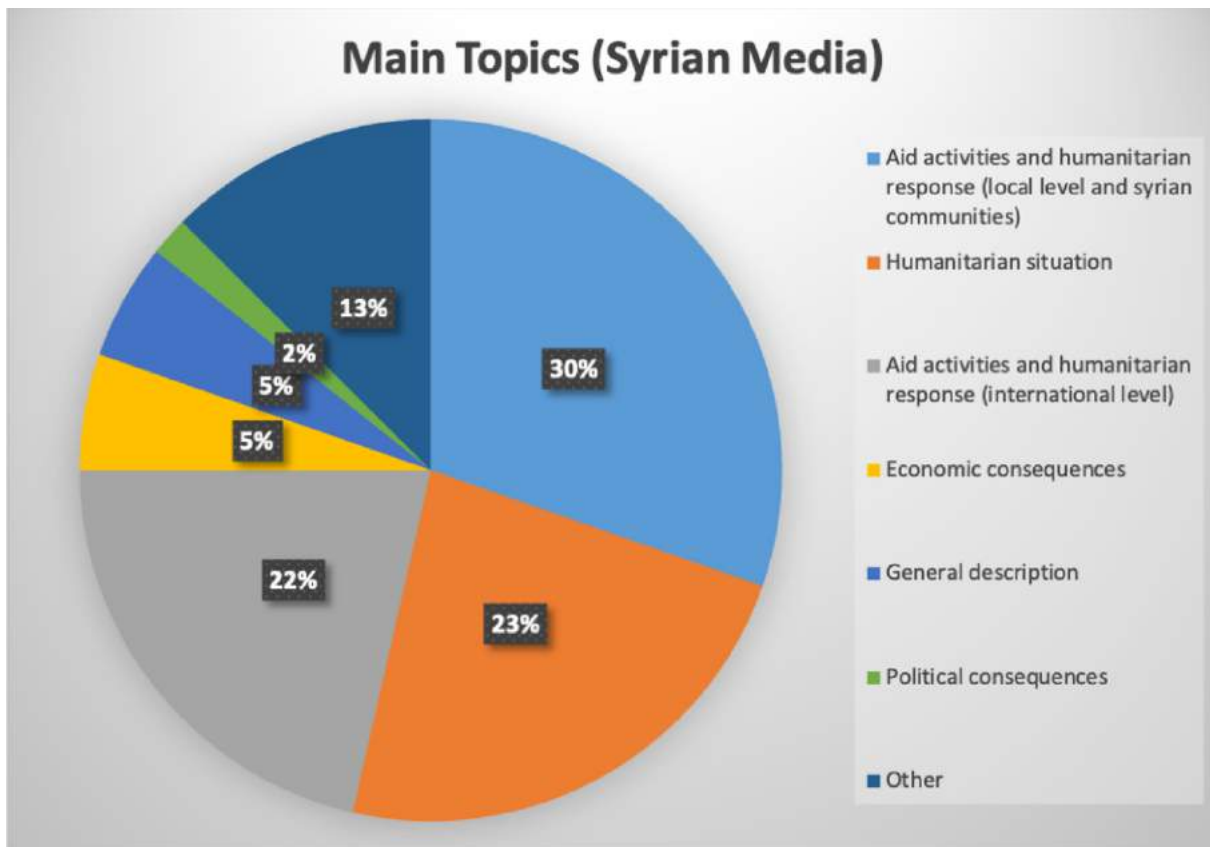
Finally, Syrian media also highlighted responsibilities by private construction contractors. *Al Watan* dedicated two articles

to this issue, and *Syrian Snack* one article. This is quite relevant, especially due to the fact that this issue did not find any space in the international and regional coverage, which on the other hand gave a certain space to the same issue in Turkey.

