



The Samir Kassir Foundation



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STIFTUNG Für die Freiheit.



Independent Media in Lebanon

Content Analysis and Public Appeal

RESEARCHERS

Jaber Bakr



Jaber Bakr is a journalist and a writer, and the Syria Program Coordinator at the Samir Kassir Foundation since September 2012. He is a recurrent columnist at the London-based Al-Arab daily newspaper. He worked with several local Syrian newspapers, including Abyad wa-Aswad (2006-2008) and Al-Watan (2009-2012). He has undergone training in digital media, documentation of human rights violations, investigative journalism, and business journalism, and has trained a number of activists and citizen journalists in Syria. He participates in the production of documentaries, especially those relating to humanitarian issues and Syrian detainees. He volunteers at the Syrian human rights organization Ur-Nammu.

Karim Safieddine



Karim Safieddine is the Audience Research Coordinator at the Samir Kassir Foundation. He joined the Foundation in October 2020. His portfolio also includes working on public awareness of digital rights issues and monitoring discrimination and hateful content on social media. He holds a Master's degree in Comparative Politics from the London School of Economics and a BA in Economics from the American University of Beirut.

Jad Safwan



Jad Safwan is the Media Development Research Coordinator at the Samir Kassir Foundation. He joined the Foundation in December 2019. He has experience in the advertising business, after having co-organized events and worked on research projects related to education and development policies with the United Nations Global Compact Network Lebanon and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB). He graduated from AUB in 2017 with a BA in Public Administration.

Nada Sleiman



Nada Sleiman is a translator and a researcher at the Samir Kassir Foundation. She joined the Foundation in November 2011. Besides translating all reports and press releases for the Foundation, she is also contributing to media monitoring projects and providing support to emerging media. She taught translation and communications at the St-Joseph University in Beirut since 2011, and has joined the Master's program in Cultural Intelligence and Innovation at Université Paris-7 in France.

Supervisor

Ayman Mhanna



Ayman Mhanna is the Executive Director of the Samir Kassir Foundation (since September 2011). He also served as Executive Director of the Global Forum for Media Development (January 2016-February 2017), a network of 200 international organizations that support media development and press freedom. He taught public policy development and communication at the Faculty of Economic Sciences of Saint-Joseph University in Beirut (September 2011-December 2015) and previously held the position of Senior Program Officer at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (March 2007-August 2011). He has participated in many international conferences on freedom of expression, security, media, and human rights. He holds a Bachelor's in Economics from Saint-Joseph University in Beirut and a Master's in International Affairs and Development from the Institute of Political Studies – Sciences Po in Paris.

Mona Massaoudi (Intern)



Mona Massaoudi interning at the Samir Kassir Foundation from July to September 2019, student of International Relations at Al-Akhawayn University – Ifrane, Morocco, and a volunteer with Amnesty International Morocco since July 2018.



The Samir Kassir Foundation

The Samir Kassir Foundation is a Lebanese non-profit organization officially incorporated in Beirut under registry number 30/A.D., founded on February 1, 2006. It is named after Samir Kassir, a Lebanese journalist assassinated in Beirut on June 2, 2005. It aims to spread democratic culture in Lebanon and the Arab world, encourage new talents in journalism, and build the movement for a cultural, democratic, and secular renewal. These are the conditions to lift the Arab populations out of their “state of malaise,” described in Samir Kassir’s book “Being Arab.” The Foundation strives to defend freedom of media and culture through the SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom that it hosts, which has become – since its establishment in 2008 – the largest center to monitor violations against journalists and artists in the Arab Levant as well as a reference for research on journalism and for training media professionals and enhancing their skills.



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
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The **Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF)** is the German Foundation for Liberal Politics. Established in 1958 by Theodor Heuss, the first President of the Federal Republic of Germany, FNF promotes liberal values, above all the freedom of the individual for his and her pursuit of happiness. FNF promotes liberal thinking and liberal policies in cooperation with its local partners through activities of civic education, international political dialogue, and political counseling. In the Lebanese civil society, the Foundation's work aims at contributing to building a state of law, fighting corruption, promoting good governance and supporting participation in local politics. It is undertaken in cooperation with partners such as the Lebanese Economic Association (LEA), the Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA), the Lebanon Conflict Resolution Network (LCRN), the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) and Sada Al-Beqaa.

Comments

1. Introduction

2. Content Analysis of Independent Online Media

- a. Methodology
- b. Presentation of the media outlets
- c. Data analysis
 - i. Size of the data
 - ii. Type of content
 - iii. Medium used
 - iv. Themes of the pieces
 - v. Sources and external references
- d. Findings

3. Focus Group Analysis

- a. Methodology
- b. Findings and respondents critique
 - i. Consumption habits and media trust factors
 - ii. Attractiveness factors of media content
 - iii. Findings

4. Recommendations

Introduction



Lebanon has a diverse media sector with extensive historical roots intertwined with the different social components of the Lebanese society. Its development, however, has been tightly linked to the local and regional political context and to a history of political funding to media outlets. Political publications were the main channel to express the opposition to the Ottoman rule in the late 19th and early 20th century and a springboard for aspiring political leaders to convey their ideas to the Lebanese public during the French mandate and the early years of Lebanon's independence.

The country's sectarian diversity, geographic location, and open political regime turned Beirut into the most vibrant journalism and printing hub in the Levant. It was in Beirut that intellectuals, often political dissidents from across the Middle East, would meet and produce ideas, books, and articles. It was also towards Beirut that Arab – and later other regional – powers sent funds to media outlets to promote their policies and agendas. All these factors contributed to the growth of the Lebanese media in both its print and audiovisual sectors.

During the 1975-1990 civil war, political parties and fighting militias took advantage of the quasi-collapse of law enforcement to launch unregulated private radio and television channels. Following the 1989 Taif Agreement, which expressed the need to dismantle all

illegal media outlets that had been established during the years of conflict, the Lebanese Parliament issued a law on audiovisual media in 1994, setting conditions and standards for radio and television broadcasting. Based on this law, *“the government handed out licenses to some media outlets and shut down others.”*¹ In fact, licenses were granted – or denied – on political and sectarian grounds as a way to accommodate the Syrian regime, which was exerting direct military and political control over post-war Lebanese politics.

After the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, the audiovisual media sector was open again to new political voices, which were previously banned. Yet, the media landscape continued to reflect the political and sectarian divisions, and remained dependent on political funding from local leaders and regional sponsors. Political funding started to decrease in 2008 with the global financial crisis and more acutely after the eruption of uprisings and revolutions in several Arab countries in 2011. What was then referred to as the *“Arab Spring”* brought down some sponsors of Lebanese media, particularly in Libya and Egypt, and pushed other regional players, most notably Saudi Arabia and Iran, to drop their investment in soft power, including media, in order to focus more on direct confrontation.

As a result, dozens of Lebanese media outlets had to close or limit their operation. The

list includes Al-Bayrak newspaper, Monday Morning and La Revue du Liban magazines (2011), Al-Ousbou' Al-Arabi magazine (2014), Al-Kifah Al-Arabi magazine (2015), As-Safir newspaper and Al-Hawadeth magazine (2016), Al-Ittihad newspaper (2017), Al-Balad newspaper, Al-Hayat newspaper, and all of Dar Assayad's publications including Al-Anwar newspaper and Assayad, Al-Shabaka, Fairuz, Al-Difaa Al-Arabi and Al-Fares magazines (2018), Al-Mustaqbal newspaper and Future TV (2019), Magazine-Le Mensuel and the print editions of The Daily Star and Le Commerce du Levant (2020).

In parallel, Lebanon saw the emergence of a large number of news websites, thanks to the relatively lower operating costs on the one hand, and the wider possible reach of online publications on the other hand. Online outlets like Lebanon Files, El-Nashra and NOW Lebanon were among the pioneers of the sector, followed by countless others. While read by a large number of citizens, locally and abroad, these outlets are yet to find a sustainable business model. Some popular online media are still directly connected to political parties (Tayyar.org, Lebanese-Forces.org, and Kataeb.org for example), or funded by regional powers, such as Qatar, involved in Al-Araby Al-Jadeed and Al-Modon. Others are co-funded by private sector sister organizations (like El-Nashra – part of the El-Bareed group and Lebanon Files that is linked to Statistics Lebanon). Also, in many cases, online media outlets limit their publications to interviewing second tier politicians, reposting news wires published by the National News Agency, and showcasing articles (often ill-referenced and ill-cited) from other publications. Click-baits are also a method commonly used to attract readers.

Several key elements of sustainable journalism are missing from most of these experiences. These ingredients include, among others: editorial independence, adherence to ethical standards of journalism, investigation, fact-checking and in-depth reporting, innovative look-and-feel and user experience, and elaborate institutional sustainability models.

As a response, independent journalists as well as young graduates embarked on the

risky adventure of establishing online media platforms that address the many shortcomings of the traditional Lebanese media landscape. Today, while these platforms are the target of several support programs from international donors and media development organizations, demographic and institutional restrictions continue to act as barriers to these platforms achieving their full growth potential. For one, there remains an assumption that the independent online outlets' content is only consumed by a limited, urban, progressive, young, upper middle-class audience, amid the transformations occurring on the level of how younger readers and viewers are receiving and tracking desired information, whether social, political, or economic. In specific, a shift towards the need for *visualizing* and *animating* facts and opinions is becoming increasingly necessary to grab the attention of the user.



