



# IT WON'T ALWAYS

# BE LIKE THIS:

How to Prepare Turkey's Journalists for a Freer Era

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# It Won't Always Be Like This: How to Prepare Turkey's Journalists for a Freer Era

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International Press Institute (IPI)

BY EMRE KIZILKAYA, IPI TURKEY NATIONAL COMMITTEE



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**About the Author:** Emre Kızılkaya is the vice chair of IPI's Turkey National Committee. After working for more than 15 years in various roles at Turkey's largest media group, including as the managing editor and digital coordinator at the daily Hürriyet, he resigned in March 2019 to continue his work on sustainable journalism as a Knight Visiting Nieman Fellow at Harvard University.

**About IPI:** Founded in 1950, the International Press Institute (IPI) is a global network of editors, journalists and media executives dedicated to furthering and safeguarding press freedom, promoting the free flow of news and information, and improving the practices of journalism.



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# Introduction

In recent years, the International Press Institute (IPI) has been an active partner in the movement to halt the criminalization of journalism in Turkey, working closely with its members in the country to uphold press freedom and resist the authorities' push to suppress the free flow of information.

Through monitoring, exposing and reporting, we have brought international attention to the plight of journalists and media workers. At the same time, our advocacy has reached out to relevant decision makers, pushing them to exert pressure on Turkey to loosen its grip on journalism. The members of our global network have also come together in condemning attacks against their fellow journalists and have shown a united front of solidarity with their Turkish colleagues behind bars or awaiting trial.

This study is a complement to IPI's advocacy work and aims to highlight concrete, achievable steps that can support the production of independent news throughout Turkey and strengthen the emerging journalistic community, particularly the latter's understanding of what constitutes good, quality journalism and how to create it.

To achieve that goal, we interviewed a relatively small but representative sample of journalism students and local journalists and publishers from all regions of Turkey and from all types of media. We also spoke with academics at both private and public universities.

The interviews and workshops with young journalists from all around Turkey revealed the most significant aspects of multiple challenges. They include the daily problems that journalism students and local reporters face in resuscitating original reporting given that most media organizations in Turkey have become merely distribution platforms for recycled content.

We believe that our findings and proposed solutions can make a contribution, albeit small, to help Turkey's journalism not only to survive the ongoing crisis, but also to flourish as soon as political, social, economic and technological conditions are normalized in the country.

After all, as one of the journalists interviewed for this study said of the current environment of repression: "It won't always be like this."



# General Outlook of Turkey's Media

There are 2,474 newspapers, 108 televisions, 3,650 magazines and 899 radio stations in Turkey, according to official figures<sup>1</sup>. 72.9 percent of the population has access to the Internet, as well as 83.8 percent of homes.

According to a report published in 2018 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism<sup>2</sup>, 87 percent of the people of Turkey get their news from digital sources and 77 percent from television. 46 percent of people say that they read print media.

The threats to quality and independent journalism in Turkey, as well as those to freedom of expression in general, can be categorized under three pillars:

- 1) *Imprisonment and other physical threats*: 137 journalists are imprisoned in Turkey as of July 2019, according to IPI's own count<sup>3</sup>. Most of these journalists are still being held in overcrowded prisons on baseless anti-terrorism charges. The indictments against them cite their work, such as news reports, as criminal evidence.

Dozens of journalists have been released conditionally or on bail in recent years, some with seized passports or travel bans, with the threat of a recurring arrest hanging over their heads like a sword of Damocles. IPI Executive Board member Kadri Gürsel, who was briefly re-arrested at the end of May 2019, is among them.

Physical assaults targeting journalists have significantly increased recently<sup>4</sup>. In May 2019 alone, Yeniçağ newspaper columnist Yavuz Selim Demirağ, Akdeniz newspaper columnist İdris Özyol, Güney Haberci news website editor Ergin Çevik, Egemen newspaper founder Hakan Denizli and Oda TV columnist Sabahattin Önkibar were injured in assaults. Most of these attacks were linked to editorial work criticizing Turkey's ruling political alliance. One of the suspects who was detained for assaulting Özyol has been working for two politicians from this alliance. Demirağ's and Çevik's suspected assailants were released, showing that impunity for attacks on journalists, which was already stressed in IPI's "Democracy at Risk"<sup>5</sup> report in 2015, persists today.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=27605> (last accessed July 2, 2019)

<sup>2</sup> See <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/digital-news-report-2018-turkey-supplementary-report>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/> (figure as of July 2, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/ipi-condemns-string-of-physical-attacks-on-turkish-journalists/>.

<sup>5</sup> See Steven M. Ellis, "Democracy at Risk: IPI Special Report on Turkey", March 2015, available online at <https://ipi.media/democracy-at-risk/> (last accessed July 2, 2019).



The threats to journalists are mirrored in Turkey's online sphere, which is one of the most vibrant in the world with more than 52 million social media users. 176 instances of violent threats out of a total of 950 instances of online harassment against journalists were recorded in Turkey as part of IPI's Ontheline project between January 2016 and February 2017<sup>6</sup>. Coordinated trolling and massive bot attacks that targeted Turkish journalists have only increased since then.

- 2) *Mass firings and other economic threats:* A majority of Turkey's top 40 media outlets, including the largest news agencies and print product distribution networks, are now directly or indirectly controlled by Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which is headed by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. According to IPI research, 170 media outlets – including news agencies, television channels, newspapers, magazines, and radios – have been seized or shut down by the government since the failed coup attempt of July 2016.<sup>7</sup> The government takeover was coupled with pro-government corporations' bids to buy and merge with more and more media outlets. As a result, 71 percent of Turkey's media audience is now fed by media outlets owned by four pro-government conglomerates, each of them having investments in at least three of the four main news and information channels (television, newspaper, news website and radio)<sup>8</sup>.

