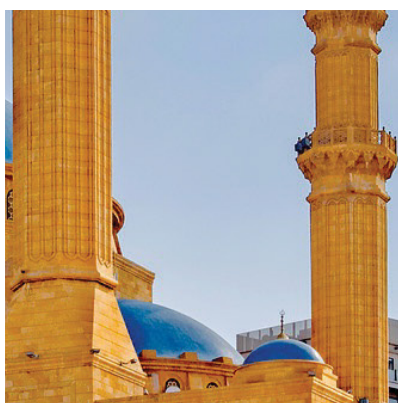
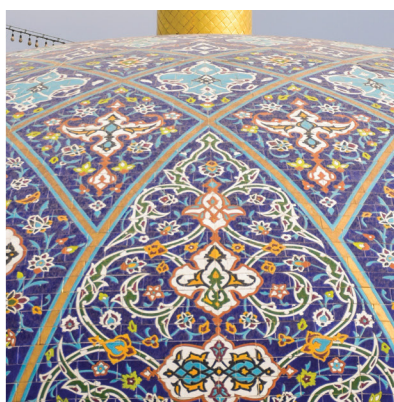
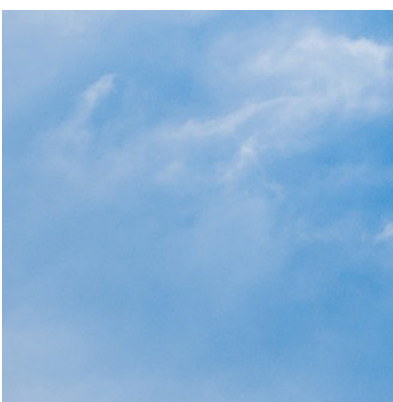
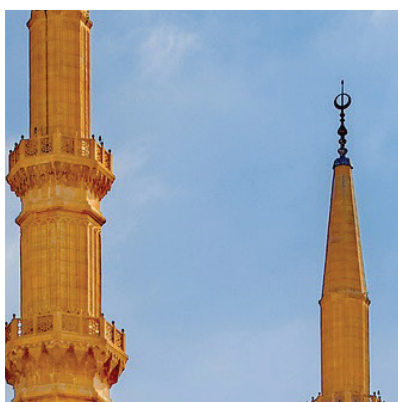
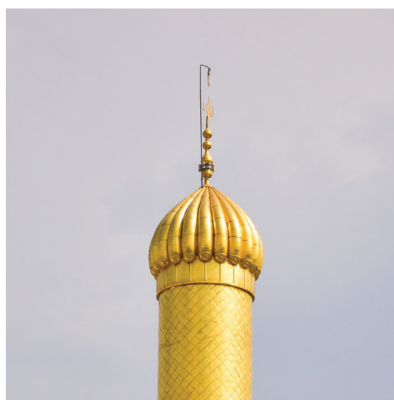




Media Coverage of Religious Freedom and Diversity in Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan

Content Analysis Report

October 2020



THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

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THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION



The Samir Kassir Foundation is a Lebanese non-profit organization officially incorporated in Beirut under registry number 30/A.D., and 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.



Internews



Internews was founded in 1982 in San Francisco. Their first project consisted of compiling archives of films, TV shows, and documentaries about nuclear war. Today, their work revolves around empowering people worldwide with the trustworthy, high-quality news and information they need to make informed decisions to foster accountability and vibrant civic debate. As an international non-profit organization, Internews operates with administrative centers in California, Washington DC, London and Paris, as well as regional hubs in Bangkok and Nairobi. Internews has worked in more than 100 countries and currently has offices in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and North America.

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Executive Summary

The world has become smaller in many ways, ever since communication became an accessible commodity. Today, cultural exchange is an inevitable feature of societies growing more diverse by the day. Media play a key role in this equation as they communicate certain messages to the masses. What these messages are, and how they are conveyed, influence tolerance and coexistence. Unfortunately, some media coverage is not always ideal for the development of pluralistic societies especially in the Arab world, where ownership of outlets is a luxury attainable to a handful of political and economic players from the ruling elites who have historically marginalized other communities. As a result, freedom of expression, cultural rights and eventually democracy and justice are jeopardized as minorities (and marginalized communities, even when they constitute a very large segment of the population) do not get a fair chance to express themselves and share their perspectives.

Religion plays a significant role in Arab countries, be it the daily life or the wide scale politics. Media here reflect that, as there are times they present diversity as a menace and simply echo the voices of whoever owns them. The purpose of this study is to look at the content produced by the most prominent media outlets in three countries in the region, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan, and understand how each discusses topics pertaining to different religious groups, paying close attention to the way religious minorities are portrayed. Ideally, this data will be used later to shape media outlets that foster quality dialogue and utilize verified information, which in turn contribute to overall peace, democracy and social justice.

Furthermore, confirming whether the views of an author or source truly represent certain outlets isn't always a straightforward matter. The outlet could simply be relaying a fact; however, it could be playing the role of a platform spreading a certain message, positive or negative, under the cover of "neutral" reporting. Both possibilities are important to keep in mind.

To better understand this, 482 pieces related to religion, religious freedom and religious diversity were selected and monitored out of the vast amounts of content created by the selected outlets: 163 were from Iraqi outlets, 259 from Lebanese outlets and 60 from Sudanese outlets.

During the monitoring process, it became clear that social and political topics are more present in the public debate while more technical topics such as the environment and science are perceived as complex or even trivial. They take time to yield results that affect everyday life while a single decision from a political leader or the "other" religious group could have direct consequences on "our" life and might lead to "our" very end. Overt religious-related hate speech was much less prevalent than implicit and subtle hints at certain segments of society.

Iraqi media focused consistently on pieces related to religious freedom or diversity. The government and Shiite oriented outlets having a highly similar discourse: Entirely denouncing violent movements while encouraging peaceful ones as well as adopting a strategy of positive self-depiction. In contrast, other outlets promoted the opposite discourse, highlighting government violence against protesters in general as well as the negative role of Shiite militias and Iran in Iraqi politics, on occasion. Minorities were only spoken of occasionally and portrayed as oppressed. However, their issues are not covered as often as those pertaining to Sunni-Shiite relations.

At first glance, neutral reporting seems to be a main characteristic for Lebanon's outlets, however, the most notable and repetitive error committed by was methodological in nature. This includes using incorrect or misleading terms, many of which group entire religious sects under the umbrella of certain political parties. This is not only inaccurate but also feeds the audience's sectarian mindset. Regardless of Lebanon's political system, these mistakes do not reflect the true political climate.

In Sudan's case, peacemaking between the North and the South occupied most of the discussion space. Highly antagonistic perspectives towards religions other than Islam were reported on by some of the local outlets: Christians, Shiites and in one case, Jews, though the reasons remain unclear. Secularism, human rights and Western values were often the target of attacks. Outlets based outside Sudan displayed a completely opposite approach, often advocating for minority rights and openly criticizing certain Sudanese political discourses.

The study showed that while the majority of the outlets monitored did not spread direct hate speech, many implicitly painted certain segments of society in a specific light. Whether it was a good or a bad light as well as what topics were highlighted depended on an outlet's political affiliation and funding. Selection biases may be difficult to alter in institutions, however, individual journalists can also do their part to raise journalistic standards. Use of correct terminologies, sources, offering diverse perspectives and adopting a more ethical approach to reporting are among the key recommended actions, all of which are best addressed through workshops and continuous mentorship.

Some of the key findings:

The most mentioned religious groups include **Muslims** (Sunnis and Shiites). This is logical given that Islam is the majority religion in the three monitored countries. There is also a fair amount of content mentioning **Christians** (مسيحي) in each country as well as **Shiites** (شيعة) and **Sunnis** (سني) in both Lebanon and Iraq. The report provides a first analysis of the nature of the conversation, while understanding the limitation of this research in providing a comprehensive overview of the narrative.

Also, **sectarianism** (طائفية) and **components** (مكونات) were among the most popular concepts mentioned, often in claims that there are attempts at minimizing sectarian strife and appeasing the diverse segments of the population.

The minimal coverage of certain topics pertaining to law, gender, the environment, science, and technology in their relationship with religion reflects the interests of the region and its governments. Social and political turmoil are perceived as more crucial for survival and worthy of attention. Social and political topics are more present in the public debate.

As for the general discourse and tone of the narrative, they were mostly neutral if not even positive at times. Though it's important to note that whatever points the authors aimed to make, they were rarely ever explicit.

Health topics were extremely scarce, as the research focused on a period of time that preceded the widespread, global COVID-19 outbreak. Had the research included content published or broadcast post-outbreak, COVID-19 coverage would have overshadowed most other topics.

Methodology

The first section of the study focuses on media content and outlines the issues covered in the articles, reports, and investigations posted on the official websites of the selected media outlets. It qualitatively and quantitatively examines the sources on which the publications relied and the references that were cited.

The content monitoring covered all the material published on the websites of selected Iraqi, Lebanese and Sudanese media outlets in the period from September 1, 2019 to January 8, 2020 – those dates included. This period was chosen in order to minimize the amount of news covering COVID-19 and see what typical news coverage would have looked like. Furthermore, only the first eight days of the month were monitored to ensure a sample that consistently represents each month.

At first, a list of keywords related to different religious groups and concepts was agreed upon. Many of which were common across countries and some were country specific. This list was used in the search to narrow down pieces of relevance. Instead of documenting all the pieces that had keywords and subjecting them to a second round of screening, we decided on the spot whether a piece was relevant to the study. Only the pieces that were relevant to religious freedoms and diversity were registered in the database by the monitors for the purpose of precision and efficiency.

Words such as *atheist* and *blasphemy* are mostly used in a pejorative way as non-religiousness is generally frowned upon in the Arab world. We used more keywords for Lebanon given the highly diverse nature of the Lebanese political, religious and sectarian landscapes. Some of them are associated with one another and at times used interchangeably. For example:

- Socialist, Walid Jumblatt and Druze;
- Baabda, Michel Aoun, Gebran Bassil and Free Patriotic Movement (FPM);
- Ain al-Tineh, Nabih Berri, Amal Movement and Shiite;
- Dahieh, Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah and Shiite;
- Saad Hariri, Future Movement and Sunni.

When assessing the relevance of pieces, we took several factors in mind including:

- The number of perspectives presented in a piece:
 - Use of only one perspective v. multiple perspectives
- How these perspectives are portrayed
 - Positively: a religious/ethnic group has a positive effect on the individual, local, regional or international level

- Negatively: a religious/ethnic group has a negative effect on the individual, local, regional or international level
- Neutrally: simply reporting on incidents/developments that took place without attributing any effects to any religious/ethnic groups
- Methodological errors:
 - Articles using the wrong terminology when discussing religious groups
 - Authors referring to religion and/or ethnicity where they should not
 - Use of misleading titles, photos and/or descriptions

The media outlets covered in the study are:

- In Iraq:
 - Al Iraqiya
 - Al Sharqiya
 - Al Sumaria
 - Al Forat TV
 - Dijlah TV
 - Al Sabah
 - Al Zaman
 - National Iraqi News Agency
 - Shafaaq
 - Nas
- In Lebanon:
 - Télé Liban
 - LBCI
 - Al Jadeed
 - Al Manar
 - Annahar
 - Al Akhbar
 - Daraj
 - Lebanon Files
 - Elnashra
 - Al Modon
- Sudan:
 - Blue Nile TV
 - Alintibaha
 - Alrakoba
 - Sudan News Agency
 - Sudan Tribune
 - Sudanile

A total of **482 items** published during this period were entered in a database, which included the following information:

- Title
- Date of publication
- URL
- Section: politics, culture, economics, news bulletin, etc.
- Type of content: news brief; feature story; opinion article; investigative article; interview
- Author
- Gender of author
- Groups
- Concepts
- Medium used: text; video; pictures
- Number of pictures
- Number of videos
- Average length of videos
- Main topics (does not apply to news bulletins as they cover a wide range of topics: national politics; regional politics; international politics; military; culture; economics; social; environment; education; human rights; sports; gender; science and technology; other topic, 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

In the charts below, the main topics discussed in the pieces are presented. This does not mean that pieces pertaining to regional politics have nothing to do with religious freedoms, for example. On the contrary, it shows that religious freedoms were touched upon while regional politics were the main topic discussed in a piece. Therefore, every piece of content in this study pertains to religious freedoms and diversity in one way or another. Furthermore, television news bulletins were excluded from such charts due to the wide range of topics they cover while only a portion of each bulletin relates to religious freedom and diversity.

We aimed at making a comprehensive list of the most popular outlets, however, several of them were excluded eventually as they did not provide access to their older content pieces. 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. However, it still takes note of sources and external references since assessing how much they are relied upon provides deeper insight concerning how much care outlets put in supporting information they relay.

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 media sector in each of the countries make their content less polarizing, strengthen their editorial capacity, and address shortcomings they may have experienced.

Presentation of the Media Outlets

Iraq

Al Iraqiya: A state-owned TV station that was founded in 2003 after the fall of Saddam Hussein. It claims to highly encourage peaceful protesting, support freedom of expression and the narrative that dissidents are sabotaging the movement that began in the fall of 2019.

Al Sharqiya: Private TV station owned by secular nationalist Iraqi media tycoon Saad al-Bazzaz, based in Dubai. It was founded in 2004 and was the first privately owned satellite channel in Iraq. Much of its content involved reporting on Iran's negative effect on the region.

Al Sumaria: Private, Beirut-based TV station founded by a group of businessmen in 2004. Its perspective is more along the lines of liberalism and rejects oppression, while catering to the diverse religions in the area. Al Sumaria also broadcasts different shows, documentaries and movies.

Al Forat TV: TV station owned by Iraqi Shiite cleric Ammar Al Hakim who had been exiled to Iran with his father, in 1979. Most of its content pertains to the Shiite sect and matters, adopting a similar outlook to Al Iraqiya when it comes to reporting on the protests.

Dijlah TV: Amman-based TV station owned by Jamal Al-Karbouli, an Iraqi politician heading the National Movement for Development and Reform (Alhal). In 2019, the Baghdad office was attacked and burned by unidentified gunmen and was shut down by the Communications and Media Commission.

Al Sabah: Official Iraqi newspaper. It was founded in 2003, after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Its content revolved around sectarianism in Iraq and aligned with Al Iraqiya's narrative when it comes to the protests. It is part of the state-funded Iraqi Media Network (IMN).

Al Zaman (Azzaman): Iraqi newspaper founded by media tycoon Saad Al Bazzaz, in 1997, and moved back to Baghdad after Saddam Hussein's fall. Its editorial policy is critical of the US and Iranian roles in Iraq. Its news discussed a diverse range of topics.

National Iraqi News Agency: First news agency in Iraq, founded in 2005. It is owned and run by the Iraqi government, providing news on the current political, economic and social life within the country.

Shafaq: A website founded by Shafaq Foundation for Culture and Media of Faily Kurds. It reports in three languages (Arabic, English and Kurdish) on diverse topics including the economy, politics, society and others.

Nas: An independent news outlet whose two directors were based in Baghdad but moved to Sulaymaniyah in 2019 for security reasons. It began in Arabic and launched the Kurdish website last year.

Lebanon

Télé Liban: Public television channel from Lebanon that has no political affiliation. It was founded in 1959 by General Sleiman Naoufal. Its influence has decreased significantly since the emergence of private TV stations in the 1990s.

Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI): Founded in 1985 by the Lebanese Forces which is today a Lebanese political party. LBCI's current CEO is businessman Pierre Daher who had cut ties with the Lebanese Forces. LBCI tries to be neutral and balanced in its editorial line.

Al-Manar: Founded in 1991, is a Hezbollah-affiliated media institution. The channel takes a strong stand against Israel and the United States while supporting the Syrian regime.

Al Jadeed: Television channel founded by the Lebanese Communist Party in the early 1990s before closing in 1994 and then resuming broadcasting in 2001 thanks to businessman Tahseen Khayat. Politically on the left, the channel generally opposes government policies.

Annahar: Daily newspaper founded by Gebran Tuéni in 1933. It is currently directed by Nayla Tuéni (who succeeded her grandfather Ghassan and her father Gebran) and supports a liberal market economy approach and is generally opposed to Hezbollah and the Syrian regime.

Al Akhbar: Daily newspaper founded by Joseph Samaha in 2006. The current editor-in-chief is Ibrahim Al-Amine. Supports the positions of Hezbollah and the Syrian regime.

Al Modon: Daily news outlet headquartered in Beirut. The editor-in-chief is Sateh Nouredine. Linked to Qatari funding.

El Nashra: Electronic daily news outlet that publishes political, artistic and sporting information in Lebanon and the Middle East, in addition to analyses of local and international events. It is owned by businessman Arz el-Murr and the current editor is Joseph Semaan. Generally supports the positions of the President of the Republic Michel Aoun.

Lebanon Files: Daily news website that publishes political and artistic information in Lebanon and the Middle East. The founder and editor is Rabih Haber. Close ties with Christian parties represented in the parliament.

Daraj: Independent Beirut-based, pan-Arab media outlet, promoting secularism, human rights and a liberal, progressive agenda. Founded by journalists Hazem Al-Amin, Diana Moukalled and Alia Ibrahim.

Sudan

Alintibaha: Previously, a pro-government newspaper, currently leaning towards the opposition, making it prone to confiscation and no longer receiving the same number of advertisements. It focuses on politics.

Alsudaninews: Independent daily Sudanese newspaper covering diverse topics. Founded by journalist professor Mahjoub Arwa in 1985. Current editor-in-chief is Diaa Addin Billal.

Alrakoba: Online news aggregator that publishes political and cultural information about Sudan and the region.

Sudan News Agency (SUNA): Sudan's official news agency, launched in 1971. Discusses a wide range of topics from politics, economics to sports both locally and internationally.

Sudan Tribune: Online news agency based in Paris, France and launched in 2005. A group of Sudanese and international journalists manage its content, which includes commentaries, analyses, maps, reports and press releases from diverse organizations. It covers both Sudanese and regional news.

