



**#Free
Turkey
Journalists**

JOURNALISM UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE PANDEMIC: TURKEY

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON
INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN TURKEY



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Journalism Under the Shadow of the Pandemic: Turkey

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN TURKEY

IPI REPORT

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Introduction

This report presents the findings from the first research into how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected independent media and independent journalists in Turkey.

Since their arrival into power in 2001, successive AKP governments have invested heavily in building a pro-government mass media, often using a carrot-and-stick strategy to entice media owners into alliances with them.

The corporate mediascape is dominated by forces whose interests are deeply vested in maintaining clientelist relationships with the AKP government. As a result, a large portion of the Turkish mainstream media has been under the control of the government for several years. The need to access fair, balanced and impartial news coverage has grown tremendously and has become even more vital during the days of COVID-19.

In this atmosphere, there are still some independent media outlets trying to survive under difficult conditions with limited sources. The pandemic has exacerbated their woes.

This report is intended to accompany a series of video interviews with leading figures from Turkey's independent media. It firstly gives an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on the working conditions of independent journalists – how their work environment changed, how news coverage of the pandemic was affected, what measures were taken to protect staff, etc.

Secondly, it records the level of censorship on independent media during the pandemic. It explores difficulties in accessing official information and how reporters turned to health workers as primary sources for accurate data.

IPI COVID-19 PRESS FREEDOM TRACKER

According to the IPI COVID-19 Press Freedom Tracker, media in Turkey faced government pressure linked to their COVID-19 coverage in particular during the first few months of the pandemic.

Independent media are mostly small companies that do not have the financial resources of the large corporations and mostly rely on advertising or circulation revenue. Therefore, the report also explores the financial challenges faced by the media, revealing some of the differences between the pro-government and independent media.

Objectives, Methodology and Context

The study aimed to explore the impact of COVID-19 on independent media outlets and journalists working in Turkey. The research was conducted through interviews (either face-to-face or online) with media owners, managers, editors and reporters of various independent media outlets.

To ensure diversity, 18 interviews were conducted with journalists from different backgrounds, including opposition newspapers, the Kurdish and minority press.

The research is based on first-hand accounts by journalists, editors and owners about their experience during the pandemic. Six of the interviews were also filmed and released as videos by the International Press Institute (IPI).¹



¹ "Journalism under the Shadow of the Pandemic: Turkey" Video-Interview Series [available here](#)

List of journalists and independent media owners who were interviewed for the project
(by alphabetical order)

- Ali Topuz, Founder and Editor-in-Chief, Gazete Duvar website
- Aykut Küçükkaya, Editor-in-Chief, Daily Cumhuriyet
- Aylin Süphandağlı, Editor in Chief, Ege Telgraf (İzmir)
- Candan Yıldız, Managing Editor, T24 website
- Doğan Akın, Founder and Editor-in-Chief, T24 website
- Faruk Bildirici, Media Ombudsman
- Fatih Polat, Editor in Chief, Daily Evrensel
- Hacı Bişkin, Reporter, Gazete Duvar website
- İpek Özbey, Managing Editor, Daily Cumhuriyet
- İsmail Saymaz, Columnist at Sözcü, TV Commentator at Halk TV
- Merdan Yanardağ, Owner and Editor in Chief, TELE1 TV
- Metin Yılmaz, Editor in Chief, Daily Sözcü
- Misket Dikmen, Owner and Editor-in-Chief, 9 Eylül newspaper (İzmir), Head of the İzmir Journalists' Association
- Ruşen Çakır, Founder and Editor-in-Chief, Medyascope
- Seyhan Avşar, Reporter, Daily Cumhuriyet
- Tamer Arda Erşin, Reporter, ANKA News Agency (Ankara)
- Yetvard Danzikyan, Editor in Chief, AGOS Newspaper
- A Kurdish journalist from local press in Diyarbakır who asked to remain anonymous.

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Working Conditions of Independent Journalists

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge effect on the work of journalists. Most of the independent media organizations had to close their offices and work from home.

“**When you are not outside, when you don’t interact with people in the bazaar, on the street or courthouse, it is difficult to both find a news angle and to do the necessary work for the news story.**

Ali Topuz, Gazete Duvar

There have been two main impacts on journalists. Firstly not being able to go out and cover the normal range of news topics due to the lockdown measures. And secondly, the health and safety risks faced by journalists themselves. Editors and managers didn’t want to risk the safety of their staff and so were hesitant to send them out.