According to the Journalists' Union of Turkey (TGS), more than 10,000 media employees are currently unemployed. Dozens of them were fired for their critical views since the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the share of the government control of media has only increased after Turkey switched to an executive presidential system from parliamentary democracy in 2017.

Pro-government publishers care little about the economic sustainability of their media outlets, as they rely solely on public tenders that the government awards them for their favourable coverage in other areas of business where they have interests.

Critical news outlets also face multiple economic threats, including potential advertisers who are intimidated by the government into not doing business with certain media, as well as a lack of digital revenue necessary to sustain journalistic work under the oligopoly of U.S.-based tech platforms. As such, both the government-controlled media as well as media independent of the government face fragile economic situations that may lead to imminent shutdowns, depending on the political and economic conditions in the future.

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://onthelinedb.ipi.media/> (last accessed July 2, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> According to IPI statistics, a total of 170 media outlets (including publishing houses) were shut down by 9 decree laws between July 2016 – July 2018. 21 of these closed institutions re-opened with the same decree laws later. 149 remain closed (53 of which are newspapers). See full IPI fact sheet on media closures at <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Fact-Sheet-Turkey-JUNE-30-2019.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See "Türkiye'de Medyayı Kimler Kontrol Ediyor?", *Bianet*, Mar 3, 2019, <https://bianet.org/bianet/print/208089-turkiye-de-medyayi-kimler-kontrol-ediyor>



- 3) *Censorship, self-censorship and other professional threats:* Dozens of jailed or dismissed journalists have been torn away from their professions as a result of direct censorship. The censorship machine works even inside the pro-government media's own cadres. In May 2019, Yeni Şafak newspaper columnist Kemal Öztürk, who is the former head of the state-run Anadolu Agency, announced that he was suspending his columns for the pro-government outlet after he wrote an article criticizing the ruling by the Supreme Electoral Board that annulled the Istanbul mayoral election, which was won by the opposition.

Turkey's Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) is the main censorship mechanism for radio and television, having the authority to shut down media outlets, suspend programmes and issue hefty fines. Gag orders by prosecutors and judges, stipulating broadcast and publication bans, are routinely issued as another form of censorship.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of websites remain blocked, including Wikipedia and dozens of digital news outlets, due to their journalistic content. Officials seek to censor social media, too. According to Twitter's latest Transparency Report<sup>9</sup>, Turkish authorities requested the platform to remove more than 5,000 tweets in the second half of 2018 alone. Twitter reportedly accepted only four percent of these requests by removing 72 accounts and blocking access to 355 tweets.

Physical and economic threats, boosted by politics, have taken a heavy toll on Turkey's journalists. Many of them admit that they resort to self-censorship to stay out of prison and keep their jobs in a period of deep economic stagnation. Under these conditions, only a limited number of journalists have decent working conditions and job security. Even in the "opposition" media outlets, almost all journalists work for lower than average wages and social rights. As no media outlet in Turkey invests substantially in journalism nowadays, journalists find themselves ill-equipped and undertrained especially in the area of digital skills.

Workplace safety is another problem. Most recently, on May 10, Anadolu Agency reporter Abdülkadir Nişancı was killed after he fell off a cliff while covering a regional construction site. As of the time of this writing, it was still not clear whether he was given proper professional training and equipment beforehand or whether his family was compensated adequately after this tragic workplace death.

Most of the threats are directly related to politics, which is a fact that reaffirms the value of IPI's advocacy work. It is also beyond doubt that these advocacy efforts should cover all aspects of the issue, including capacity building, to guarantee a better future for journalism in Turkey.

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/removal-requests.html> (last accessed July 2, 2019).

Otherwise, even when politics are normalized, the people of Turkey may find a failing media system shattered by years-long damage caused by politicians, businesspeople and technological transformation. Facing this outlook, this study was focused on how to get the journalists of Turkey ready for the moment, to help them be professionally prepared to produce and disseminate world-class journalism.

## Objectives, Methodology and Context of the Study

This study encompasses findings from desk-based research, a field trip, interviews with journalists, students, academics and local publishers in Turkey, as well as other sources, including data already compiled on the same subject by other institutions. It also includes a set of recommendations for different actors, including donors.

Research started in early 2018 when the author's online columns about the state of journalism education, training and practice in Turkey drew dozens of reactions from students and academics. This core group later turned into the New Media Communication Network, comprised of more than 800 individuals from across Turkey who are interested in journalism as a profession or academic field. Some of these individuals later engaged their institutions with the network to address some of the problems voiced during the online debates.

As part of the study, we corresponded with hundreds of journalism students, young reporters and communication academics, most of whom were members of the network. We conducted video conferences with 34 students and 29 local journalists from 19 provinces of Turkey starting from early 2019. We visited the top 10 largest communication faculties in the country – based in Istanbul and Ankara – from February to May 2019 to conduct face-to-face interviews with 21 journalism students, three deans and 15 scholars of journalism.