This study aims to assess two fundamental factors of sustainability from a sample of these new, independent, online media outlets in Lebanon:

- Adherence to high standards of quality journalism; and
- Ability to appeal to a wide audience

Furthermore, a close examination of the perception of youth and university students of these different sources of information over time was conducted in the pursuit of understanding the implications of the major political events/ruptures that have occurred in Lebanon since 2019. These events include, but are not restricted to, the popular protests that erupted on October 17, 2019, the coronavirus pandemic, and the August 4, 2020 Beirut blast.

In this context, a recurrent assumption is that particularly young social groups have grown increasingly skeptical of traditional media outlets, instead choosing unconventional, alternative online platforms for news, analysis, and commentary. This shifting trend is supposedly rooted in the fresher, more accountable, and daring approach of these outlets echoing the rising anti-establishment sentiment. This is accompanied by the perceived complicity of traditional media, which lack an investigative approach towards most of the country's woes. Nevertheless, this research also aims to reassess the media consumption patterns of these particular social groups to examine their level of loyalty to a particular news source.

The first section of this study is based on a thorough content monitoring of five online media platforms, which represent five different philosophies and approaches to independent media. The second section reflects the results of a series of focus groups conducted with young people across Lebanon to evaluate their reception and perception of what the new, independent, online outlets have been producing.

¹ Media Ownership Monitor – Lebanon, History. Reporters Without Borders and Samir Kassir Foundation. Available at: <http://lebanon.mom-rsf.org/en/context/history/>

Content Analysis of Online Independent Media

The first section of the study focuses on five online publications and looks into the issues covered in the articles, reports, and investigations. It qualitatively and quantitatively examines the sources on which the publications relied and the references that were cited.

Methodology

The content study monitored all the material published on the websites of five Lebanese online media outlets in the period from May 1 to June 15, 2019 – those dates included.

The media outlets included in the study are (in alphabetical order):



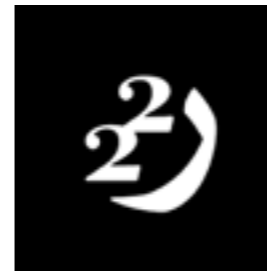
Assafir Al-Arabi
www.assafirarabi.com



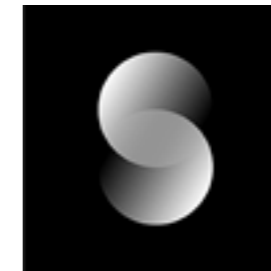
Daraj
www.daraj.com



Megaphone
www.megaphone.news



Raseef22
www.raseef22.com



Synaps
www.synaps.network

A total of 654 items published during this period were entered in a database, which included the following information:

- Title
- Date of publication
- URL
- Type of content: news brief; feature story; opinion article; investigative article; interview
- Medium used: text; video; pictures
- Number of pictures
- Number of videos
- Average length of videos
- Main topics: national politics; regional politics; international politics; military; culture; economic; social; environment; education; human rights; sports; gender; science and technology; other topics (with the possibility of more than one topic per article)
- Number of sources
- Nature of the sources: military/security; political; academic; local activist; professional; government; NGO; international organization; citizen
- Citing external references
- Number of external references
- Noteworthy excerpts.

We do not claim that this is a comprehensive evaluation of the entire Lebanese independent, online media sector. This study does not include external fact-checking of the information provided in the monitored content. It does not trace sources nor does it include interviews with editors of and workers in the various media outlets to seek further details about their editorial process.

The study is to be read as a still photography of key indicators for professional journalism that can serve as a basis for benchmarking, comparison over time, and international comparison. It is also a tool to help the Lebanese independent, online media sector in its effort to diversify its content, strengthen its editorial capacity, and address shortcomings it may have experienced.

It is also essential to note that the content monitoring took place several months before the October 17, 2019 popular uprising and more than a year before the August 4, 2020 Beirut blast, both of which increased the visibility of the independent, online media that were included in this study. The focus groups, however, took place months from July to October 2020, which would help assess if there is a link between any change in the political context and the mood of young Lebanese citizens and their media consumption patterns.

Representation of the Media Outlets



Assafir Al-Arabi is published by “*Intersections*,” a non-profit umbrella organization. It publishes in-depth analytical reports focusing on the entire Arab region with a particular attention to underrepresented and marginalized groups. Assafir Al-Arabi was created in 2011. In July 2012, the first issue was published as a weekly supplement of the (now suspended) daily newspaper Assafir. The paper sponsored Assafir Al-Arabi until Assafir’s closure in late 2016. Since then, Assafir Al-Arabi has become web-only.

Founder and editor-in-chief: Nahla Chahal.



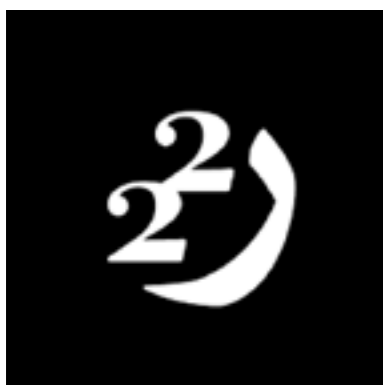
Daraj was launched by professional journalists and targets Arab readers worldwide. It publishes investigative reports, in-depth feature stories, multimedia content, and opinion pieces focusing on women’s rights, climate change, and progressive politics. It was established in 2017 as a private company.

Co-founders: Hazem Al-Amin (editor-in-chief), Alia Ibrahim (CEO), and Diana Moukalled (managing editor).



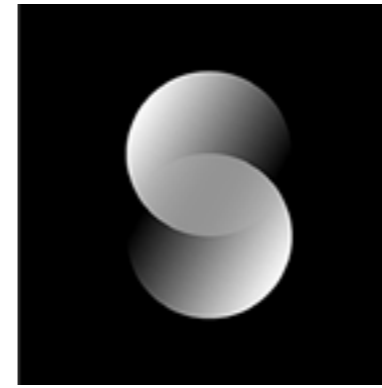
Megaphone was founded in 2017 by a multidisciplinary team of young, fresh graduate journalists, researchers and designers, for most pro bono volunteers. It is a social media-native platform focusing on acting as a watchdog and exposing controversial statements by powerful leaders.

Co-founder and editor-in-chief: Jean Kassir.



Raseef22 was established in 2013. It aims to cover lifestyle, cultural and political news from the 22 Arab countries, while focusing on issues often ignored by mainstream media. Its editorial and design team is based in 10 different countries. It is published by Levant Laboratories SAL.

Founder: Karim Sakka. Co-editors-in-chief: Rasha Hilweh and Hassan Abbas.



Synaps was established in 2016. It is an in-depth field research organization, publishing long-form analysis and fieldwork-based reports using high level social and scientific research methods. Synaps also provides communication services, training and research fellowship opportunities.

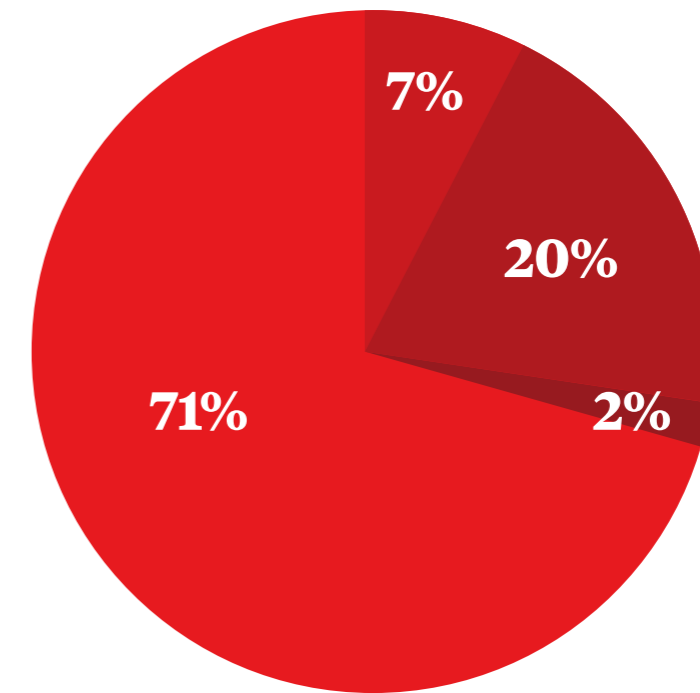
Founder and editor-in-chief: Peter Harling.



Data Analysis

The monitoring process covered a set of quantitative and qualitative criteria. This study is based on essential journalistic criteria such as sources and references cited in articles and reports, their number and nature.

Size of the Data (Fig. 1)

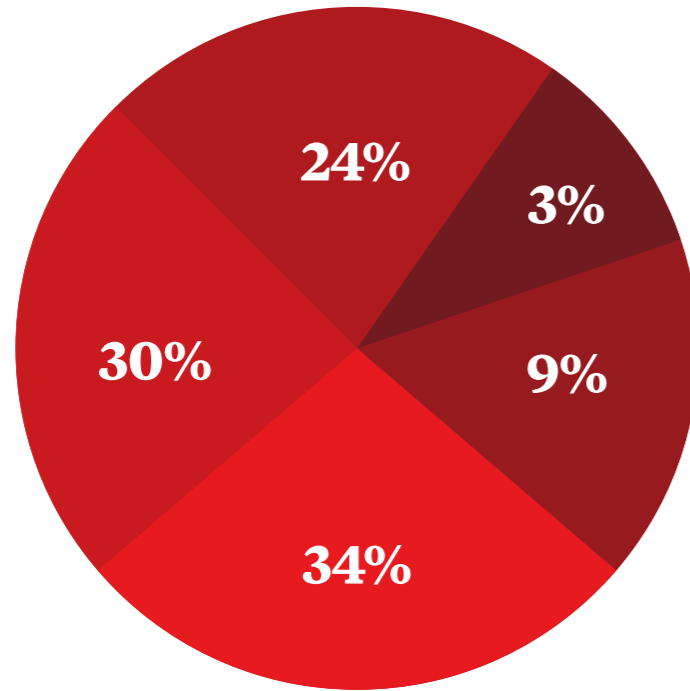


During the monitoring period, 654 pieces of content were produced in total. Only one was published by **Synaps** and is therefore excluded from the quantitative analysis. 70.8 percent of the items included in this study were published by **Raseef22**. This is a logical number for a media platform that is more comprehensive both in its geographical coverage and in the variety of topics it features.