Sudanile: The first online Sudanese newspaper from Khartoum. Founded in 2000 by professors Tariq Al Jazouli, Khalid Ezzeddine and Muhammad Ali Abdul Halim. Its first issue was released on January 7, 2001. It covers a wide range of topics from politics, industry, sports to social and other themes.

Data Analysis

The monitoring process covered a set of quantitative and qualitative criteria. The fact that we gathered **482 items relevant to religious freedoms and diversity**, out of tens of thousands of pieces, is just an indicator of the size of the monitoring operation. Irrelevant pieces were directly dismissed. This study is based on fundamental journalistic criteria such as sources and references cited in articles and reports, their number and nature. The study examines the topics covered by the media outlets over the course of the project. It also takes a general look at the sources and nature of the references commonly used.

The study also identified some noteworthy expressions and terminology that appeared in the selected articles and reports, to analyze the type of language that is used.

Iraq

Media Landscape

Overview

Restrictions on media and freedom of expression in Iraq can be dated as far back as 1931. With the support of the Iraqi Journalists' Syndicate as a government tool, this was only further intensified in the following decades. There is a well-rooted culture of state-controlled media in Iraq. With little room for investments due to security fears, the media sector in Iraq relied mainly on government advertising until 2008.

TV is the primary source of news for citizens (97%). "Almost all homes have a satellite dish and there are dozens of Iraq-focused satellite TV networks."¹ Independent print media struggle to maintain credibility under political pressure through diverse ways such as violent repression during the Saddam Hussein rule, politically motivated funding and militia pressure afterwards.

Nowadays, most of the successful stations are foreign-backed initiatives and with visual and online media on the rise, print is no longer as pivotal as before. 35.1% of Iraqi households possess a radio device so radio stations' audience is declining.² It's important to note that the Kurdish media field is a landscape of its own with little to no interaction with audiences outside Iraqi Kurdistan.

1 Iraq profile – media, *BBC*, May 2, 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14546541>, last visited on September 17, 2020.

2 Wagner, P., *Media Landscapes, Iraq*, *European Journalism Centre*, available at: <https://medialandscapes.org/country/iraq>, last visited on September 17, 2020.

Recent Events and Political Climate

Widescale anti-corruption and anti-government protests have been ongoing from the beginning of October 2019 into the monitoring period of this project. Since then, violence has escalated, and hundreds of protesters have been killed due to the security forces' repression and targeted assassinations. A dozen media outlets have been closed in light of the government's crackdown on freedom of expression and independent journalists have also been receiving worrying death threats.

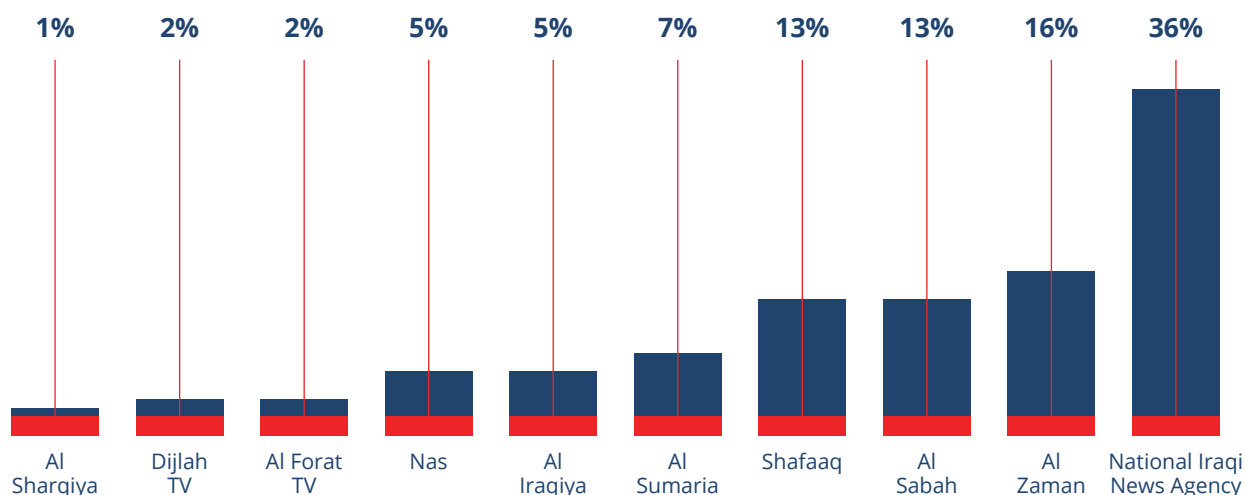
These developments have been unfolding amid a protracted political crisis. On November 29, then Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi announced his resignation. On January 2, 2020, a US drone strike killed the leader of Iran's Quds force General Qassem Suleimani alongside the commander of a major pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiite militia. The political crisis has not stopped in February 2020, despite the nomination on February 1 of Mohammad Allawi as new Prime Minister. His nomination, nonetheless, was rejected by Baghdad protestors and he stepped down. On March 20, Adnan Al-Zurfi, was asked by President Barham Saleh to lead the new cabinet. Al-Zurfi's nomination was rejected by several influential groups and he also resigned shortly afterwards. The political crisis continued until April 2020, with the withdrawal of Prime Minister designate Adnan Al-Zurfi and the subsequent nomination of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, Iraq's national intelligence chief, to form the new cabinet on April 9.

On May 23, the UN revealed documents showing cases of abduction and torture of Iraqi protesters, which the new Prime Minister pledged to investigate. Two days later, Al-Kadhimi announced that the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Units should be an Iraqi institution under state authority. On June 26, Iraqi counterterrorism forces raided the headquarters of Kataeb Hezbollah, an Iran-backed militia, suspected of carrying out a flood of rocket attacks against US forces.

In terms of COVID-19, hundreds of cases were being announced on a daily basis in May, leading to a series of restrictive measures. In June, hospitals were overwhelmed. Currently, some of the provinces have maintained full lockdowns, but most have eased restrictions in an effort to revive the local economy.

Size of the Data

Chart 1: Size of the data



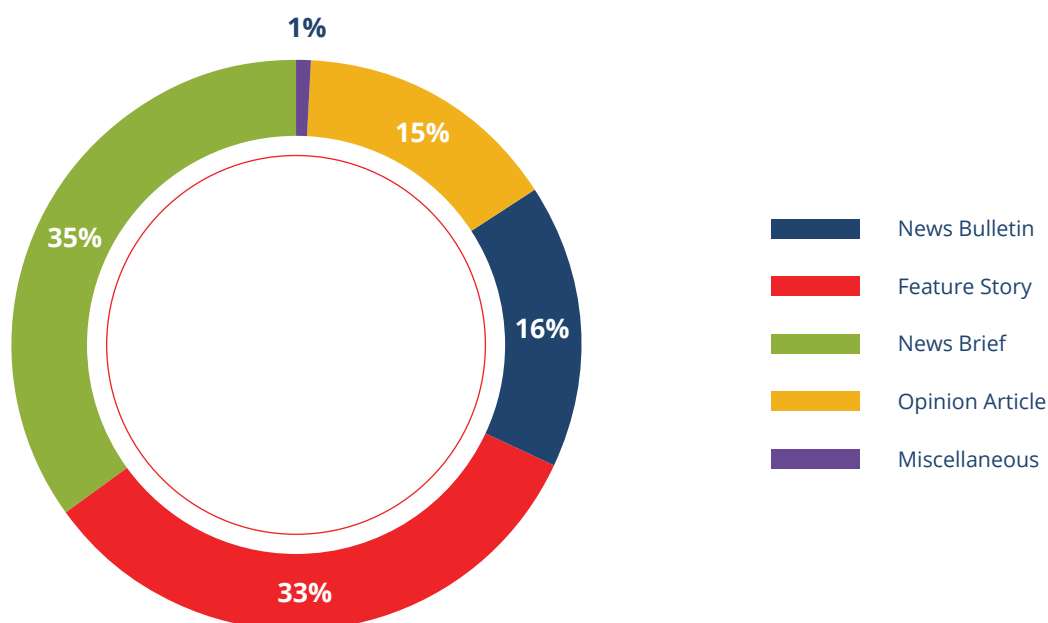
During the monitoring period, 163 relevant pieces of content were produced in total from Iraq. 36 percent of the items included in this study were published by the **National Iraqi News Agency**. This is a logical number for a media platform that is more comprehensive both in its geographical coverage and in the variety of topics it features.

Al Zaman provided 16 percent of the data. In third place came **Al Sabah** and **Shafaaq** with 12 percent, then **Al Sumaria** at 7 percent. **Al Iraqiya and Nas** followed at 5 percent each.

Finally, **Al Forat TV** and **Dijlah TV** produced 2 percent of the content.

Type of Content

Chart 2: Type of content

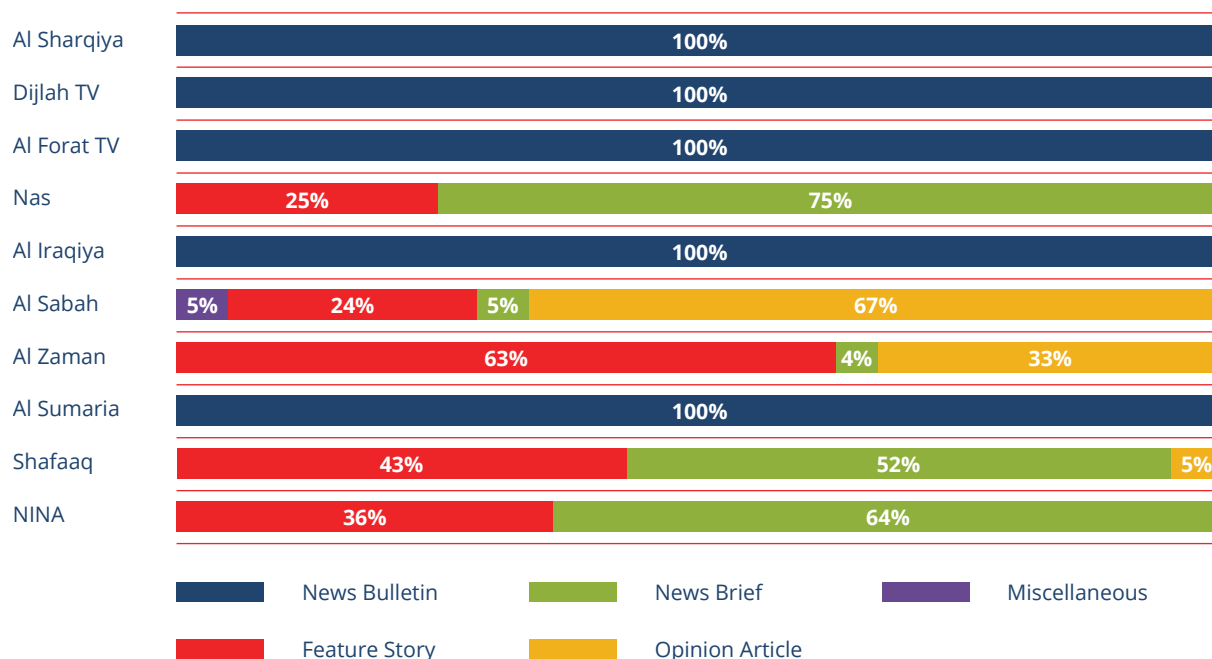


The 163 items were broken down according to their type. 35 percent were **news briefs**, coming mainly from coverage of current events and stories taken from international news wires. Then came **feature stories** (33 percent of the content), **news bulletin segments** with 16 percent of the data, followed by **opinion articles** that reflect the views of authors who often share similar views with their respective outlets, and finally **miscellaneous** pieces with 1 percent as they did not fall into any of the above categories.

News bulletin segments represent the largest proportion of the content in 5 out of the 10 monitored media outlets, as demonstrated in Chart 3. This is expected because they belong to TV stations, which only broadcast news bulletins and talk-shows.

When it comes to other kinds of outlets, **news briefs** figured the most in each of **Nas** (75 percent) and **NINA** (64 percent). **Al Zaman** had the highest percentage of **feature stories** at 63 percent.

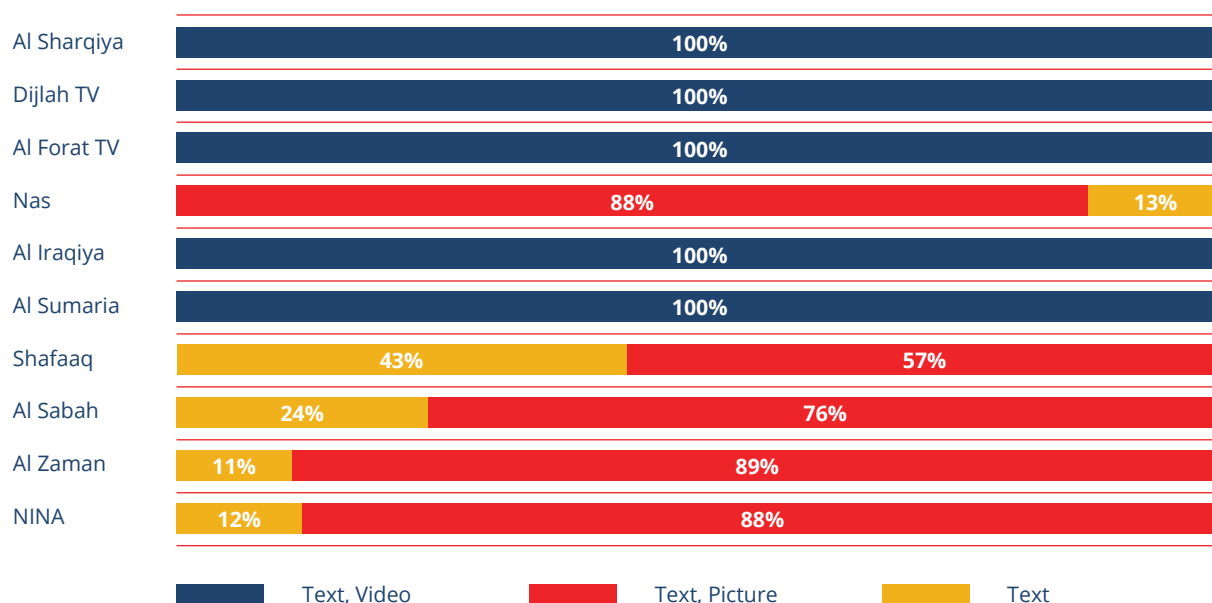
Chart 3: Type of content per media outlet



Opinion articles were the main type of content in **Al Sabah**, which also was the only outlet to have a piece count as miscellaneous, in fact a poem about Qassem Sulaimani.

Medium Used

Chart 4: Type of medium used



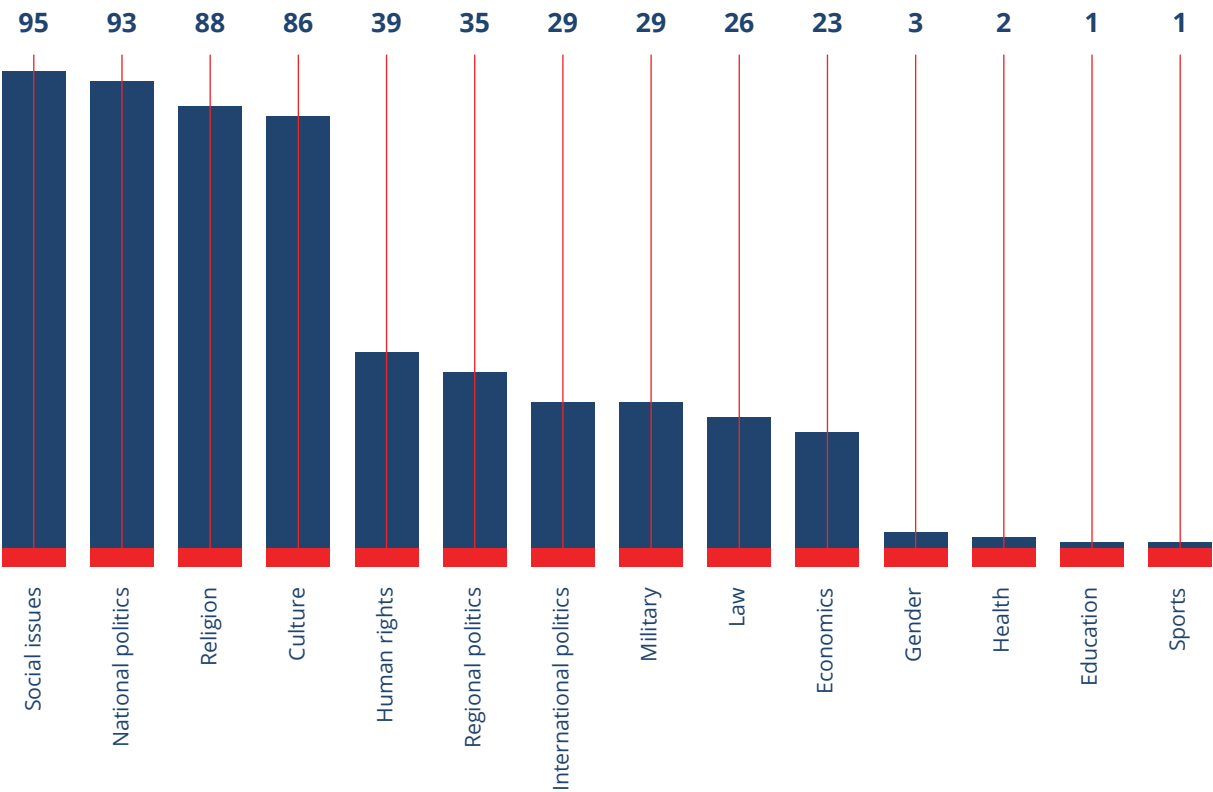
Content was kept as visual as possible to retain the audience's attention. Video was primarily used for news bulletins by **Al Sumaria, Al Iraqiya, Al Forat TV, Dijlah TV and Al Sharqiya**.