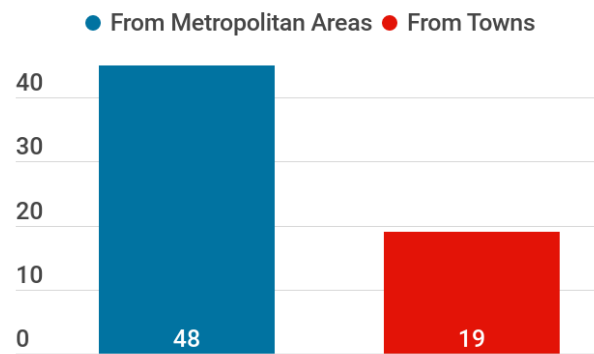
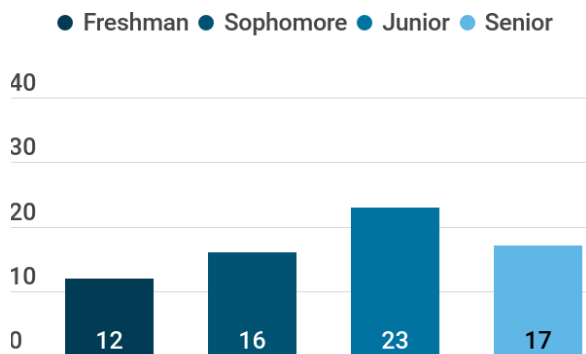
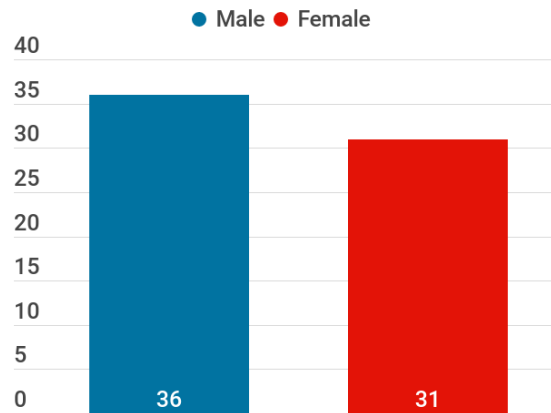




The Communication Faculty of Ankara University (ILEF), which is home to the first-ever four-year-long public journalism school in Turkey, was one of the institutions visited for this study in May 2019. During the visit, Dean Abdülrezak Altun also opened the doors of the faculty's New Media Research Laboratory (NETlab).

We also facilitated three workshops in Istanbul between February and April 2019, inspired by design-thinking methodology that prioritizes ideation and iteration, with 12 journalism students who came to Istanbul from a total of 11 cities in all seven geographical regions of Turkey.

Some attributes of the 67 students who participated in the video conferences, face-to-face interviews and workshops were:



After interviewing dozens of media employees, journalism students and academics for this research, three fault lines were detected to describe the “circulatory system” of Turkey’s media. They are: The fault line between large, national outlets and local media; between more experienced, older journalists and their younger colleagues; and between students at upscale journalism schools in metropolises and those in underfunded ones, especially in the countryside. As such, it was seen that the main predictors for the opinions of those who were interviewed are directly related to whether they work for or study at a larger institution or a smaller one (media outlets or universities), as well as whether they are digital natives or not.

There are more than 100 communication faculties throughout Turkey. Although not all of them house journalism schools, most of them have New Media departments in which many students choose journalism courses, which means that around 2,000 journalism students graduate each year. If the analogy for Turkey’s media is a circulatory system, then its capillary vessels are these schools: Like capillaries, they initially seem like they are of secondary importance, as most media organizations tend to ignore a candidate journalist’s school or department, usually applying their own tests for professional skills before employment. In reality, however, journalism schools are of vital importance, especially in Turkey’s contemporary context in which most journalism students are forced to self-publish their work through blogs, vlogs and social media in the absence of healthy, strong news organizations, especially in local communities. Similar to the way capillaries carry blood to each and every corner of the body as a vital function, these schools – with their students who usually relocate before and after their university education – carry journalism to all parts of Turkey. It explains why the ratio of journalism school graduates at local news organizations is significantly higher than those at national ones.

The field trip, interviews and workshops were organized with this context in mind. The broad scope of the study aims to identify nationwide as well as localized strategies to ensure that independent and quality journalistic content continues to be produced and disseminated in Turkey, and that Turkey’s long tradition of independent journalism survives the current crisis.



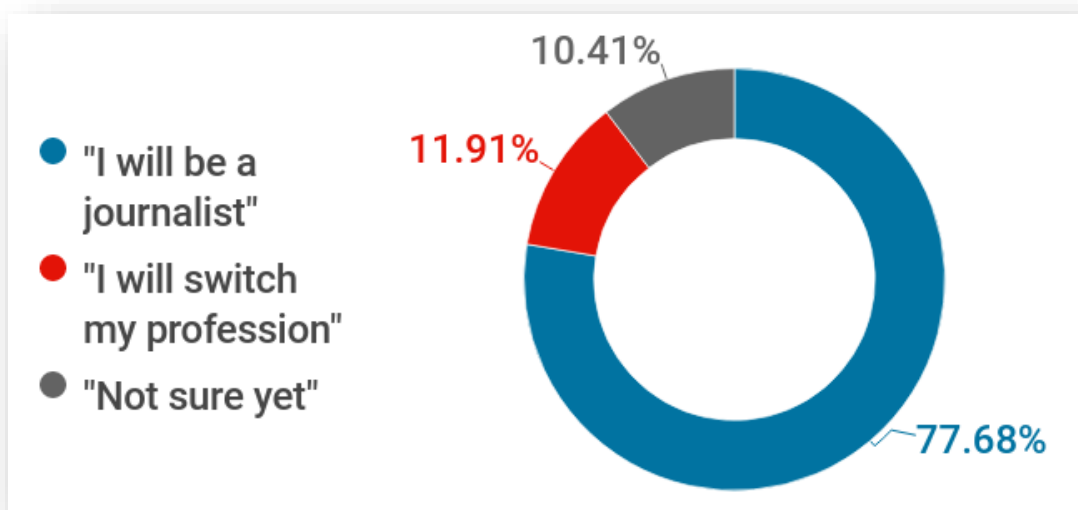
*Bilgi University, a private institution whose world-class communication faculty is headed by Dean Halil Nalcaoğlu, hosted one of the brainstorming and workshop sessions in February 2019 with students who came to Istanbul for this event from several provinces including Ankara, Izmir, Erzurum, Uşak and Kocaeli. In this photo, journalism student Sait Burak Ütücü (L) from Anadolu University in Eskişehir is seen while making a presentation during a roleplaying session, which was held to identify the problems that communication students face today.*



Nevertheless, the imposition of censorship starting in the educational system as well as the prospect of remaining unemployed for years do not seem to be breaking the will of young journalists. Hence, the same student also voiced his determination to establish a website where his peers “will be completely free to publish their news and opinions”.