Daraj provided 20 percent of the data. In third place came **Assafir Al-Arabi** with 7.2 percent, then finally **Megaphone**, which at the time was social media only, with 2 percent of the content.

- Raseef22
- Daraj
- Assafir Al-Arabi
- Megaphone

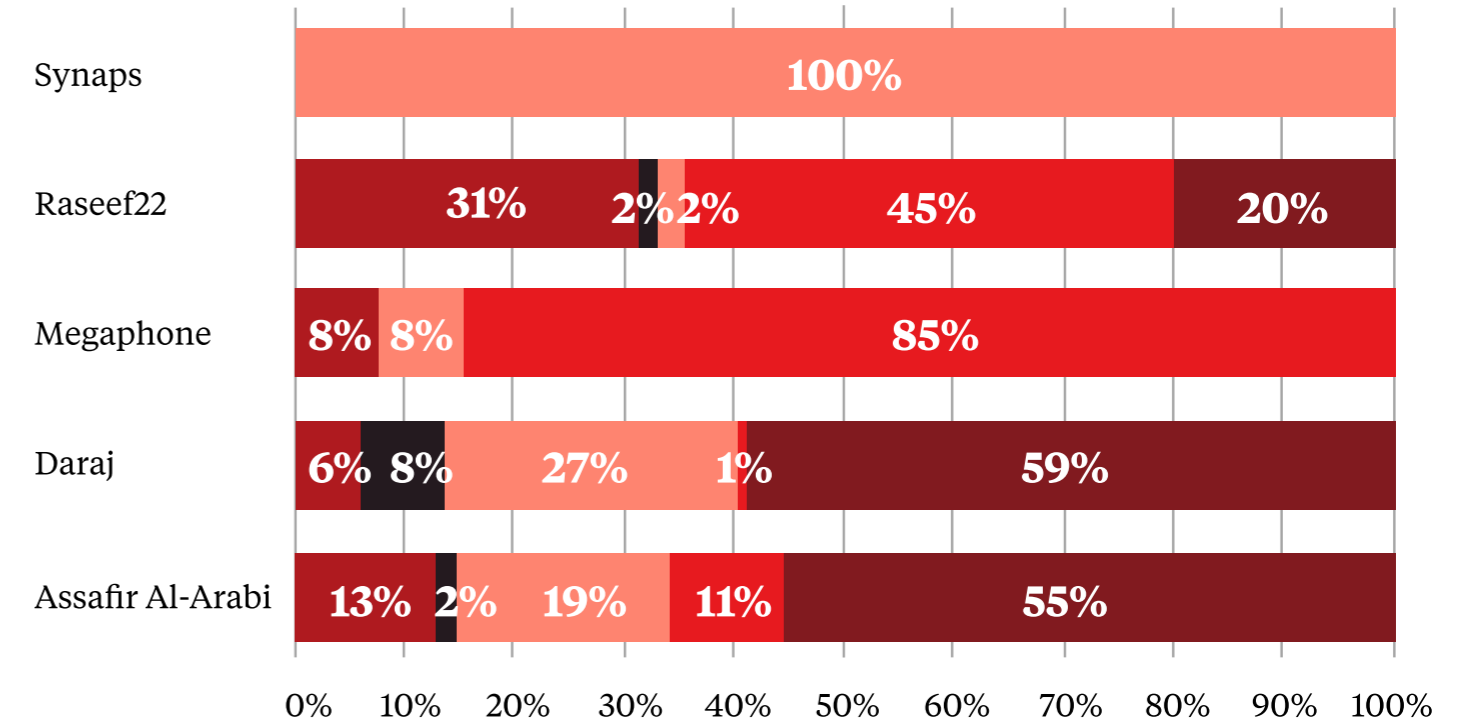
Type of Content (Fig.2)



The 654 items were broken down according to their type. 34.1 percent were **news briefs**, coming mainly from coverage of current events and stories taken from international news wires. Then came **opinion pieces** (29.7 percent of the content) that reflect the views of writers who often do not get featured in traditional and mainstream media. **Feature stories** with 24.6 percent of the data, followed by **investigative articles** with 8.6 percent, and finally **interviews** with 3.1 percent.

- Newsbrief
- Opinion Article
- Feature Story
- Investigative Article
- Interview

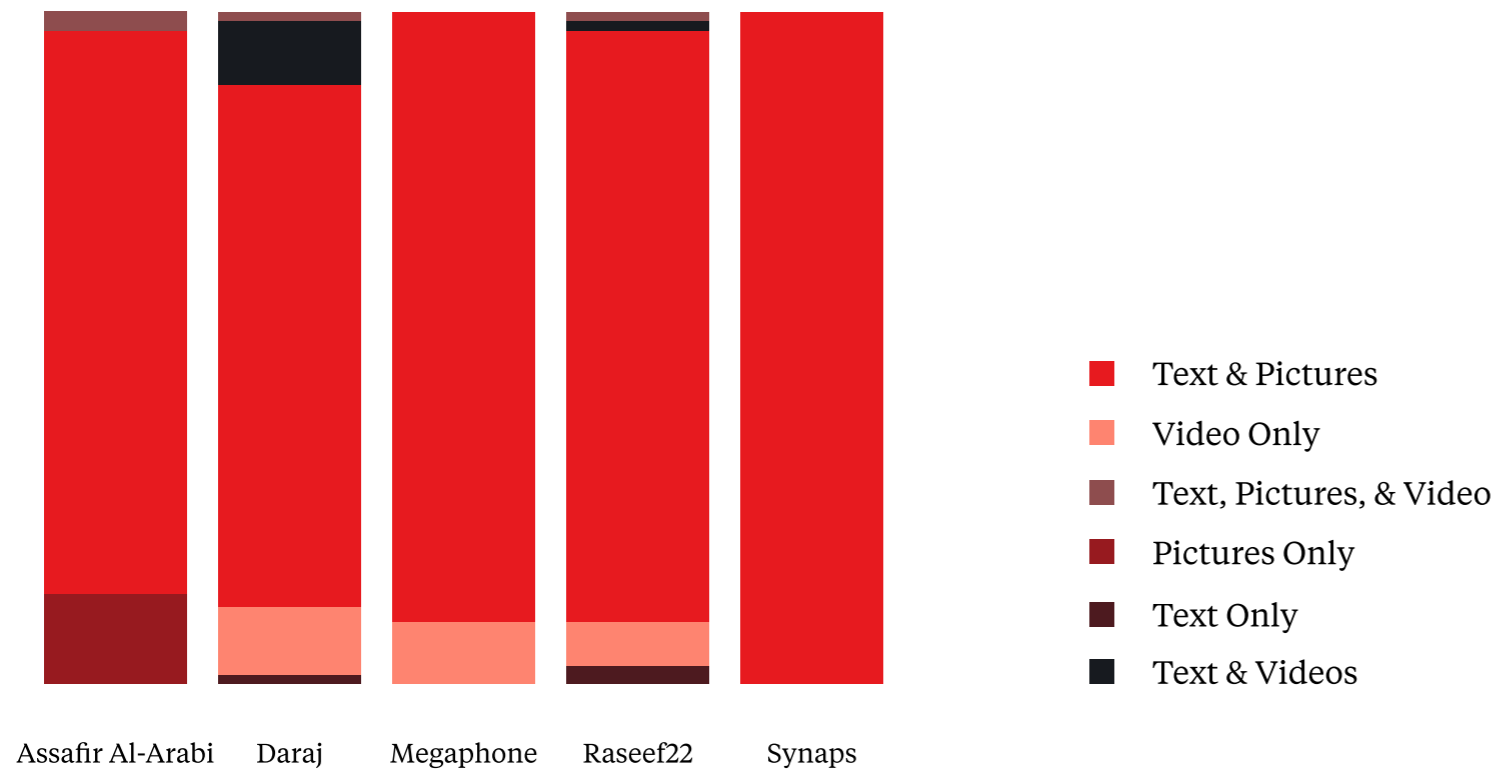
Type of Content Per Media Outlet (Fig. 3)



- Feature Story
- Interview
- Investigative Article
- Newsbrief
- Opinion Article

News briefs represent the largest proportion of the content in two out of the five monitored media outlets. More specifically, they figured mostly in each of **Megaphone** (85 percent) due to the very nature of their social media-native reporting and **Raseef22** (45 percent), where they vary between short news briefs and slightly longer un-signed news reports, often obtained through international news wires. **Opinion articles** had the largest proportion of content in two other media outlets. They figured mostly in **Daraj** (59 percent of the content) and **Assafir Al-Arabi** (55 percent). The only type of content in **Synaps**, due to their focus on slowly-produced long forms, was investigative reporting.

