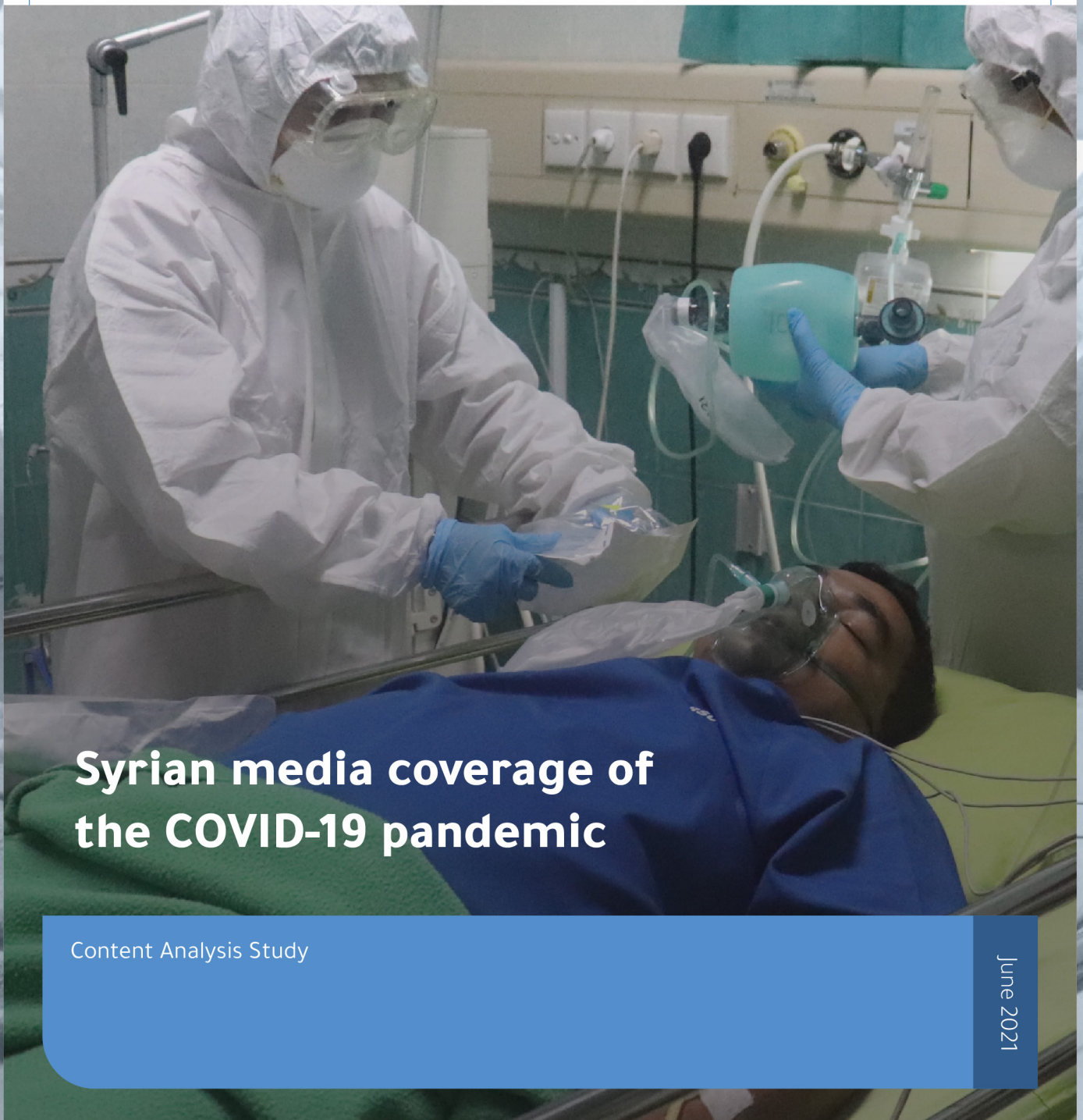




المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير

Navenda Sûriyayî ya Ragihandinê û Azadiya Derbirinê
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression



Syrian media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic

Content Analysis Study

June 2021

About the Center:

The Violations Documentation Center was established in April 2011 as one of the initiatives of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM). The center records and documents violations of human rights within Syria and contributes to parallel that with reenforcing and spreading the culture of human rights in Syria.

The center is led by about thirty activists inside and outside Syria, most of whom are within Syria in different Syrian governates, cities, and towns. They document the violations committed by all parties to conflict regardless of the identity of the committer or the victim. This includes documenting the names of the victims, detainees, missing and kidnapped people in Syria. The Violations Documentation Center also works to monitor violations against Syrian refugees in countries of immigration.

The Violations Documentation Center operates as one of the initiatives of the Justice and Rule of Law Program at the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, which includes the Strategic Litigation Project and the Victim Associations Support Project.



Table of Contents:

THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	2
PREAMBLE.....	3
THE STUDY PROBLEM.....	5
OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY.....	5
THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDY.....	6
STUDY VARIABLES.....	6
STUDY HYPOTHESES.....	6
STUDY METHODOLOGY.....	6
STUDY POPULATION.....	7
STUDY RESULTS.....	7
CHAPTER ONE: THE SYRIAN MEDIA'S INTEREST IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.....	7
CHAPTER TWO: THE POLITICAL IMPACT ON THE PRESS COVERAGE OF THE COVID-19 - PANDEMIC IN SYRIA.....	15
CHAPTER THREE: DEALING WITH THE FLOOD OF MISINFORMATION AND RUMORS.....	18
Recommendations.....	29



Executive Summary:

- ▶ The Covid-19 pandemic created new challenges for the media around the world, and these new burdens along with the extremely dangerous conditions of the press in Syria by the De facto authorities and the Syrian government, especially with the severe restrictions on the right of free access to and dissemination of information, based on arbitrary legal texts or through intimidation and violations against journalists to intimidate them, which led to major obstacles to the press to provide accurate information about the spread of the pandemic in the country.
- ▶ The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression monitored 154 newspaper articles and more than 136 hours of television and radio broadcasts in the first three weeks of July 2020, to reach key indicators on how the Syrian media covered the pandemic news. The analysis of the data we obtained revealed significant gaps in the Syrian media's coverage of the pandemic, especially in disseminating accurate information and correcting rumors. The evaluation was based on indicators of the media's work and the official definition provided by UNESCO of the role of media during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis of the data obtained through the monitoring process also showed that the media could not manage sufficient resources to obtain accurate news, especially with doubts supported by practical research about the information provided by the Syrian government about the spread of the pandemic in Syria.
- ▶ The difference in the political orientation had a clear effect on the form of dealing with the pandemic and the basic concerns of the media in covering the pandemic, which essentially proves that there is an effect of the political orientation on covering the pandemic news in Syria, which prompts a request to the de facto authorities and the Syrian government for not interfering in covering and disseminating information about the pandemic.



Preamble

The rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is caused by Coronavirus or //sar-cov-19//, made the population around the world in need for a lot of information to raise awareness about the pandemic and its spreading areas, in addition to the information they need to know about the governmental procedures in response to the pandemic.

Obtaining accurate and correct information often had an important impact on human life or death, and in this situation, the media response of the pandemic developments and the quality of information that they publish through various platforms was very important, and the widespread of misinformation or rumors related to the concerns caused by the pandemic became a great threat to the work of medical institutions and the health system in general.

This challenge was doubled over in Syria, as the difficulty of journalists accessing accurate information about the spreading of the pandemic and the dangers surrounding the work of journalists in various regions of the country made it more difficult for media organizations to work in the Syrian geography to obtain accurate information and deliver it to the Syrian people.

The multiplicity of health references due to the distribution of de facto authorities beside the Syrian government has resulted in the absence of a national comprehensive source to clarify general procedures or information for citizens and journalists alike, and there were cases¹ in which the conflict between the forces played an important role in spreading misleading information to the population about the areas and numbers of infected people.

Based on its previous experience in monitoring and analyzing the Syrian media discourse, in addition to monitoring the violations that media workers in Syria are exposed to during work and being pressured by the various parties of the conflict, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression started a process of monitoring and analyzing the media in Syria for several purposes, including monitoring hate speech and misinformation, monitoring violations of the right of the media and its working environment, and several studies have been issued in this field, including a study on hate speech and incitement to violence in the Syrian media.

In this study, researchers of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression conduct a comprehensive monitoring process of the media directed to Syrians in various areas and

political orientations, to monitor its role during the Covid-19 pandemic, and measure the ability to perform its required role, which is to provide accurate information to help Syrians avoid as much risks as possible, and the impact that may the political conflicts have on that coverage and its performance.



The Study Problem

Syria suffers from conditions of war and the control of de facto authorities in conflict with each other and conflict with the Syrian government and has often been classified as the most dangerous country for journalists, which made the process of transmitting accurate information about the pandemic spread, its conditions, and the infected areas an extremely difficult mission.