Articles relied more on pictures as a way to make their content more attractive for those seeking engaging content yet do not want long load times or heavy data consumption.

Shafaaq relied the most on text-only pieces while **Al Zaman** utilized text-picture combination more than the rest.

Themes of the Pieces

Chart 5: Themes covered



First, it is important to reiterate that news bulletins were not included in the topic/theme assessment due to the very wide range of topics included in each bulletin. And all the themes listed are featured in the pieces of content that have been selected for this study for their relevance to the issue of religious freedom and diversity.

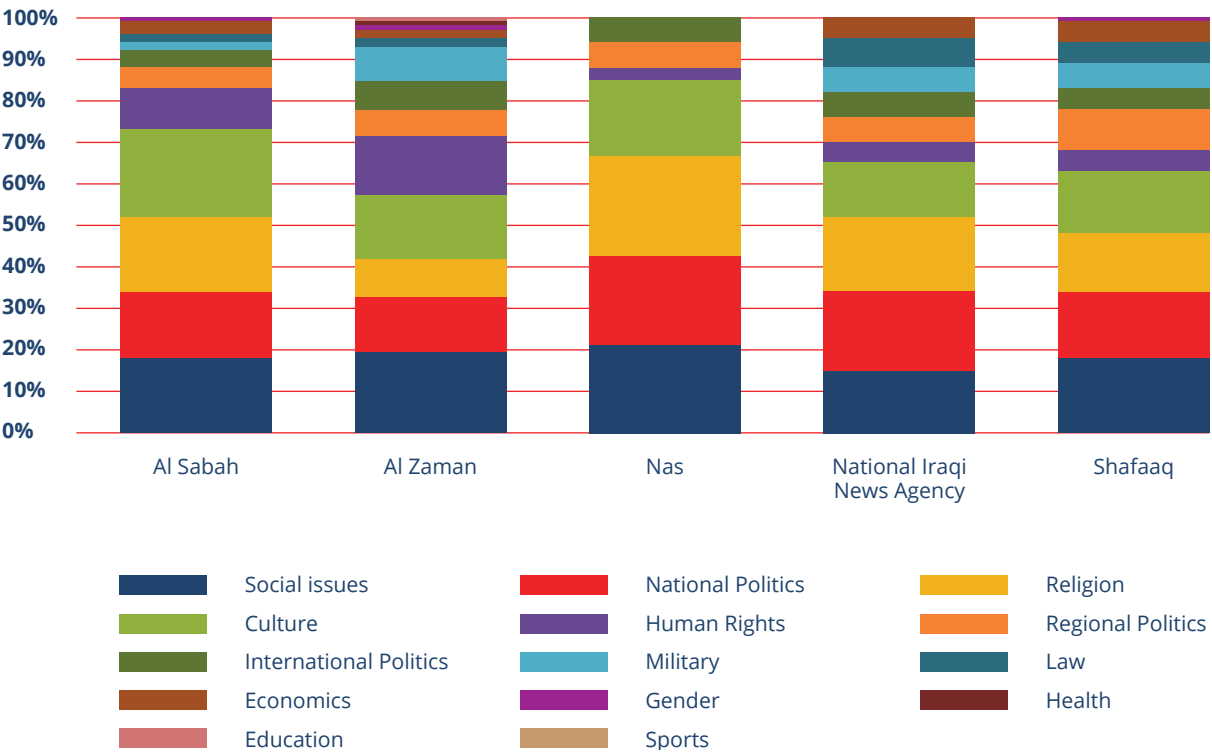
Social issues (in media pieces that also tackled religious freedoms and diversity) were the most recurrent topic in the data monitored, in 95 pieces of the published material (70 percent of the content). **National politics** followed in 93 pieces (68 percent of the content). 88 pieces covered **religion** and 86 pieces discussed **culture** (65 and 63 percent respectively), which aligns well with our keyword selection.

Interestingly, **human rights** were a key topic in 39 pieces (29 percent of the content) as well as **regional politics** in 35 pieces. **International politics** and **military** were mentioned in 29 pieces each. Close behind, **law** and **economics** were topics of discussion in 26 and 23 pieces respectively.

Issues that made no notable appearance include **gender**, **health**, **sports**, the **environment**, and **science & technology**.

It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one topic.

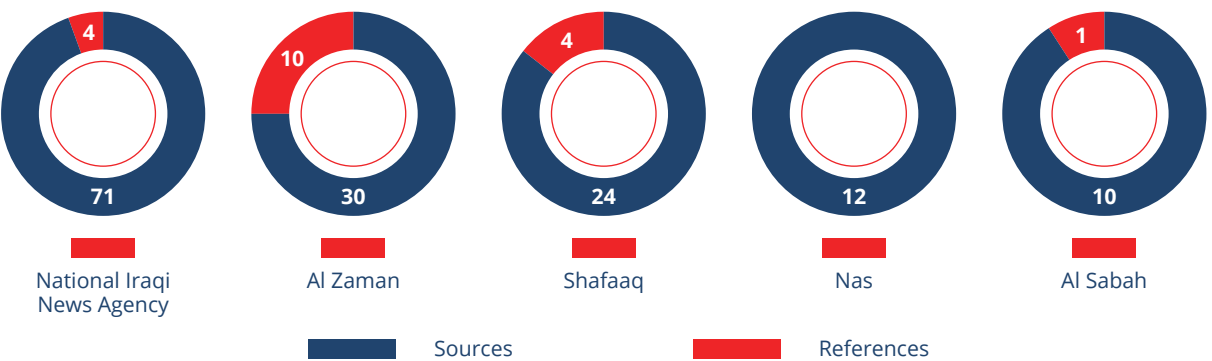
Chart 6: Breakdown of themes per outlet



It's interesting to see somewhat similar ratios in terms of topics covered among the various outlets. This is especially notable for **social issues** and **national politics**, being the most prevalent topics. For example, social issues were tackled in 18 percent of Al Sabah's pieces, 19 percent of Al Zaman's, 21 percent of Nas's, 15 percent of NINA's and 18 percent of Shafaaq's.

Sources and External References

Chart 7: Number of sources and references per outlet

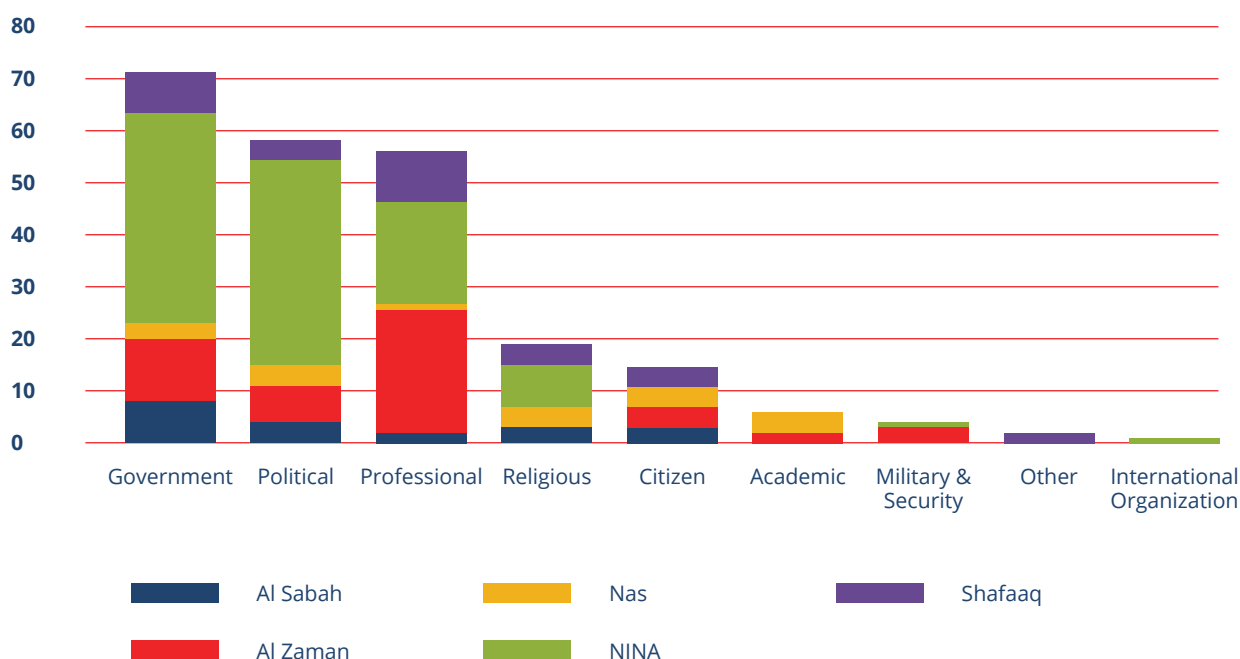


To assess the approach of media outlets to sources and external references, this study excluded opinion articles, interviews and news bulletins. This brings the total number of news briefs and feature stories down to 111 pieces.

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 111 articles and reports that were selected, 147 sources were cited, i.e. an average of 1.32 sources per article, as well as 19 external references, i.e. an average of 0.17 references per articles.

NINA had the highest number of sources while **Al Zaman** utilized external references the most, as a way to substantiate their content. On the other hand, **Nas** used no external references, relying mainly on sources.

Chart 8: Nature of the sources



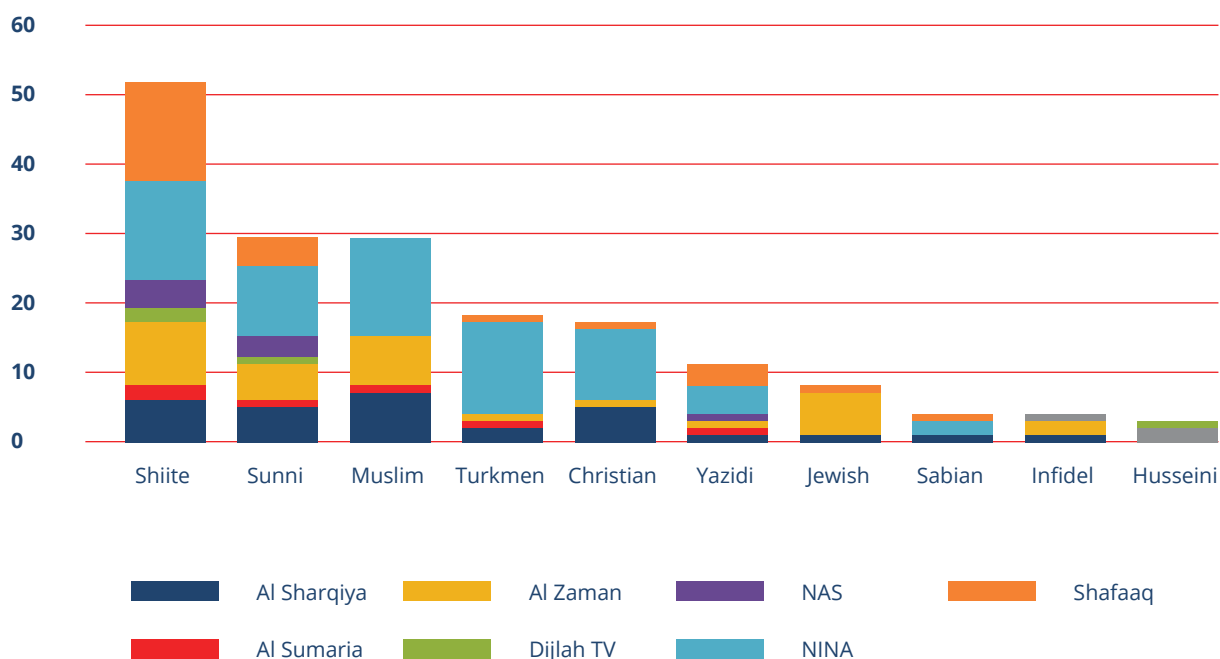
The most striking finding when looking at the nature of the sources cited by the media outlets monitored is how **local activists** and **NGOs** made no appearance in this study. **Military and security, international organizations** and **other** sources tailed the ranking of used sources, appearing in a very limited number of the pieces out of the 111 monitored.

Conversely, the media outlets subject of this study relied on **government** sources in 71 pieces (64% of the content) followed by **political** officials in 58 pieces (52 percent of the content). **Professionals** i.e. people working in their field of expertise, came in close third in 57 pieces. **Religious** sources (priests, sheikhs, etc.) and **citizens** were used in 19 and 15 of the pieces respectively (17 and 14 percent), while **academics** only appeared in 6 pieces as a source (5 percent).

The main reason **government**, **political** and **professional** sources took the lead is because of NINA. Al Zaman also relied heavily on **professional** sources. They were also the only outlets to use **military & security** as sources. Shafaaq was the only outlet to use sources outside the pre-defined list for this research.

Groups Mentioned

Chart 9: Groups mentioned per outlet



Due to the large amount of data gathered and studied, the chart above only shows the top-10 most common religious/sectarian groups referred to in each outlet.

The most used word is **Shiite** شيعي, appearing in 51 pieces (31 percent of the content). In the second place, the words **Sunni** سني and **Muslim** مسلم appeared in 30 pieces each (18 percent each). **Turkmen** تركماني came in fourth, appearing in 18 pieces (11 percent of the content) and **Christian** مسيحي was used in 17 pieces (10 percent of the content).

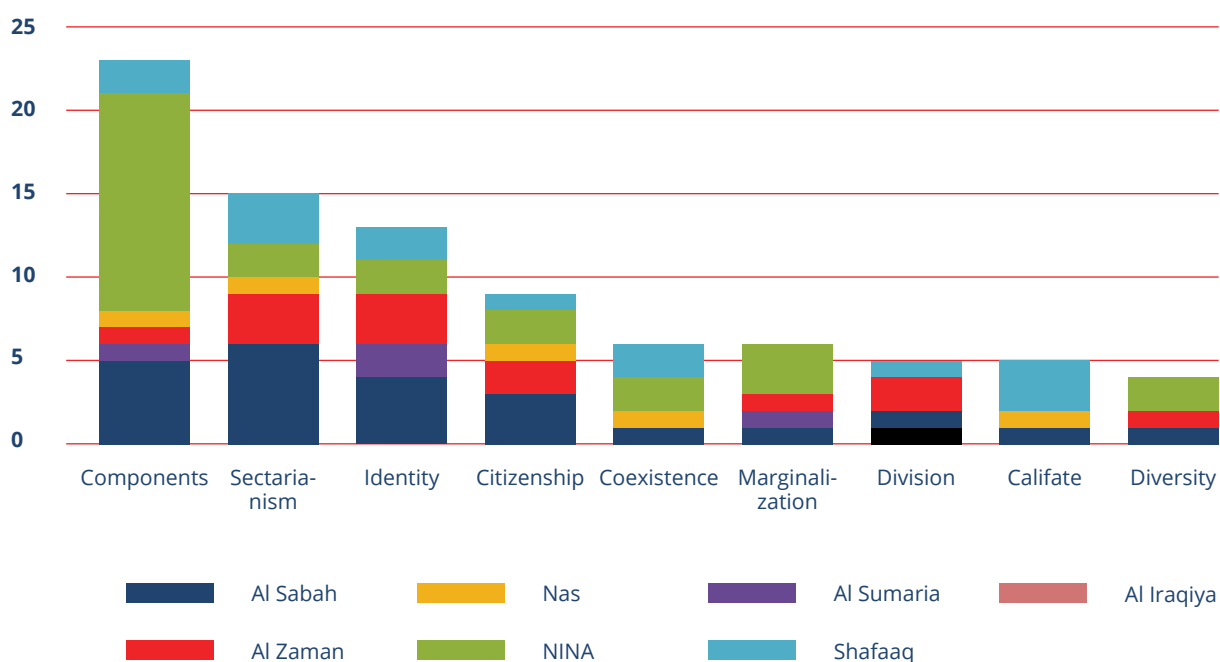
Additional relevant but not quite prominent groups include **Yazidi** أيزيدي, used in 11 pieces (7 percent of the content) and **Jewish** يهودي, used in 8 pieces (5 percent of the content).

The following words comprised 2 percent of the content, being used 3-4 times each: **Sabian** صابئي, **Infidel** كفر, **Hussein** حسيني and **Mandaic** مندائي, while each of the remaining groups were used once or twice and appear in no more than 1 percent of the monitored content.

It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one group.

Concepts Mentioned

Chart 10: Concepts mentioned per outlet



Due to the large amount of data gathered and studied, the chart above only shows the top-10 most common concepts used by each outlet.

The most used word is **components** مكونات appearing in 23 pieces (14 percent of the content). In the second place, the word **sectarianism** طائفية appeared in 15 pieces (9 percent). In the third place, the word **identity** هوية was used in 13 pieces (8 percent of the content).

Other concepts include **citizenship** المواطنة, used in 9 pieces (6 percent of the content) as well as **coexistence** التعايش, **marginalization** تهميش, **division** تقسيم and **califate** خلافة each of which was used in 6 pieces (4 percent of the content each).

Each of these words was used in 2 percent of the content: **diversity** التنوع, **majority** أغلبية and **persecution** اضطهاد, while the remaining concepts were used once or twice and appear in no more than 1 percent of the monitored content.

It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one concept.

Findings and Recommendations

This section will analyze some of the key ideas propagated by the different media outlets monitored be they negative, positive or even neutral. We aim to present the most striking sentences, try to show their significance in this study and recommend certain courses of action to address them.