Type of Medium Used (Fig. 4)



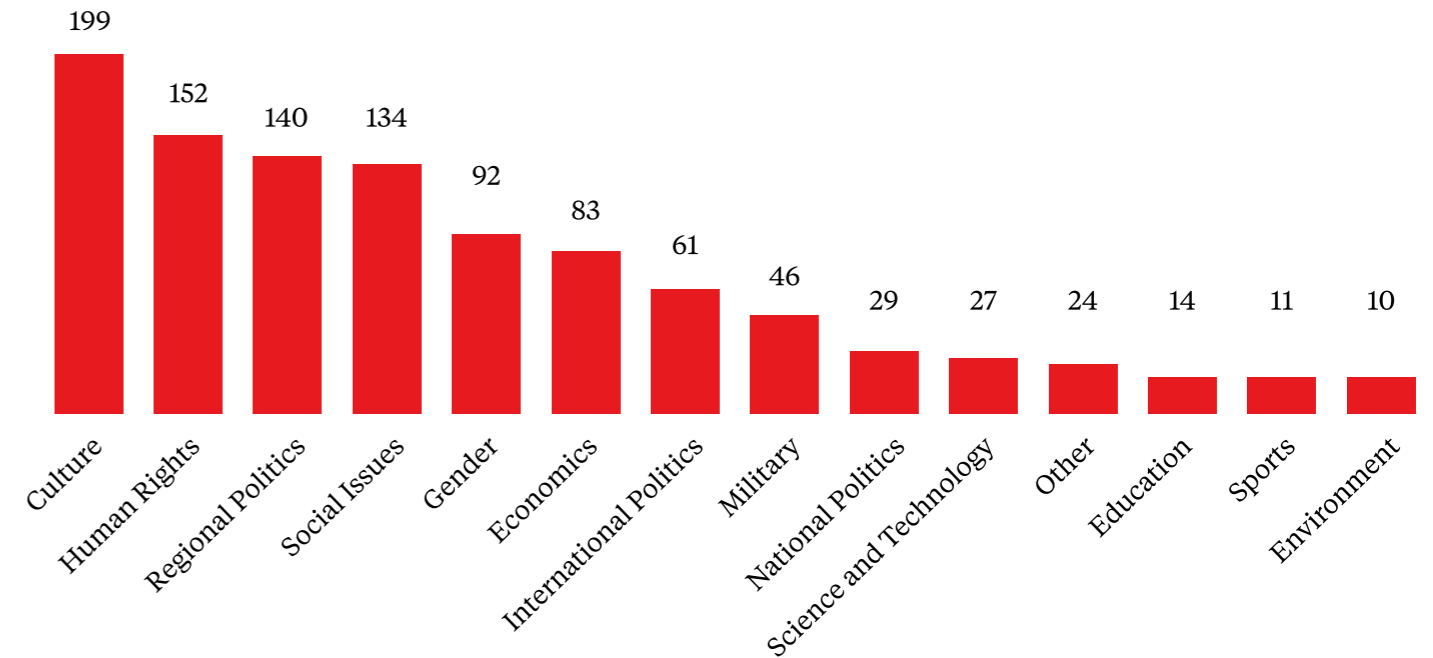
While slightly over 9 percent of the total produced content used a single medium, most of the content were combinations of text, pictures, and/or videos. On average, the outlets used 1.7 pictures by piece (a total of 1,108 pictures), and 0.13 video per piece (a total of 90 videos) of an average length of 4:05 minutes.

Assafir Al-Arabi used more than one medium in 38 out of 47 of their pieces (81 percent of its content). They averaged at 1.1 pictures per piece, and published a total of two videos during the monitoring period with an average length of 3:25 minutes per video. Assafir Al-Arabi is also the only media outlet that dedicated nearly 15 percent of its pieces to picture-only publications, showcasing modern arts and paintings by Arab artists.

Daraj used a combination of media in 84 percent of its content (114 out of 131 pieces), with an average of 1.9 pictures per piece and a total of 30 videos of an average length of 5:20 mins. Daraj also leads in the ranking of highest reliance on videos, with 23 percent of their content featuring at least one video.

Raseef22 used a combination of media in 92 percent of its content (423 out of 461 pieces), with an average of 1.7 pictures per piece and a total of 56 videos of an average length of 3:24 minutes per video.

Themes Covered (Fig. 5)

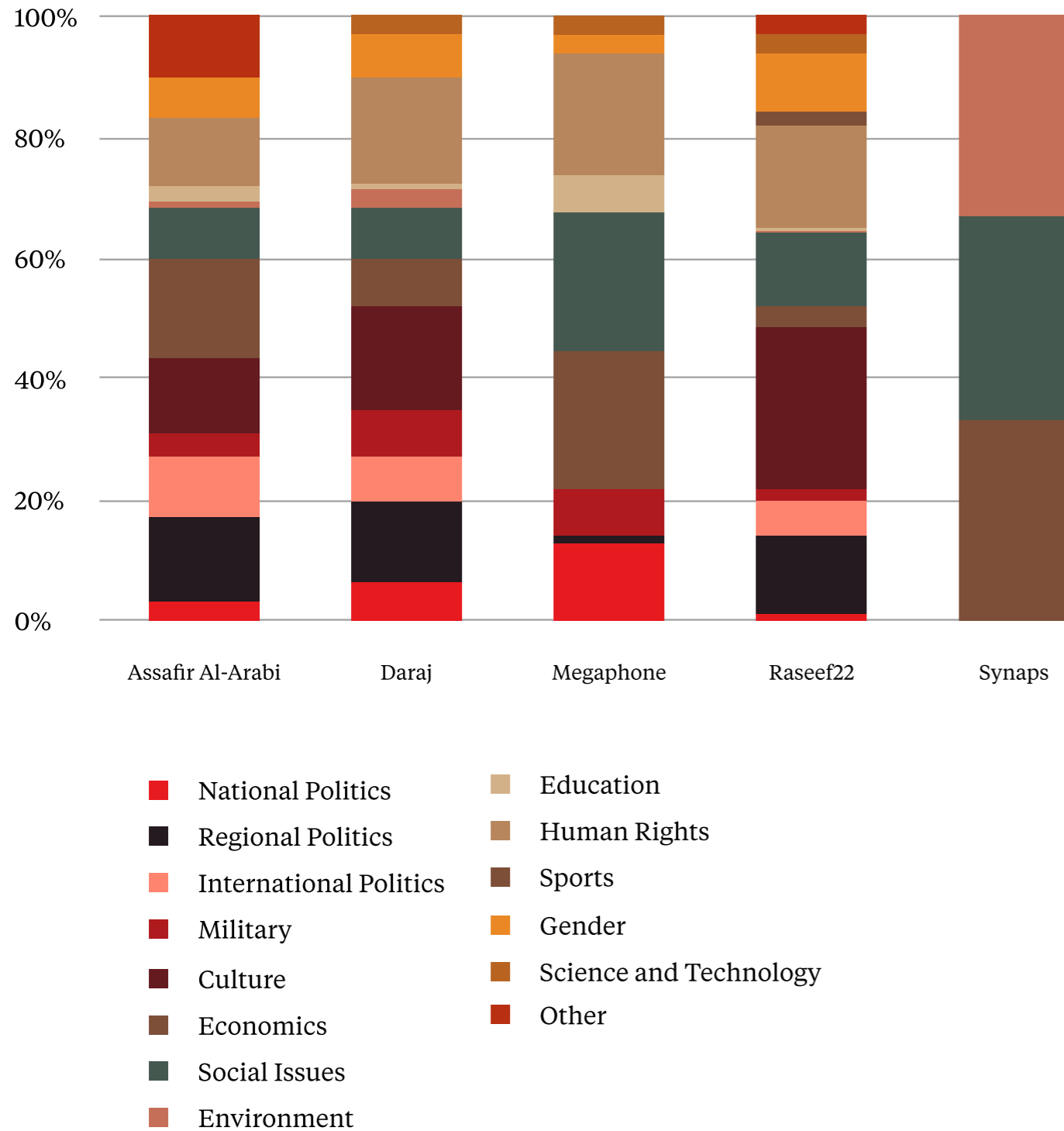


Culture was the most recurrent topic in the data monitored across the five outlets, in 199 out of the 653 pieces that were analyzed (in 30.5 percent of the published material). **Human rights** followed in 152 pieces (23.3 percent of the content); 140 pieces covered **regional politics** (21.4 percent); 134 pieces covered **social issues** (20.5 percent); and **gender**-related content closed the top-5 with 92 pieces (14.1 percent).

Both regional and international political issues were more frequently tackled than **national politics**. **International politics** appeared as a theme in 61 pieces (9.3 percent of the content), while national politics were merely found in 29 pieces (4.4 percent of the content).

Topics that are often regarded as youth-oriented like **science and technology** and sports were also rarely featured in the monitored outlets with, respectively 27 pieces (4.1 percent of the content) and 11 pieces (1.7 percent). Surprisingly, the **environment** was the least covered topic during the monitoring period with a meager share of 1.5 percent of the content. It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one topic.

Themes Covered Per Outlet (Fig. 6)



Each monitored media outlet had a different priority topic. The most recurrent theme in **Assafir Al-Arabi's** publications was **economics** appearing in 23.4 percent of their content, closely followed by **regional politics** in 21.3 percent, and **culture** in 19.1 percent of the content.

The most recurrent theme in **Daraj's** publications was **human rights** appearing in 32.1 percent of their content, followed by **culture** in 25.2 percent, and **regional politics** in 22.1 percent of the content.