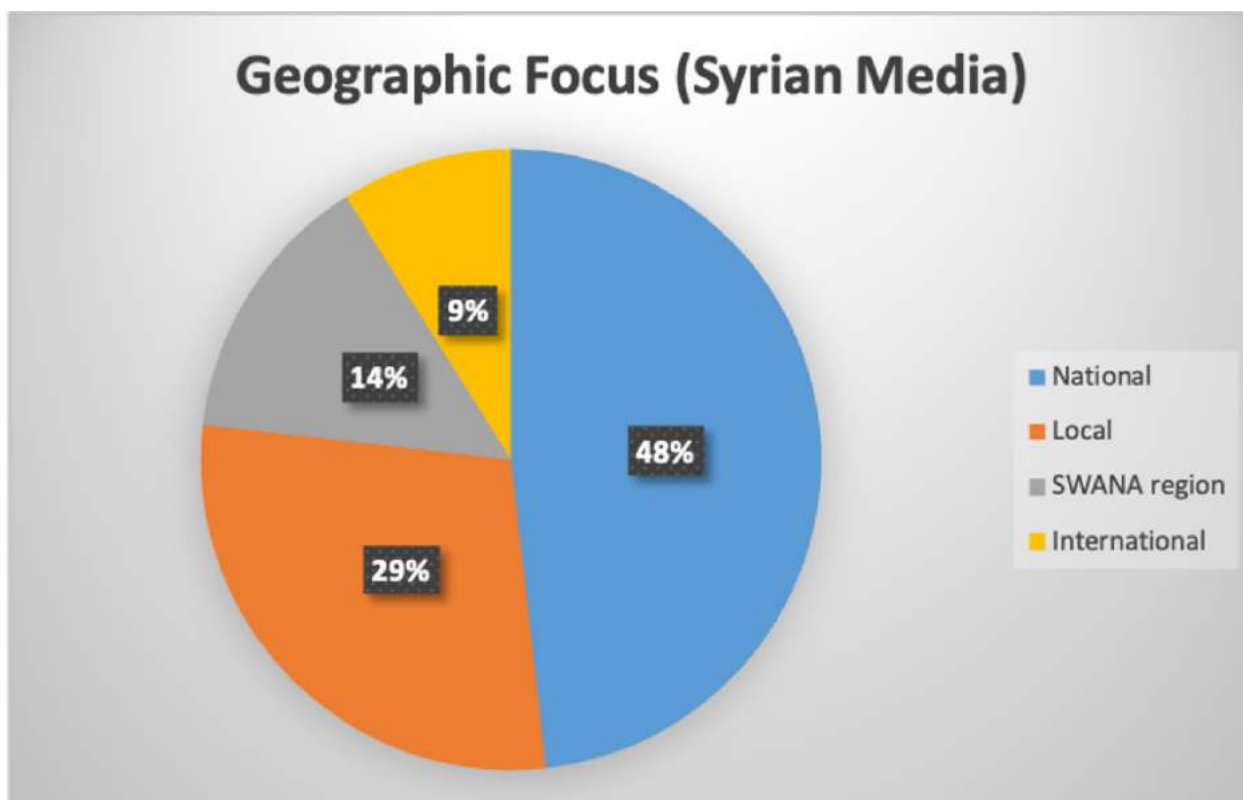
However, the way Syrian media produces accountable journalism showcases the same flaws we analyzed in international and regional media.

First, they did not cover these issues within the right formats of accountable journalism, as these responsibilities were generally only mentioned in news reports describing the general situation, instead of in investigative

**Fig. 28** Main Topics (Syrian Media)



**Fig. 29** Geographic Focus (Syrian Media)





reports or editorials demanding explicit accountability.

Second, out of 20 articles identifying some responsibilities, these responsibilities were well supported by sources and information in only 12 cases. An exception is [an article](#) by Rozana, which made a stronger effort in assessing different responsibilities and analyzing them in detail.

Third, out of 56 articles, only 17 provided some historical background. As we have previously seen, offering background information is crucial when it comes to properly assessing any responsibility in a complex issue such as this. And even if their audience is mainly Syrian, outlets should not presume their readers know everything about the historical context, especially in a country that has been torn up by a very complex conflict for the last 12 years.