“Like they say in that old fighting movie: No retreat, no surrender!” another student from the southeastern province of Diyarbakır said.

Young reporters’ resilience can also be seen through the question of whether they plan to continue in or leave the profession of journalism. Fifty-two of the 67 students surveyed affirmed that they will become journalists despite the pressures. Eight of them said that they will switch to another profession and seven others said they are not sure yet:



## b. Insufficient education and training

As seen in the word cloud, one of the most frequent problems cited by students is the curriculum of journalism schools. Many students complained that there was “too much theory” in their education and the practical training was not enough to equip them with the right kind of tools and skills in the age of digitization.

“I learned how to write a news story only in the third year at the communication faculty,” journalism student Sila Tekin said. “Our journalism school failed to transform the students to give them an analytical and social mindset. Critical thinking was only in theory as it stumbled when it came to practice. Students are finally handed diplomas, but not any road map that shows them what to do next as an individual journalist.”

There are several journalism schools operated by private universities, such as Bilgi, Kadir Has and Bahçeşehir in Istanbul, that provide ample opportunities to students with updated curricula and respected scholars. However, journalism students face challenges especially at public universities in the countryside when it comes to improving their knowledge and skills. Several students from these public universities – as well as private ones particularly in smaller towns – said that most academics did not “update themselves” despite the need for constant change and improvement to adapt to the ongoing technological shifts.

“I am a senior student in journalism but this was the first time that I saw such an academic environment that nourishes me,” a participant from a public university in a small town said after attending one of our brainstorming sessions.



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Another problem is the lack of modern equipment in many universities. This is particularly problematic for television and radio journalism students. Several academics stressed that their students graduate without even seeing a modern camera or lighting set. “The practice unit of my faculty publish and broadcast news about our university. But everything that should have been taught during this practice was only explained verbally during our lectures. Our lecturers also explained actual happenings and events about journalism verbally, but we did not have any lectures with a critical perspective”, student Ahmet Çağatay Bayraktar added.

Several students stressed the need to have new, digitally focused courses in their curriculum, supported by required equipment and apps. Data journalism, mobile reporting and basic coding were some of the most mentioned courses in this regard. One student, Ali Safa Korkut, added that the lack of “relevant” courses is not limited to digital ones. “We should also learn more about how to cover gender issues or news stories related to children.”

The TGS and the Turkish Journalists’ Association (TGC) have recently opened journalism training programmes, some of them funded by the European Union. Although these programmes are of top

quality and highly efficient, they currently do not have a large enough capacity to cover all journalists and the whole country. The state-owned Press Advertisement Institution's (BIK) retraining programme, on the other hand, has a larger capacity and more widespread organization, but – as to be expected – it fails to provide high-quality courses in which critical journalism skills are shaped.

### c. Insufficient internship opportunities

Besides these problems in their academic education, journalism students and recent graduates also point to a lack of opportunities in productive, efficient internships. According to Kubilay Kos, a 2017 graduate in journalism, internships are “the only way for a student to acquire digital skills because they are not sufficiently taught at the school”.

“I have learned how to write a news story during my internship period, not at journalism school,” Ayşegül Kılıç, a recent graduate in journalism, said.

Despite this perceived importance, students do not always have access to effective internships. Some students simply skip them because they are not a requirement for a diploma, while others struggle to find time for one in the midst of a busy schedule of university lectures.

While only a handful of students can find an internship that would develop their skills, others are “exploited”, as young journalist Alya Şahin put it. Local media outlets in particular use interns at work functions that are not related to journalism, and usually without paying any salary or covering social security costs. A journalism student from the Black Sea province of Trabzon said that she interned “almost like a slave”.

### d. Insufficient (foreign) language knowledge

Even at the journalism schools where English is the main language of education, most students fail to read, write or speak fluently in any foreign language. As these students are usually not taught effectively in their own mother tongues, it becomes even harder to teach them a foreign language. Hence, linguistic incapability lies at the root of poorly written news stories.



**Moreover, inability to speak English also disconnects young journalists from most of the world, leading them to a cul-de-sac in which they are only exposed to the oxygen-poor waters of the Turkish media landscape, instead of a nurturing, inspiring world of journalism at the global level.**

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“Turkey’s biggest problem is foreign language and vision. Journalism students do not follow the developments in the world that affect their professions”, Gülberk Arpaçay, a student, said.

The sharp difference between journalism students who speak foreign languages and those who cannot was observed during the study. Although we could not quantify the gap, the nature and quality of the two groups’ relations with and opinions about today’s journalistic products were quite far apart from each other. The students who cited “best use” examples from leading global news brands like The New York Times or The Guardian, for instance, were also the ones who put forward the most creative and effective solutions in our design-thinking workshops. They were several times likelier to come up with ideas for journalistic products that go beyond text, or innovative methods that require more than traditional news-gathering techniques.

## Findings and Observations about Local Journalism

Our interviews with local journalists from all regions of Turkey revealed the existence of many common problems that are not location-specific. First and foremost, local journalists – not only reporters and editors but also publishers – cited the economic situation that rapidly worsened in the past year. The Turkish lira’s devaluation, especially since August 2018, brought about additional costs to newspapers, as all of them import paper from abroad.

### a. Rising costs, falling revenues

While costs skyrocketed, revenues continued to fall. As Turkey moved into recession, most companies cut their marketing budgets, depriving media outlets of advertising revenues. Some resorted to cost-cutting measures, like publishing newspapers with fewer or black and white pages. According to several interviewees, not only newspapers but also local television stations and news websites were hit hard in recent months, leading to layoffs.