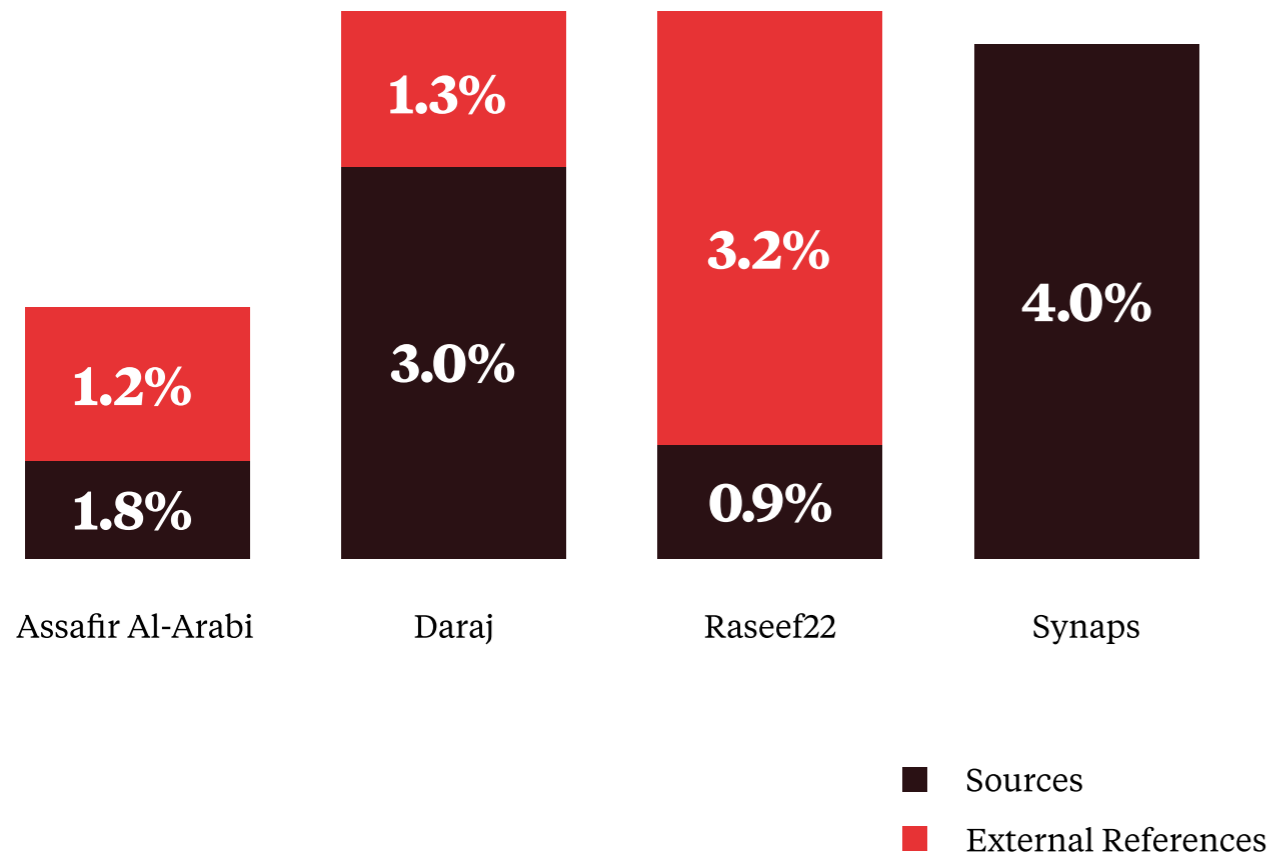
Megaphone led with **social issues** in 61.5 percent of their content, followed by **economics** in 53.8 percent, and **human rights** in 46.2 percent of the content.

The most recurrent theme in **Raseef22's** publications was **culture** appearing in 34.1 percent of their content, followed by **regional politics** in 21.7 percent, and **human rights** in 20.8 percent of the content.

Synaps's only article during the monitored period discussed issues of **economics, social issues, and the environment**.

Relatively, **national politics** was most prominently featured in **Megaphone** (in 30.7 percent of the content) and **Daraj** (in 13 percent of the content). **Gender**-related topics were most prominently featured in **Raseef22** (in 14.8 percent of the content) and **Daraj** (in 14.5 percent of the content).

Average Number of Sources and References (Fig. 7)

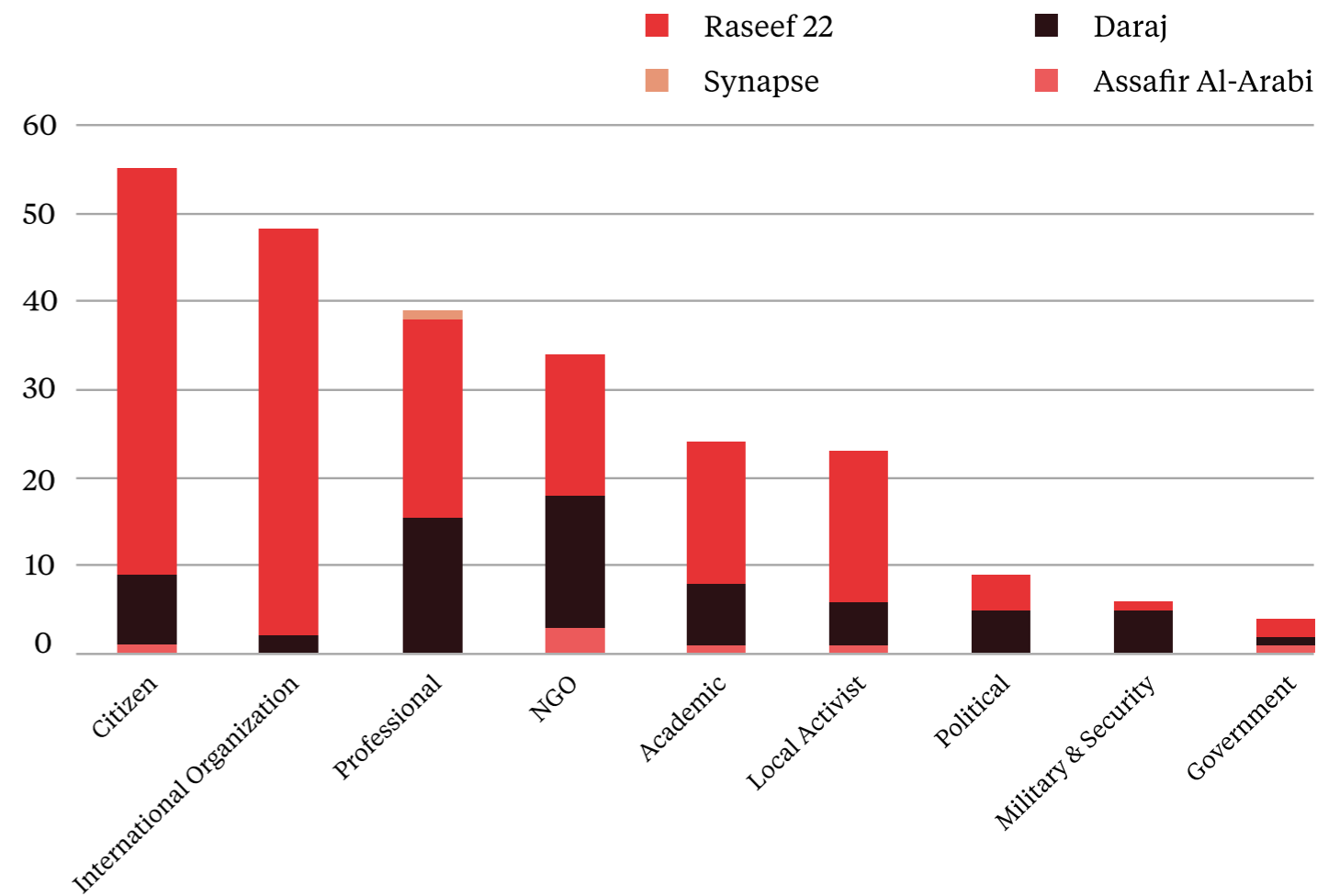


To assess the approach of media outlets to sources and external references, this study excluded opinion articles and interviews, as well as the content produced by Megaphone because of their different, social media-oriented journalistic method. This brings the total number of news briefs, feature stories, and investigative reports down to 428 pieces.

For the purpose of this study, sources are defined as individuals that give information relayed in the article or report. References are defined as publications and statements made by institutions cited in the article or report. In the 428 articles and reports that were selected, 481 sources were cited, i.e. an average of 1.1 sources per article, as well as 1,246 external references, i.e. an average of 2.9 references per articles. On average, at least 4 external individuals, institutions or publications were cited in each piece of content, above the three sources per article historically-recognized minimum in quality journalism standards.

Synaps and **Daraj** most often refer to individual sources, with an average of four and three sources per piece respectively, while **Raseef22** and **Assafir Al-Arabi** rely more on citing organizations and institutions, with a respective average of 3.2 and 1.2 external references per piece.

Nature of the Sources (Fig. 8)



The most striking finding when looking at the nature of the sources cited by the media outlets monitored is how infrequently they rely on the usual sources that traditional media refer to. **Government, military and security, and political** sources tailed the ranking of used sources, appearing in only 19 pieces out of the 428 monitored, i.e. in less than 4.5 percent of the content.

Conversely, the media outlets subject of this study gave voice to regular citizens, impacted by the issue they were covering, in 55 pieces (12.9 percent of the content), followed by representatives of international organizations in 43 pieces (10 percent of the content), and **professionals**, i.e. people working in their field of expertise, in 39 pieces (9.1 percent of the content).