This research attempts to examine the performance of the Syrian local media in all its diversities and affiliations during the Covid-19 pandemic in Syria in 2020 and to analyze work methods and transfer of information related to the pandemic. The research will also analyze the conditions of journalists working in Syria or neighboring countries, during the pandemic, their vulnerability to the pandemic, and their ability to perform their tasks in disseminating accurate information about it.

According to UNESCO, the positive roles of media and information provision during the COVID-19 pandemic are mainly:

- ▶ Sharing life-saving information and uncovering misleading information.
- ▶ Promoting the utilization of the basic right to access information.
- ▶ Promoting using mass media, information, and communication technology for the public good.

Thus, the formulation of the study question was based on the expected role of the media during the pandemic, which include transferring of life-saving information, exposing misleading information, and promoting the right of Syrians to benefit from the information they need to make healthy decisions about their own lives during the pandemic.



Objectives of the study

This study is designed with the aim of trying to determine fact-based answers to the following questions:

- ▶ Did the local Syrian media provide sufficient information about the Covid-19 pandemic spread, and was this information reliable?
- ▶ What were the circumstances related to the journalists' work during the pandemic to report their news about it?
- ▶ Has the Syrian media given enough space to cover the Covid-19 pandemic developments?

The utilizing of that space allocated to cover the developments of the pandemic will also be discussed, as will the types of sources and journalistic templates used to transmit the information. What are the topics that were related to that coverage? Was there an impact of the political conflict on that coverage in Syria, and how is that?

The Importance of Study

So far there are no comprehensive studies of the Syrian media performance in its various orientations during the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the importance of transmitting accurate information during the current conditions in Syria, including a lack of all kinds of services and a significant decline in health services, which make prevention and self-protection from the pandemic much more difficult to achieve.

Study Variables

Dependent variable: Media and press materials related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Independent variable: types of press materials, types of sources, and the duration.

Study Hypotheses

The first hypothesis: There is a scarcity of accurate information about the Coronavirus spread in the Syrian media of its various political orientations.

The second hypothesis: There is a discrepancy in the way the Syrian media dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic depending on their political orientation.

The third hypothesis: The Syrian media could not effectively deal with the spread of misleading information.

methodology

The research follows the descriptive, analytical, and comparative approach to differentiate the work of different types of journalism in conveying and educating Syrians about the pandemic. The research uses the content analysis form tool to obtain quantitative and qualitative data about the performance and products of the Syrian press during the pandemic.

The research also uses the interview tool with key figures from the local Syrian press, to shed light on the risks and difficulties they faced during their work related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Five interviews were conducted with members of the editorial boards of Syrian media institutions during March of 2021, to highlight some aspects that may not be shown in content monitoring and analysis.

Moreover, a questionnaire form has been distributed to a number of Syrian journalists working inside and outside Syria to inquire about their work conditions and the way their media institutions respond to the Covid-19 pandemic from their viewpoint as journalists. An analysis of the outcomes of the questionnaire will be published in a separate appendix later.



Study population

The study population represents the Syrian media in various areas and types (printed, radio, and visual media (TV)) and according to their geographical presence (Media operating in the areas of the Syrian government, media operating in the Autonomous Administration areas, and media operating outside Syria). As for the study sample, the researchers selected press materials randomly without repetition from the total production of the selected media institutions in the first three weeks of July of 2020². The study vocabulary was chosen from 24 media outlets representing the three political orientations.



Study Results



Chapter One: The Syrian Media's Interest in the COVID-19 Pandemic

This chapter of the study attempts to either confirm or deny the first hypothesis in the study that: There is a scarcity of accurate and official information about the Covid-19 pandemic spread in the Syrian media in all their political orientations.

This is carried out by approaching and analyzing the study data and comparing the performance of the media in general in their attempts to access the most accurate information about the pandemic and publish it to the Syrian audience, and this was based mainly on analyzing the data collected during monitoring the sections that published materials related to the Covid-19 pandemic, and on the journalistic types that make up this published content, to access accurate information on one aspect of this coverage.

The obtained data during the study showed an increase in the average number of materials related to the Covid-19 pandemic in the Syrian media, within two types of media, the visual media (TV) and Radio. The percentage of monitoring in the visual media (TV) reached 59.59% and 67.44% in the radios, while in the printed media it did not exceed 28.4 %, which is the lowest percentage. It is worth mentioning that this percentage includes all the political affiliations of the media in and around Syria that have been monitored. The explanation for the high level of coverage in the monitored period is due to the increasing interest about the pandemic spread in the country and the high rates of infection officially announced by all the de facto authorities and the Syrian government during that period. Despite the high level of coverage of the pandemic in the Syrian media, a review of the media sections that published news and information about the pandemic, and the types of press materials which dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic, give a different impression to what the numbers we mentioned above suggested, which may make us believe that the Syrian media has widely and well covered the pandemic.

On the other hand, the disparity in coverage among the radio, visual media (TV), and printed media in covering the Covid-19 pandemic shows that the visual media (TV) and radio have shown, in theory at least, a greater interest in covering pandemic news than the printed media, but when we check the press materials published in each of media, there were fundamental differences among them.

Media Type	Total Monitored	Frequency of monitoring related to the Covid-19 pandemic	Total minutes of monitoring	Repetition of minutes of monitoring related to the Covid-19 pandemic	The average percentage of media monitoring Covid-19 pandemic
Read media	154	40	-	-	28.24%
Visual media (TV)	129	70	4178	2525	59.59%
Radio	107	57	3997	2462	67.44%
Total	390	167	8175	4987	51.75%

Figure No. (1) shows the percentage of media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The obtained data during monitoring the written media, which includes newspapers, websites, and news agencies, shows that 37.5% of their published news related to the Covid-19 pandemic, were published under the Local Health section, this news provided medical information and covered the medical personnel developments to response to the pandemic in Syria. The total percentage of news under the health sections, whether local or global, reached 42.5%, which is nearly half the number of news related to the pandemic. While the percentage of news related to the pandemic published in the economic and local livelihood sections were 30%, and those published in the local political sections 7.5%.

Based on this, it becomes apparent that the Syrian written media has shown an interest in disseminating health information about the Covid-19 pandemic, and the low percentage of news within the written media related to the pandemic means that this coverage cannot deliver all information during a period that witnessed a new peak in the numbers of infections officially announced in the country, especially that the materials published within sections related to public health are less than the general total of materials, of which a large part focused on the economic and social outcomes of the pandemic.

Despite the interest of the written media in providing information related to public health and health conditions in the country, the decline in their coverage compared to other traditional media results in a decreasing percentage of content that includes health information and coverage of news of the pandemic spread, which is the kind of information that can be classified as life-saving information that included in UNESCO’s definition of the role of media during the Covid-19 pandemic.



The percentage of the section that includes information on the Covid-19 pandemic is distributed in the written media

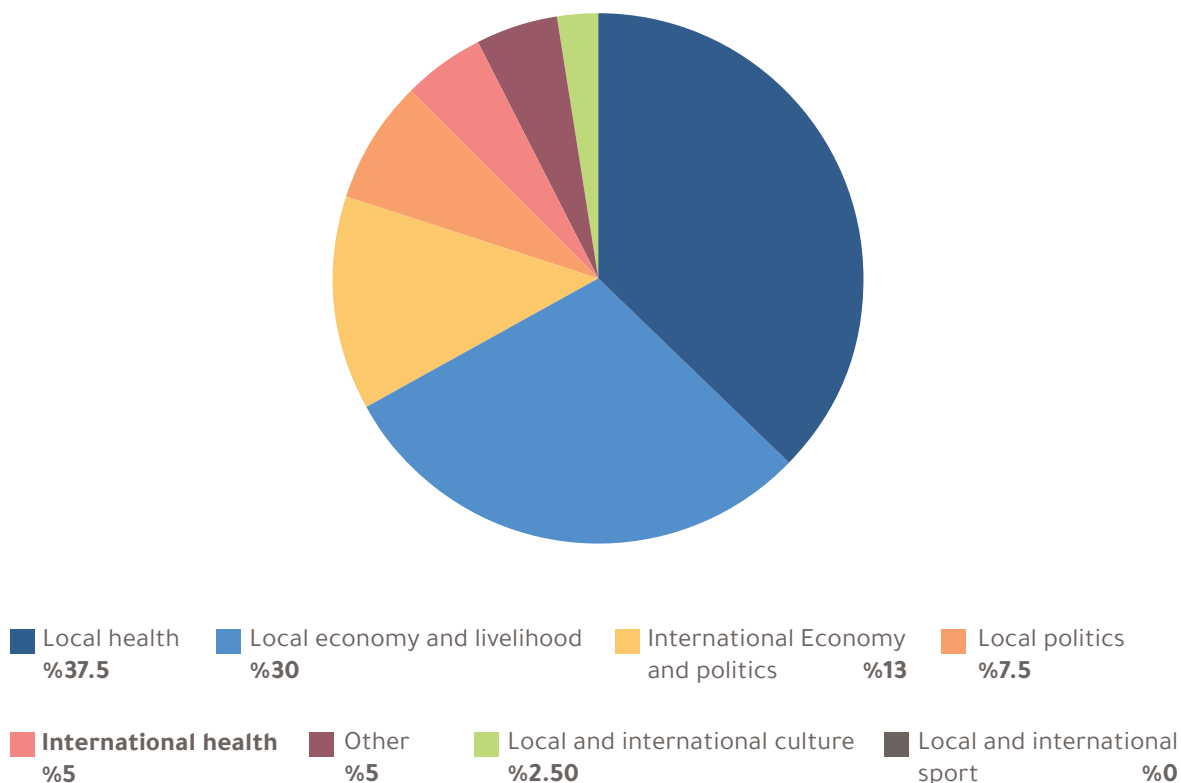


Figure No. (2) shows the distribution of materials related to the Covid-19 pandemic to the press sections of the written media.

