A White Paper on Youth and Media

Introduction note

This paper was produced under Free Press Unlimited's 2022 Syria Program "Cohesion through Independent and Inclusive Media (CIIM)", which focuses on youth as as media users, consumers and producers.

This report discusses the main obstacles journalists face, particularly with regards to targeting youth, and offers up to date information about youth media habits, as well as how youth perceieve new and traditional media.

Extensive research has been done to inform on the subject, including an academic literature review; research reports; and direct live feedback from a series of focus groups with members of young audiences organized by Free Press Unlimited in 2022. This paper is guided by an analysis of how different media outlets (international, regional, and Syrian) operate on social media platforms, and which sections and programs specifically target youth; it includes interviews with Syrian journalists; and a content analysis of whether and how Syrian independent media cover and portray youth in the media.

Upon demand, access to the entire report can be requested. Please write us at researchsyria@ freepressunlimited.org

In the end of this paper, you can find the literature list on which the original report is based.

Some initial conclusions about youth and media

While youth has always been a significant, but difficult target for media organizations, recent technological changes made reaching this segment of society even more challenging.

In Syria, people under 14 constitute around 33% of the total population,[1] and those between 15 and 24 years old around 20%.[2]

This data alone indicates how important it is for journalists in general, and other civil society in Syria, to understand how to better reach and communicate with youth.

Youth today are the audience of tomorrow and the way they engage with media content indicates which direction the field is heading.

Below we list some of the main elements constituting the complex relationship between news, media and youth:

- **The connection** between journalism organizations and youth **remains a complicated one**: after all, how can a 14 year old person be compelled to read a newspaper full of bad news about the world? However, digital media, and especially social media, offers journalists opportunities, as well as new challenges.
- **The digitization** of media content **did not rejuvenate** the audiences. Young people today tend to have their own approach to media content and news outlets, but even the most established ones still struggle to engage them.
- With different degrees, mainstream media in general **does not appear to target** youth as they often do not have dedicated sections or sub-outlets and their coverage **does not highlight** youth issues or **speak to them as an audience.**
- It is **not yet clear** how news media should **operate on social media** such as TikTok, Snapchat, or Instagram, in order to attract audiences, particularly youths , and how to build a sustainable model on these platforms.
- However, some post-2011 digital independent media organizations in the MENA region are attempting to attract young, albeit well educated adults, by displaying more visual and

---

1 https://www.statista.com/statistics/326601/age-structure-in-syria/

FREE PRESS UNLIMITED

graphic styles, covering a variety of issues from the environment to sexual health; and using a more modern language and tone.

Youth and news: awkward bedfellows

- Youth, even more than adults, tend to inform themselves exclusively through **social media.**
- Young people are more **cause or issue-oriented** than driven by regular media habits. They are **"brand agnostic"**: they do not regularly consult the same sources, but rather seek out information from a variety of mediums. Even their preferences for social media platforms tend to change rapidly.
- Young audiences **wait for the news to find them,** and not vice versa. It is no longer about where you get the news, but more about who told you about it, and if you can share it.
- The **attention** span of youth is regularly characterized as rapidly dwindling. It is purported that young people are not very interested in reading traditional articles of 1500 words or more.
- Young people **tend to trust media** organizations **less** than adult people. At the same time, they have their own strategies to decide if news is trustworthy or not: is it repeated by different sources? Is it supported by clear visual evidence? Do comments and feedback support the news? **Content quality is usually more important than the name of the source.**

What do youth look for in media content?

- **Connectivity.** Young people often search for valuable social information they can share and discuss with their peers.
- **Flexibility, Creativity, and Innovation.** Content should be entertaining, and innovative in its presentation. Creativity, engagement, and interaction are more important than credibility. They can find the traditional ways to present news unengaging and depressing, as news is almost always "bad news".
- **Multimedia Content.** Young people generally prefer multimedia, video, or audio content to written articles.
- **A different approach to news.** Many youths are still interested in politics or other causes, but they approach journalistic content differently. **They do not** necessarily **prioritise objectivity and impartiality** but rather who says what. For them the figure of **"who is a journalist"** is more open to **different interpretations**. Young people can get their information from a Youtuber, an online celebrity or a sports star on twitter. They also appreciate **constructive** and **positive content**, which can serve their social needs without boring or depressing them.