Al Forat TV did not state any overtly negative or positive comments. Their focus was mainly on dissidents within the protests, claiming they have turned the demonstrations violent and have attacked both peaceful protesters as well as the police. While not directly a religious topic, the idea propagated was that violent protests lead to sectarian unrest. Most reports concerned religious events pertaining to Shiites and were from a positive outlook toward this community. This [news bulletin](#) shows that large numbers of Shiites are coming together from all over the country to visit Karbala, “escaping oppression and seeking the values of freedom” and that “this is a testimony to the resilience and generosity of the Iraqi people.” (35:09-37:06)

Al Iraqiya spoke positively of Shiites and [stated](#) in a news bulletin that a certain unity of the Iraqi people existed under the Imam Hussain banner. (31:27-32:17) Mandaics were portrayed as a symbol of unity and forgiveness in this [news bulletin](#). (37:32-38:10) However, in another [news bulletin](#), when it comes to reporting on the protests, a similar line of discourse to Al Forat TV was followed. (1:40-2:04)

In this [feature story](#), Al Sabah spoke of harmony and coexistence while mentioning Turkmens. In this [opinion piece](#), they mentioned oppressed Shiites and Jews in one of their pieces while calling for further coexistence. Another opinion piece [here](#), called for the same. Most of this lies within the neutral area as they do not speak positively or negatively of any religion.

However, this [opinion piece](#), is an example of how Al Sabah praise Muslims and Shiites. A woman they interviewed says: “With my husband, children and grandchildren, I strive to invest the Day of Ashura³ to help the poor, displaced Syrians, and Iraqi refugees, and to promote social solidarity”. This [feature story](#) also reports that Syrian and Palestinian refugees were painted as a threat to the country’s demographics by Lebanese politicians, due to so many of them being Sunnis, which would “threaten the sectarian balance.”

Al Sharqiya did not present any notably positive or negative pieces however it did tackle the concept of geopolitical balance in this [news bulletin](#) (26:16-27:00), where Salah Al Arbaoui, a prominent opposition figure, criticized the Abdul Mahdi government. Al Arbaoui stated that the government does not provide services appropriately and in does not meet the required standards in terms of sectarian, gender and geographic representation.

3 The day Hussein ibn Ali, grandson of prophet Muhammad, died at the Battle of Karbala, symbolizing sacrifice in the face of injustice. It is a significant holy day for Shiite Muslims, many of whom make a pilgrimage to Karbala and feed the poor and mourn the historical events that transpired.

In its news bulletins, Al Sumaria highlighted the [oppression of Yazidis](#) (17:30-18:01) and the [marginalization of Turkmens](#) (4:43-7:39). It also showcased the [Sunnis being segregated](#) (21:26-21:58). On the other hand, the Popular Mobilization Forces (Al Hashd Al Shaabi), made up of Shiite militants were painted in a positive way by showing they are donating blood to help “peaceful civilians” who were injured in the protests [here](#) (41:33-41:52). Overall, Muslims were positively portrayed such as in [this news bulletin](#) that mentioned how common the name Mohammad had become worldwide (46:12-48:43).

In this [feature story](#), Azzaman spoke of Jews more often than the rest of the outlets, though this was mainly in reference to the holocaust; it is still a noteworthy observation as the article reminded the readers of how oppressed Jews were at the time. Azzaman also highlighted that an outstanding student was Jewish without mentioning the religious beliefs of the rest of people they spoke of in this [feature story](#). On the other hand, there are religious references to purely political events, such as in this [opinion piece](#): “I remember that an Iraqi ambassador who was sent to retirement a few days ago said in a television interview that he had held the curtain of the Kaaba to pray to God against the Iraqi Prime Minister after he had deprived him of his position, and thus his performance showed a new trend of settling government conflicts in front of God!”

Dijlah TV generally presented neutral content, only highlighting Shiite corruption and Iranian transgressions on one notable [occasion](#) (2:30-3:12, 43:26-44:02).

Nas’s most notable content spoke of both Sunnis and Shiites. In this [news brief](#), they referred to a Sunni political figure by his sect in the title “A Sunni figure proposes a council led by Sadr to succeed Abdul Mahdi,” which contributes to the promotion of a sectarian mindset. In this [news brief](#), the Sunni religious body was mentioned as corrupt. In another [news brief](#), Shiites were said to have asked a question of highly sectarian nature “Are Shiites unable to provide quality independent candidates?” when a candidate from a different sect was suggested by Sunni political players.

NINA highlighted Turkmen voices, showing them as a marginalized minority often worried about elections and their relationship with Kurds such as in this [feature story](#). It’s not clear whether this is negative or positive but worth noting as it is the outlet mentioning Turkmens the most. Shiites were represented in a positive light such as when they were present early for a parliamentary session in this [news brief](#) or when another [news brief](#) stated that the Shiite entities are loved despite “the enemy propaganda” being spread. Interestingly, one of the [feature](#) stories highlighted corruption in Sunni entities.

Shafaaq focused more heavily on the Shiite community as the news outlet mentioned a Shiite cleric who was exposed for gaining money out of child “marriage of pleasure” in this [feature story](#). In this [news brief](#), Shiites were implicitly accused of being responsible for destruction of property in protests mainly because most of the residents of the area were Shiite. In another [news brief](#), Turkmens were linked with ISIS leadership. However, Yazidis were generally portrayed as a vulnerable, oppressed and marginalized population as seen in this [feature story](#).

Overall, the Iraqi media showed a heavy focus on the protests in articles and reports that were linked to religious freedom or diversity rather than religious issues per se, with both the government and Shiite oriented outlets having a broadly similar discourse: peaceful protests are encouraged, yet certain ill-meaning individuals are inciting violence and even, potentially, sectarian strife. In contrast, other outlets promoted the opposite discourse, highlighting government violence against protesters in general as well as the negative role of Shiite militias and Iran in Iraqi politics, on occasion.

It is also noteworthy that Shiite oriented outlets relied primarily on positive self-depiction whether it is by denying negative accusations used by other groups or promoting the positive role of Shiites in the region.

Yazidis and Turkmens were spoken of occasionally as oppressed minorities or through a clearly positive light. Work remains to be done within that area to ensure issues that are dear to minorities, including Christians, are highlighted even further in the midst of the rivalry between political groups associated to the two main Muslim denominations. Sunni-Shiite interactions play a key role in the Arab world and this was reflected in the reporting. There was either strong praise of one's own sect or heavy criticism of the other, whereas minorities' issues are given less attention. Technically speaking, sources and external references should be used more to foster a stronger culture of evidence-based journalism.

Lebanon

Media Landscape

Overview

Until the 1970s, Lebanon was characterized by a culture of openness and freedom of expression that was unique in the region. Beirut attracted plenty of funding for its publications and was a regional media hub.

Today, media institutions are highly polarized and very few try to remain neutral. “Since media outlets do not rely on readership, but rather on investors as a source of revenue, there is little – if any – interest in producing quality journalism.”⁴ This is further exacerbated by arbitrarily implemented, vague, inconsistent and antiquated legislation.

Political, economic, social and cultural features published by the Arabic services of agencies such as Reuters and Agence France Press (AFP) usually find considerable space in Lebanese media outlets and are often quoted by the local TVs, radios and news websites.

“Historically, Lebanon has had one of the highest ratios of private newspapers per head in the Arab world.”⁵ However, no accurate circulation numbers are currently available.

More recently, online media outlets – including several independent and youth-led initiatives – have been rapidly growing in popularity at the expense of offline outlets. This is evident as many well-known and deep-rooted newspapers have closed down in the recent years.

Recent Events and Political Climate

In Lebanon, since October 17, 2019, rallies and protests have been taking place across Lebanon to denounce the corruption of the Lebanese political class and demand the establishment of a government of independent, non-partisan experts. The protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri on October 29 and the collapse of the coalition cabinet he led since January 2019.

On December 19, the President of the Republic Michel Aoun named former Education Minister Hassan Diab as Prime Minister-designate after the latter was endorsed by a slim majority of parliamentarians affiliated to Hezbollah and allied parties. Mr. Diab’s nomination was rejected by independent protesters on the grounds that he lacks the political weight to put an end to corruption, as well as supporters of Mr. Hariri, who denounced Diab’s nomination in spite of the opposition of the major Sunni political actors.

4 Trombetta, L. and Pinto, C., Media Landscapes, Lebanon, *European Journalism Centre*, 2016-2018, available at: <https://medialandscapes.org/country/lebanon>, last visited on September 17, 2020.

5 *Ibid.*

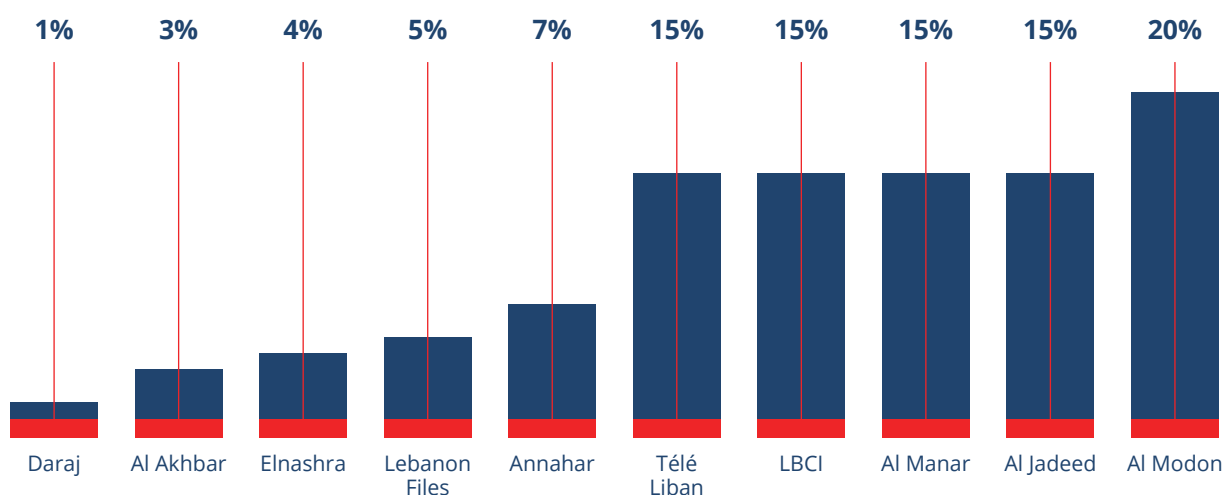
On January 21, 2020, President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Hassan Diab named a new 20-member cabinet, including six women. For the first time in the Arab world, a woman (Zeina Akar) was named Minister of Defense (in addition to her position as Deputy Prime Minister). However, the Diab government's ties to Hezbollah-allied political forces were evident and the protests peaked as violent clashes erupted in downtown Beirut.

In February, in addition to the economic and financial crisis, the Lebanese citizens, media and political class focused their attention on the COVID-19 outbreak. On February 21, the Minister of Health announced the first case of a COVID-19 infected person in Beirut. COVID-19 has continued to dominate the news since then, as different measures from curfews to border closures were taken. On March 7, two days before the country was supposed to settle a USD 1.2 billion tranche of bonds in foreign currency, the government announced its default on foreign debt. The announcement deepened the economic and financial crisis that the country is going through, leading to further restrictions on citizens' access to cash and bank operations.

On August 4, a massive blast at the port of Beirut destroyed large areas of the city, killing nearly 200 and injuring 7,000, while leaving 300,000 homeless. The explosion led to a massive popular anger that forced Prime Minister Diab to resign and to be replaced on August 31 by Ambassador Mustapha Adib, who recused himself on September 26. A new Prime Minister is yet to be named.

Size of the Data

Chart 11: Size of the data



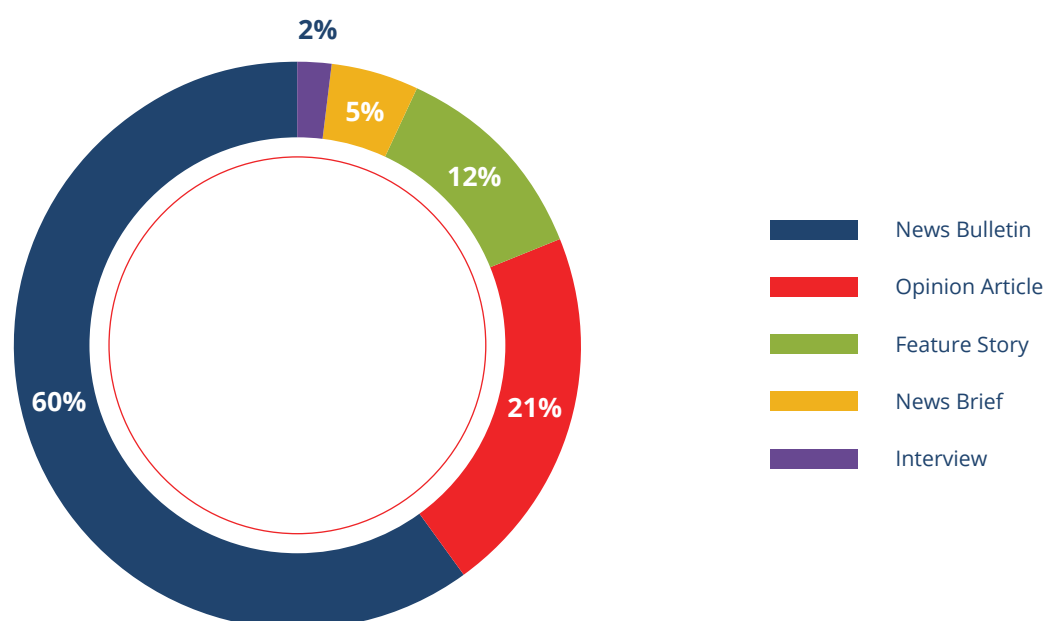
During the monitoring period, 259 relevant pieces of content were produced in total from Lebanon. 20 percent of the items included in this study were published by **Al Modon**. The second place is not far off but encompasses 4 outlets **Al Jadeed**, **Al Manar**, **LBCI** and **Télé Liban**, all of which are TV channels. In third place, **Annahar** provided 7 percent of the data

Lebanon Files, **Elnashra** and **Al Akhbar** provided 5, 4 and 3 percent of the content respectively.

Finally, in the last place, Daraj only produced 1 percent of the content (2 pieces).

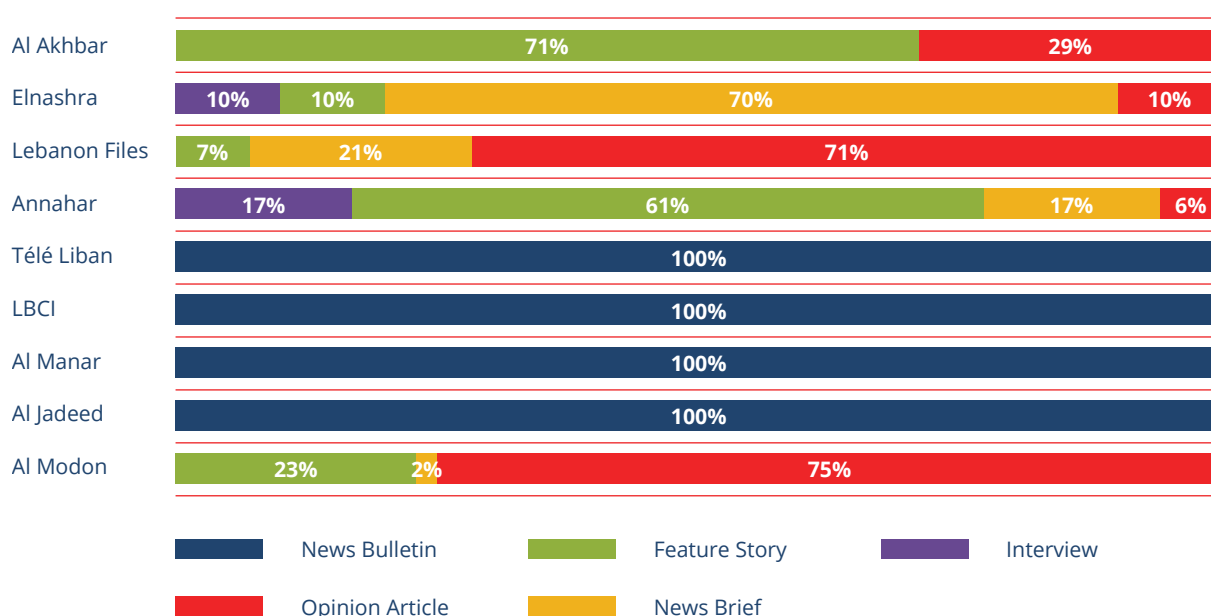
Type of Content

Chart 12: Type of content



The 259 items were broken down according to their type. 60 percent were **news bulletin segments**, coming mainly from coverage of local politics, current events and some stories taken from international news wires. Then came **opinion articles** (21 percent of the content) that reflect the views of authors who often echo the positions of their respective outlets' owners, **feature stories** with 12 percent of the data, followed by **news briefs**, and **interviews**.

Chart 13: Type of content per media outlet



News bulletin segments represent the largest proportion of the content in 4 out of the 10 monitored media outlets. This is expected because they belong to TV stations, which only broadcast news bulletins.

When it comes to other kinds of outlets, **opinion articles** figured the most in each of **Al Modon** (75 percent) and **Lebanon Files** (71 percent). **Al Akhbar** had the highest percentage of **feature stories** at 71 percent.