When looking at press material related to the Covid-19 pandemic published in the written media by the various political orientations, we find that 90% of them belong to the type of news, while the investigations were completely absent from the news that were monitored in this research, which means that the attention of the media was focused on transmitting the available information from the main sources without the ability to search and obtain information that may have been concealed from the public by the de facto authorities in their controlled areas, and if we refer to a study carried out by Imperial College London³, it estimated that the announced deaths due to infection with the Coronavirus in the city of Damascus may not exceed 1.25% of the actual number of deaths caused by the disease, that will lead us to face a huge information gap that traditional press news cannot cover.

In the absence of journalistic investigations and declining percentage of news analysis to only 5%, you will find that the written-media outlets were unable to bridge this gap of information, and the difference between official statements and facts on the ground, that the aforementioned study estimated, is much worse than the published official information.



The percentage of Covid-19 pandemic news distribution in the written media

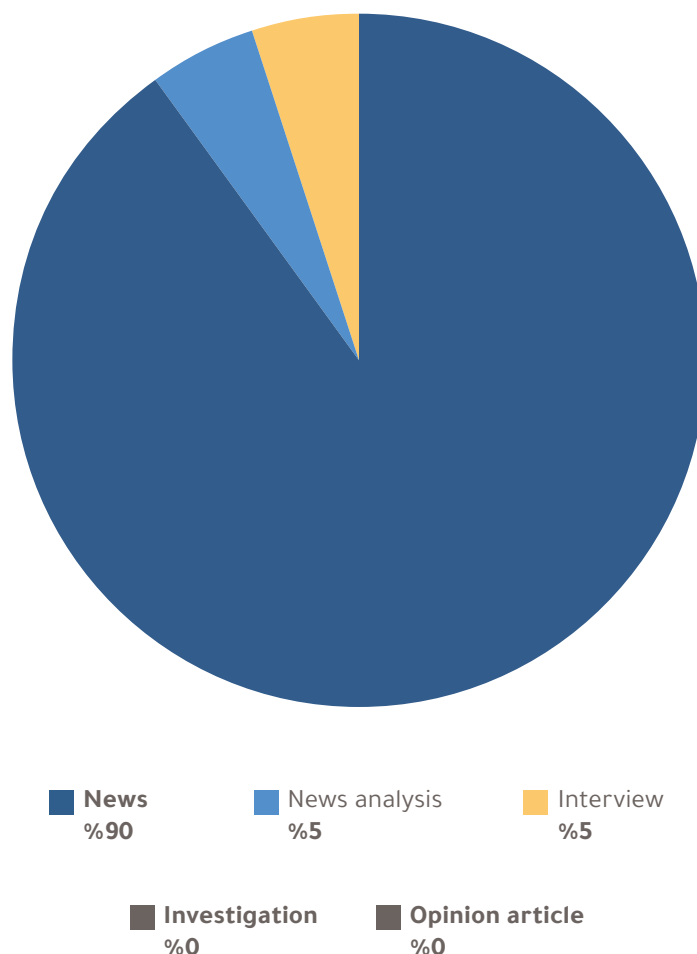


Figure No. (3) shows the distribution of news related to the Covid-19 pandemic among the types of press news in the written media.

As for the visual media (TV), we will find that despite the high percentage of content related to the Covid-19 pandemic, regardless of the political orientation, only 4.29% of the content was published under health-related sections, while the largest percentage of 37.14% was published in Local politics sections; and it is noticeable that the coverage in the visual media of the impact of the pandemic on local and international sports was greater than its coverage under the health sections, as the percentage of news related to the pandemic in the sports sections reached 5.71% of the total published news related to the pandemic.

These figures demonstrate the significant shortage in the life-saving information related to public health, and the coverage of health personnel response to the disease and its spread areas, and thus the actual coverage of the visual media of the pandemic is much less than the percentage of materials related to the Coronavirus on their platforms. The coverage in these media outlets focused on the political and social effects of the pandemic and life activities much more than trying to provide accurate information about the extent of the pandemic and the information needed to prevent it.



The sections containing the Covid-19 pandemic distributed in the visual media

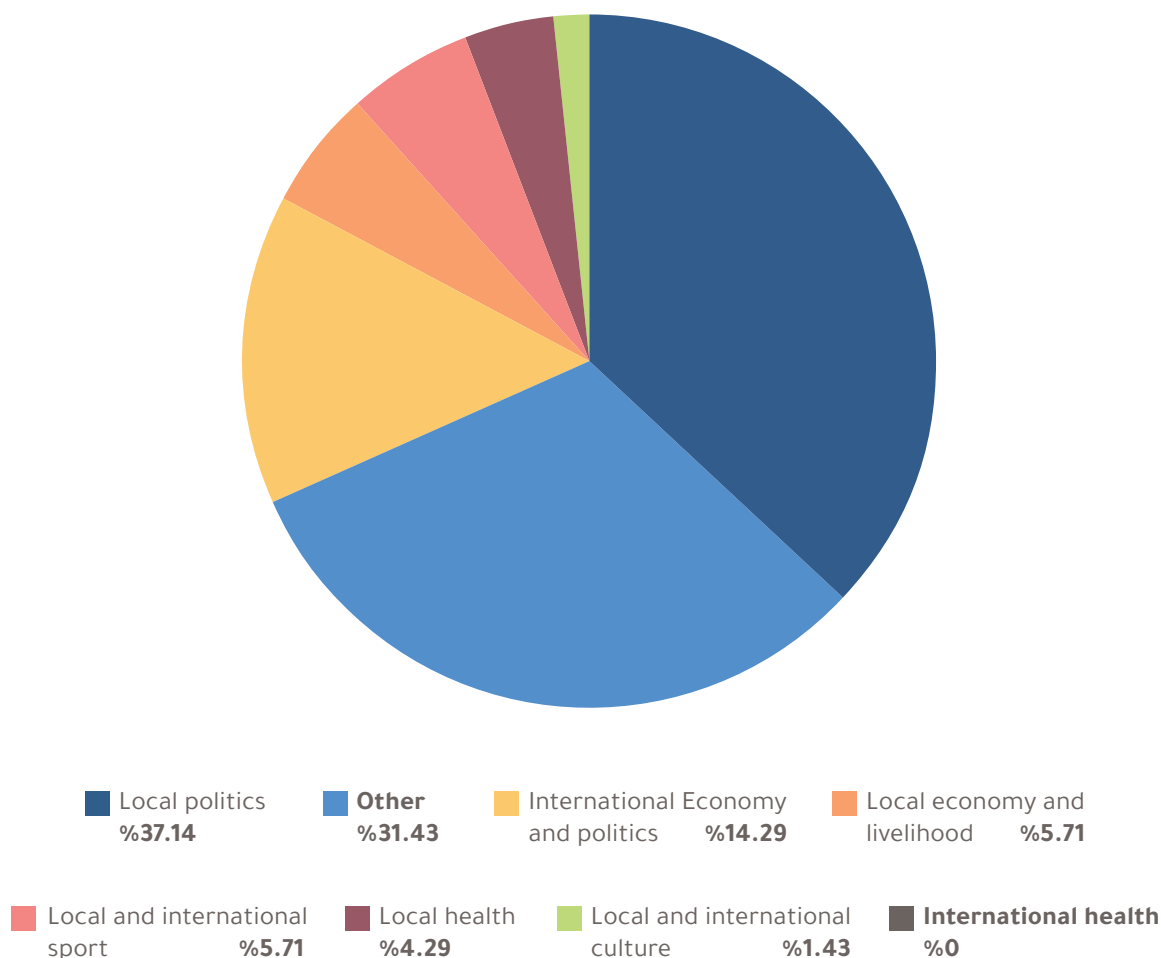


Figure (4) shows the distribution of press news related to the Covid-19 pandemic to the press sections of visual media.

