

SYRIA IN GLOBAL MEDIA – media monitoring study

FACTS AND METHODOLOGY

- Almost one year of monitoring global media coverage. The first analysis period was 10 March 2015 – 10 September 2015 and the second one 1 October 2015 - 29 February 2016
- Boolean algorithm, search word count at the heading level
- 292 digital media outlets across the globe publishing textual content in English
- Looking at 44,220 articles at the heading level (33,528 unique articles)
- Social media: Twitter and Facebook public content in English
- 6 million social media posts

KEY FINDINGS

Media outlets

- Generally media reported according to its home country's geopolitical position and policy on Syria.
- Women and children were practically absent from heading level, amounting to less than 3% of the coverage. However, articles on women and children do interest readers and get shared and liked in the social media more than other articles.
- Terrorism and conflict news had the biggest share of media coverage during the period of analysis comprising 46-48% of all coverage on Syria.
- The amount of coverage on humanitarian aid was minimal, 3% during the reporting period, and was ignored due to concentration on conflict themes. The coverage piled up in the beginning of 2016 with reporting on the besieged cities in Syria and aid conference in London. However, the report shows OCHA reported on 400,000 Syrians living in besieged areas already in November 2015 and that went almost unnoticed due to coverage of battles. There are examples of ISIS receiving wide media attention at the expense of humanitarian aid and refugees, and the suffering of civilians.
- Coverage on peace grew tenfold from the first analysis period to the second one, increasing from 3% (336) to 11%. (3457). The explanation can be found in the Vienna meetings and subsequent Geneva process. A lot of attention was paid to ceasefire violations.
- Syrian media (both opposition and loyalist) had very little reach outside Syrian audiences. As such, there is a "disconnect" between the Syrians and the international media discourses.
- Coverage on the refugee topic increased from 7% to 23% only after the refugee crisis started reaching Europe in August 2015 and diminished again to 11%. The physical proximity of the refugee issue seemed to increase the European media's interest in the topic.

Social media

- In social media the amount of posts on Syria tripled from the first analysis period to the second, from 1.5 million posts to 4.5 million. 89% of posts were on Twitter. The terror attacks in Paris increased the conversation volumes. Active discussion on the refugee issue was another reason for the growth.
- The refugee issue was the most popular theme. Its publicity grew ever since the refugees reached Europe in autumn 2015 from 12% to 31% of all posts on Syria. Social media users' interest in refugee issues grew further to 33% in the second analysis period, receiving ten times more hits than in the first analysis period even though the media outlets' interest to refugee issues decreased.

- Politics and conflict came second with 25% and terrorism had third most popularity with 14%.
- Tracking the social media posting on Syria reliably is challenging due to the large amount of posting robots controlled by different actors.
- Pro opposition posts dominate in Twitter, there were very few pro-regime posts. ISIS' social media presence is narrowed down since Twitter deleted 125,000 ISIS accounts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MEDIA

- Strive for diversity in coverage: show women, children, and grassroots movements. 85% of Syrians are not involved in the fighting, yet belligerent activities comprise nearly half of the coverage.
- Cover what is being done for resolving the conflict. Peace is the most relevant topic also at the height on battles and is being worked on even when there is no internationally lead peace process going on. Look into the grassroots.
- Humanitarian and aid NGOs may be able to provide key warning signs of impending crises and conflict trends.
- Publish human stories, they show the everyday context of war and are also shared and liked in the social media more than news wires of bloody battles.
- Through the refugee crisis Syrian war has become a global household issue which doesn't cease to interest people. Dig into the socio economic circumstances of the war, this might make the refugee issue more understandable.

BACKGROUND

What is Syria Initiative?

Syria Initiative is a peace building project coordinated by FELM with regional and Syrian partners. Started in 2013, the initiative works on three main sectors:

- Empowering peace activists and their institutions across all parts of Syria.
- Supporting inclusive political dialogue among the different stakeholders on different levels towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict.
- Empowering Syrian voices to network, advocate and communicate for peace.

Syria Initiative works with a wide range of international stakeholders, including the UN and EU bodies, to develop frameworks for the de-escalation of violence and stabilizing political solutions.

Purpose of the Syria in Global Media study

Media discourse plays a big role in how conflicts are perceived. Unlike in domestic news, in foreign news the media outlets are often the only source of information for ongoing events. In foreign conflicts the case is even more so. Through choosing what aspects of the conflict are covered, which topics are highlighted and which actors are interviewed, media coverage participates in creating what is understood as the "reality" of the conflict. Through reporting the current events to their readers and viewers the media also lays the ground for imagining the future: based on how the situation seems like now, what can be seen as possible or probable? In a way media coverage is the measuring stick against which people measure their hopes and expectations of the future.

These hopes, expectations, shared understanding and analysis of what is realistic and possible can transform into discussion, action, social movements and eventually state policies. Or alternatively it can lead to fear, frustration,

paralysis and hopelessness. Media coverage has an impact on how the solution of the conflict is seen. Is achieving peace presented as a necessity? An impossibility? Or a naïve dream?

In the work of grass roots peace activists inside Syria, a constant challenge is that there is no culturally accepted space to work for peace or discuss it. Narratives based on continuity of war dominate on all sides. Peace activists risk their lives and are persecuted, criticized and suspected by all parties to the conflict. The international community doesn't often know about the peace work inside Syria or doesn't find it credible against the bigger picture on Syria, the one that is dominated by war narratives. More diverse media discourse could help to carve out the social space for peace activists to work in and to legitimize their role.

In order to support Syrian peace builders' advocacy and communication efforts and to increase the stakeholders' knowledge of the media context concerning them, Syria Initiative has examined the ongoing global media discourse on Syria through series of media studies which tracked coverage of 292 digital media outlets worldwide as well as over 6 million social media posts. The findings of the study encourage Syria Initiative to advocate for diversity in the media coverage on Syria.