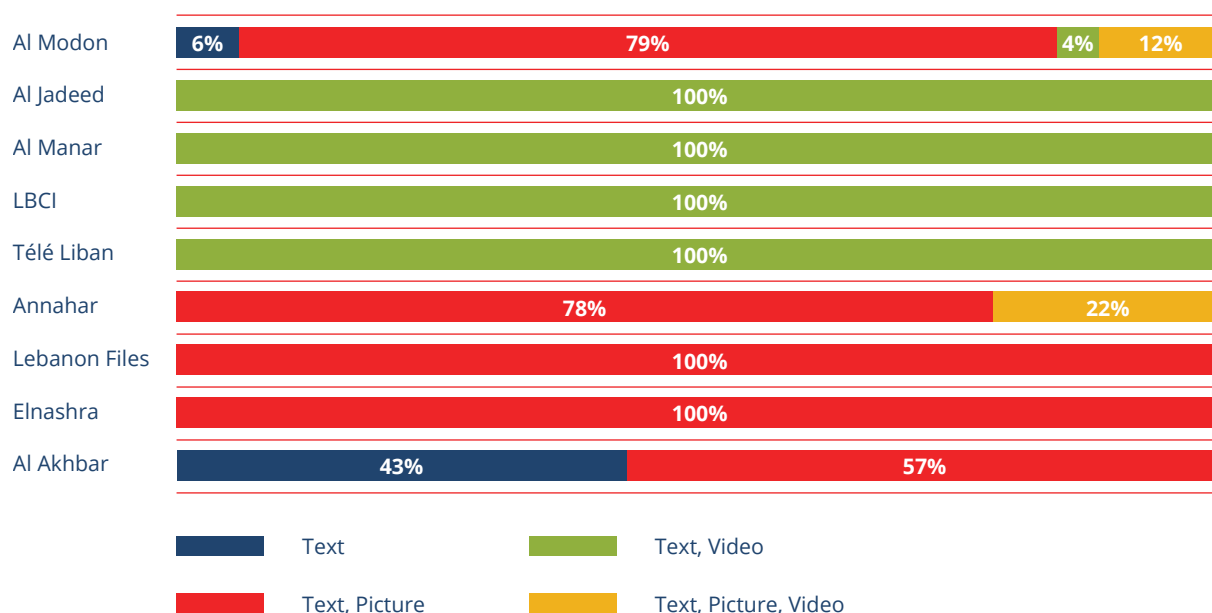
News briefs were the most common type of content in **El Nashra**.

Finally, **Annahar** produced the most interviews at 17 percent.

Daraj was not included in this analysis as it only produced 2 articles, a tiny fraction compared to the rest.

Medium Used

Chart 14: Type of medium used



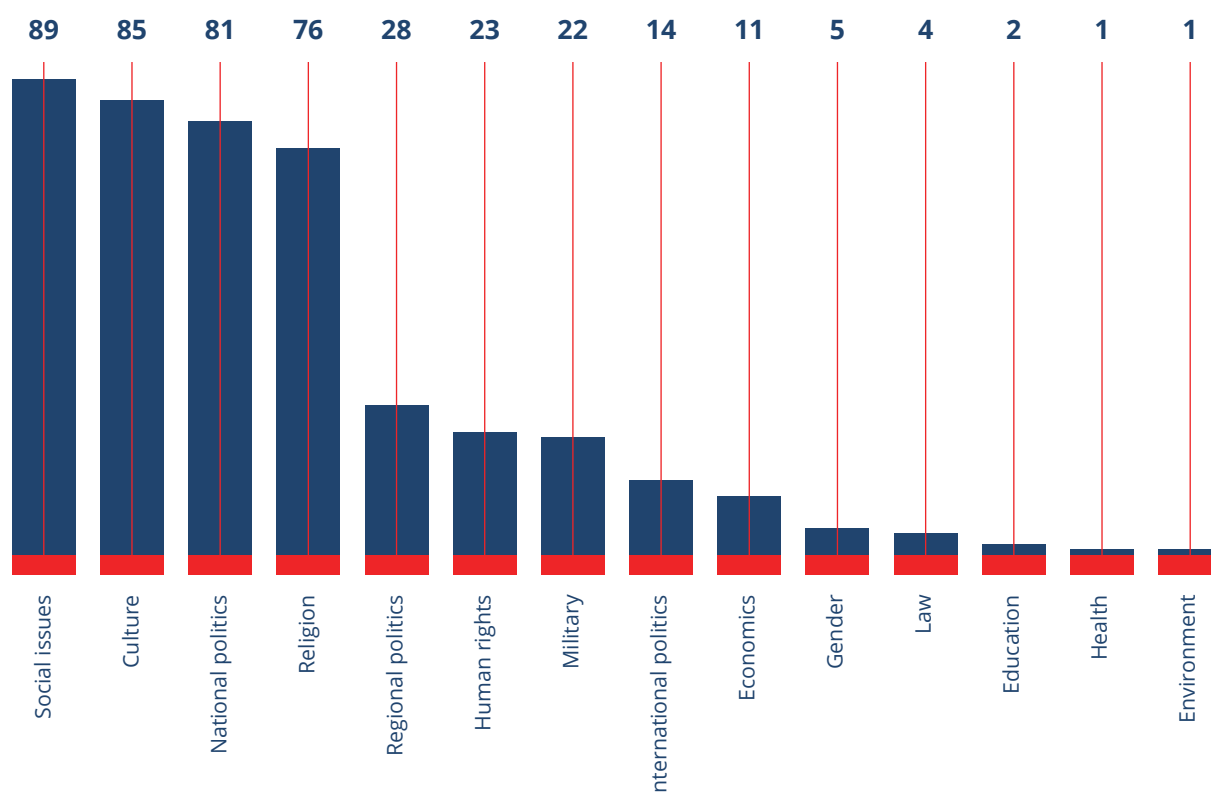
Video was mainly used for news bulletin segments by **Al Jadeed**, **Al Manar**, **LBCI** and **Télé Liban**.

Outlets producing written content primarily utilized a combination of text and pictures.

Al Modon and **Annahar** used text and pictures alongside video simultaneously in a few of their articles. **Annahar** also showed the most diverse use of mediums among the outlets.

Themes of the Pieces

Chart 15: Themes covered



Once again, it is important to reiterate that news bulletins were not included in the topic assessment due to the very wide range of topics in each bulletin. The numbers below refer to media pieces that tackled religious issues alongside other topics.

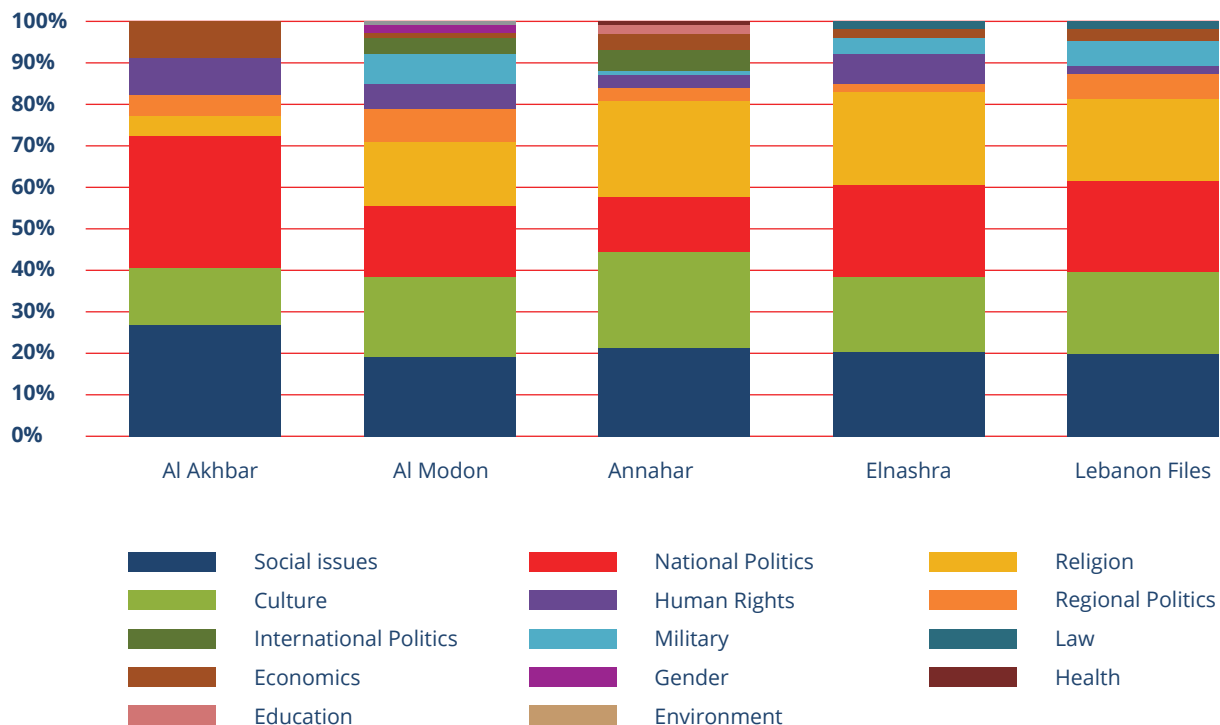
Social issues, **culture** and **national politics** were the most recurrent topics in the data monitored. Pieces of content focusing solely on **religion** followed in 76 pieces (83 percent of the content excluding news bulletins). 28 pieces covered **regional politics** (27 percent), taking the fifth place.

Human rights related issues were covered in 23 pieces (22 percent of the content), **military** in 22 pieces, **international politics** in 14 pieces and **economics** in 11 pieces.

Topics that were touched upon but in a very minimal fashion include **gender**, **law**, **education**, **health** and **environment** while **sports** as well as **science & technology** made no appearance, slightly similar to Iraq.

It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one topic.

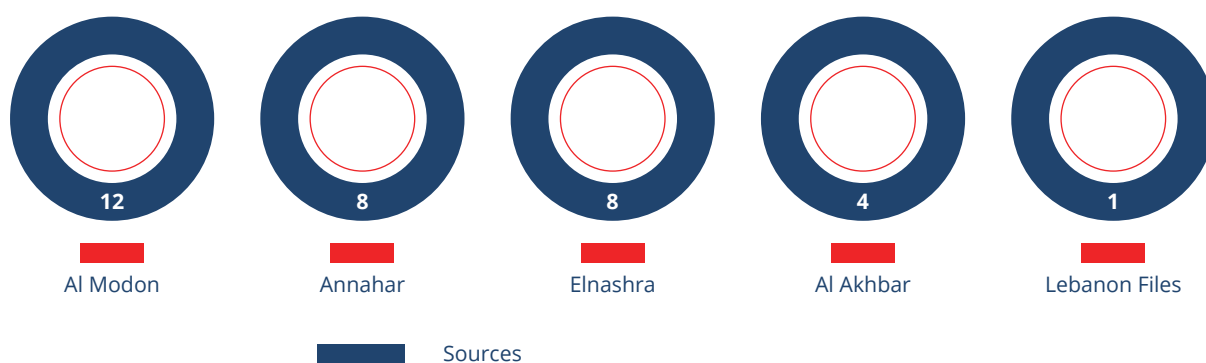
Chart 16: Breakdown of themes per outlet



Annahar, Elnashra and **Lebanon Files** covered **religion** similarly in about 22% of their content. This further indicates that the keyword selection was accurate. **Al Akhbar** focused the most on **national politics** in relation to religious freedoms and diversity.

Sources and External References

Chart 17: Number of sources and references per outlet

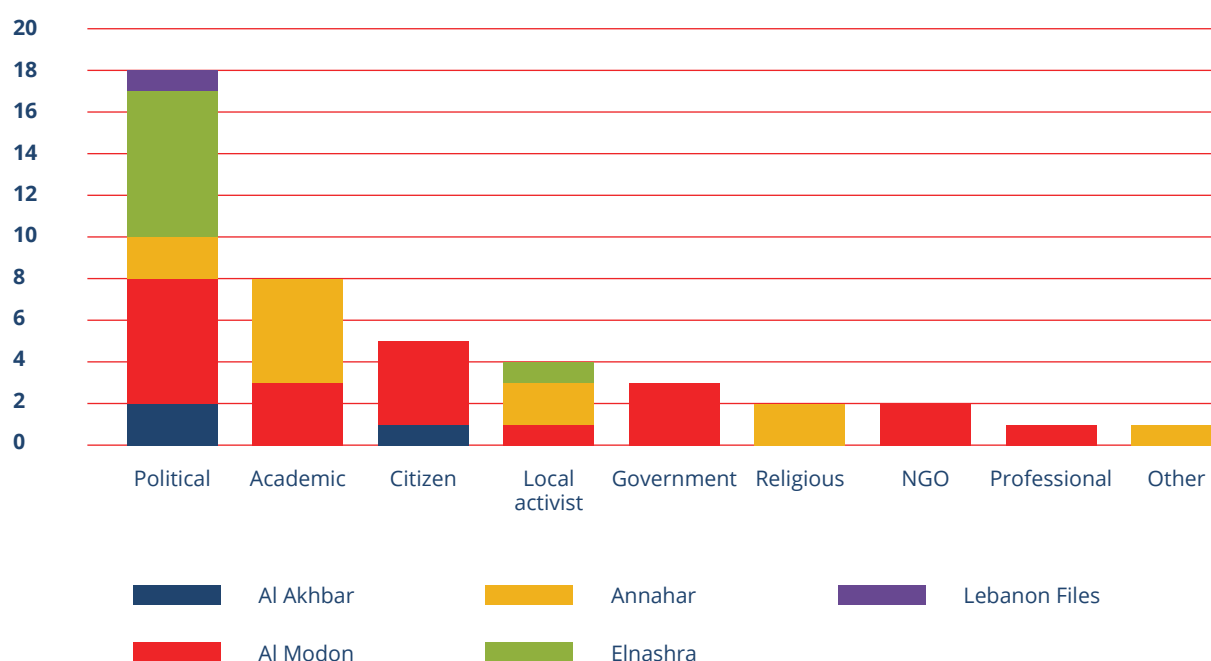


To assess the approach of media outlets to sources and external references, this study excluded opinion articles, interviews and news bulletins. This brings the total number of news briefs and feature stories down to 44 pieces.

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 44 articles and reports that were selected, 33 sources were cited, i.e. an average of 0.75 sources per article, as well as no external references, raising concerns over the credibility of the information provided as well as the journalistic standards of the Lebanese outlets.

Lebanon Files had the lowest number of sources while **Annahar** and **Elnashra** both took the second place after **Al Modon**.

Chart 18: Nature of the sources



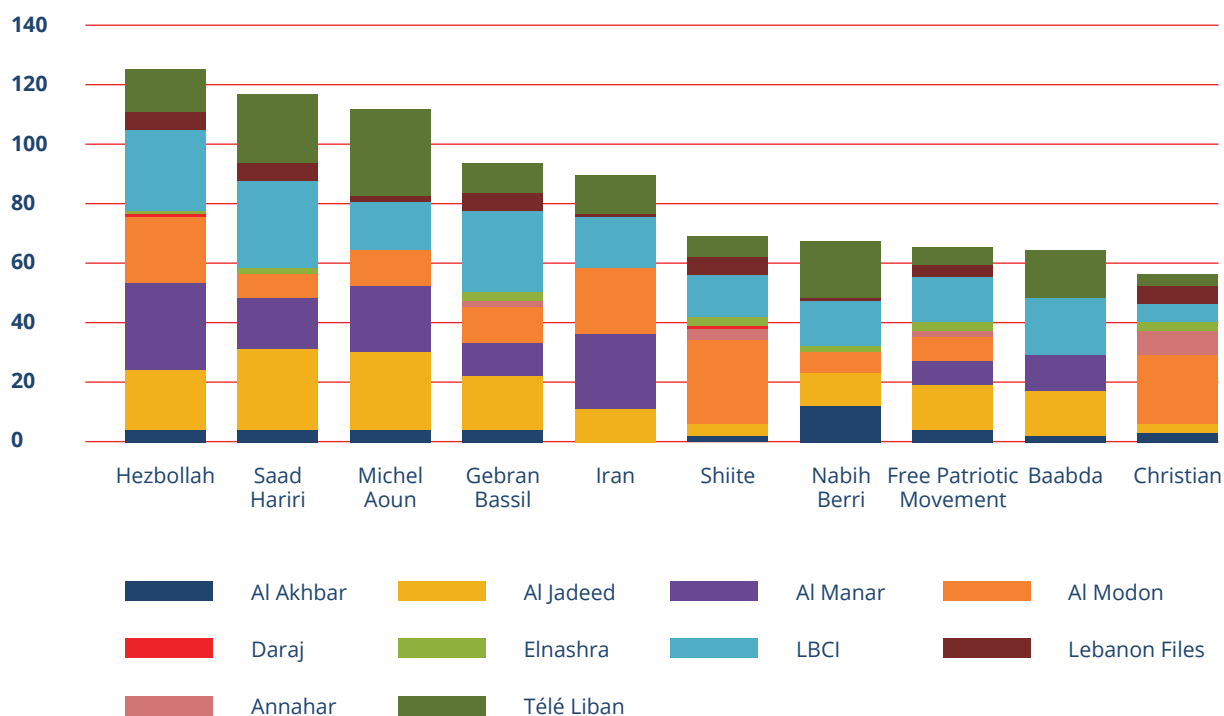
The largest portion of the sources is **political** (41 percent of the content). This is not surprising as politics play a big role in Lebanese daily life one way or another and many people are familiar with politicians' names and affiliations. **Professional sources**, i.e. people working in their field of expertise, and **other** sources tailed the ranking of used sources, appearing in one piece only out of the 44 monitored (2 percent).

The media outlets subject of this study gave voice to **academics** in 8 pieces each (18 percent of the content), followed by **citizens** in 5 pieces (11 percent of the content), **local activists** in 4 pieces (9 percent of the content). **Government** officials were cited as a source in 3 pieces (7 percent of the content).

Lastly, **religious** (priests, sheikhs, etc.) and **NGO** figures were used as sources in 2 content pieces each (5 percent of the content).

Groups Mentioned

Chart 19: Groups mentioned per outlet



Due to the large amount of data gathered and studied, the chart above only shows the top-10 most common keywords referring to religious/sectarian groups referred to in each outlet.