The collected data about the journalistic types produced by the television channels that were monitored during the study also show that the largest percentage of dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic was in news bulletins, in a 42.86% percentage, while the percentage of documentary investigations covering the pandemic did not exceed 2.86%, and interviews with specialists have a similar percentage, which are very low compared to the need to publish reliable information and reveal facts that are not officially published. This data not only clarify the wide differences between the actual spread of the disease on the ground and the announced figures but also reveals many aspects of the response to the pandemic in Syria.

It should be noted that the proportion of relatively good entertainment programs that dealt with the pandemic, which amounted to 31.43% of the total coverage of visual media (TV) channels related to the Coronavirus, did include educational advertisements and entertainment programs aimed at disseminating accurate news about the pandemic, but included also entertainment programs that mentioned the pandemic as one of the events surrounding daily life without any other indications, which makes it unhelpful in providing life-saving information that should be an essential part of their content.

News reports and talk shows share the same percentage of content related to the Covid-19 pandemic at a rate of 10%, which contained a part of useful important information for the audience, but it does not compensate for the lack of necessary investigative reports to deliver accurate information to the Syrian audience; Which makes visual media (TV) channel coverage in Syria unable as well to obtain complete information about the pandemic due to the absence of accurate information, which needs research and scrutiny on a larger scale, and this is not provided by regular news programs.



The distribution of press materials related to the Covid-19 pandemic by type of journalism in the visual media

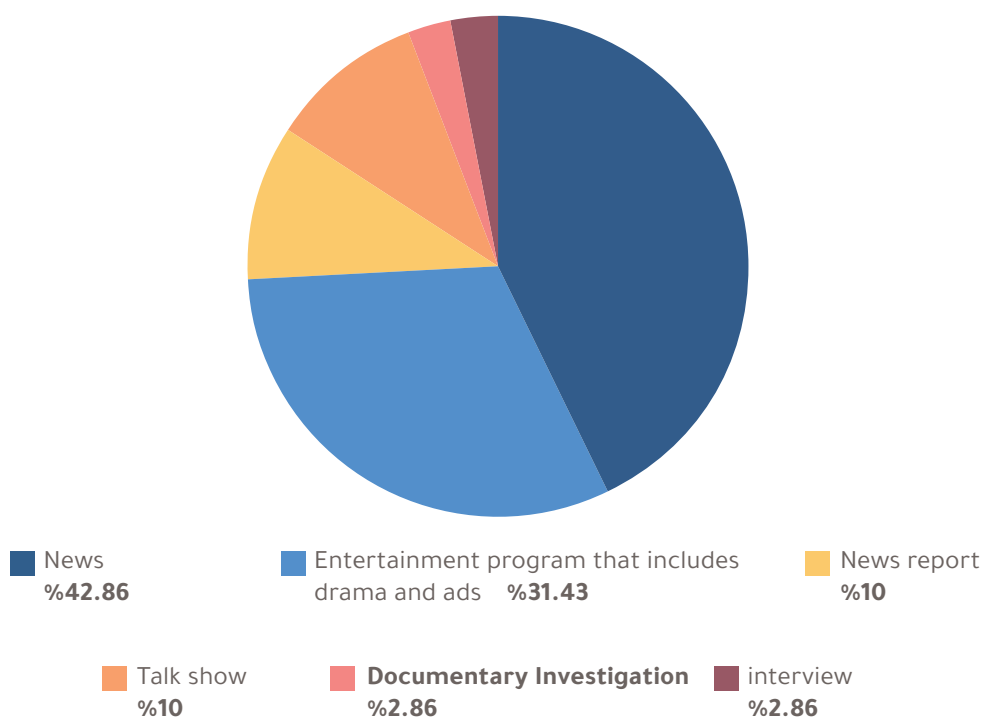


Figure No. (5) shows the distribution of press materials related to the Covid-19 pandemic by type of journalism in the visual media.

Likewise, the sections that dealt with the pandemic news can be observed in the broadcasted media (Syrian radio stations), the section that dealt the most with the pandemic was the local politics section with 38.6% of the total coverage of Coronavirus news, followed by the other section by 31.58%, while the coverage rate within the health section didn't even get over 8.77%, which leaves a very small percentage in this coverage for life-saving information; less than a tenth. The section responsible for local politics can be considered as the one responsible for covering the policies of local authorities about dealing and responding to the pandemic, but this information will remain incomplete if it is not supported by accurate information on prevention and treatment methods and the areas of the pandemic spread.

Covering the economic and livelihood effects of the pandemic reached 15.79% of the total coverage of the disease on Syrian radio stations. This can be explained by the focusing of Syrian media on covering the effects of the pandemic in its economic, livelihood and political aspects more than providing basic information about it, as a result of easy access to information about these effects, while the media may face great obstacles to reach accurate or approximate figures, even about the level of the pandemic's spread in Syria or certain areas of it.

The distribution of press materials related to the Covid-19 pandemic to the press sections of the broadcast media

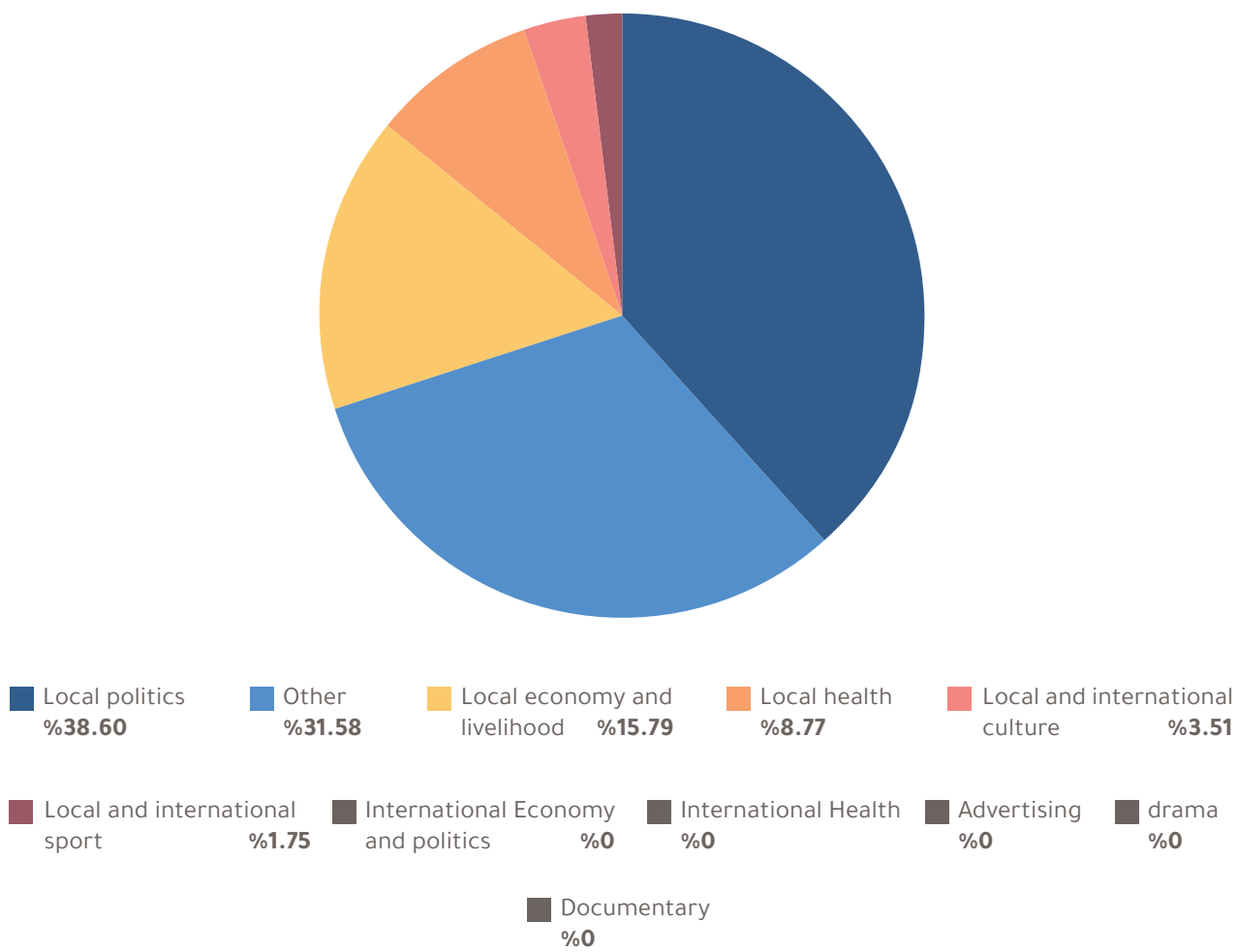


Figure No. (6) shows the distribution of press materials related to the Covid-19 pandemic to the press sections of the broadcasted media.