This affected the quality of journalism. “For good quality journalism, you need to be on the ground”, the managing Editor of the Cumhuriyet daily, İpek Özbey, said.

“When you are not outside, when you don’t interact with people in the bazaar, on the street or courthouse, it is difficult to both find a news angle and to do the necessary work for the news story”, Ali Topuz, editor-in-chief of Gazete Duvar, added.

Some of those did go out were exposed to the virus. According to Seyhan Avşar, a reporter for Cumhuriyet who caught COVID-19, being in crowded places created a lot of physical dangers for journalists. “Some of us live with our families and are worried about

our parents. I had to isolate myself for two weeks from my family when I caught the virus. It was such a difficult period for me. But the journalists who suffer most are the health reporters and photographers, because they have to go inside the hospitals and intensive care units. Besides the fear of catching the virus, seeing and witnessing COVID-19 patients suffering first-hand is also a trauma for journalists.”

Tamer Arda Erşin of ANKA News said, “We wrote news articles warning the citizens to take the necessary measures to protect themselves from the pandemic, but because of the nature of our job; we couldn’t take our own measures. Journalism is a profession in which you need to be active and mobile all the time, when you are on the ground you maybe contact dozens of people in one day. And this puts you in a very fragile situation.”

According to Candan Yıldız, the managing editor of T24, working from home limits discussion. “We continued our work by talking about news through applications like WhatsApp, but it is incomparable to talking about news face-to-face in the flesh.”



Besides the fear of catching the virus, seeing and witnessing COVID-19 patients suffering first-hand is also a trauma for journalists.

Seyhan Avşar, Cumhuriyet

Aylin Süphandağlı of Ege Telgraf in İzmir said, “there are only three journalists left in the office; one editor, one page designer and one online editor. As editor-in-chief I came to the office three days a week but I mostly worked from home. The most challenging thing for us was not being able to send the reporters out. They had to conduct all the news by phone. And most of them still do. The journalism routine is finished in İzmir. The press briefings are made online, interviews are online, etc. Journalism is conducted at its lowest level right now.”

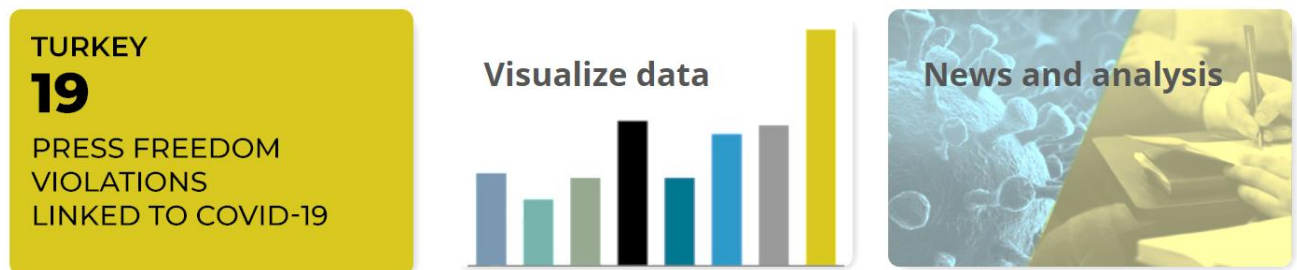
Censorship and Access to Information

Press freedom in Turkey is under tremendous pressure. Hundreds of journalists have been prosecuted, arrested or jailed in recent years. In general, media coverage of any topic that is sensitive for their government is liable to lead to harassment or persecution.

IPI's COVID-19 Press Freedom Tracker

Turkey's From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic the International Press Institute launched [the COVID-19 Press Freedom Tracker](#), a dedicated monitoring tool of all press freedom violations reported globally resulting from the pandemic.

19 incidents have been reported for Turkey ranging from a series of detentions of journalists held for questioning over their COVID-19 reports to fines and arrests against media.²



² Turkey Alerts on IPI COVID-19 Tracker -

https://ipi.media/covid19/?alert_type=0&language=0&years=0&country=turkey

Key cases include:

- Broadcasting regulator RTÜK issued 3-day broadcast ban and a fine in the amount of 3 percent advertising revenue against Fox TV for critical comments on COVID-19
- RTÜK fine KRT TV over criticism of the government response
- RTUK fined Tele 1 for broadcasting a press conference of the Turkish Medical Union
- BİK, the public body that distributes state advertising, imposed an advertising ban on BirGün newspaper over an article entitled “They can do anything with the Coronavirus excuse”
- A court blocked access to a Dokuz8 News report on 26 COVID-19 cases in a factory
- At least 13 journalists were detained, arrested, or questioned about reports they had published on COVID-19.