In **Assafir Al-Arabi**, people working for **NGOs** appeared in 15 percent of the monitored

content. **Citizens, academics, local activists, and government** sources appeared each in 5 percent of the monitored content for each category. **Political and military and security** sources were completely absent from **Assafir Al-Arabi's** content.

Daraj gave a relatively wider space to **NGO** sources in 34.1 percent of their pieces, followed by **professional** sources in 31.8 percent, and then **citizens** in 18.2 percent.

In **Raseef22**, the plurality of sources were **citizens**, in 12.7 percent of the pieces, followed by representatives of **international organizations** in 11.3 percent, and **professional** sources in 6.6 percent.

Content Analysis Findings

In this quantitative section of the report, we scrutinize the data gathered via our content monitoring of five independent media outlets (Assafir Al-Arabi, Daraj, Megaphone News, Raseef22, and Synaps) based on several key parameters: data size, content type, medium used, piece themes, and sources or references. Accordingly, we attempt to locate particular trends encompassing the common and different styles and methods adopted by the aforementioned outlets.

1. The media outlets that were included in this study are generally reflecting a bottom-up framework in which citizens, organizations, and on-the-ground testimony are seen as solid alternatives to sources and news provided by political parties and the government. While more information is needed to arrive at a conclusive result, the data supplies our analysis with an indication that the outlets under study provide a normative narrative unfriendly towards the storyline peddled by the country's pillar establishment. This is further confirmed by the aforementioned outlets' thematic focus on ideas pertaining to human rights, social issues, and culture, the last two constituting controversial topics revolving around gender and counter-culture (i.e. countering mainstream or traditional norms diffusing Lebanese society). It is interesting to contrast this approach with the sourcing methods of mainstream outlets; such platforms, influenced and owned by stronger political forces, are henceforth more reliant on retrieving their sources from the establishment itself.

2. The consistent and extensive usage of visuals, whether manifesting in images or videos, indicates a contemporary outreach strategy for many of these outlets. While more research ought to be conducted with regard to the demographic components behind these outlets' readership, the prevalence of these visuals, alongside the social media-focused approach of pages such as Megaphone, suggests a policy of catering to young age groups, increasingly uninterested in text-dominant traditional publications. It is worth noting that the qualitative data provided by our focus groups with young persons in later sections will assist us in revisiting and reevaluating this suggestive finding.

3. With the exception of Synaps, most of these platforms distanced themselves from topics which require more in-depth and specified research, particularly science, technology, and the environment. Although Assafir Al-Arabi contains long in-depth research essays on topics pertaining to culture and regional politics, more technical fields are virtually absent from the site. While this indicates the dominance of socio-political-centric concerns and an overwhelmingly opinionated culture with regard to the priorities of their editorial boards, the striking absence of environment-related issues suggests that hard-hitting and popular debates on the global stage, such as climate change, have yet to intensively surface in the Lebanese cultural sphere. This finding contrasts with the pressing priority of many environmental issues in the country, such as water pollution and mismanagement of solid waste.

4. Despite there being a set of similar thematic, demographic, and citizen-based aspects within these outlets, the data indicates a particular specialization for each platform. While Daraj and Assafir Al-Arabi predominantly contain opinion articles, Synaps focuses almost exclusively on in-depth and comprehensive research projects. Meanwhile, Raseef22 primarily juggles between news briefs and feature stories. Megaphone, on the other hand, intensively covers news (this, however, does not take into account that Megaphone later launched an opinions section in late 2019. Such a feature is examined more thoroughly in our focus group discussions).

Qualitative Audience Research

The qualitative research tool utilized in this section centers on focus group discussions, which generally revolve around conversations that take place between participants in a number of sessions and in response to a discussion guide. First, we outline the methodology; after that, we put forth an analysis subsection to comprehensively outline the findings.

Methodology

We use Ivanoff & Hultberg's (2006)² focus group assumptions to define the goals, parameters, and criteria we ought to follow in the pursuit of successful sessions. In this context, *success* primarily relates to the extent to which we are capable of capturing useful, new, and "pattern-inducing" qualitative data and information. These criteria include but are not restricted to shared interactions, common experiences, participant empowerment, and an awareness-inducing and permissive atmosphere.

Participant Pools and Purpose of Involvement

The purpose of these discussions was to comprehend (1) the extent to which participants *know* about independent media outlets launched roughly in the past four years, (2) how the participants interact with the media landscape *in general* (source of breaking and in-depth news and analyses), (3) the judgement of these participants towards these independent outlets, (4) and finally what these participants suggest these platforms do to improve their performance, appeal, and reach.

In order to arrive at inclusive and comparative conclusions, a total of five focus groups, each of which with specific participant attributes and demographics, were conducted between July 15 and October 8, 2020. The sessions were joined by a maximum of six participants

and a minimum of three participants. One shared commonality between all focus group participants is their belonging to an age range from 18 to 25. Two sessions involved university student participants with an anglophone background (with a tilt for male participants), and two others involved students with a francophone background (with an overwhelming tilt for female participants).

While the aforementioned four sessions primarily brought together students studying in Beirut, the fifth focus group acts as a control group with youth mixed between students and non-students from a variety of locations outside of Beirut, including southern Mount Lebanon, South Lebanon, North Lebanon, and West Bekaa. Overall, focus group participants came from diverse regional and confessional backgrounds, worldviews, occupations, and university majors.

Discussion Outline

Before expanding upon the general structure of the discussion, it is important to clarify that there is a slight difference in structure between the two focus groups conducted in mid-July 2020 on the one hand, and the other three focus groups conducted in early October 2020 on the other hand. The first two focus groups conducted in July first commenced with a few standard questions pertaining to the participants' news sources and judgements on credibility. The moderator then proceeded to showcase three sets of text excerpts, videos, images, and audio recordings from different news outlets in order to elicit feedback and recommendations from the participants. Meanwhile, the last focus groups conducted in October contained a reduced *two* sets of text excerpts, visuals, and audio in order to make the sessions more concise and stimulating, and asked more questions about the impact of the August 4, 2020 Beirut port blast on media consumption, keeping all else equal.

² Synneve Dahlin Ivanoff & John Hultberg. (2006), Understanding the multiple realities of everyday life: Basic assumptions in focus-group methodology, Scandinavian journal of occupational therapy, 13(2), 125-132.

Ethics

A concrete ethical standard and procedure was followed with all participants in the five aforementioned groups:

1. Researchers informed participants about the purpose of the study, highlighting the overall mission and role of the Samir Kassir Foundation.
2. Researchers acquired total consent from participants in order to have their sessions recorded for practical procedural purposes.
3. Researchers refrained from pressuring or intimidating participants into eliciting particular answers. Instead, a tolerant and conducive atmosphere allowed for a free flow of ideas.
4. Finally, researchers assured all participants that their personal information and identities will not be disclosed to any external parties. In specific, guarantees were given to all participants that published results will not include any form of personally identifiable information.

Focus Group Analysis and Findings

The analysis conducted below, alongside the findings identified and elaborated in this same section, are categorized according to different clusters of questions utilized for the discussion process and mentioned in the methodology section (see above). We first highlight the recurrent habits and methods through which youth and university students from different backgrounds acquire news about events occurring locally and regionally. Then, in order to best understand if (and how) these habits are rationalized, we elaborate on some of the criteria mentioned by the participants in relation to the level of credibility enjoyed by different outlets.

The next cluster of findings pertains to the extent to which the young participants are already familiar with or exposed to the outlets behind some sample texts, audio recordings, and video excerpts demonstrated in a presentation, alongside their judgement of the content, graphical stylings, and 'share-ability' of the displayed samples. Finally, a set of critiques and suggestions put forth by the participants will be summarized at the end of the section. It is crucial to clarify that while the clusters below will mention minor yet noticeable discrepancies between the responses provided by francophone urban students, anglophone urban students, and students or youth residing in remote/peripheral areas, we insist that the discussions remain limited in terms of the ability to verify such differences. Focus groups are not surveys. They respond to the *why* question, not to the *how many*.

Consumption Habits and Media Trust Factors

A close and thorough examination of participants' responses, across all regional and language-based backgrounds, indicates a high consumption of news via social media, the medium on which they proclaimed to spend much of their time. While a variety of social media platforms were recurrently mentioned by the participants, usage of Instagram and Twitter has apparently exceeded that of Facebook, a platform now seldom used by a number of younger participants. Even for one participant on the older end of the age range, the last time he shared something on Facebook was the year of 2015.

Furthermore, one 20-year old student from Beirut emphasized her dependence on Instagram pages such as Megaphone and The Lawyard for recurrent events and debates occurring across the country. Participants with a relatively larger appetite for political activity cited the October 17 revolution as a catalyst for their

increasing time spent on consuming news via social media and official sources. Nevertheless, when asked about how their consumption was altered after the explosion which occurred on August 4, 2020, some participants articulated a distaste for news, specifically citing the overwhelmingly emotional attitude prevalent on social media following the disaster.

On the other hand, television remains an important source of news for a significant minority of participants. For instance, a law student residing in Beirut mentioned that although she formerly checked cable television for news and commentary; events following the October 2019 popular protests shifted her attention to quick updates from social media. Interestingly enough, francophone students were more inclined to watch television than their

anglophone counterparts, with the latter almost exclusively reliant on alternative sources.