How is Youth portrayed by the media?

Several studies highlight different problems when it comes to how mass media portray youth and their issues.

Some of the most important are:
- Tendency to associate youth with **laziness, vacuity, immaturity, obsession with online influencers and reality TV.** Young people are often portrayed as **unaware or illinformed, in need of protection and/or not capable of taking coherent decisions.**
- Mass media tend to **associate** youth with **certain topics** (ie: music, films, sports and

entertainment), and **exclude them from others** such as politics and culture for example.

- In the **MENA region,** youth appear to be **even more marginalized** in the media, and often treated in a superficial and condescending way.
- Youth are often deemed **unreliable sources,** and their voices are not included.

These elements tend to reinforce the reservations youth have towards traditional journalistic platforms, as well as their quest for alternative sources.

What about youth and media in Syria?

A series of focus groups held by Free Press Unlimited which included Syrian youth in different geographic areas confirmed similar trends to those at the global and regional level.

In particular, Syrian youth:

Feel that traditional media **do not represent** their **perspectives** and do not represent them properly.

- Perceive **traditional media** as **old**, and tend to follow them only together with their parents.
- Believe that traditional media have **prejudices and biases** against young people.
- **Do not trust mass media**, and specifically traditional media.
- **Look for entertainment** and/or visual and entertaining styles of content.
- **Prefer constructive and overpowering** content, such as individual stories of success.
- **Privilege TikTok, Instagram and YouTube** as social media, with Twitter and Facebook playing a less relevant role.
- **Rely on mobile phones and social media more than TV for their news consumption.** Newspapers, even in digital versions, are practically absent from their media consumption.
- **Do not find Syrian media attractive**. They

4

FREE PRESS UNLIMITED

prefer international media or individual profiles on social media.

- **When in exile, they tend to lose their interest in Syrian current affairs**.

These trends are identified also by other surveys, which confirm Syrian youth refer mostly to online influencers, or groups on WhatsApp and Telegram, to get informed.

…and Syrian independent media?

We conducted a series of interviews with journalists working for Syrian independent media platforms, and analyzed some of their content in order to investigate how these organizations approach youth.

The conclusions were:

- In general, Syrian independent media **do not reach** or even **try to target** young audiences and do not **have dedicated strategies** to do so.
- There is often some **confusion** among journalists when it comes **to what constitutes a "young audience".** For example, some respondents consider "youth" as people over 30 or even 40 years old.

- Even when media articles cover issues related to youth, **the language, the formats, and the visuals are the same as the rest of the coverage**. In fact, even when independent media cover youth, it seems that this coverage is directed to an adult audience.
- The coverage **does not give enough space to young sources and voices**. Even when they are present, young sources are overshadowed by older experts and/or more authoritative sources.
- The articles tend not to give information about the age of the protagonists or the sources.
- **Almost all young sources are men**.
- The articles tend often to portray youth as **victims** and as a **particularly fragile** component of society.
- Often youth is associated with **negative themes** such as drug addiction, terrorism, declining marriage rates, the deterioration of economic conditions, military conscription. Often youth is **relegated to specific topics** such as technology and social media.

Recommendations for media organizations

Youth should be more included and considered in the coverage in terms of representation and content production

- Give youth more opportunities to express **their opinions and views**.
- Feature a **more diverse range of topics and content**.
- Don't exclude young people when in need of **expertise and verification**.
- **Avoid clichés and generalizations**.
- **Recognize diversity** among youth, especially when it comes to gender.
- **Hire** dedicated **young journalists** in the newsroom in order to cover youth issues and perspectives through first-hand experience and approaches.
- Do not aim at targeting youth through imitating their language or through topics you perceive as theirs. **Youth can be repulsed** by content that pretends to be about them and in their name, but **that is clearly not produced by and for them**.

