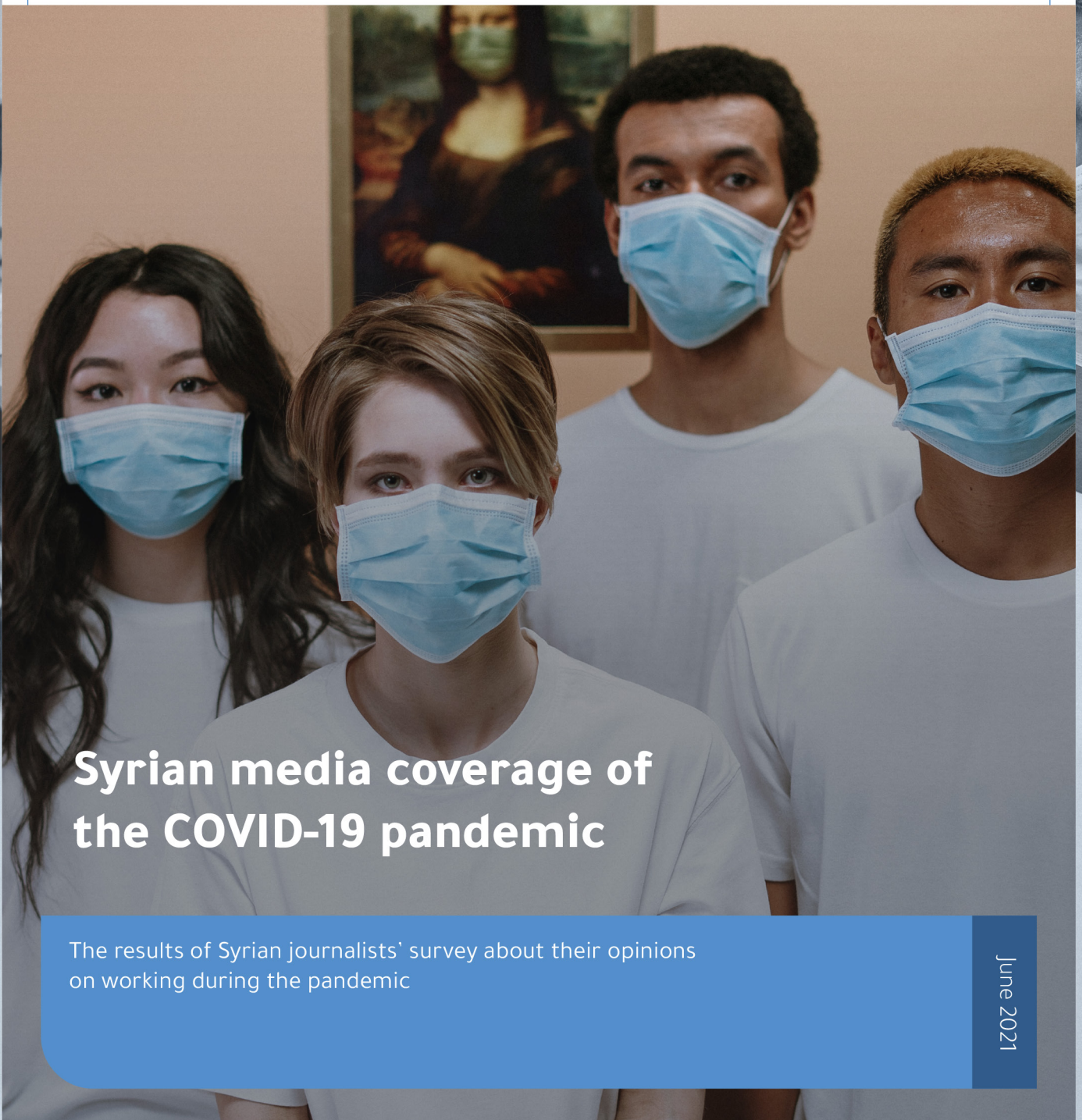




المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير

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Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression




## Syrian media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic

The results of Syrian journalists' survey about their opinions  
on working during the pandemic

June 2021



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## Preamble

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression disseminated a form containing questions to **60** Syrian journalists inside and outside the country, trying to get a deeper understanding of their working conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the way the institutions they work with as journalists dealt with them and their editorial plans to cover the pandemic news. The questionnaire was answered by **41** Syrian female and male journalists, working with many local and international media outlets.

The following tables demonstrate the distribution of female and male respondents according to the basic variables of the questionnaire, and, notably, the female respondents are fewer than the male respondents, which may be due to several reasons, including the decline in the number of female journalists inside and outside Syria as well, and the difficulties in reaching respondents due to the method of communication.

The majority of respondents were in the age group between **26 -35** years, and live in Syria, which is better to provide greater insight into their working conditions inside the country.

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	5	12.1%
Male	36	87.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No.(1) shows the distribution of respondents based on their gender.

Country of residence	Number	Percentage
Syria	33	80.4%
Turkey	3	7.3%
Jordan	1	2.4%
Europe	4	9.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No. (2) shows the distribution of respondents based on their country of residence.