Regarding the distribution of coverage among journalistic types, more than half of the coverage was provided during newscast with 59.65% of the total coverage related to the Covid-19 pandemic, while the percentage of investigative reports within that coverage did not exceed 1.75%, which is the second smallest percentage of investigations among media types that were spotted during the search. The focus of the pandemic coverage within newscast only, can be considered an indication of the tendency of Syrian radio stations to transmit only available news provided by official and medical sources on the ground, as a result of several major obstacles, including the difficulty of verifying information from independent sources or accessing medical sources working directly, especially in the areas of the Syrian government control, in addition to the main precautions that any investigative work needs during the Covid-19 pandemic, which most of the Syrian media institutions have not been able to have due to lack of funding. While entertainment programs received 29.82% coverage, these programs are unable to provide life-saving information on their own, especially as they may not have the required reliability to transmit information due to the rumors and inaccurate news that spread about the Coronavirus during the past year. The percentage of news reports and personal interviews with specialists did not exceed 3.51% for each, which is a very low percentage, incapable of providing the necessary awareness, which is considered one of the main media tasks during the pandemic period. It can be explained by the high costs of specialists, which is a challenge that most Syrian media institutions cannot afford due to the lack of financial resources, in addition to the difficulty of accessing Arabic-speaking specialists or communicating with Syrian specialists from areas controlled by other authorities.



The distribution of press materials related to the Covid-19 pandemic among journalistic types in the broadcast media

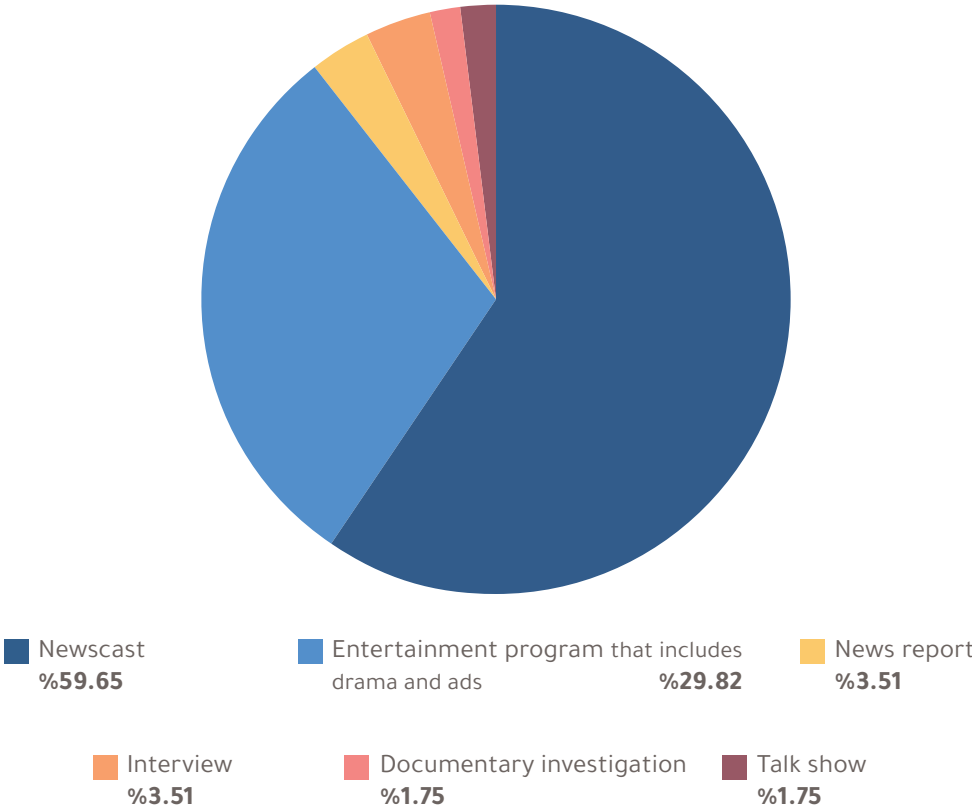


Figure No. (7) shows the distribution of press materials related to the Covid-19 pandemic among journalistic genres in the broadcast media.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Syrian media showed a clear tendency to limit coverage on available information by open and official sources, without serious attempts to uncover missing information or bridge the gap between reality and official statements that may have deliberately neglected to admit a large proportion of infections. Also, the low percentage of news related to public health and important medical information in the coverage of the pandemic is evidence of the insufficiency of that coverage. The three types of traditional media in Syria (written, visual media (TV) and Radio), regardless of their political orientations, have the previously mentioned weaknesses, which leads us to confirm the first hypothesis in the study, there is a scarcity of accurate information about the Coronavirus spread in the Syrian media of its various political orientations.

Chapter Two: The Political Impact on the Press Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Syria

This chapter attempts to answer the question of the second hypothesis in the study about the political influence or disparity between media outlets, with their different political orientations, in their coverage of the pandemic caused by the novel corona virus, and the type of coverage will be compared among the media outlets according to the sections within which the materials related to the pandemic have been published based on the data that the researchers collected while conducting this research

Therefore, media outlets will be classified based on their political orientation by the place of operation as follows:

- Media outlets operating from government-controlled areas.
- Media outlets operating from Northwestern Syria and Turkey.
- Media outlets operating from areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria.

The collected data shows that the media outlets operating in areas controlled by the Syrian government have had the most proportion (53.71%) of materials related to the corona pandemic. Despite that, the materials that talked about the health aspects related to the corona pandemic were not more than 8.26%, while most coverage clearly focused on the local political and economic impacts of the pandemic, as the two aspects had 20.66% and 6.61% respectively.

The bias of coverage by these media outlets can be explained by the Syrian government's pressure to portray the negative impact of the sanctions against it during the Covid-19 pandemic to exploit this diplomatically in order to demand the lifting of sanctions. These percentages also demonstrate a desire by the regime's government to link the failure of crisis management and all economic burdens to sanctions and bear the burden of a severe decline in public services, including health.

From these numbers, it can be noticed that the media outlets operating in Syrian-government-controlled areas tend to focus on covering the impacts of the pandemic, despite the rise of the proportion of the novel coronavirus related content, the proportion of active coverage in the health section is not high, which practically means that the highest proportion of the COVID-19 pandemic related media coverage did not provide the audience with the required essential information according to the duty of communication outlets during such circumstances. The sections of variety content and (international economy and politics) have also had a high proportion of the COVID-19 pandemic coverage in the media outlets operating in areas controlled by the Syrian government, with the former section reaching a 10.74% percentage of

coverage, and the latter amounting to 5.78%.

Although the other sections have advertisements about awareness, the section also includes material that mentions the pandemic without providing any vital information on the topic. With reference to the aforementioned study conducted by the Imperial College London, about the doubts supported by scientific studies about the accuracy of the figures presented by official sources in the areas under the control of the Syrian government regarding the spread of the pandemic, the high coverage rate does not compensate for the lack of accurate information. As for the media outlets operating in the opposition-controlled areas in the northwest of Syria and in Turkey, the percentage of materials related to the pandemic is less than that published by the media operating in the areas controlled by the Syrian government. The percentage here reached 36.84% of the total material recorded during this research. On the other hand, the percentage of materials allocated to the health section out of the total monitored materials was 7.23%, which is close to that of the media operating in the areas controlled by the Syrian government, which means that the percentage of effective coverage of the pandemic is close in both cases. In areas controlled by the opposition, there is less interest in publishing content within other sections and (international politics and economy) sections that relates to the Corona pandemic, as the percentage of content related to the Coronavirus in these two sections amounted to 6.57% and 2.63%, respectively.

The coverage of local policies related to the Corona pandemic has received a lower proportion among the media outlets operating in the areas controlled by the opposition and in Turkey, as a result of the media in these areas avoiding publishing the official data provided by the authorities linked to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib) except when necessary, which drove the percentage in this section to barely reach 10.52%, which is less than half that of the media operating in the regions controlled by the Syrian government, which keep on to publish official data issued by the regime's government continuously. As for the coverage of the economic and livelihood effects of the pandemic, we will find that the media operating in the opposition-controlled areas have had a greater percentage than their counterparts in the areas under the regime's and the Autonomous Administration's control.

With regard to the media operating in the Autonomous Administration-controlled areas in northern and eastern Syria, we find that the coverage proportion related to the Corona pandemic has amounted to 39.31%, which is close to that of the media operating in the opposition-controlled areas. On the other hand, the effective coverage of the pandemic within the health department was the lowest among its counterparts, reaching only about 3% of the total monitored materials, while the coverage within other section related to the Corona pandemic was the largest, with about 16% of the total monitored materials, which is also the largest among their counterparts in the media operating in the regime-or opposition-controlled areas.