A significant portion of revenue for local newspapers come from the state-owned BİK, which distributes official advertisements for public tenders and official notices among media outlets. In an article in Mersin University’s Social Sciences Institute Magazine in June 2018, Kandemir Atceken noted that local newspapers are forced by the state to fulfil certain “requirements” to get official advertisements, like being a “political daily on current topics” with pages of at least 1.60 square metres

in total. These types of limiting conditions allow the government to disqualify many media outlets from receiving advertisements.

During our interviews, the publishers of three local newspapers in the Black Sea region said that the funds provided by the BIK amounted to more than 50 percent of their revenue. Unsurprisingly, these newspapers have pro-government editorial policies – but even they are now under threat economically.

“The BIK has recently increased the ad prices a little bit but it is not enough to cover our costs, which have skyrocketed in recent years. Because everything, from the rent to transportation costs, got so much more expensive in one year [due to the lira’s depreciation]”, a local publisher said.

Local newspapers that are critical of the government also complain about BIK’s policy of “handpicking” those who will receive official advertisement funding. Another issue of complaint is the “cannibalization” of local advertisement by national media outlets.

In Turkey, “all politics are national” and in almost every district the top media outlets are national ones. Still, there are many strong local outlets that are not taken into account by the state or private companies as seriously as they would deserve according to their market share. İhsan Özdemir, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Öz Diyarbakır*, for instance, recently stated that a total of 76 ads, some of them with large budgets, should have been given to local newspapers in the Diyarbakır area in April 2019 but instead went to national media<sup>10</sup>. Journalists in Diyarbakır and other southeastern provinces can do little but urge the provincial governor to intervene and protect local media from having their revenue “cannibalized”.

The situation is likely to get worse before it gets better because even this insufficient and unjust BIK revenue model has simply stopped working. Sefa Saygıdeğer, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *5 Ocak* in the southern province of Adana, described “economic independence” as one of the key issues facing local journalism. He noted that a new legal regulation stipulates that foreclosure announcements will not be published through local newspapers anymore, depriving them of most of their BIK revenue. Challenging official figures, he cited the real number of local newspapers as “around 1,000” and said that “the ultimate end seems near” for the remaining outlets.

While some local newspapers simply shut down, others downsize and merge with their former competitors to survive. An example can be seen in the eastern province of Kars, where there were once more than 10 local newspapers. Now, most of them have merged, leaving only two newspapers. “Beside large media outlets, local newspapers need help. Editorial independence [against political

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<sup>10</sup> See “Yerel gazeteler can çekişiyor. Yerel Basının Mutfağında Yangın Var!”, *Başkale Haber*, May 31, 2019, <https://baskalehaber.com/haber-263-gundem-yerel-gazeteler-can-cekisiyor-yerel-basinin-mutfaginda-yangin-var.html> (last accessed July 2, 2019).



interference] should be maintained and these outlets should be supported to withstand the economic pressure”, Saygıdeğer concludes.



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The increasingly harsh economic environment has made the life of local journalists even harder. Two reporters, one from Turkey’s southeast and another one from the Marmara region, said they have been working without any insurance or social security for the past year. One of them said that she agreed to quit as a staff correspondent for a critical local newspaper to become a freelancer, a move that allows the company to channel the social security costs of the journalists that were previously paid to the state to a freelance copyright budget. “Two other reporters also accepted the offer. Otherwise the newspaper was about to shut down”, she added.

### **b. Turkey’s news deserts**

As a result of the deteriorating economic situation, coupled with years of political pressure and abuse, “news deserts” have formed in Turkey. For instance, Izmir is the third biggest city in the country but not even a single local television station operates there anymore. Ege TV, which previously broadcasted to the whole region, was recently shut down. The leading local newspaper, Yeni Asır, is one of the oldest media outlets in Turkey but had its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s when its circulation topped even the national newspapers in the Aegean region. However, it lost most of its audience after it replaced its journalistic achievements in the past with a staunchly pro-government, “news-less” editorial policy more recently. Now, national newspapers dominate the local news industry with their regional supplements every day, but local journalists stress that even they are not economically viable despite employing “so few” reporters.

Despite all the challenges, there are smaller, but relatively influential local newspapers that stick to a critical editorial policy, like Bu Sabah newspaper in the eastern province of Malatya. According to one reporter, such newspapers are “still being published solely out of idealism” but it is not clear how long they can survive because they are economically unsustainable.

In some provinces, more than a dozen local newspapers are still published, like the Central Anatolian provinces of Kayseri and Konya, as well as the southeastern province of Şanlıurfa. But these numbers



are misleading in terms of these newspapers' actual journalistic effect, as many dailies employ only a couple of people and most of them sell a few dozen copies each day. Still, some provinces are home to particularly popular local newspapers with significant circulations, like Bursa, Eskişehir, Samsun, Trabzon and Kocaeli.

In many other areas, however, the situation is much worse, depending on local realities. The southeastern province of Kilis, for instance, has the highest ratio of Syrian refugees compared to local residents, but there is only one local news outlet in the city and it has no content in Arabic. Ethnic and cultural groups in other areas, from the Roma community in Turkey's northwest to the LGBTI community in rural areas, have neither a voice nor an ear in the media, whether local or national.

### **c. Lack of strong local media hampers next-gen reporters**

The lack of local media outlets and the weak presence of national ones in local communities is bad news not only for journalists in these regions, but also for students who struggle to find a prospective employer or an internship opportunity that can foster their skills. Even one of the largest local newspapers, one of whose reporters was interviewed for this study, the influential Olay newspaper in the western province of Bursa, has only 10 full-time journalists.

One young reporter from the southern province of Antalya who started to work at a prominent local newspaper following her graduation said that the state-owned Akdeniz University had provided her with the necessary journalistic perspective and skills thanks to an efficient "applied education" system that used the school's student news agency. The Mediterranean region did not have a journalism school until Akdeniz recently opened one. Still, the interviewee stressed that a good academic education is not enough especially in provinces like Antalya, where there is no competitive local media market anymore despite the existence of 13 local newspapers. She added: "The journalistic perception and technical skills of local news outlets here are quite limited. All local media outlets are very similar to one another and none of them has journalistic ambitions. Young journalists struggle to find somewhere to sharpen their skills." She also complained about older journalists' "archaic mindset" and the irksome sexism at media outlets, whether local or national, views that were echoed by other interviewees.