Age Group	Number	Percentage
18 - 25	4	9.7%
26 - 35	31	75.6%
36 - 45	5	12.1%
46 - 55	1	2.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No. (3) shows the distribution of respondents based on their age group.



## Section One: Working Conditions

Journalists are one of the most affected groups by the Covid-19 pandemic, as they had to deliver a lot of information within short periods. On the other hand, these pressures were added to already existing ones among these Syrian journalists, who are covering the worsening situation in the country, and it often forced them to take risks and work in unsafe environments during the spread of the pandemic. It may have also financially affected the institutions they work with, which is reflected on their work and their personal lives.

This Section of the questionnaire attempts to shed light on this aspect and understand the general tendency that the conditions of Syrian journalists took during the period of the pandemic last year (2020).

The results show that **41.4%** of respondents confirmed that the closures in the country in which they live, have greatly affected their financial income because most of the Syrian journalists working inside the country work as accredited correspondents or independent journalists with local and international media outlets; the closures and movement restrictions have affected their work.

The percentage of Syrian journalists whose income was affected significantly is up to **48.4%**, even though the closure procedures in Syria were lesser than those in neighboring countries or European countries. The income of Syrian journalists inside Syria has been greatly affected regardless of these measures, which indicates that there are other reasons as well, such as the reduction in wages in press institutions, or the decline in demand for journalistic material from Syria as a result of the international media's focus on the effects of the pandemic in other regions. Only **14.6%** of the total respondents indicated that their income was not affected at all.

The general measures to prevent and control the spread of the virus had effects on the income of journalists, which affected their ability to work efficiently, and their ability to devote themselves to delivering life-saving information or helping in prevention.

On the other hand, more than half of the respondents suffered from symptoms of Coronavirus infection during the year 2020 (**60.9%** of them), which indicates that the percentage of affected workers in this field may be much greater than others as a result of the risks due to their movement and mixing and even working in environments that may be considered dangerous, or in which the virus is active, such as hospitals, all of that is to obtain relevant information. This high percentage of the possibility of having a Covid-19 infection means adding another life-threatening element to the journalists living in Syria, especially since the proportion of journalists who have suffered from symptoms of an infection inside the country rises to **66.6%**, this high percentage indicates that there are no special protection measures for journalists and the nature of the new risks they face during their work.

Despite all these risks, only **36.5%** of respondents indicated that their institutions provided them with means of protection, while **63.4%** of them did not receive any means of protection. The percentage of journalists who received face masks protection and sterilizers from press institutions inside Syria decreased to **30.3%**. This fact points to a decline in the standard of protecting journalists inside Syria.

## Have the full closures in your country affected your income?

Answer	Number	Percentage
Did not affect	6	14.6%
Affected a little bit	8	19.5%
affected moderately	10	24.3%
significantly affected	17	41.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No. (4) shows the distribution of respondents according to the impact of the closures in their country on their material income.

## Have you experienced symptoms of Covid-19 infection during the year 2020?

Answer	Number	Percentage
Yes	25	60.9%
No	16	39%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure (5) shows the distribution of respondents according to their exposure to symptoms of Covid-19 infection during the year 2020.



Did the institution which you and your colleagues work for provide you the means of protection, such as face masks and sterilizers during your work?

Answer	Number	Percentage
Yes	15	36.5%
No	26	63.4%
Total	41	100%

Figure No. (6) shows the distribution of respondents to the questionnaire in their press institutions for protective devices such as face masks and sterilizers during their work.

## Section Two: Working Methodology During Covering the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section focuses on the way the media dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic from the journalists' point of view, and the taken or not taken measures by media outlets, and the way it reflected on their work, and the extent of journalists' knowledge of the purpose of these procedures, and the interest of these measures in developing the capability of journalists to work and handle such exceptional and unprecedented situations.

Analysis of the results of the questionnaire shows that **63.4%** of the respondents were aware of the existence of an action plan developed by the editorial board in the media organization in which they work to cover the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, only **12.1%** of the respondents answered with "No", while **24.3%** said they do not know (only three of them were working as freelance journalists, while seven others worked in Syrian media outlets).

The higher percentage of journalists who confirmed the existence of an action plan to deal with the pandemic indicates that the media outlets make the Covid-19 conditions resulted from the spread of the pandemic among their main work priorities, and this will be reflected in increasing the volume and quality of coverage, especially with the presence of planning that prepares for emergency changes resulting from the exceptional circumstance associated with the pandemic.

The high percentage associated with positive planning in media organizations increased when respondents were asked about the existence of plans in their media outlets to deal with rumors and misleading news related to the Covid-19 pandemic, as the percentage of those who answered "Yes" reached **73.1%** of the total sample. This percentage indicates a high level of awareness among media outlets and journalists of the need to deal with such misleading

news and publish the facts, which is one of the most important tasks of media organizations in such circumstances.

The vast majority of journalists who responded to the study also had direct contact with primary medical sources, who can give accurate information about the pandemic as shown by the results of the questionnaire. Such a thing had a significant impact on the journalists' ability to access the correct information and follow up the pandemic news frequently, which improves the quality of media coverage in their media outlets.