Covering the political and livelihood effects of the pandemic was covered by 9% and 4.27%, respectively, which are lower percentages than those of other media outlets, and the tendency of the media in the regions controlled by the Autonomous Administration to focus on publishing content related to the novel coronavirus in other section and the decreased focus on providing important information within the health section are evident from these figures, and this may be due to several reasons, including the absence of a significant increase in the number of infections in the Autonomous Administration areas during that period, in addition to the decrease in the impact of the pandemic on the population's livelihood in front of other

reasons such as tensions caused by the battles that took place at the end of the year 2019 in the region.

Based on the analysis of the previous data, we will find clear differences in the Syrian media outlet's coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic based on their political orientation, as the media outlets operating in the areas under the control of the Syrian government focused on covering the political and livelihood effects of the pandemic, while a substantial percentage of the media production of media outlets operating in the opposition-controlled areas and Turkey focused on providing health-related information, while the media operating in the Autonomous Administration regions of northern and eastern Syria have focused on producing content related to the pandemic within the other section, which could be a good evidence to prove the second hypothesis in the research that says that there was a disparity between the media, with their different political orientations, in their coverage of the pandemic.

Political Orientation	Local Politics	Local Economy and Livelihood	International Politics and Economy	Health	Variety	Culture	Sport	Pandemic-Related	Total monitored
Media Outlets in Regime-Controlled Areas									
Percentage	20.66%	6.61%	5.78%	8.26%	10.74%	1.65%	0%	53.71%	100%
Media Outlets Operating in Turkey and Opposition-Controlled Areas									
Percentage	10.52%	7.89%	2.63%	7.23%	6.57%	1%	1%	36.84	100%
Media Outlets Operating in Autonomous Administration-Controlled Areas in North and East Syria									
Percentage	9%	4.27%	3%	3%	16%	3%	0%	39.31%	100%

Figure (8) shows the distribution of recorded materials according to the two variables of: political orientation of the media outlet and the sections under which the press materials were published.

Chapter Three: Dealing with the Flood of Misinformation and Rumors

This chapter attempts to deal with the question of the third hypothesis in this study related to the handling of the Syrian media -regardless of its political orientations- of misleading information. In an attempt to answer this question, we will rely on the analysis of monitoring data on types of news, sources, and general objectives of the published materials related to the COVID-19 pandemic within the media outlets, in addition to the frequency of keywords associated with this pandemic, and what this data can indicate.

Since the hypothesis deals with all media of different political orientations, the segmentation of the comparison will depend on the type of media (Written, Visual media (TV), Radio) to analyze the differences between those types and the general tendency of the media regarding this vital issue in determining the ability of the media outlet to provide life-saving information, especially with the large spread of rumors and misinformation about unconventional and incorrect treatment methods, or about the where the disease is found and how it can spread, which may pose a threat to the lives of many if they consider that this false information may be correct, particularly with regard to treatment and prevention methods.

Regarding the written media, the analysis of the monitoring data made by the researchers of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression showed that all the news related to the Covid-19 pandemic that were recorded were only fresh news, with the absence of any press material providing correction to false and misleading rumors or news about the pandemic.

It can be noted that there is at least a Syrian website interested in correcting false news but was not included in the data collection covered by this research. The monitoring showed that the media did not cooperate with institutions specialized in correcting false news. The absence of any correction of misleading information about the COVID-19 pandemic and symptoms of the novel coronavirus transmission is a serious gap in media coverage of the pandemic news, especially with there being a flood of inaccurate and misleading information, which may threaten life if relied upon, and the data shows that the Syrian media were unable to provide appropriate content in this context in order to correct what might be stuck with people of both rumors and misleading information.



The distribution of news type percentage in written media's coverage of Covid-19

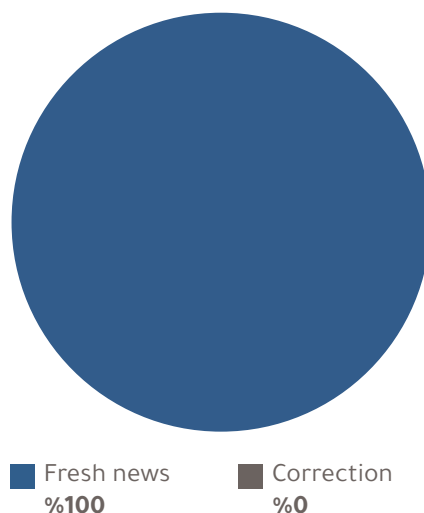


Figure NO. (9) The distribution of news type percentage in written media's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As for the source, the vast majority of the materials published in the read media (newspapers, websites, and news agencies) are committed to transmitting news from a primary source, which is news that depends on statements from known officials of the local authorities or international institutions operating in the region, including World Health Organization and its Regional Office. The percentage of news that relied on primary sources amounted to 90% of the total materials devoted to monitoring the COVID-19 pandemic, while press materials that relied on secondary sources, which practically means the transmission of news that were broadcasted by other media, amounted to only 10% of the total allocated press materials covering the pandemic.



The distribution of source type percentage for press materials allocated to cover Covid-19 in written media

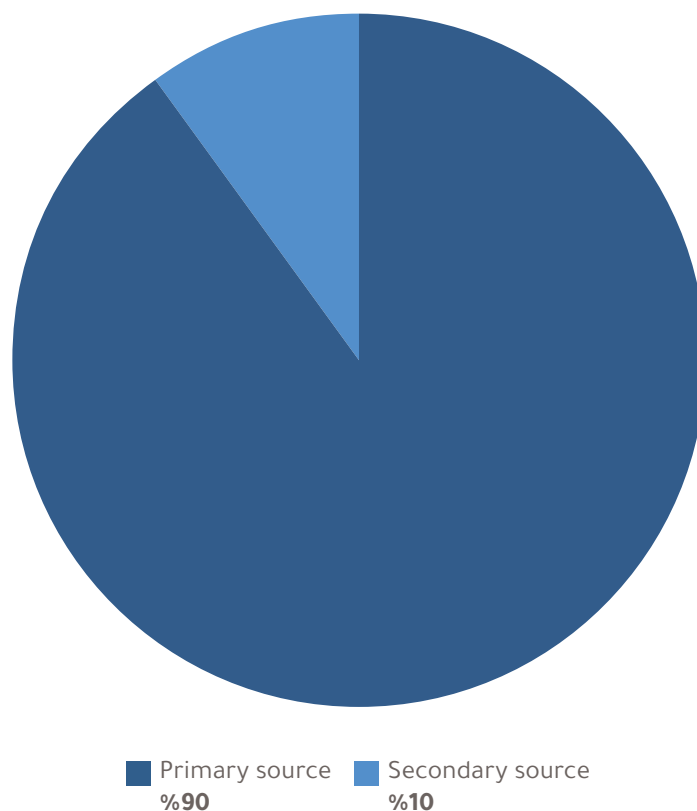


Figure (10) The distribution of source type percentage for press materials allocated to cover the COVID-19 pandemic in written media.

On the other hand, upon looking at the distribution of the purpose of the published press material, as part of the read media coverage of the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus, it is shown that there is a decline in the percentage of awareness-raising materials, which amounted to only 10% of the total coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, while the transmission of information received the largest proportion, which amounted to 77.5%.

Thus, a major part of the mission of the media during the pandemic has been absent or has fallen in priority, which practically means that the effective coverage of the pandemic and the role that the media outlets are required to play during this pandemic is clearly lacking in a significant part of it.



The distribution of Covid-19 materials based on their aim in written media

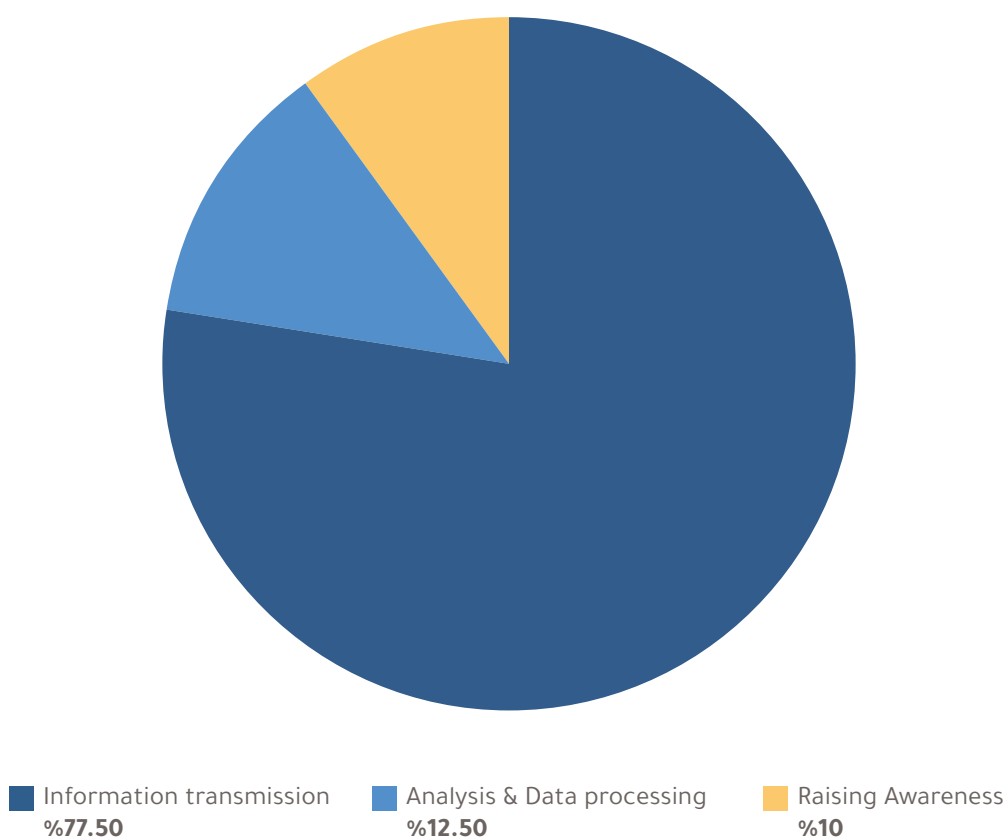


Figure (11) The distribution of material recorded that relates to COVID-19 pandemic based on the aim of the press material in written media.