Another serious problem that both local and national newspapers face is distribution. There is a quasi-monopoly in the newspaper and magazine distribution business in the hands of a pro-government media group. Nominally, under Turkey's Press Law, distribution companies cannot refuse to print a newspaper or a magazine. This provision was the parliament's reaction to a brutal war between media holdings in the 1990s. Still, the current perception that the rule of law can easily be broken by those in power leads many "opposition" newspapers to feel an imminent threat over their heads, like another sword of Damocles. "Of course we are anxious, but perhaps this threat may lead us to establish our own distribution companies", a local publisher from the southern province of Adana said. Naturally, this threat also amplifies concerns about self-censorship.

And what about news agencies and websites? The situation is also not bright on these fronts in any part of Turkey, as seen from the testimonies of multiple interviewees.

“In the whole Aegean region, including Izmir, there is not a single news website that is doing proper journalism except Ege’de SonSöz,” a prominent regional journalist from one of the largest media groups in Turkey said.

A senior journalist who is based in Izmir explained: “The media business has turned from journalism to press release publication. The nation-wide news agencies [the state-run Anadolu Agency, and private agencies Demirören and İhlas] do not employ enough reporters for a country as large as Turkey. So, their stories are not adequate in number or quality to satisfy neither national nor local demand. Most of the low-cost local news websites, on the other hand, have turned into a weapon of blackmail. Their publishers use these outlets to extort local politicians and businesspeople.”

## **Heart of the Problem in Two Case Studies:**

### **How original and impactful journalism is asphyxiated – and where it can still breathe against the odds**

Original, impactful reporting is an endangered species in today’s Turkey because of the combined problems faced by local media outlets and journalism students, some of which are explained in this report. The physical, economic and professional threats, all aggravated by the central government’s policies, begin at the local level. An outsider who monitors this process may describe it as an organized effort to asphyxiate journalism in its cradle.

The government directly or indirectly controls all news agencies in Turkey. It also encourages clientelism in local media outlets. Meanwhile, by opening dozens of new communication faculties in the past decade, it diluted the quality of journalism education. These three institutions – the agencies, local media outlets and journalism schools – are the keys to original, impactful reporting that can make those in power uncomfortable, e.g., politicians, bureaucrats and businesspeople.

In today’s Turkey, all leading news websites, including those owned by Turkey’s largest media groups, overwhelmingly recycle and repackage content produced by agencies. The overall number of reporters working in the field is shrinking, as is the number of exclusive stories with an added value for the public interest.



According to an academic article published in the Social Sciences Institute Magazine of Atatürk University in December 2018, authored by Olcay Uçak and Abdi Erkal, 15 percent of stories published by local news websites in Turkey are exclusive content. Although even this number appears low, it is way higher than the corresponding figure for national media outlets.



**The physical, economic and professional threats, all aggravated by the central government’s policies, begin at the local level. An outsider who monitors this process may describe it as an organized effort to asphyxiate journalism in its cradle.**

One of the most popular Turkish news websites published more than 700 stories every working day in April. More than half of these stories were merely repackaged local news, provided by agencies from 81 provinces of Turkey. Around 300 of them were repackaged national news stories, again provided by the agencies. Only 50 stories each day could be labelled as “original”. However, excluding opinion pieces and cheap entertainment “news”, the real number of exclusive stories of added news value published per month at one of the largest journalism employers in today’s Turkey can be counted on one hand.

Yet there is an incalculable public interest in original and impactful journalism, which can be seen most clearly in two recent local stories that ended up as national phenomena in Turkey.

The first story is from the Black Sea province of Giresun. On April 12, 2018, local media – local newspaper reporters as well as the local correspondents of two national news agencies – reported that 11-year-old Rabia Naz Vatan died in the hospital after she was hit in front of her home in the Eynesil district by a car that fled the scene. However, local news reports dramatically changed the following day and published “corrections” claiming that the girl had actually committed suicide by jumping out of her family’s apartment. One such correction was published by Eynesil Haber, a local newspaper that is close to the district mayor, who is a member of Turkey’s ruling party.

Rabia’s father urged national media to investigate his daughter’s death, but none of them did. (Actually, the crew of a national television programme that investigates cold cases and suspicious deaths filmed in the district but never aired an episode.) For several months after that, only a citizen journalist, Metin Cihan, investigated the incident and published original news stories about it. Cihan conveyed the mourning father’s own findings to a wider audience through his Twitter account, while also calling on other journalists to join the investigation. The results from Cihan’s reporting suggested that the unidentified car in the initial stories was driven by the nephew of the mayor and that Rabia’s death was covered up by making it look like a suicide.



Mainstream media were still overwhelmingly silent or passive when the father, who filed criminal charges against powerful politicians, was sent to a mental institution and Cihan, the citizen journalist, was detained by the police. But thanks to the father's and the journalist's efforts, it was too late to suppress this local story, which entered the national agenda with the help of social media. As hundreds of people marched to protest in the small town of Eynesil, the two men were released while Turkey's justice and interior ministers both promised to solve the case. Meanwhile, the mayor, who is speculated to have links to a ruling party executive, was ousted in the local elections of March 31, 2019, when the AKP lost the district to the opposition for the first time since the party's founding in 2001.

"We are experiencing the consequences of corruption in politics and in media. We are even turning a blind eye to the murder of a child to protect some politicians. We are afraid of asking how Rabia Naz died. It will not go on like this. We should not get used to living like that", Şaban Vatan, the father of Rabia Naz, said in a tweet.