On the other hand, half of the respondents confirmed receiving training either directly or via the internet to improve their information and experiences about the emerging coronavirus and ways to deal with the pandemic, the other half who did not receive any training, were exposed to greater risks during their fieldwork as a result of their lack of accurate and correct information, and they may be more vulnerable when dealing with misinformation and rumors in the absence of basic scientific knowledge about the disease.

► **Has the editorial board in your organization developed, according to your information, a plan to cover the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Answer	Number	Percentage
Yes	26	63.4%
No	5	12.1%
I do not know	10	24.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No. (7) shows the distribution of respondents according to the existence of a plan for their media outlets to cover the Covid-19 pandemic.





Has the editorial board in the organization in which you work, according to your information, developed a plan to deal with rumors and misinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic?

Answer	Number	Percentage
Yes	30	73.1%
No	3	7.3%
I do not know	8	19.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No. (8) shows the distribution of respondents according to the existence of a plan for their press institutions to deal with rumors and misinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Do you, as a journalist, have direct contact with official health authorities and humanitarian organizations working in the medical field in your area?

Answer	Number	Percentage
Yes	38	92.6%
No	3	7.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No. (9) shows the distribution of respondents according to having direct contact with official health authorities and humanitarian organizations working in the medical field in their area.

Has your organization provided any training or lectures, either directly or online, to increase your knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answer	Number	Percentage
Yes	21	51.2%
No	20	48.7%
Total	41	100%

Figure No. (10) shows the distribution of respondents according to attending a training organized by their media outlet to increase information about the COVID-19 pandemic.



### Section Three: The Prominent Challenges

This section attempts to show the most prominent challenges and difficulties facing Syrian journalists during their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, to study the impact of each of them on the journalists' work and media outlets. Whether these challenges are logistical difficulties or political impacts that may weaken their ability to provide effective pandemic news coverage to the Syrian public.

The results of the questionnaire showed that the majority of journalists who responded to the study did not face any difficulties in obtaining confirmed information about the spread of the pandemic, at a rate of 78%. This result may contain some bias in the sample, as most of it was journalists working in the northwest of the country, where humanitarian organizations working in the medical field, adopt neutrality as a basic principle about information related to the pandemic, which may explain the low percentage of respondents who said that they had faced problems accessing information (21.9%).

In any case, it can be noted that this high percentage of those who did not face any problems shows that no party, whether it is a de-facto authority or a political regime, can completely conceal and withhold information from journalists.

The percentage drops when the journalists were asked about the existence of problems in disseminating information about the Covid-19 pandemic, as the percentage of those who faced problems in this did not exceed 12.1% of the total respondents. The physical location or the association of most respondents with local media outlets or international media outlets operating outside the country may give a wider margin for publishing information, but journalists also have their means, such as their pages on social media, to reach out to the public, which decreases the chances of having problems in disseminating information.

The financial obstacles were the kind of obstacles that had the largest percentage of the respondents' choices, as **36.5%** of them said that it is the most prominent obstacle they faced in their work while covering the news of the pandemic, while the fear of contracting the disease was only **17%**, and the lack of facilitation from authorities in the journalist's working area had a percentage of **14.6%**.

The financial obstacles, especially after the grants provided to the media were affected by the global economic downturn caused by the spread of the Corona virus and the general closure measures, are the most prominent obstacles facing Syrian media institutions today. Especially for the media which depend in large part of its funding on grants from institutions, and these obstacles affect the effective coverage of journalists, and it seems that better management of the available resources may cover part of the gap created by the lack of funding.

The percentage of journalists who consider that their outlets' coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic was affected by its political orientation did not exceed **12.1%**, which is a very good percentage in light of the political polarization taking place in the country and the great influence of the de-facto authorities on various aspects of life, but on the other hand, it should be noted that the existing bias in the sample may affect the outcome of this question.

### Have you had trouble obtaining reliable information about the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in your area?

Answer	Number	Percentage
Yes	9	21.9%
No	32	78%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No. (11) shows the distribution of respondents according to their problems in obtaining confirmed information about the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in their region.

Have you had trouble publishing important information related to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answer	Number	Percentage
Yes	5	12.1%
No	36	87.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No. (12) shows the distribution of respondents according to their problems in disseminating important information related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

What are the biggest obstacles you face in your work to cover COVID-19 news and stories?

Answer	Number	Percentage
Fear of infection	7	17%
Lack of facilities from the authorities in my area	6	14.6%
logistical obstacles (we do not have sufficient equipment for protection)	5	12.1%
Financial Obstacles (There is no coverage for fieldwork in my outlet)	15	36.5%
No major obstacles	8	19.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No. (13) shows the distribution of respondents according to the obstacles they face during their work to cover the news of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Do you think your outlet's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic has been affected by its political orientation?

Answer	Number	Percentage
Yes	5	12.1%
No	36	87.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure No. (14) shows the distribution of respondents according to their perception of the political impact on their media organizations' coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.



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