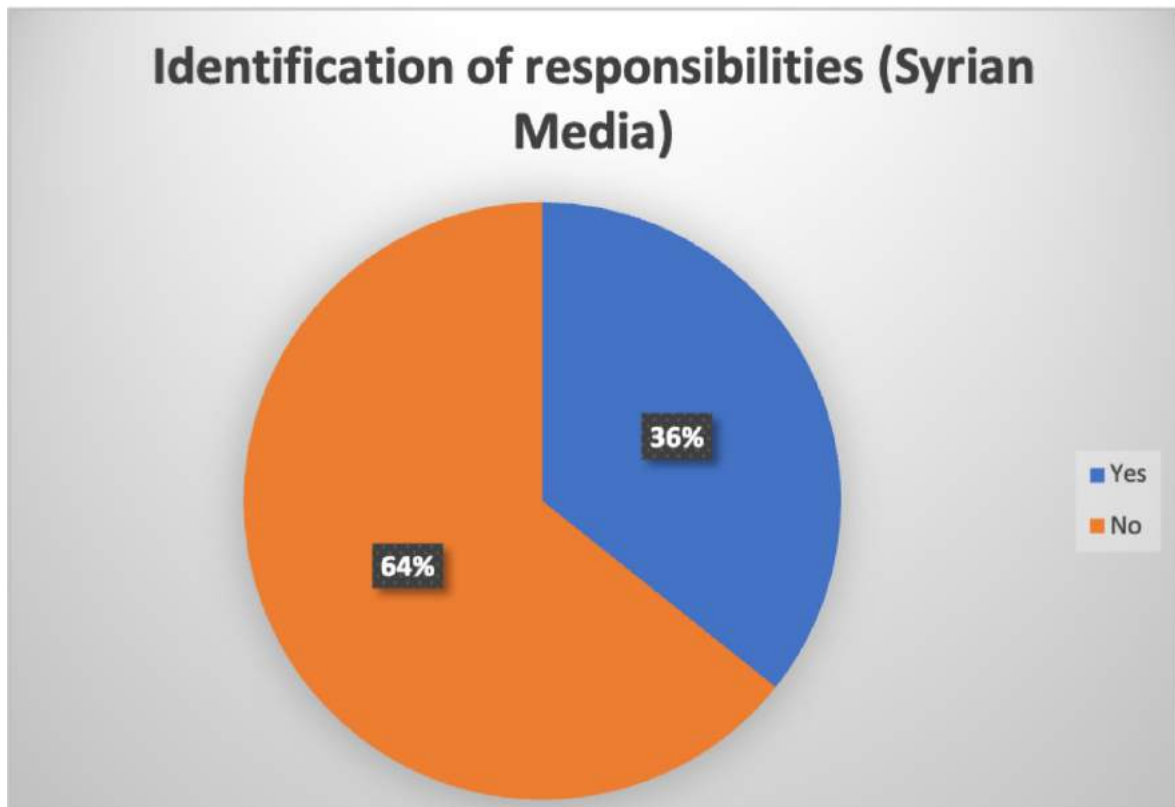
**Fig. 30** Main Sources (Syrian Media)

Name of the source	Occurrences	Percentage on the total
National NGOs and CSOs	38	17%
Syrian government and officials (aggregated)	30	13%
Rebel Actors	20	9%
Ordinary citizens	18	8%
UN	11	5%
Official foreign sources (aggregated)	11	5%
Refugees and IDPs	7	3%
Other sources	91	40%
Total sources	226	100%