Cihan described the whole episode as "miserable". Speaking about local media in Eynesil, he said: "They are almost completely controlled by local authorities. Almost no other voice could be heard there. Because they are under control, local media failed to report the truth even after the national media picked up the story. Of course, their commercial relations are decisive here."



*A picture of Rabia Naz (L) and her father, Şaban Vatan, who is demanding justice for his daughter (Credit: BirGün)*

The second case is from the southern province of Antalya, the dynamics of which as regards local media outlets and journalism students were previously described. As stated, the seemingly crowded news marketplace is actually shallow and non-competitive in this large city, which is also known abroad for its massive tourism industry. One journalism student said that anyone who wants to be “really informed” about what is happening in Antalya is forced to turn to social media, because original journalism is so rarely produced now due to the negative forces described previously.



***We are experiencing the consequences of corruption in politics and in media. We are even turning a blind eye to the murder of a child to protect some politicians. We are afraid of asking how Rabia Naz died. It will not go on like this. We should not get used to living like that***

- Şaban Vatan, the father of Rabia Naz (on Twitter)

In March 2018, a YouTube channel called İlave TV was born under these conditions. The channel features street interviews about recent news stories or contentious public debates. Its founder, Arif Kocabıyık, says that he took to the streets with his brother-in-law to “be the voice of the people in the street because there was no newspaper or television left in the mainstream media that does it”. His channel quickly became one of the most popular local outlets, with some of its videos watched millions of times. In one of the most popular videos, Kocabıyık examined how many people in Turkey merely say that they would open their houses to a Syrian refugee but refuse to do so when they are given a real chance. (Like Cihan, Kocabıyık was also briefly detained and is still on trial for insulting Erdogan with a tweet suggesting that the Turkish president “shed crocodile tears”.)

“A couple of national TV stations offered me a job, but I don’t want them to put limits on me or restrict my freedom. I was also concerned that the people in the streets will refrain from speaking to my microphone when they see the logo of a big TV channel there”, Arif Kocabıyık said.





*Arif Kocabiyik (L) is seen in this screenshot during a street interview (Credit: İlave TV)*

Neither Metin Cihan nor Arif Kocabiyik is a “journalist” in the traditional sense. Although Cihan worked at a media outlet for a brief period and Kocabiyik had a short-lived venture publishing a local newspaper in Antalya, their current journalistic work makes little use of their earlier media-related experience. Kocabiyik, who is currently working full-time as a private security guard at a university in Antalya, says that his past experience as a wedding cameraman helps him to produce news and interviews for his YouTube channel on a part-time basis.

Still, both of these citizen journalists – who travel around the country independently for their reporting almost as a hobby – embody the change in Turkey’s media landscape. One of them investigates important issues that other journalists ignore, while the other presents different viewpoints to an audience that is not used to it.

These are the rules of engagement for a new kind of public service journalism in Turkey. The question is now how to spread the values and skills of quality journalism to all the capillary vessels of the country to support journalism students and young reporters who will shape tomorrow’s journalism. In workshops with the latter groups, we aimed to come up with a set of creative solutions, addressing the questions in the minds of various actors, including donors who seek the most efficient ways to support freedom of the press in Turkey.

# Six Proposals to Support Independent Journalism in Turkey

## a. An open source curriculum and a MOOC platform

Journalism students are the most effective starting point for strengthening Turkey's emerging journalistic community. Any such effort should begin by supporting them, particularly their understanding of what constitutes quality journalism as well as their capacity to create it. Many students, especially in the countryside and at public universities, have no access to a modern curriculum. A lack of foreign language skills also keeps them away from following the best-use cases in journalism around the world.

To solve these problems, we propose to develop an "open source curriculum" in journalism, whose courses – text, audio and video – and other educational material would be accessible online for free. The platform will be organized as a massive open online course (MOOC) and would also function as a forum for volunteer journalism educators – who can be selected from among respected journalists and academics – and students. The MOOC, which will be designed as a mobile-first platform, will be constantly updated to keep up with the pace of technical and technological changes in the production of quality journalism. Its subjects will cover everything related to the profession today, from multimedia storytelling and data journalism to how individual journalists can monetize their service with advertising and/or reader revenue.

The platform will be the main go-to place for anyone, including citizen journalists, from any province in Turkey, to get equipped with the information, mindset and skills to produce quality journalism. Kurdish and Arabic-language content can also be added. Such an online platform will also complement the EU-backed efforts of the TGS and the TGC to improve professional education and training.

*Potential actors:* Turkish universities, journalism organizations, NGOs and donors

## b. Community-driven 'creative cafes' and 'journalism experience centres'

In today's Turkey, an increasing number of publishers have moved from production to distribution of news content, leading to fewer original stories, while the public at large remains largely uninformed about the contribution of journalism to a democratic society.



Journalism is much more than commodity news and the audience should also learn more about it. Meanwhile, reporters, especially in local communities across Turkey, need places and events to sharpen their creativity and engage with their communities while doing so.

A successful example is being practiced in Scotland and could be tested in Turkey as well. Clydesider was founded in West Dunbartonshire in 2016 as a community media and creative training social enterprise. Since then, it has published a free quarterly magazine focused on the positive stories and creative talents of local people in the county with 15 regular volunteers and 100+ other volunteers who contribute their time and skills to the production and distribution of 10,000 copies of the magazine, each issue of which is focused on a different theme. The programme engages the community with the journalistic process.

Recent initiatives like TGS Academy present a similar opportunity for reporters and communities in Turkey's three largest cities, while smaller towns still lack such venues and events. The Black Sea and Mediterranean regions in particular have vibrant journalism communities whose members are currently unable to find a place to showcase their talent. Opening a community-driven creative cafe in Antalya or Trabzon, for instance, can foster collaboration and boost creative thinking in these provinces.