Nevertheless, a few students across categories mentioned their experiences with news phone applications related to different local outlets, primarily Al-Jadeed and MTV. A student studying at the Lebanese University said she consumed and compared all forms of information from live media applications in order to build a comprehensive image of the "truth." A small number amongst anglophone students and

youth residing outside of Beirut mentioned the role of local and regional WhatsApp groups, made to disseminate news and information; participants claimed that such a tool was particularly utilized during and after the October 17 popular protests. Furthermore, the extent to which non-Beirut residents rely on or are aware of

independent media is seemingly linked to their support for the protest movement, which was known for its cross-regional effect and reach³. Finally, students very rarely mentioned regular visits to websites as a source of information; this is suggestive of a proclivity for quick, short, and social media curated/shared bits of knowledge.

On the other hand, the discussion on *trust factors* demonstrated both common and disparate concerns. Despite their extensive use of it as a source of information, students residing in Beirut, across all backgrounds, were highly skeptical of social media's reliability and credibility, with one citing its relatively decentralized and chaotic nature. "Instagram is filled with fake news from a variety of small pages that have been proven unreliable," said one engineering student residing in Beirut. Accordingly, the need to verify and

"Usage of Instagram and Twitter has apparently exceeded that of Facebook, a platform now seldom used by a number of younger participants."

fact-check certain events via more reputable and popular sources was consistently mentioned. Despite the many questions raised and the overall skeptical attitude, students repeatedly mentioned “popular consensus” as a trust factor. In other words, if the source is repeatedly used by their close circles, they would be more inclined to use and trust the source themselves.

Furthermore, participants from different regions and backgrounds repeatedly brought up official media channels’ affiliations with sect-based parties, suggesting this to be an obstacle towards producing credible and believable outputs. Yet, a significant fraction of participants remains dependent on mainstream media for immediate news, particularly due to the latter’s close proximity to the authorities. Nevertheless, an overwhelming trend amongst participants emphasized the need to fact-check the official sources in a variety of ways. One method repeatedly cited is conducting comparisons between different outlets to adequately build one’s own narrative about what happened and how it ought to be judged. These comparisons were said to have also amplified the respondents’ ability to identify the political affiliations and editorial standpoint of each outlet.

"Participants with a relatively larger appetite for political activity cited the October 17 revolution as a catalyst for their increasing time spent on consuming news."

Moreover, one business graduate from the Université Saint-Joseph (USJ) believed that regularly visiting international news networks was one way to double check less reputable local networks, especially because of the former’s disconnection with Lebanese sectarian political parties. Moreover, most student participants seem to have built an extensive trust in independent media outlets when seeking more elaborate reports and analysis; some examples cited by a student from USJ include Megaphone and Legal Agenda. “*While I generally visit the*

[state-owned] National News Agenda as a trusted source for immediate events, proper analytical feature stories can be found on pages such as Megaphone and Legal Agenda; both of these outlets follow a narrative I regularly trust.” Trust in the analyses of independent media outlets seems to be stemming from a normative, common moral ground with readers who have become increasingly defined by their anti-establishment position vis-à-vis the Lebanese authorities. Besides that, other trust factors elaborated by participants include the level of consistency and professionalism in design and writing quality, alongside the extent to which an outlet is citing

"Francophone students were more inclined to watch television than their anglophone counterparts, with the latter exclusively reliant on alternative sources."

"Trust in the analyses of independent media outlets stems from a common moral ground with readers, increasingly defiant vis-à-vis the Lebanese authorities."

on-the-ground original and direct references. The latter was specifically important for youth residing outside of Beirut, especially due to their dependence on sources pertinent to their region and specific locality. Such a propensity for trusting relatively localist sources of information amongst non-Beirut residents is also reflected in their viewership of websites and WhatsApp groups specializing in news pertaining to their locality. For instance, a resident from South Lebanon referenced Bintjbeil.org, a website named after the South Lebanese town of Bint Jbeil.

"The extent to which non-Beirut youth rely on or are aware of independent media is linked to their support for the anti-establishment protest movement."

³ Lebanese protests: cross-communal rage. (October 30, 2019). Al Jazeera. Available at: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/positionpapers/2019/10/lebanese-protests-cross-communal-rage-191030061643333.html>



Attractiveness Factors of Media Content

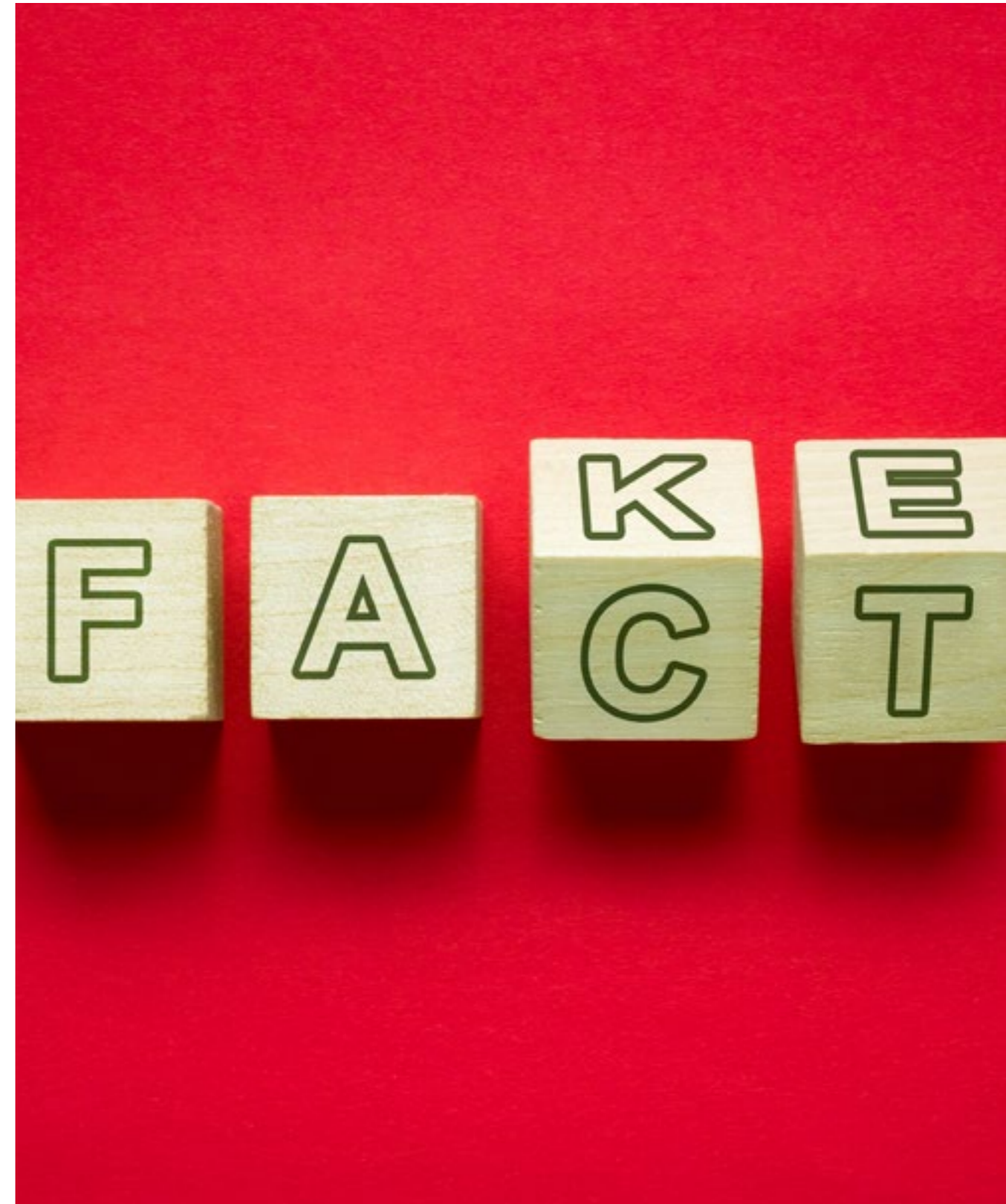
Visualizing News

In order to comprehensively outline the many factors that we have taken into account when assessing the subjective perceptions of youth and university students vis-à-vis different media content, in this subsection, we examine the statements of participants from different focus groups to signify their input on visual and content attractiveness.

Across all universities and regions, participants supported the utility of visuals, particularly animated audiovisual content, in news and commentary. This is primarily demonstrated by their desire to share short informative videos instead of text-dominant articles. Relatively positive attitudes towards in-depth video features on pages such as Megaphone demonstrate the importance of animating news gathering and reporting in order to grab the user's consistent attention while watching such outputs. In fact, one media communications student from Beirut stressed the importance of facial expressions when receiving news or information. *"I wouldn't listen to anything that is purely audio-based; I feel the need to be guided by facial expressions when listening or even reading something. It adds a lot more input and enthusiasm to the content I'm viewing,"* said one business student residing in Beirut. Only a few university students clarified that visuals were not necessary as long as the written content interests or attracts them.

In addition, first-glance impressions of websites were strikingly crucial for the vast majority of participants. Factors such as level of homepage crowdedness, font, color choice and consistency were repeatedly mentioned in an assessment of eight independent media sites (Daraj, Megaphone News, Mashallah News, Raseef22, Beirut Today, The Public Source, Labneh and Facts, and Assafir Al-Arabi). Participants explicitly highlighted the importance of these factors in indicating how recurrent their visits to a site may be.

"Across all groups, participants supported the use of visual, particularly video content, in news and commentary."



Some striking patterns surfaced when examining sites such as Beirut Today and Mashallah News: Participants suggested that the thematic categorization of content, alongside the display of dates on thumbnails, were important indicators of a site's professionalism and easy user interface. Also, most participants preferred the visuals of Megaphone's social media framework over its website (which does not have a homepage and solely features articles via specified URL links), suggesting the latter to be too dry in terms of colors, design, and symbols. *"The issue with Megaphone's website is that it gives an overtly formal and non-colorful taste when compared to the content it produces and shares on social media platforms,"* said a 20-year old resident from the West Bekaa region. Not only are visuals a physical factor of attractiveness, but they also hold particular meanings concerned with notions of "professional look-and-feel."