The top 3 used words are **Hezbollah** **حزب الله**, **Saad Hariri**⁶ **سعد الحريري** and **Michel Aoun**⁷ **ميشال عون** used in 124, 116 and 111 pieces respectively (48, 45 and 43 percent of the content). The following keywords were used between 54 and 93 pieces each (21 to 36 percent of the content each): **Gebran Bassil**⁸ **جبران باسيل**, **Iran** **إيران**, **Shiite** **شيعة**, **Nabih Berri**⁹ **نبيه بري**, **Free Patriotic Movement** **التيار الوطني الحر**, **Baabda**¹⁰ **بعبدا**, **Christian** **مسيحي** and **Hassan Nasrallah**¹¹ **حسن نصر الله**.

The above data indicates that the most prominent figures in the country were discussed the most, many of whom have held positions of power in the government and/or represent certain religious groups: **Saad Hariri** (Prime Minister at the time, **Sunni** position), **Michel Aoun** (President, **Maronite** position),

- 6 Saad Hariri is a former Prime Minister (2009-2011; 2016-2019), Member of Parliament for Beirut and leader of the Sunni-majority Future Movement.
- 7 Michel Aoun is the President of the Lebanese Republic (since 2016) and founder of the Christian-majority Free Patriotic Movement.
- 8 Gebran Bassil is the president of the Free Patriotic Movement, a Member of Parliament and the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun.
- 9 Nabih Berri is the Speaker of Parliament (since 1992) and the leader of the Shiite-majority Amal Movement.
- 10 Baabda is a town in Mount Lebanon where the presidential palace is located.
- 11 Hassan Nasrallah is the secretary general of the Shiite militant group and political party Hezbollah.

Nabih Berri (Speaker of the Parliament, **Shiite** position), **Hassan Nasrallah** (Secretary General of Hezbollah, **Shiite** group) and **Gebran Bassil** (Head of the Free Patriotic Movement, **Christian** group previously led by President Michel Aoun before becoming President of the Republic).

These groups appeared in 25 to 44 pieces each (10 to 17 percent of the content each): **Muslim** مسلم, **Sunni** سني, **Lebanese Forces** القوّات, **Maronite** ماروني, **Future Movement** تيّار المستقبل, **Socialist** إشتراكي, **Samir Geagea**¹² سمير جعجع and **Walid Jumblatt**¹³ وليد جنبلاط.

Comprising 3 to 9 percent of the monitored content each (8 to 24 pieces each): **Druze** درزي, **Amal Movement** حركة أمل, **Dahieh**¹⁴ الضاحية, **Mohammad Raad**¹⁵ محمد رعد, **Ain al-Tineh**¹⁶ عين التينة, **Kataeb** الكتائب, **Turkey** تركيا, **Orthodox** أرثوذكسي, **Armenian** أرمني, **Gemayel**¹⁷ الجميل, **Catholic** كاثوليكي, **Marada Movement** تيّار المردة and **Sleiman Frangieh**¹⁸ سليمان فرنجية.

Lastly, the following groups represent some of the least referenced ones in Lebanon, appearing in merely 1 to 5 articles each (1 to 2 percent of the monitored content each): **Jaafari** جعفري, **Roum** روم, **Protestant** بروتستانت, **Alawite** علوي, **Evangelical** إنجيلي, **Jewish** يهودي, **Atheist** ملحد and **Coptic** قبطي.

It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one group, as mentioned in the methodology. Names of officials are included in the selection only if the media piece is relevant to the topic of religious freedoms and diversity. Not all articles and reports mentioning the above-listed names are included in the selection.

12 Samir Geagea is the leader of the Christian-majority Lebanese Forces party.

13 Walid Jumblatt is the leader of the Druze-majority Progressive Socialist Party.

14 Dahieh is the southern suburb of Beirut, mainly inhabited by Shiite citizens.

15 Mohammad Raad is a Shiite Member of Parliament leading Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc.

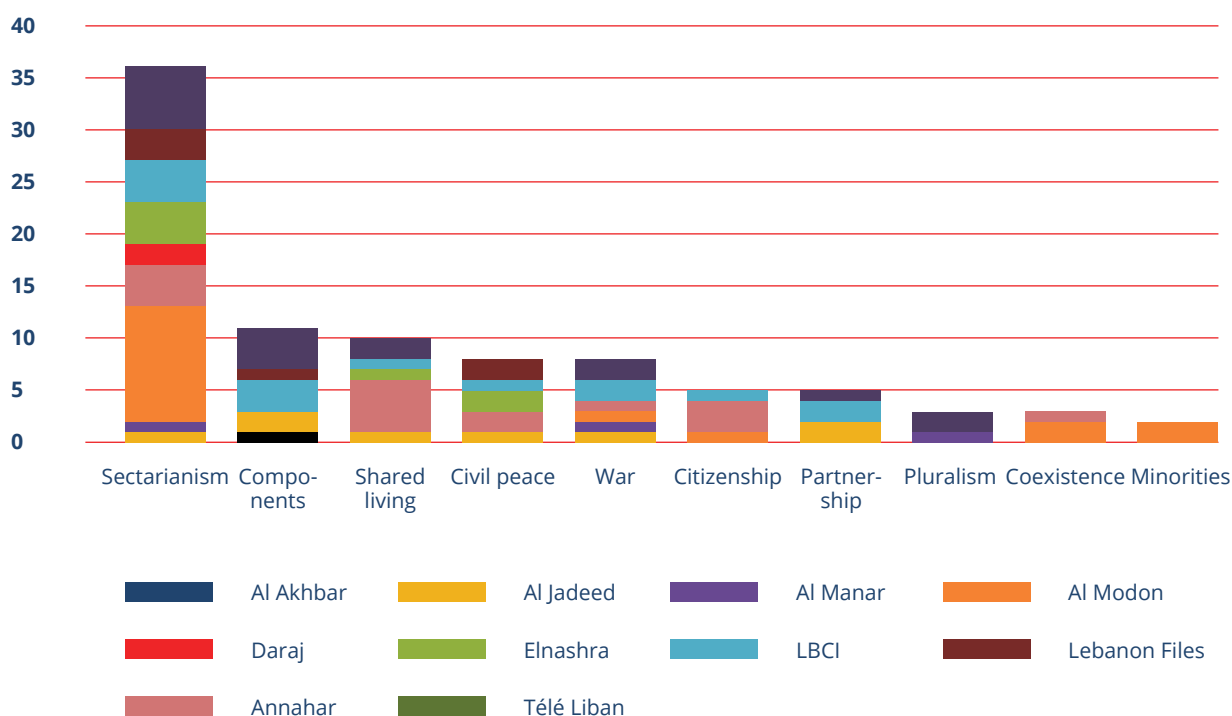
16 Ain al-Tineh is an area in Beirut where the headquarters of the Shiite Speaker of Parliament are located.

17 Prominent Maronite political family that comprises two former Presidents of the Republic.

18 Sleiman Frangieh is the leader of the Maronite-majority Marada Movement.

Concepts Mentioned

Chart 20: Concepts mentioned per outlet



Due to the large amount of data gathered and studied, the chart above only shows the top-10 most common concepts used by each outlet.

The most used concept is **sectarianism طائفية** appearing in 36 pieces (14 percent of the content). In the second place, the words **components مكونات** and **shared living العيش المشترك** appeared in 11 and 10 pieces respectively (4 percent of the content each), followed by **civil peace السلم الأهلي** and **war حرب** figuring in eight pieces each (3 percent of the content each).

Other concepts include **citizenship المواطنة** and **partnership الشراكة** used in 5 pieces (2 percent of the content each).

Finally, each of these words was used in 1-2 percent of the content so each in 1-3 pieces: **pluralism التعددية**, **coexistence التعايش**, **minorities أقليات**, **diversity التنوع**, **Christians' rights حقوق المسيحيين**, **minority أقلية**, **identity الهوية**, **living together العيش معا**, **one life الواحد**, **sectarian incitement تهديد طائفية**, **marginalization تهميش** and **personal status law الأحوال الشخصية**.

It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one concept.

Findings and Recommendations

This section will analyze some of the key ideas propagated by the different media outlets monitored be they negative, positive or even neutral. We aim to present the most striking sentences, try to show their significance in this study and recommend certain courses of action to address them.

To better understand the below content analysis, we will briefly outline the way Lebanon's consociational system operates. Following the civil war from 1975 to 1990, the Taif Agreement peace accord was adopted on November 5, 1989. It confirmed the fact that the President of the Republic would be a Christian Maronite, the Speaker of the Parliament would be a Muslim Shiite and the Prime Minister would be a Muslim Sunni. The parliament would be comprised of 128 members divided equally between Muslims and Christians, and represent the 18 different sects. A similar division would be adopted in the Council of Ministers as well as other government entities. Hence, it has become a habit of news outlets and politicians to refer to "quotas" when discussing Lebanese politics and the representation of the various groups.

A [feature story](#) in Al-Akhbar newspaper under the headline of "Al-Marada to the Aounists: 'Our candidate is stronger than yours!'" remarkably used "Christian representation" several times instead of using the names of the parties: the Marada, the Lebanese Forces and the Free Patriotic Movement, which reinforces the sectarian perspective, meaning the use of sectarian groups and not parties, while talking about the upcoming presidential battle. In another [feature story](#) in Al-Akhbar newspaper under the title "A race between formation and blocking roads," it was noteworthy that the sectarian perspective was used to talk about forming a government, such as the "Shiite quota" and the "Christian quota," and not the partisan or political framework.

In Al Modon's [opinion piece](#) the government formation is referred to by sectarian and not partisan quotas, such as the "Shiite share" and not Hezbollah or the Amal Movement's, as well as the Druze quota, and the Maronite quota in reference to the Free Patriotic Movement, the Marada movement, and the "Orthodox share" and others. This reinforces a sectarian perspective on politics, rather than one that focuses on balance of power between parties.

This [opinion article](#)'s author explained the link between corruption and the rivalry among the various sectarian groups. In this [opinion article](#), the author used the phrase "going back to past barricades"¹⁹ when referring to clashes that occurred between pro- and anti-Hezbollah groups in different areas of Beirut.

In this [feature story](#), the author focused on the Sunni community, stating it is the "weakest," while clearly indicating that Hezbollah and its weapons were directed at this sect. The author pointed out that the Sunnis in Lebanon placed Hezbollah, Iran and Israel in the category of one enemy. By doing so, he further highlighted a Sunni-Shiite division and conflict.

19 Referencing Lebanon's civil war from 1975 to 1990.

As for Daraj, only two opinion articles have been included in the report, [one](#) of which presents the link between radical Islam and military dictatorship in Egypt and Syria, where the author used the term “Islamic boogeyman” to describe using Islam to incite fear for political gain, while in [the second](#) it showed neutrality in discussing the role of religion in the Lebanese society.

This [news brief](#) from Elnashra, reported on the favorable position of the Lebanese National Bloc party towards civil marriage. The article mentioned “the authorities’ intention to maintain the separation of citizens on sectarian grounds because of their refusal of civil marriage.” And in this [feature story](#), the term “Shiite duo,” which refers to the Amal Movement and Hezbollah, was used instead of using the names Hezbollah and Amal Movement, replacing them with the sectarian category that dominates the two parties.

In this [opinion piece](#) on Lebanon Files, the author discusses the position of the President of the Progressive Socialist Party to deal with the formation of the government, where he used the term “Druze representation” and his demand “not to marginalize the Druze community,” as it shows the sectarian approach to representation in the government, which reinforces the sectarian perspective and the confusion between political and sectarian considerations.

In this [feature story](#) on Lebanon Files, the writer refers to the political alliances with a sectarian and not a partisan perspective, that is, when he talks about the relationship between the Aounist movement and Hezbollah and the latter’s political need for a “strong Christian ally.” On the other hand, the writer sheds light on the candidates for the presidency affiliated with the Marada, the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces, under the perspective of who has “Christian representation,” meaning the parties are placed within their religious, not political, framework.

In this [news brief](#) on Lebanon Files, the position of the National Secretary of the Arab Socialist Baath Party calling for the abolition of political sectarianism and the establishment of the civil state was highlighted.

In this [opinion piece](#) on Lebanon Files, the author refers to those who stand at the forefront of the revolutionaries with their religious-sectarian background and not the party framework or national identity, as he wrote, “Christians stand at the forefront of the revolutionaries, as do the Shiites.” In the same article, the use of phrases that reinforce the religious and not the national perspective is highlighted. The author used the phrase “the party’s (Hezbollah) weapons and practices led to the impoverishment of Christians and Muslims at the same time.”

This [news brief](#) in Annahar referred to a meeting between members of the Constitution and Law Committee in the Maronite League and the head of the Organization for the Protection of the Rights of Christians in the East, and the discussion was about the need for Lebanese Christians to receive American support. This approach further strengthens the sectarian perspective through which the reader looks and highlights the sectarian approach to this meeting.

This Annahar [feature story](#) sheds light on a positive message referring to coexistence through the stance of the President of the International Antonine School on the centenary of the founding of the state, saying, "The students are proud of the fact that the Patriarch Al Howayek and Muslim sheikhs declared the first state in the Middle East."

In a [news bulletin](#) on Télé Liban concerning the formation of the government (2:00-2:30) the term dissolving the Christian, Sunni, and Shiite knot and the Druze knot was used in reference to giving ministerial portfolios that satisfy the relevant political leaderships; that is, it shed light on the government formation from a sectarian perspective, not partisan or political.

In another [news bulletin](#) on Télé Liban, the position of Maronite Patriarch Al-Rai is highlighted (10:10-10:15, 10:19-11:38), as he "refused to provoke sectarian and sectarian prejudices as a tool of political action to attract the masses because it deepens sectarian divisions," encouraging the population to stay away from everything that creates sectarian divisions among the Lebanese.

LBCI was neutral in most of its coverage but this did not prevent the presence of a few notable examples of sectarian lenses. For example, an LBCI [news bulletin](#) (section 15 minute 1:14) used the term "Shiite duo" instead of using Hezbollah and Amal Movement's official names. This practice was repeated in this [news bulletin](#) (section 2 minute 1:25) within another segment that was talking about the formation of the government and the approval of the "Shiite duo." On a more positive note, an [interview](#) (section 6 min. 4 52-4:53) with a former minister affiliated with the Lebanese Forces focused on the "reconciliation between the Druze and Christians in Mount Lebanon."

Al Jadeed used the term "Shiite duo" several times in the [introduction](#) of their news bulletin (1:36) and in another report in the same bulletin (13:36). The term "senior Sunni symbols" (1:27) is also added to refer to the previous prime ministers via their sectarian background not by their names or previous positions. And another focused on adding the "sect" field to a form issued by the Ministry of Labor for private companies for employees to fill out and "screen them as Muslims and Christians", (5:02-5:03). This [news bulletin](#) highlighted the issue, which led to the cancellation of the updated form after communicating with the Minister of Labor in the report.

Concerning Al Manar, the main focus was largely on the terms "Resistance," "Hezbollah," and "Dahieh" in addition to covering the positions of members of the Hezbollah-affiliated Loyalty to the Resistance parliamentary bloc and other figures from the party that owns the channel. In a [news bulletin](#) mentioning the reconciliation between Hezbollah and the Progressive Socialist Party, no sectarian terminology was used. In [another report](#), "diversity" in Lebanon was highlighted and the idea of "excluding the other" was strongly rejected (33:19-33:29) via the position of Patriarch Al-Rai. In a [third report](#), the beginning of the news bulletin was that Jumblatt said that he would put forward names from outside the Progressive Socialist Party even though he specifically highlighted it would be someone from the Druze sect.

Most of Lebanon's outlets adopted a highly neutral approach at first glance, focusing mainly on the country's political dynamics. However, the most repetitive error noted was methodological. Using terms such as Christian representation, Druze share, Shiite duo etc. reduces the role of political parties in Lebanon down to their sectarian affiliation. While it is true that the Lebanese system is confessional and sectarian by nature, this should not eliminate the perspective of a multitude of political parties competing on the electoral, parliamentary and government scene for their own interests, and not necessarily driven by a religious or sectarian agenda. Such references group all members of a certain sect under a partisan umbrella, which is not accurate. It is misleading as it reinforces the reader's sectarian mindset. This provides an incorrect and/or incomplete reading of the political situation.

Sudan

Media Landscape

Overview

The independent media sector in Sudan is rather underdeveloped. Staff is not adequately trained, and investments are low. Decades of government crackdown on freedom of expression²⁰ and monopoly have had a strong impact on overall performance.

The most popular radio stations are government-owned while little information is available concerning local radio stations, which have only been emerging since the overthrow of former President Omar Al-Bashir. There is potential for foreign channels, however, they have yet to gain the public's trust.

With social media taking over, print media is becoming less relevant. TV remains more engaging and possibly more accessible while pan-Arab channels are growing in popularity. At the same time, key challenges for Internet use include costliness, misinformation campaigns and content removal.

Recent Events and Political Climate

The political transition that began in the summer of 2019 is in the process of devising new rules and enforcing some forms of accountability, in spite of the delicate balance between military and civilians in the new government.

One of the most symbolic gestures is the trial of ousted dictator Omar Al-Bashir, and his conviction on December 13, 2019 to two years in prison for possessing foreign currency unlawfully and receiving illegal gifts. He was also indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide in Darfur.

The year began with a wave of violence around Sudan, with disputes between Arab and African ethnic groups in West Sudan, an attempted coup in the capital Khartoum, and a deadly attack on ethnic grounds in the disputed area of Abyei along the South Sudan border. On January 31, 2020, US President Donald Trump added Sudan to a six-country list included in the travel ban.

On February 4, a meeting was held in Entebbe, Uganda, between the president of Sudan's ruling Sovereign Council Abdul Fattah Burhan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This meeting is the first sign of normalization between the two countries and drew sharp criticism from the Palestinian Authority and many left-wing groups in Sudan.

²⁰ Sudan profile – media, *BBC*, July 23, 2019, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14095119>, last visited on September 17, 2020.