As for the frequency of keywords within materials related to pandemic coverage in the written media, the largest percentage of occurrences was associated with general words referring to the virus, while we find that the occurrences of key phrases related to prevention and treatment information and the extent of disease spread were much less and the most frequent of which (which is the phrase “prevention measures”) did not exceed 9 occurrences in all the materials that have been recorded in the written media related to the pandemic category. These data give an important indication of a great lack of information provided to observers in the written media about protection and methods of preventing the disease.

Words	Frequency
Coronavirus	123
Quarantine	32
COVID-19	13
Epidemic	12
Pandemic	10
Protection Measures	9
Protection	8
Spread of Disease	5
Disease Treatment	2
Raising Awareness	2
Borders Closure	2
COVID-19	1
Awareness Campaigns	1
Coronavirus	0
The Spread of the Pandemic	0
Lockdown	0
Disease Treatment Methods	0

Figure No. (12): A table showing the frequencies of keywords related to the COVID-19 pandemic coverage within recorded materials in written media.

As for the visual media (TV), the percentage of news that corrected false information has reached 7.14%, which is higher than that of the written counterparts, but it remains a low percentage in front of the expansion of the spread of misinformation. The overwhelming percentage of novel news, which have amounted to 92.86% that the visual media outlets have also preferred to direct their resources towards publishing novel news, at a time when the audience in Syria was in great need of correcting misleading news and rumors that may contain life-threatening information.

These data give a clear indication of the existence of a significant lack of verifying wrong information by the visual media (TV), which leads to saying that there is a big gap in their work on the materials allocated to covering the pandemic caused by the coronavirus.



The distribution of Covid-19 pandemic-related news type percentage for visual media outlets

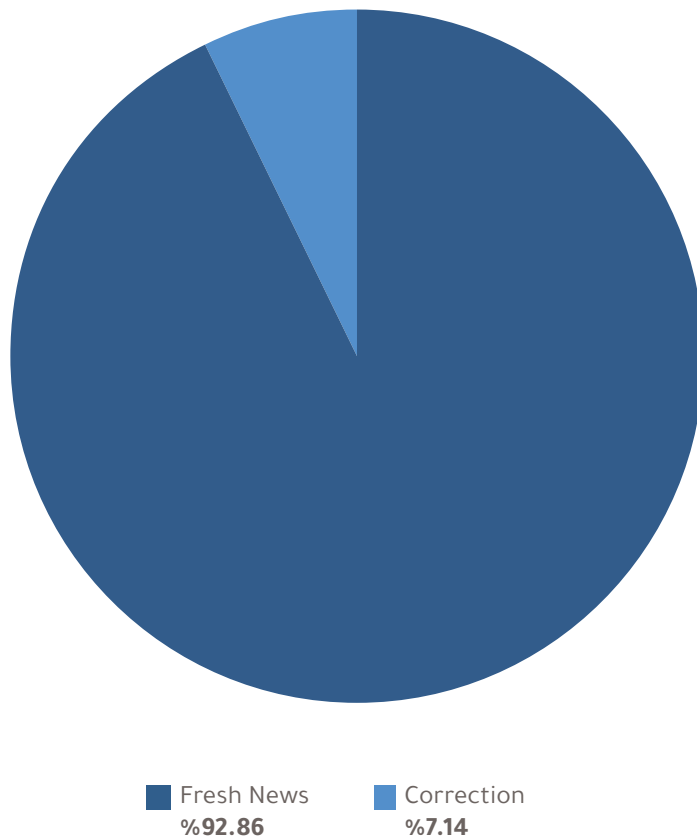


Figure No. (13): The distribution of COVID-19 pandemic-related news type percentage for visual media outlets.

On the other hand, it can be noticed that the reliability of the information provided by the visual media (TV) is significantly lower than its readable counterparts, depending on the source type indicator, as nearly half of the news they provided (47.14% of the total coverage related to the COVID-19 pandemic) relied on secondary sources, while 52.86 % of the news was taken from primary sources based on official statements and news provided by correspondents of these media outlets.

Regarding this indicator while noting that the accuracy of information decreases when it is transmitted from unofficial sources or other media, this threatens the credibility of a large proportion of the information provided by visual media outlets during their coverage of the pandemic. Although the reliance of television stations on the news produced by newspapers is normal, the high percentage of this dependence greatly gives an indication that amount of scrutiny that was allocated to the information provided to viewers may be questionable, which creates a new loophole in the visual media (TV channels) in their effective coverage of the pandemic.



The distribution of Covid-19 pandemic news source type in visual media

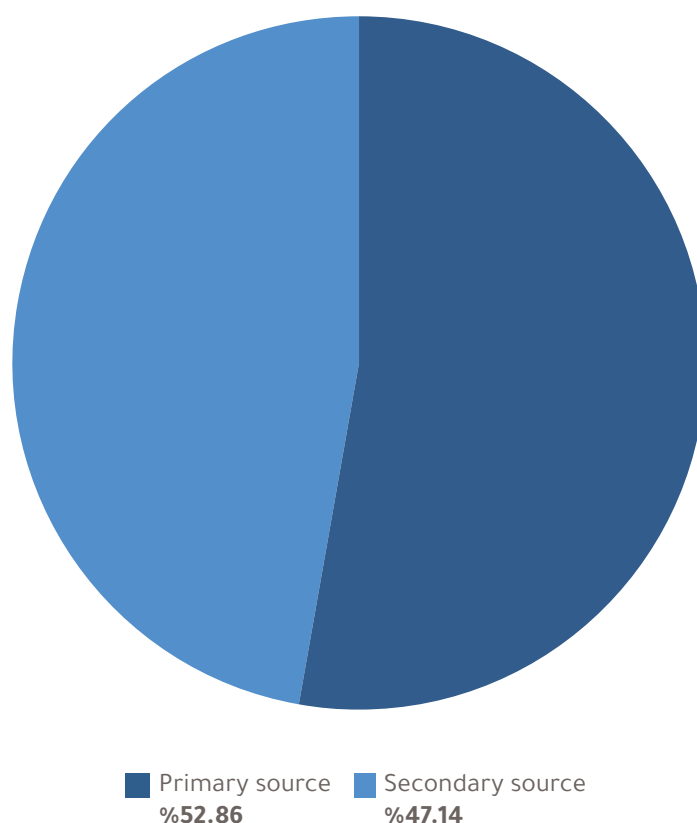


Figure No, (14) The distribution of COVID-19 Pandemic news source type in visual media

As for the repetition of key phrases related to covering the Corona pandemic; the rates of these occurrences are similar to those of the read media, as we will find that the differences between the occurrences of the phrases that generally refer to the Corona virus or pandemic are much higher than the key phrases for providing information about The spread of the disease or the correct ways to prevent it, which means the absence of this information and its retreat in front of the transmission of general news of the pandemic without providing the necessary information to the followers.

Words	Frequency
Corona Virus	308
Epidemic	53
Coronavirus	51
Protection	32
Pandemic	24
Protection Measures	24
Spread of Disease	18
Spread of the Pandemic	17
Quarantine	13
COVID-19	12
Lockdown	10
Borders Closure	8
Raising Awareness	7
COVID-19	5
Disease Treatment Methods	2
Disease Treatment	2
Awareness Campaigns	2

Figure No. (15): A table showing the frequencies of keywords related to the COVID-19 pandemic coverage within monitored materials in visual media outlets.

On its part, the performance of the Radio outlets was similar in terms of the indicators of information auditing of other media outlets, as the percentage of news related to correcting false information was kept at a very low percentage within the overall coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. The percentage of corrections from the total news related to the pandemic amounted only to 5.26%, while the percentage of novel news was 94.74%, which means that Syrian radio stations have made a similar decision to television channels, websites, and newspapers, by focusing their coverage of the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus on novel news without directing part of their resources to correct misinformation and widespread rumors.