Although the vast majority of participants did not know of their existence, The Public Source and to a lesser extent Assafir Al-Arabi were seen as neat and "easy" on the eye; nevertheless, but the former's logo was rendered too crowded and incomprehensible relative to the rest of the content. Nevertheless, both sites were commended for their consistent and easy-to-read font, structure, and order.

The importance of visuals, however, is contested when delving into the relevance of podcasts. Some francophone university students generally believed that lacking visuals render podcasts a relatively weak tool of communication; nevertheless, one student emphasized audiobooks as an exception. On the other hand, anglophone students were more inclined to accept the utility of podcasts on condition that they feature popular and influential figures. *"I would definitely follow a podcast if starred, for instance, by someone like Dima Sadek [journalist and former TV presenter] and Dan Azzi [Economist and popular Twitter user]; I think that would be a big hit in Lebanon considering how known and popular these figures are in recent times."* All in all, there is no unified stance on whether the podcast market will be of particular interest to either investors or consumers. *"I think it's subjective. Some people enjoy auditory content, such as audiobooks; nevertheless, there are certain contexts, like debates, where hand gestures and facial expressions become increasingly important in the pursuit of measuring certain psychological outputs,"* said one business student from USJ.

"Anglophone students were more inclined to accept the utility of podcasts on condition that they feature popular and influential figures."



Attractiveness Factors of Media Content

Content Appeal

As anticipated, students and youth across all universities and regions preferred to read and share items of which they had some knowledge and interest, demonstrating little-to-no interest in wanting to learn something they are not accustomed to. Furthermore, there was a general propensity for reading and following up on social issues, rather than items perceived to be technical and specialized. A plausible hypothesis would be that the youth tend to reinforce existing knowledge by reading commentary and additional opinions. After showing participants a highly political article, which tackles certain events in Syria, one francophone student from USJ complained: *“While the article is indeed interesting, I wouldn’t delve into it much as it requires additional research on preliminary knowledge which I’m simply not in touch with.”*

Interestingly enough, attraction towards controversial items remains contested, with some anglophone students and youth residing outside of Beirut suggesting that they generally refrain from sharing items that may cause socio-political contention on their social media pages. On the other hand, some participants who have grown outspoken over the years openly enjoy and disseminate content concerned with contentious and disputed topics, such as the fate of the LGBTQ+ community in the country. For instance, one student from USJ stated: *“people generally complain about the content I share on my personal pages; however, this does not stop me from indulging in these important topics and matters.”*

Other points of friction relate to language and “local v. foreign” optics of analysis. With regard to the former, francophone students and youth residing outside of Beirut both emphasized the importance of prioritizing Arabic over foreign

languages when reading local news; nevertheless, much of the former remained comfortable when reading foreign languages such as English and French. Moreover, participants defended the need to consistently translate text to English in order to garner international attention to many of Lebanon’s stories. On the other hand, a significant fraction of anglophone students explicitly highlighted their preference for reading English as an alternative to their mother tongue. However, both anglophone and francophone subgroups within this study underlined the dual importance of local and foreign news. “We need to simultaneously see both the wider regional picture and the local context,” stressed one clinical psychology student residing in Beirut. The renewed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is an example of a remote issue that somehow resonates strongly among Lebanese students. Meanwhile, some youth residing in peripheral areas were more inclined to refute the importance of covering foreign and/or international news, specifically highlighting the need to extensively focus on issues affecting them with close proximity. *“Before delving into any regional topics or geo-political discussions, we need to start with the issues facing and threatening us directly in these tough times,” said a West Bekaa resident.*

“Youth tend to reinforce existing knowledge by reading commentary and additional opinions rather than seeking new topics or positions they are not accustomed to.”



Qualitative Research Findings

To sum up, responders' assessment of independent media supplies us with a robust and relatively balanced view in terms of assessing the outlets' reach, accessibility, and potential sustainability:

1. Social media, encompassing both independent and official media, alongside news phone applications, have become the primary source of news for youth and students due to their relative technical accessibility on smart phones.

2. Trust in news and platforms in the most general sense remains a convoluted and contested reality. Independent media have not replaced official media in terms of direct and immediate news, largely due to the perceived (and actual) capacity and reach of the latter. Nevertheless, a noticeable shift can be seen on the level of political commentary, opinion articles, and analyses. In these domains, alternative platforms have gained significant traction due to an increased skepticism towards the political affiliations of these official outlets.

3. Visuals – specifically videos – are primarily important for young readers whom have grown detached from text-dominant publications. This does not only relate to the plain visual power of digital video, but also the ways in which videos, especially when narrated in colloquial Arabic, increase the chance of readers fully understanding the content without misconstruing the tone or meaning of text.

4. University students currently residing and studying in Beirut are more inclined to read text or content written in the second foreign language they have acquired, as opposed to Arabic. However, a decent portion of students residing outside of Beirut either prefer to or exclusively read in Arabic, their mother tongue.

5. While controversy and vibrant discussion indeed attract a wide readership, particularly those interested in certain socio-political controversial issues, a sizable portion of youngsters refrain from associating themselves with particular positions by sharing or commenting.

6. Local issues remain a priority for the vast majority of participants. Participants justified this by mentioning the accumulation of issues facing the country at this current stage. Nevertheless, most of still believed that observing the wider context is fruitful in order to arrive at a solid and comprehensive analysis.

7. Students and youth are not as interested in exploring technical topics if not elaborated in more popular terms. Instead, an interest in normative and social questions is prevalent; one may argue that youth and students have an appetite for unambiguous clarity, especially in unstable and anxious times.

Recommendations

Before delving into our recommended prescriptions to relatively new, independent media ventures, particularly the outlets examined within the focus groups and quantitative research, it is crucial to stress the fact that any suggestions given to a media outlet must take into account its logistical goals, target audience, and overall philosophical and technical vision. Hence, this research assumes that many of these outlets hope to target the youth, especially university students perceived to be a potentially loyal subgroup of readers. In the pursuit of this criterion and end goal, we outline the following recommendations:

1. It is crucial that the outlets aim at demystifying technical and specialized content in order to provide the most accessible information to the public. While it is the case that many youngsters have a propensity for learning new information and items pertaining to their overall surrounding, one ought to locate and utilize the most adequate and sensible tools of communication in order to deliver this form of content in the most reasonable way possible, as opposed to impeding their access to and comprehensibility of the information. For instance, this can be implemented by contributing to a “popular culture” related to scientific and environmental topics via a lexicon which is significantly different from the academic styling.

2. The variety of interests, languages, and rhetorical approaches generally favored by readers justifies the crucial role of media diversification amongst outlets competing for youth viewership. In other words, newspapers which aim at attracting a wide range of youth and students must explore different topics and language options. While this would require a significant degree of funding and support, it is important to locate ways in which a website or social media page’s content can cheaply incorporate these various distinct categories, including but not restricted to scientific findings, politics, economics, and the environment. Moreover, it is also recommended that outlets incorporate at least two languages, especially considering that a significant fraction of students and youth in Lebanon are bilingual or trilingual.

3. An important criterion repeatedly mentioned by students and youth from different linguistic and regional backgrounds is visualizing textual content. Due to many reasons unexplored in this research, the age group under study has become increasingly less susceptible to books and large bland texts. Hence, the usage of images, simple texts, and audio references is crucial; however, this ought to sustain certain criteria related to order, crowdedness, and color consistency. While it is the case that judgement of these visuals is limited by subjective lenses, a more specified judgement can be pursued by a verification process (with readers and non-readers) led by the outlets under study.

4. Independent media outlets must be strategic in the way they balance between local and foreign content/topics. Although the local population remains most interested in news concerned with immediate surroundings, there still exists a sense of intrigue for geopolitical and international politics. These particular foreign and/or international lenses are definitely salient in order to add more layers of knowledge to established domestic experiences. In other words, locating ways to harmonize and narrate the correlated relationship between *local* and *foreign* affairs is important to provide a more comprehensive, stimulating, and exciting picture for the audiences of these outlets.

5. Independent media outlets should consider immersing themselves in community-building projects, in sync with non-government organizations and local rights groups. These collaborations can facilitate the connections, conceptions, worldviews, and citizen-based focus of the outlets. Such collaborations include covering stories pertinent to local activities and initiatives, and taking part in research projects to highlight evidence-based approaches to advancing the mutual interests of all parties. After gradually building up a more sophisticated network, these outlets may potentially build connections with local players, incentivizing decentralized or municipal-level transparency on the latter’s part.

6. The rise of the “*influencer*” and “*popular personality*” community, particularly amongst independent, non-confessional circles, signals the need to build and promote new voices and faces related to and referenced by different platforms. Giving these platforms a “face” is one method through which a more engaging spirit can accompany the paper and its editorial mission. This also allows the site/platform to significantly engage its readers on different social media networks via personal pages of such influencers.

7. It is essential not to isolate the activities and performance of these independent outlets from the wider political and institutional context in which they operate. In other words, there ought to be extensive political reform in the direction of

i) Combating all forms of state control on and political capture of social media and the internet,

ii) Supporting the financial and institutional sustainability of small independent media businesses to incentivize the employment of media workers, and


iii) Directly encouraging the commitment to ethical codes capable of amplifying consumer trust in these outlets and platforms.

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