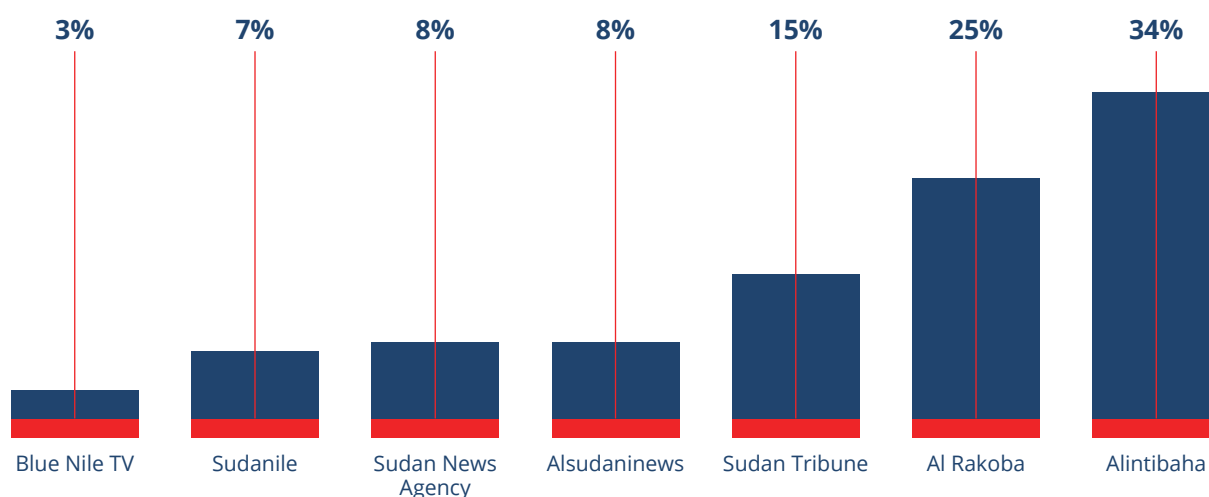
On March 9, Sudanese Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok survived an assassination attempt in Khartoum, when his motorcade was attacked by gunfire and bombs. Several arrests followed the attempt. Attention shifted to the COVID-19 outbreak towards the middle of the month, when the country declared on March 18 the state of emergency and the closing of borders. These measures exacerbated the severe bread and fuel shortages that the country has been facing for months.

At the societal level, the most important development in Sudan was the April 30 law that criminalized female genital mutilation (FGM). It was passed after long activism from women's rights groups, in a country where 9 out of 10 women have suffered FGM in their early childhood.

Sudan remained involved in the trilateral negotiations with Ethiopia and Egypt in an effort to defuse risks of conflicts associated with the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile river. Both Ethiopia and Egypt have been trying to get Sudan closer to their camp.

Size of the Data

Chart 21: Size of the data



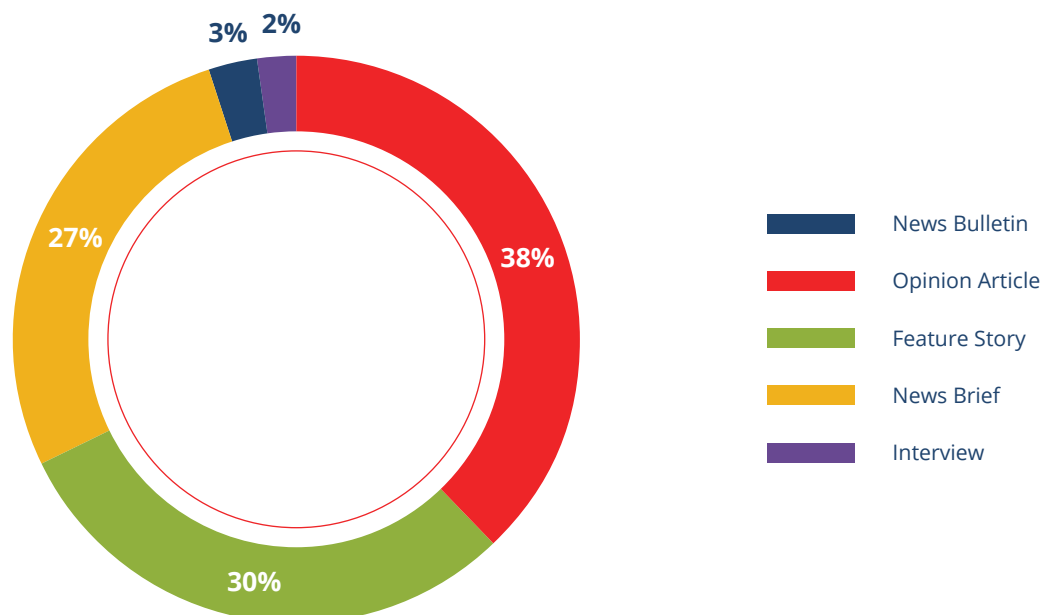
During the monitoring period, 60 relevant pieces of content were produced in total from Sudan. 34 percent of the items included in this study were published by **Alintibaha**. In second place, **Al Rakoba** provided 27 percent of the data, followed by **Sudan Tribune** producing 13 percent of the content monitored.

The fourth place was occupied by both **Alsudaninews** and **Sudan News Agency** providing 8 percent of the content.

Finally, we have **Sudanile** producing 7 percent of the content followed by **Blue Nile TV** at only 3 percent. It is noteworthy to mention that **Blue Nile TV** is the only TV outlet in this part of the study.

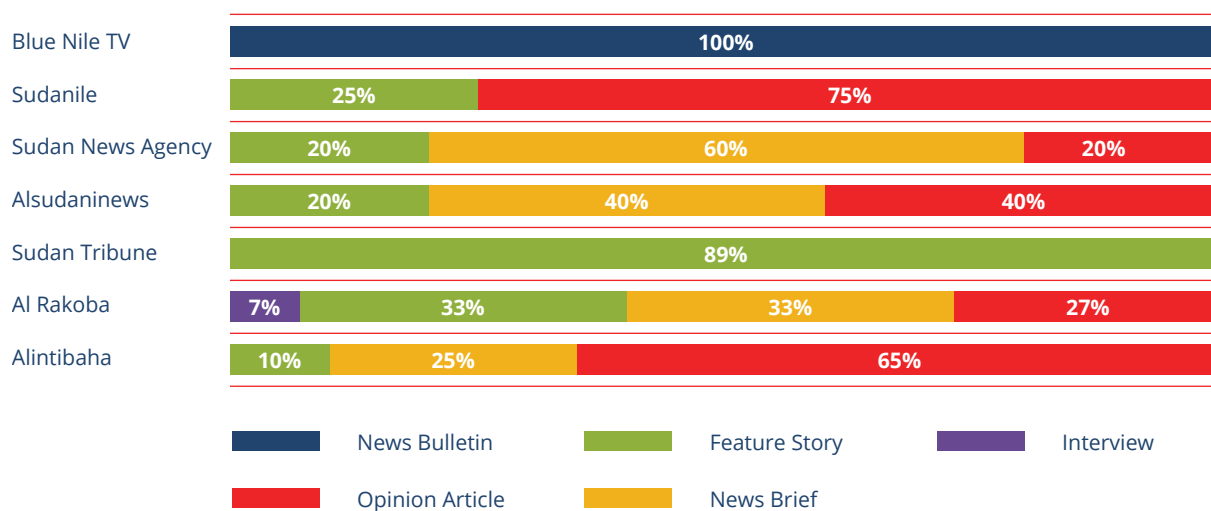
Type of Content

Chart 22: Type of content



The 60 items were broken down according to their type. 38 percent were **opinion articles** that reflect the views of authors who often share those of their respective outlets, 30 percent were **feature stories**, 27 percent were **news briefs** coming mainly from coverage of current events and stories taken from international news wires. Then came **news bulletin segments** with 3 percent of the data and finally **interviews** with only 2 percent.

Chart 23: Type of content per media outlet



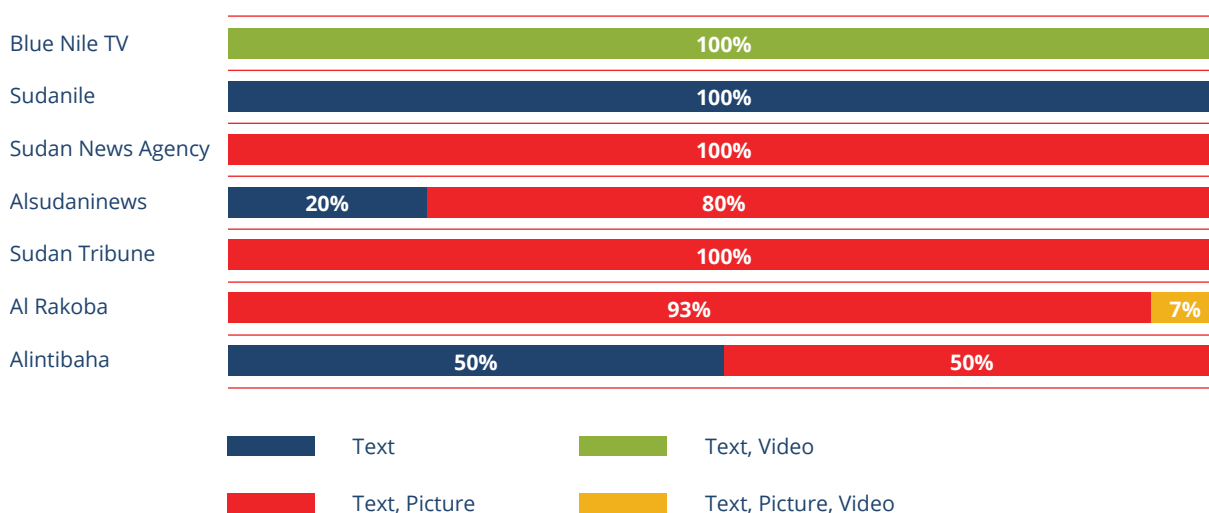
Opinion articles represent the largest proportion of the content in 2 out of the 7 monitored media outlets. Opinion pieces can be less evidence-based and leave room for potential disinformation.

News briefs figured the most in each of **Sudan News Agency** (60 percent). **Sudan Tribune** had the highest percentage of **feature stories** at 89 percent, this type of content comprised around 20 percent for most other outlets.

Al Rakoba had the most diverse selection and was the only outlet to utilize interviews, albeit only 7 percent of their content.

Medium Used

Chart 24: Type of medium used



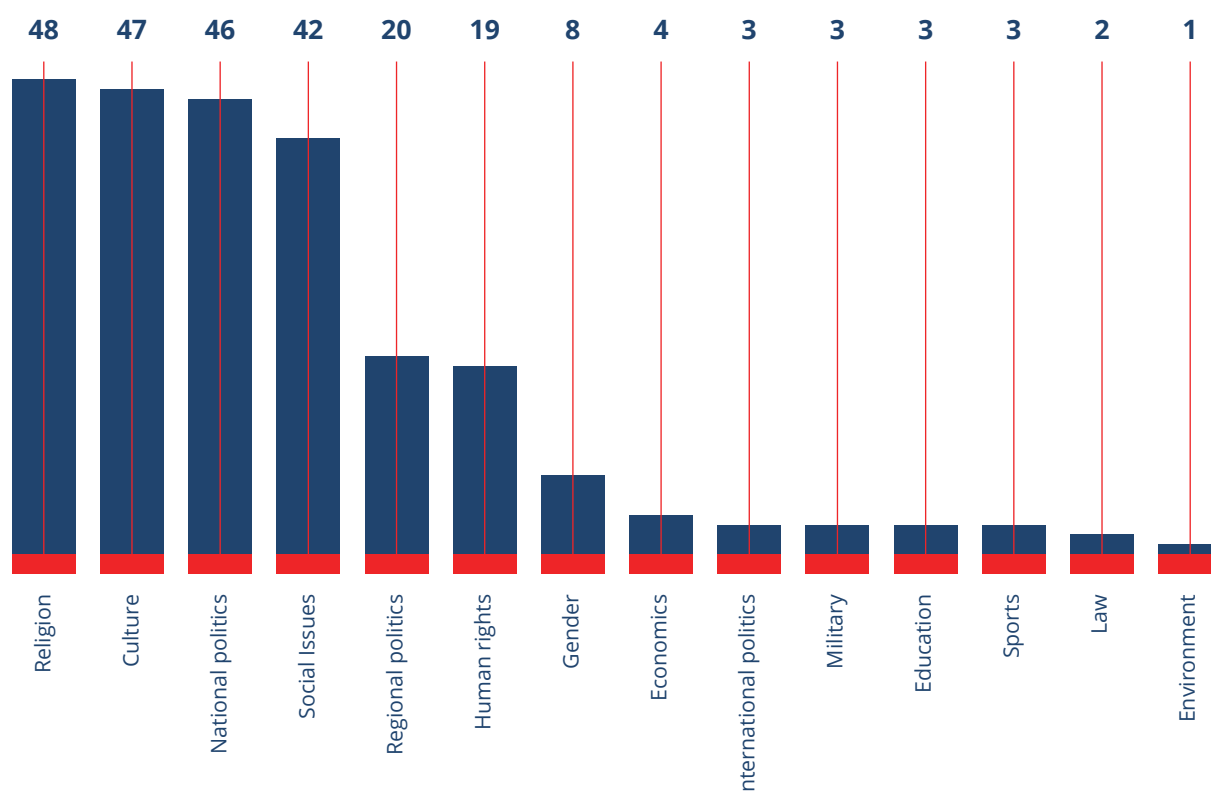
Video was only used by **Blue Nile TV**.

Articles relied more on pictures as a good in-between answer for those seeking engaging content yet do not want long load times or heavy data consumption.

Sudanile was the only outlet to rely solely on text while **Al Rakoba** was the only one to utilize all three mediums in a few of their content pieces.

Themes of the Pieces

Chart 25: Themes covered



News bulletins were not included in the topic assessment due to the very wide range of topics they tackle.

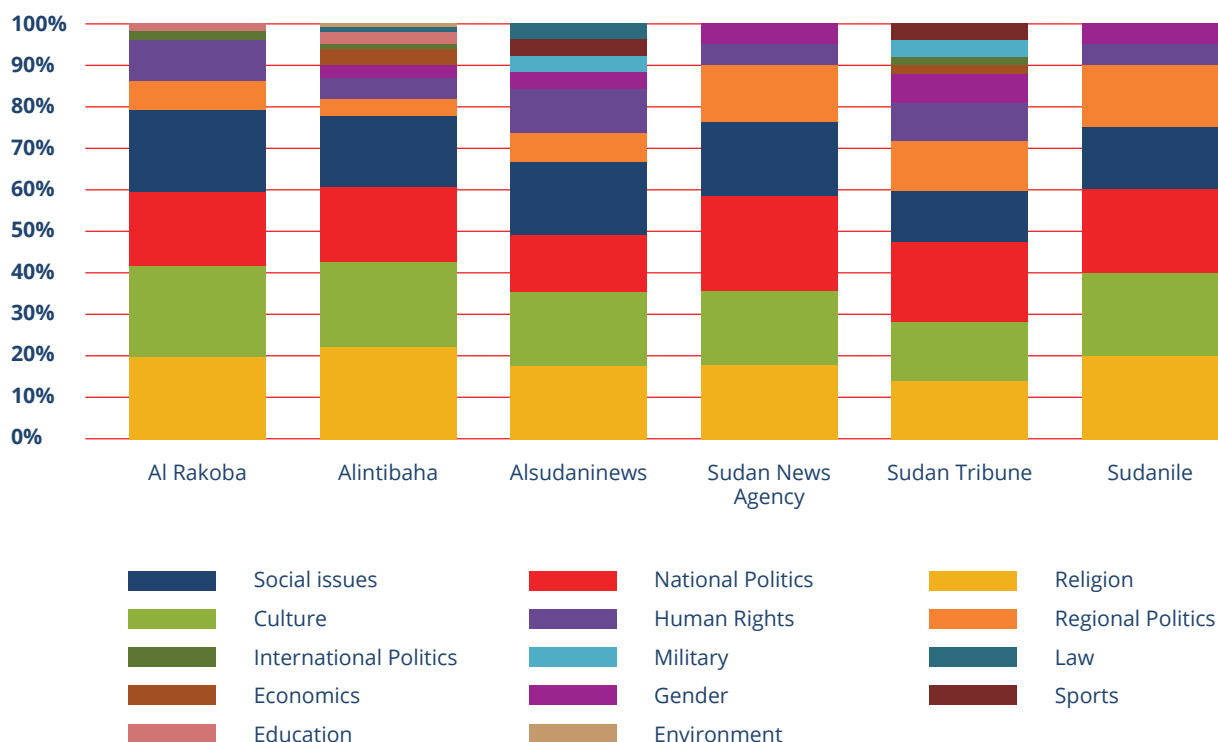
Religion was the most recurrent topic in the data monitored, in 48 pieces of the published material (83 percent of the content). Topics associated with the issue of religious freedoms and diversity included **culture** in 47 pieces (81 percent of the content). 46 pieces covered **national politics** and 42 pieces discussed **social issues** (79 and 72 percent respectively).

Interestingly, **regional politics** occurred in 20 pieces (34 percent of the content) as well as **human rights** in 19 pieces. **Gender** was mentioned in 8 pieces and **economics** in 4. Close behind, **international politics**, **military & security**, **education** and **sports** all were included in 3 content pieces each (5 percent of the content).

Lastly, **law** and **environment** were topics of discussion in 2 and 1 pieces respectively, while **health** was not covered at all.

It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one topic.