The distribution of Corona pandemic news type in radio outlets

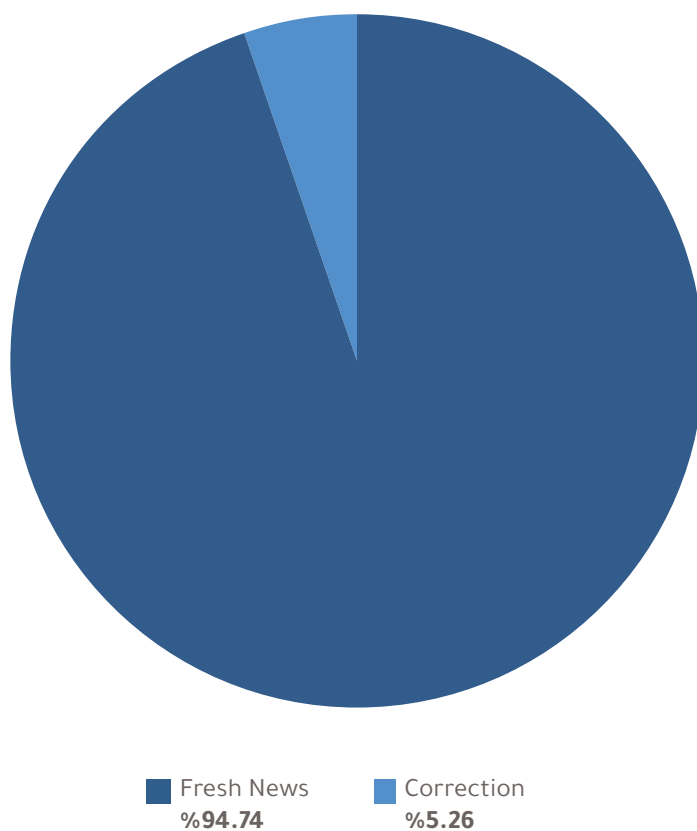


Figure No. (16) The distribution of Corona Pandemic news type in radio outlets.

In view of the source type index, which is vital in assessing the reliability of the news published by media outlets, the Syrian radio outlets have shown a better tendency than their visual counterparts to broadcast news that come from primary sources, as the percentage of these news out of the total news coverage of the pandemic amounted to 85.96%, while the percentage of that relied on secondary sources amounted to 14.04%, which is a relatively good percentage in comparison to television channels, but it remains more dependent on secondary sources than its written counterparts, which achieved the best results within this indicator.

The distribution of source type percentage for press materials allocated to cover Covid-19 in radio outlets

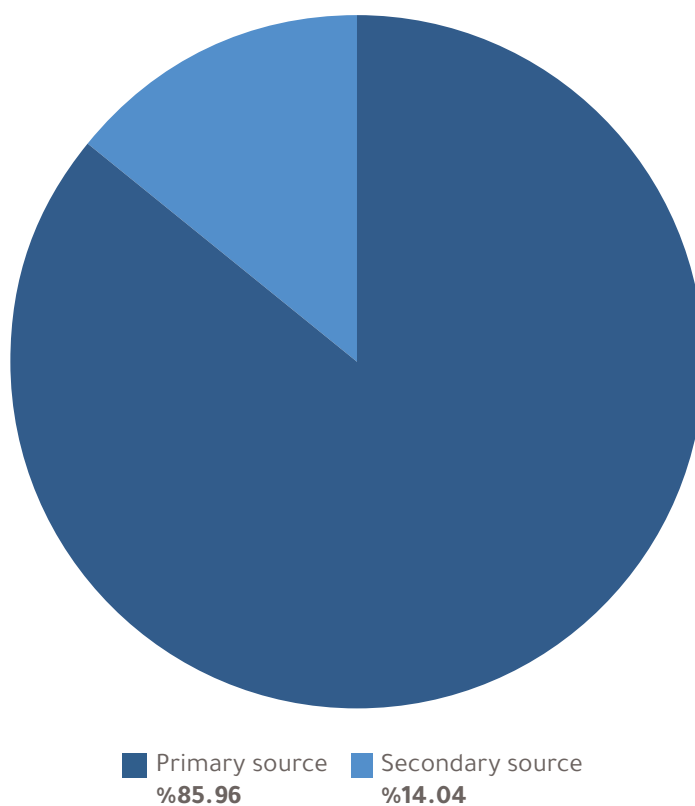
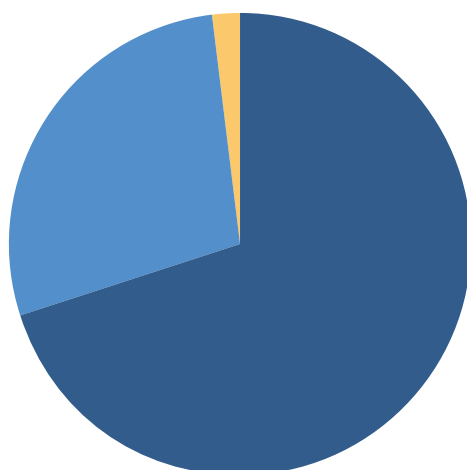


Figure No. (17) The distribution of source type percentage for press materials allocated to cover the COVID-19 pandemic in audible media.

Despite the high percentage of materials related to awareness-raising in the radio outlets, the general trend of the distribution of the aims of press materials at the Syrian radio stations remains within the same tendency shown by the rest of the media types, and the Syrian radio stations have also maintained the same tendency regarding the keyword index, which focuses on public information, with a weakness shown in providing information on prevention as the data evidence obtained during the monitoring process shows.



The distribution of the general aim of the article about the Covid-19 pandemic in radio outlets



Information transmission
%70.18

Raising Awareness
%28.07

Analysis & Data processing
%1.75

Words	Frequency
Corona Virus	288
Protection	48
Quarantine	38
Awareness Campaigns	37
“Coronavirus”	37
Protection Measures	35
Raising Awareness	24
Spread of Disease	22

Spread of the Pandemic	20
Epidemic	15
Pandemic	8
COVID-19	6
“COVID-19”	3
Borders Closure	2
Lockdown	1
Disease Treatment Methods	0
Disease Treatment	0

The former data, together with a comparison of media performance through several indicators examining the process of checking information and correcting rumors, show that the Syrian media were unable to effectively counter the flood of rumors and misinformation, which confirms the third hypothesis in this study.



Recommendations

- ▶ Syrian media outlets, of all political orientations and types, must allocate more space to providing health-related information from trusted resources such as the World Health Organization or the international and local medical organizations that are operating in the country, in order to guide the audience toward better ways for protection.
- ▶ Syrian media outlets must allocate more space and resources to correct the rumors and misinformation, which are life-threatening, based on accurate medical resources and with the help of specialists.
- ▶ Providing more space for specialists to appear on media outlets would be useful in improving the quality of the information received by Syrians about the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ▶ The de facto authorities in the country must not interfere in the media outlets' coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic
- ▶ The de facto authorities in the country must provide accurate information about the amount of the pandemic's spread and its victims.
- ▶ Increase of journalists' training in investigative journalism.
- ▶ Increase in the resources of the institutions that are involved in the development of media outlets, which are working on raising the journalists' potential on one side and raising enough awareness regarding the professional handling of crises and attempting to provide the required resources on the other.



References:

1 A Reuters report about the first infection with the Coronavirus was recorded in the city of Qamishli, in the northeast of the country under the control of the Autonomous Administration, revealing that officials in the areas controlled by the Syrian government did not inform the bodies in the Autonomous Administration about the results of the analyzes of that case. [Link](#).

2 This period witnessed the highest daily death rate according to official figures issued by the Ministry of Health in the Syrian government, and the first confirmed case of the novel coronavirus was recorded in northwestern Syria within the same period.

Link to CNN's report on numbers of deaths, [link](#).

Link to a report by Enab Baladi newspaper about the registration of the first confirmed case of Covid-19 disease in the northwest of the country, the [link](#).

3 Watson, O.J., Alhaffar, M., Mehchy, Z. et al. Leveraging community mortality indicators to infer COVID-19 mortality and transmission dynamics in Damascus, Syria. Nat Commun 12, 2394 (2021). [link](#)



المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير

Navenda Sûrîyayî ya Ragihandinê û Azadîya Derbirînê
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression

للإطلاع على تقاريرنا السابقة باللغة العربية
[/https://scm.bz](https://scm.bz)

للإطلاع على تقاريرنا السابقة باللغة الانكليزية
[/https://scm.bz/en](https://scm.bz/en)

للإطلاع على تقاريرنا السابقة باللغة الكوردية
[/https://scm.bz/kmr](https://scm.bz/kmr)