Organization and presentation of content should be adapted and refined

- Use a **"road signs and context"** approach to help young audiences navigate the sea of information they are immersed in. For example, articles should offer more context and background to news, making clear **the 'why'** and not only the who, what and where. Journalists should try to be more descriptive and engaging. Articles should make more extensive use of **maps, infographics, and simple designs** to explain complex issues.
- **Use more links and sources**, this will reinforce your credibility among youth. Apparently youth tend to appreciate news aggregators.
- Provide **"wisdom journalism",** meaning that reporters should explain why something matters. Try to have a more **interpretive, explanatory, and even opinionated take** on current events. Holding Q&As with journalists and articles answering specific questions, for example, can be very helpful.
- **Rethink website design**. The homepage of a media outlet should be simple, attractive, **deprived of superfluous content**, and with a specific identity. **Only a few** selected items should be highlighted in the home page, while social media could be used to advertise the rest of the content.
- **New formats can be experimented**. Online articles almost always reproduce the traditional paper structure, with text and pictures. Not only can this be too repetitive and unattractive for a younger public, but it does not exploit the potential longer cycle of online content. For example, having **a template that explains clearly a certain issue and is constantly updated** can attract the audience multiple times, but does not require to be produced from zero every time.
- Invest more on **positive, constructive and empowering** news, try also to provide social information young audiences can use in their circles.

Engage more with your audience
- Invest towards **"engaging newsrooms"**. Journalists should try to dedicate a part of their time to **communicate with their audiences** by giving them space to participate on social media, hosting columns from the community, hosting interviews; involve online influencers; join online threads and conversations; be reactive and responsive; acknowledge contributors. Youth value interactions and the sense of belonging to a community.
- **Identify the platforms where youth are more present and how trends are changing**, as preferences tend to mutate at a fast rate.
- **Develop micro-formats** on social media to convert effectively journalistic heavier content into items that can attract a broader audience and circulate better across a variety of platforms.

The challenges

Reaching youth remains a difficult task for media organizations today, especially if they do not have many resources. Here we list some of the main challenges media organizations have

FREE PRESS UNLIMITED

to consider when it comes to building up their young (but not only) audiences.

- Reaching youth sometimes needs radical changes in the structure of content production and presentation. These changes often require specific **know-how**, but most importantly they demand the necessary **resources** to hire journalists to transform the newsroom in a younger, more interactive, and more social media capable organization.
- Reaching youth means to communicate well on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and others. These activities need resources and are time consuming. The problem is that there is **no clear business model** when it comes to the use of social media. Let's be clear: even if media organizations succeed in attracting youth on their social media, it is difficult to convert this audience increase into revenues. **Attracting audiences on whatsApp and Instagram requires capital, but tends not to bring any, and sometimes it does not even attract greater traffic towards the main websites.**
- **Social media platforms have their own limitations...**when it comes to adapting journalistic content in order to attract audiences. Two examples: A WhatsApp group has a limit in terms of numbers, which means a media outlet should manage many of them at the same time. Stories on Instagram end in 24 hours and need to be always reproduced.
- **...and their own logic.** If they want to attract youth, media organizations may need to find viable compromises with their professional values of objectivity, impartiality, and language neutrality, in favor of more personal, creative, visual and attractive tones.
- **Youth have their own tastes for news.** Youth want a more creative, flexible and innovative content, while older audiences want to rely upon a constant and coherent product. However, finding a balance may not be very easy. For example, you can succeed in attracting some young audiences, but at the same time lose a part of your traditional audience.

This is why many media organizations prefer to open a sub-outlet dedicated to youth, rather than changing their already existing channels. But also this choice has its own downsides: it costs even more money; and it requires training and coaching young journalists into being capable of working autonomously.

- **Engagement activities are not easy to implement**. There is no ultimate codebook about how to attract young audiences on social media. Stories of success are often related to specific persons who are particularly talented in communicating on these platforms, and it is not easy to find them or to replace them when they leave.
- **Youth is not one homogeneous group**. There are differences related to geography, class, gender and so on. This could be particularly problematic for Syrian independent media, as Syrian youth may have had very different experiences in relation to the war and the political context they currently live in, or if they belong to IDPs, refugee camps or Syrian diaspora communities. For these reasons, media organizations should identify more in detail **which kind of youth they want to target, and where**.