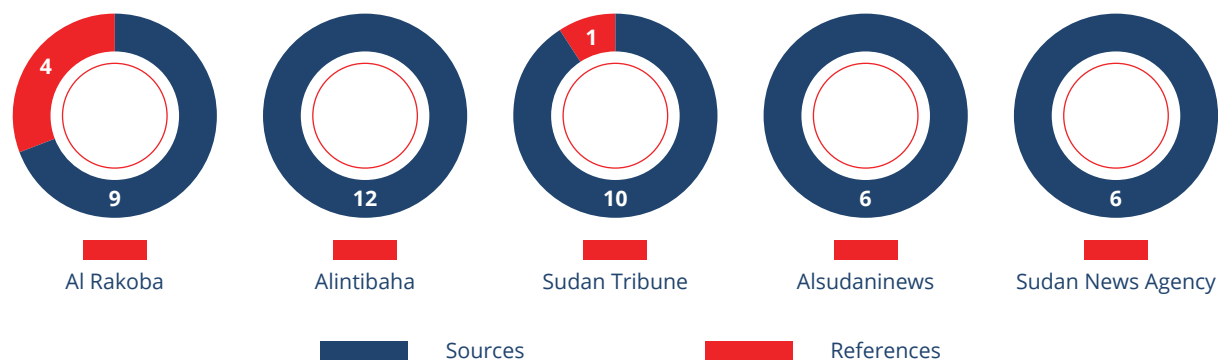
Chart 26: Breakdown of the themes per outlet



All outlets except **Sudan Tribune** covered **religion, culture** and **social issues** to a similar degree. National politics was also a popular topic indicating that religion is covered from the lens of its links with local politics.

Sources and External References

Chart 27: Number of sources and references per article

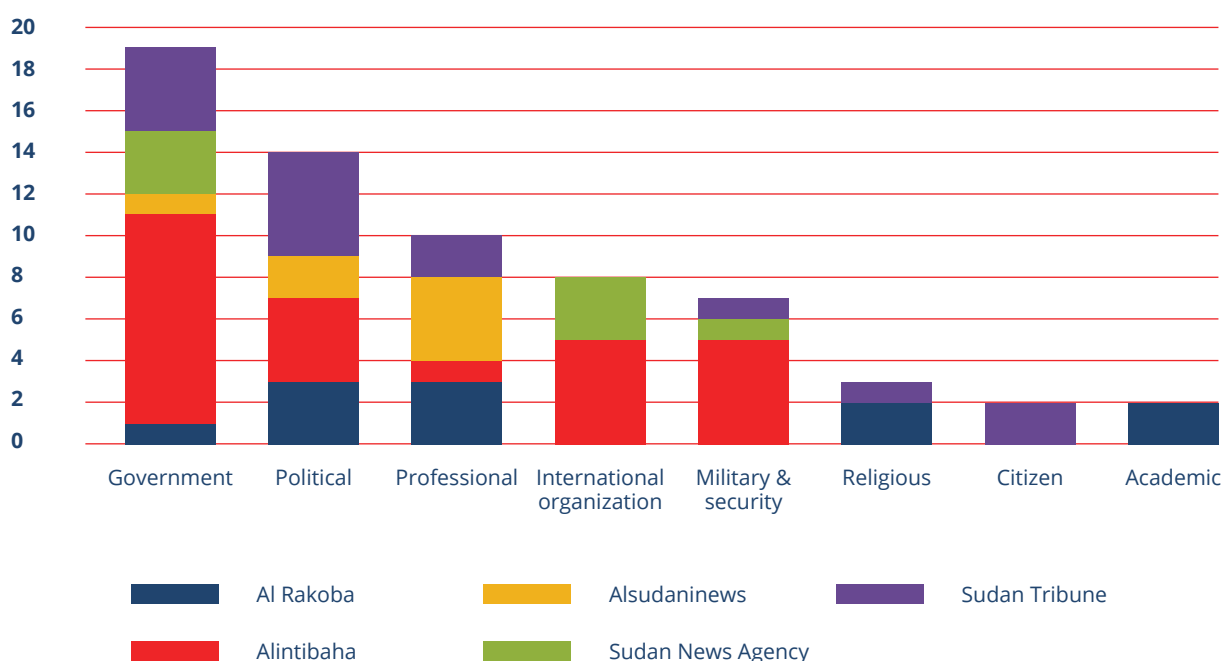


To assess the approach of media outlets to sources and external references, this study excluded opinion articles, interviews and news bulletins. This brings the total number of news briefs and feature stories down to 34 pieces.

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 34 articles and reports that were selected, 43 sources were cited, i.e. an average of 1.26 sources per article, as well as 5 external references, i.e. an average of 0.15 references per articles.

Sudan News Agency as well as **Alsudaninews** had the lowest numbers of sources while **Al Rakoba** and **Sudan Tribune** were the only ones who used external references, potentially indicating an attempt to further substantiate their content.

Chart 28: Nature of the sources



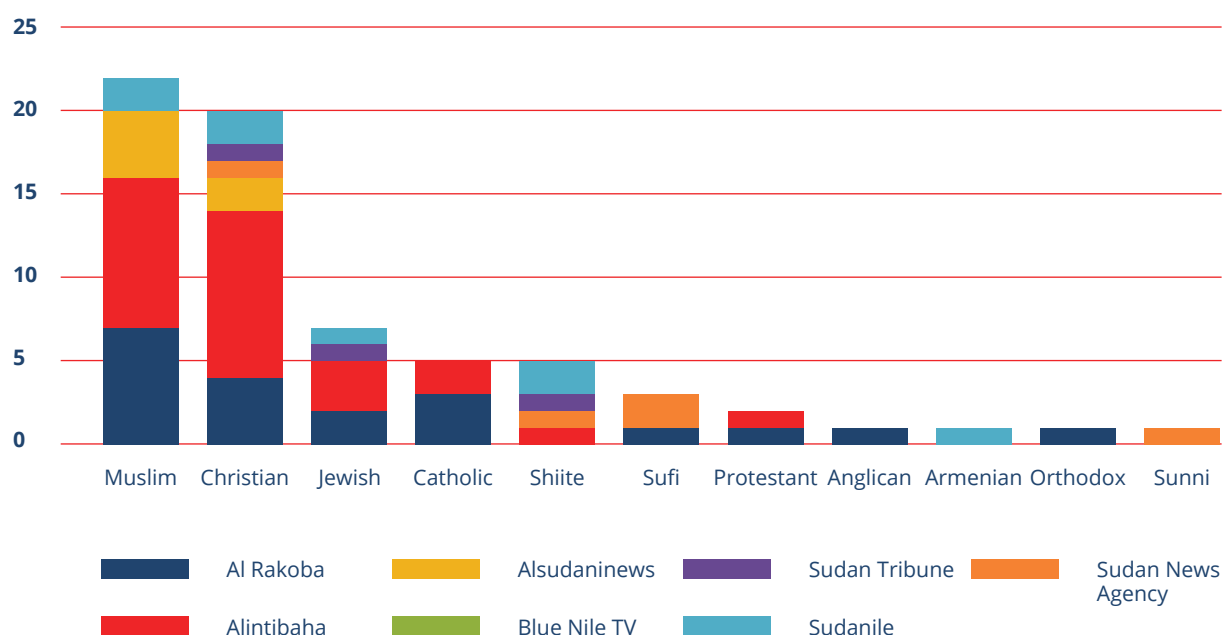
The most striking finding when looking at the nature of the sources cited by the media outlets monitored is how **local activists** and **NGOs** made no appearance in this study as sources. **Citizen** and **academic** sources trailed the ranking of used sources, each appearing in only 2 of the pieces out of the 34 monitored.

Conversely, the media outlets subject of this study relied on **government** sources in 19 pieces (56 percent of the content) followed by **political** sources in 14 pieces (41 percent of the content). **Professionals** i.e. people working in their field of expertise, came in third place, in 10 pieces (29 percent of the content). **International organizations** as well as **military & security** were used in 8 and 7 of the pieces respectively (24 and 21 percent).

The main reason **government** sources take the lead is because of Alintibaha, which also relied the most on **military & security**. Sudan News Agency also relied heavily on **government** sources and international organizations. Sudan Tribune relied the most on **political** sources and was the only outlet to utilize **citizens** as sources. Al Rakoba was the only outlet to utilize **academic** sources.

Groups Mentioned

Chart 29: Groups mentioned per media outlet



The most used word is **Muslim** **مسلم** appearing in 22 pieces (37 percent of the content). In the second place, the word **Christian** **مسيحي** was used in 20 pieces (33 percent of the content), followed by **Jewish** **يهودي**, appearing in 7 pieces (12 percent of the content). In the fourth place, both **Catholic** **كاثوليكي** and **Shiite** **شيعة** were used in 5 pieces each (8 percent of the content each).

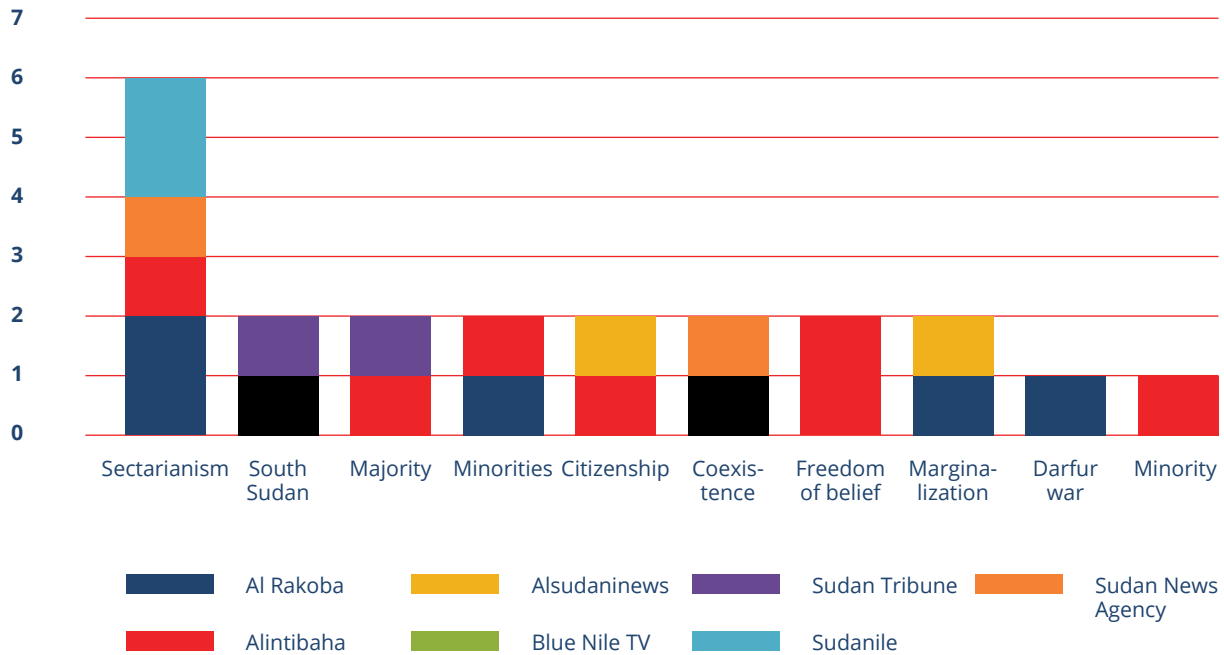
Additional relevant but not quite prominent groups include **Sufi** **صوفي**, used in 3 pieces (5 percent of the content) and **Protestant** **بروتستانت**, used in 2 pieces (3 percent of the content).

The following words comprised 2 percent of the content, each being used once: **Anglican** **انجليكاني**, **Armenian** **أرمني**, **Orthodox** **أورثوذكسي** and **Sunni** **سني**.

It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one group.

Concepts Mentioned

Chart 30: Concepts mentioned per media outlet



Due to the large amount of data gathered and studied, the chart above only shows the top-10 most common concepts used by each outlet.

The majority of the words were used once or twice. The furthestmost used word is **sectarianism** طائفية appearing in 6 pieces (10 percent of the content). It was followed by **South Sudan** جنوب السودان, **majority** أغلبية, **minorities** أقليات, **citizenship** المواطنة, **coexistence** التعايش, **freedom of belief** حرية المعتقد, and **marginalization** تهجير, each of which appeared in 2 pieces (3 percent of the content each).

Other concepts include **Darfur war** حرب دارفور, **minority** أقلية, **components** مكونات, **diversity** التنوع, **pluralism** التعددية, **identity** الهوية, **partnership** الشراكة, **living together** العيش معا, **shared living** العيش المشترك, **religious freedom** الحرية الدينية, **tolerance** قبول الآخر, **civil peace** السلم الأهلي, **federal** فدرالي, **persecution** اضطهاد, **religious racism** عنصرية دينية, each appearing once (2 percent of the content).

It should be noted that the same article or report could cover more than one concept.

Findings and Recommendations

This section will analyze some of the key ideas propagated by the different media outlets monitored be they negative, positive or even neutral. We aim to present the most striking sentences, try to show their significance in this study and recommend certain courses of action to address them.

Blue Nile TV did not present much religious-related news and mainly focused on general politics. It's important to note that the sample was extremely small and not very representative compared to other outlets as they did not upload their content consistently on their online platforms.

Alintibaha published a particularly negative [opinion article](#). It used polarizing language, claiming Islam is in danger from Christianity as well as other "heathens" and that this is facilitated by secular governments. In another [opinion piece](#) (since removed by the outlet), the author claimed that anyone who listens to atheist Karl Marx rather than Prophet Muhammad must be avoided. Interestingly, different sects were spoken of positively (Sufis) and negatively (Shiites) in the same [opinion article](#) by a political figure. Negatively when Shiism was labelled as a perverted religion and Shiites were branded as a criminal influence to be purged from the country, hiding behind Sufism as they used Sufi facades to polish their image. Positively, as the Sudanese Sufism needs to be protected by the international community for the values of human rights and coexistence to remain.

Alsudaninews was generally neutral, however, there were news briefs and [opinion pieces](#) where Islam was presented as the only religion to be accepted while all the rest must be rejected as they threaten the national identity with secularism. This rejection was also under the pretext that anything else is a Western tool of control, hate speech and influence, including the human rights charter. It should be noted that secularism has gained a bad reputation in the Arab world as it is often mistakenly associated with atheism and blasphemy and a discarding of traditional values for corrupt Western ones.

In a [feature story](#), Al Rakoba reported substantial hate speech from the former president's uncle (At-tayyeb Mostafa), stating that "Christians are not even worth the ammunition that hit them," highlighting that the regime provokes more hate towards Christians of South Sudan than those who remained in the North. Another [news brief](#) mentions how Sudan's former president, Omar Al Bashir, enforced sharia law and pushed Christians out of the country.

On the other hand, one of their [feature stories](#) detailed how one of the public schools in Germany is now teaching different religions instead of only Christianity to foster cultural and religious pluralism.

Sudan News Agency (SUNA) highlighted Sufism as a positive influence within Sudan, promoting the values of unity in the Sudanese society in this [news brief](#). In another [news brief](#), it represented Christianity positively once again as seen when they wrote of a pastor from the Ministry of Churches who had been holding workshops dealing with pertinent issues for Christians and the society. Interestingly, they spoke well of the protests in Iraq as a positive force combatting sectarianism and uniting different religions in this opinion piece. This contrasts with what some of the Iraqi outlets portrayed.

Sudan Tribune showed a notable lack of positive reporting on any religion though they did not speak ill of any either. However, through feature stories, they reported about transgressions of Muslim political parties against women and other minorities such as when Nigerian militia Boko Haram enforced Sharia law in Christian areas or when the Minister of Sports in Sudan came under fire for promoting women in football.

In an opinion piece, Sudanile reported negatively when it comes to religions aside from Islam especially towards Christians, who were branded as attempting to undermine Islam and change the national identity during the colonization days, according to the outlet. On another occasion, Jews were presented as deceitful and sowed seeds of sectarian dissent. Finally, there was excessive generalization when attributing a foreign sponsor for each religion, as seen in this opinion piece. Christians were linked to the US while Shiites to Iraq and Iran.

In the Sudanese media, the bulk of the discussion concerned the peace process between the North and the South, its possibility, how it could be achieved, and its implications. Local outlets seemed aware of the tensions especially those between Christians who remained in the North and the rest of the population. Some reported highly antagonistic views towards religions other than Islam with a specific focus on Christianity and Shiites (not seen as truly part of Islam). One outlet spoke ill of Jews in particular, however, the reasons behind this are not entirely clear. Secularism, human rights and Western values were often the target of attacks. In contrast, outlets based abroad emphasized the importance of pluralism and minority rights while criticizing intolerant discourses in politics far more often than local ones.

It is crucial for Sudan, a country going through a major, yet fragile, transition that outlets perpetuating negative news and hate speech about religions of any kind, especially minorities, adopt a less antagonistic approach to avoid dangerous societal repercussions. There must always be room for communication and dialogue for all parties to feel heard and prevent potential conflicts. Once again, religious identities and beliefs must not be confused with political views and ideologies. Representation of more diverse perspectives within pieces is also highly necessary, especially considering most of the content monitored was opinion pieces.

Conclusion

While most outlets are not usually spreading outright hate-speech, many implicitly hint at certain segments of society, attributing negative characteristics to them or misrepresenting their views and positions. In other cases, positive representation of preferred groups is blatantly clear. Religion or religious groups were discussed in a highly diverse selection of topics, showing that antagonistic, friendly and neutral discourses about religious freedom and diversity can be adopted in a wide range of scenarios, from topics related to politics all the way to scientific issues.

Depending on the media outlets' political affiliation and funding, it may be inclined to report on certain topics or adopt certain perspectives. This selection bias can be difficult to circumvent due to either lack of willingness or ability. However, a part of the responsibility also lies with individual journalists who seek to improve the quality of their own work. We recommend adopting a more ethical, accurate approach that does not incite sectarian discord but fosters communication. This can be done by using the correct terminologies when referring to groups, coverage of more diverse topics and presentation of multiple perspectives. Sources and references are a crucial matter as well, since they give credibility and challenge the authors to support claims with concrete data, while spreading the much-needed culture of evidence-based journalism.

The above points are best addressed through a series of training opportunities and continuous mentorship towards more professional journalistic work, which mitigates inaccurate stereotypes and disinformation. Given the media's powerful role in shaping public opinion, these factors are essential to push for a more democratic lifestyle that respects the diverse groups within any society.

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