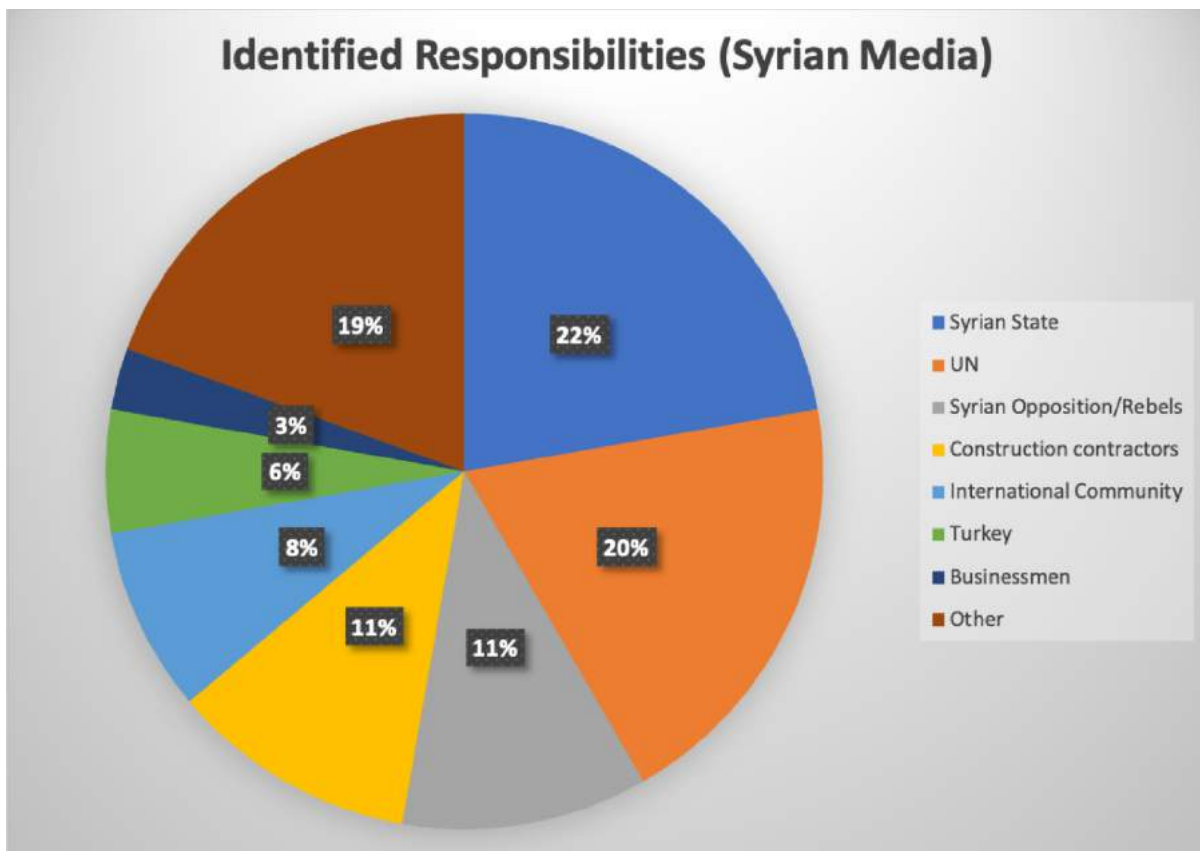
**Fig. 31** Identified responsibilities in Syrian Media

Actor	Main Responsibility	Second Responsibility	Third Responsibility	Total
Syrian State	6	2	0	8
UN	4	1	2	7
International Community	2	1	0	3
Syrian Opposition/Rebels	2	1	1	4
Construction Contractors	3	1	0	4
Businessmen	1	0	0	1
Turkey	0	2	0	2
Russia	0	1	0	1
Other	2	3	2	7
No one	36	44	51	-
Total	56	56	56	-

**Fig. 32**



**Fig. 33**



## Conclusions on Syrian Media

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The coverage analysis of Syrian media highlights even more the limitations that emerged in international and regional media. Indeed, Syrian outlets presented a more local perspective, highlighting the role of initiatives of Syrian communities, of local aid efforts, and specific issues related to the earthquake's impact on the economic, education, and cultural sectors.

While international and regional media tended to privilege official, and often not Syrian sources, these outlets privileged local voices, institutional ones but also sources affiliated with some national NGOs and CSOs. Syrian media also covered more diversified types of responsibilities, as for example, those of local construction contractors.

Nevertheless, Syrian media also displayed some of the same limitations displayed by the international and regional media.

In particular:

- Syrian media could dedicate specific articles to accountable journalism purposes. These articles can be investigative pieces, interviews with experts, or more simply analytical pieces in which responsibilities are assessed in detail and in a way that makes them clearer to their audiences.
- Providing detailed background information is mandatory. This is important even for a Syrian audience, as the media cannot take for granted that all Syrians possess all the necessary contextual information. Offering

background information contributes to clarifying where responsibilities are, and which actors should be held accountable. For example, each article covering the issue of the slow aid response because of the closure of the crossing points between Turkey and Syria could have included precise information on the reasons behind that situation. An alternative would be to produce a dedicated piece on that specific issue, that can be used as a source through a hyperlink in following articles.

- Syrian media could better support accusations and responsibilities with credible data and sources. Expert sources and local witnesses possessing valuable information could be contacted directly in order to strengthen specific accusations.
- Syrian media could provide more space and voice to local NGOs and CSOs and their initiatives as a positive counterbalance to mismanagement. Accountable journalism can also pass through the recognition of positive practices, or of the initiatives of the actors making efforts to fight bad ones.

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(1) Arta FM was not included in the in-depth analysis as it did not produce written content in relation to the earthquake in the considered period.