Perhaps more importantly, these venues can also be positioned as "journalism experience centres" to let audiences see how reporters work for the common good. They can also serve as media literacy centres, like those that exist in Finland, where communities can learn how to be resilient amid the flood of disinformation. In these centres, local people in Turkey can also convene and meet with educators and practitioners of journalism.

*Potential actors:* Municipalities, journalism organizations, NGOs and donors

### c. Mapping trusted news organizations and local reporters to assess trustworthiness and credibility

Despite the ongoing challenges, there are still dozens of local news outlets in Turkey. In our age of media manipulation, there is a need to grade them for truthfulness, accuracy and respect for ethical standards in journalism. A "Web of Trust" for journalism in Turkey, particularly at the local level in which news providers are largely unknown to outsiders, can make the work of manipulators harder while supporting the "idealist" journalists there.

This study suggests exploring the possibility of a programme to assess news outlets on the basis of trustworthiness and credibility through the use of clear and measurable criteria as a way to improve quality journalism across Turkey. This programme would also be a way to inform donors about the professional qualification of news institutions, initiatives and related individuals.

Such a digital map can also be used in other projects to support independent journalism in Turkey, some of which are noted below. Moreover, the leading local journalists in every region or province

can be named as an IPI Ambassador and their regular work can be featured, e.g., on a dedicated website or a special newsletter. IPI Ambassadors can also be entitled to publish the best work from student newspapers on this website and set up "impromptu newsrooms" with local journalists and students to investigate emerging local stories, which can be nominated for project-based, ad hoc funding.

*Potential actors:* Trusted journalists, journalism organizations, NGOs and donors

#### **d. Incubator and accelerator programmes to disrupt Turkey's dysfunctional media**

The years-long political and economic pressures, combined with social polarization, have led to the slow death of mainstream media. Disruptive ideas with the hope of building a new business model for journalism should be encouraged.

With a larger programme of incubation, co-working spaces like creative cafes can be expanded to provide journalism start-ups access to a network of similar companies, mentors, research, events and other valuable resources for learning how to build and grow a media business from scratch. This incubator can be complemented with an accelerator programme, where the most successful applicants can access investment – international donors and/or investors – as well as tailored mentorship.

*Potential actors:* Journalism organizations, NGOs, donors and investors

#### **e. International internship programme for journalism students in Turkey**

There is a high demand from journalism students for internships but insufficient opportunities at media outlets in Turkey. A sponsored internship programme, in which students can experience journalism at the world's leading media outlets, may bring enormous benefits to the development of quality journalism in Turkey. It will not only widen the horizons of the participating students, but also contribute to improving their foreign language skills.

*Potential actors:* Journalism organizations, NGOs and donors

#### **f. A new award to incentivize quality journalism in Turkey**

As Bahar Ünlü, a journalism student, noted, many young reporters are discouraged by their seniors from staying on the path to becoming masters of their profession. What journalism students and young reporters need most, apart from an effective education and on-the-job training, is inspiration

and encouragement. A new award programme for quality journalism in Turkey could help accomplish this goal.

The new award should be designed as a prestigious, professional acknowledgement of journalistic talent to incentivize production of original content for the public interest. Most journalism awards in Turkey either lack relevant categories, including digital ones, or fail to provide any meaningful financial benefit to applicants. These two factors negatively affect competition and desirability with respect to these awards. International awards, on the other hand, are usually kept out of the reach of Turkey's young reporters due to their huge, global spectrum.

*Potential actors:* Journalism organizations, NGOs and donors

## Conclusion

Journalism in Turkey faces centralized threats, most of which are also seen in many other countries.

- On the **political** level, the threat comes from an authoritarian government and is embodied by the cold iron bars of the jail cell.
- On the **economic** level, the threat comes from partisan media companies and is embodied by their employees who censor themselves for fear of being fired.
- On the **technological** level, the threat comes from insensitive digital networks and is embodied by the failure of tech giants to replace the flood of online disinformation with truthful, quality content.

These centralized threats can only be countered in a decentralized way through democratic solidarity among citizens against the holders of power. It should be about going from the big picture of the mainstream to each and every area on the local level. It should also combine the old-school principles of top-class journalism with the cutting-edge tools of the media of our time.

This study offered a number of hints and clues suggesting that the most efficient way to reach these goals is by enabling and empowering young journalists of Turkey, providing them with modern skills and toolkits to encourage media innovation, and paving the way for them to form strong bonds with their local communities.

This perspective can also be interpreted as the most natural, almost biological response to potentially fatal threats to the livelihood of journalism in Turkey: When arteries are clogged, the body develops its capillaries into main vessels, creating alternative paths for blood flow. If the body is unable to find such a solution itself, then an external intervention of a physician is needed to heal the patient by putting in a coronary stent.



In interviews for this report, Turkey's journalism students and young reporters strongly emphasized their belief in the public good of journalism, as well as their ambition to improve their professional work and skills. In many areas of Turkey, however, they wage an uphill battle and need help. Serap Can, a journalism scholar from our New Media Communication Network put it this way: "Many of these youngsters, who see a TV camera perhaps once in four years of university education and speak neither a foreign language nor even their mother tongue effectively, complete their 'journalism internship' by using a photocopier machine, being forced to move to Istanbul to find employment and turn into desperate masses there."

In the words of journalism student Alya Şahin, the ongoing pessimistic mindset affecting Turkey's journalists must first be "shattered." The capacity-building phase should be coupled with confidence-building measures, as the systemic problems can be overcome by creative solutions based on a thorough understanding of Turkey's journalists and news audiences. Resilient news organizations and "T-shaped" journalists – skilled in their field but able to collaborate across disciplines – can be born out of this process.

In this study, we presented only glimpses of this picture to highlight the importance of a bottom-up approach that focuses on improving journalistic capacity at the grassroots level, incentivizing start-up-minded innovation from neighbourhood to neighbourhood to help independent, quality journalism flourish throughout Turkey.



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