At the same time, many of the news organisations interviewed reported no new, or exceptional level of pressure launched by the government in response to the pandemic. İpek Özbey of Cumhuriyet said, “Nobody asked us ‘why are you covering this topic’ or ‘why are you writing this piece about the pandemic?’”

However, the government, already backed by the vast majority of media, has control over the narrative and so did not need to invoke new powers to control the reporting.

Independent journalists also risked being targeted by internet trolls for their reporting. İsmail Saymaz, a columnist at Sözcü, was amongst the journalists who faced a wave of threats from pro-government social media trolls, following his criticism of the government’s response to the pandemic. “My criticisms towards the distribution of the masks, towards the health system and to the health minister was reflected as ‘Hostility towards Turkey’ by the pro-government media and social media accounts”, he said.

The lack of official accreditation for independent journalists was another obstacle to travelling during lockdown. The official press card is issued by the Directorate of the Communications of the Presidential Office. However, many independent journalists

have been denied such a card. “Lawyers were able to travel with their lawyer ID, while it was not same for the journalists because of the way the press card is issued”, Ali Topuz of Gazete Duvar said.



The Regulators Step in to Censor the Media

The most significant punishments against independent media were issued by the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), Turkey’s broadcast regulator, against independent broadcasters.

TELE1 TV, an independent channel founded by journalist Merdan Yanardağ in January 2017, was fined 25,880 Turkish liras by RTÜK.³ The fine was in response to TELE1’s March 16 broadcast of a press conference by Sinan Adıyaman, president of Turkey’s biggest

³ RTÜK General Assembly Decision on TELE 1, March 25, 2020.

<https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/ust-kurul-kararlari/6112-sayili-kanunun-8inci-maddesinin-birinci-fikrasinin-i-bendinin-ihlali-nedeniyle-kanunun-32nci-m/28585?>

doctors' union, the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), in which Adıyaman said, "The coronavirus cases in Istanbul have skyrocketed."

Merdan Yanardağ said "the fine was for 'pushing the society to panic', however we didn't push or lead the society into panic, we just warned the society".



In April, RTÜK imposed a three-day ban on Fox TV and fined it 3 percent of its advertising revenue following comments by its prime-time anchor criticizing the government's handling of COVID-19.

In August, RTÜK imposed an administrative fine on KRT TV for "insulting the president, health minister and the government" following remarks by a guest, Dr. Serdar Savaş, who criticized the opening of high schools and universities during the pandemic.

In December, the Press Advertising Agency (BİK) followed RTÜK's lead and issued a 3-day advertising ban on BirGün for an article titled "They can do anything with the coronavirus excuse" after a court blocked news reports on illegal construction works by the president's director of communications, Fahrettin Altun.

Police and Judicial Action against Journalists

IPI's COVID-19 Press Freedom Tracker has recorded several cases in which journalists were fined or summoned for questioning because of their COVID-19 coverage.

In March 2020, journalist Lezgin Akdeniz was questioned over a report that churches and Alevi sanctuaries were not being disinfected while mosques were, in the southeastern city of Diyarbakır. According to local news, minority places of worship were disinfected after the report was published. Akdeniz was released after interrogation.

On March 20, 2020, Mustafa Ahmet Oktay and Eren Sarıkaya from Bartın-based Halk Newspaper and Pusula Newspaper were taken into custody over a report published about the spread of COVID-19.

In March 2020, İsmet Çiğit, news director of the local website Kocaeli Ses, was detained at his home near Istanbul after publishing an article headlined, "Two coronavirus-linked deaths in Derince hospital." The editor, Güngör Arslan, was also detained, and spent the night in the police station for publishing the article online. Mesut Akbulut, the editor of the Kocaeli newspaper, was briefly detained two days earlier for reporting another coronavirus case in the city. All the journalists were released after interrogation.

Access to Information and Government Manipulation

A central issue for journalists became how to assess the veracity of government statements and statistics on the pandemic and how to access other sources of information such as health workers, which was already made difficult by the lockdown.

A culture of refusing access to information particularly to independent media is deeply engrained in the Turkish government and so efforts to interview officials were regularly denied. Hacı Bişkin, reporter of Gazete Duvar, described access to official information as the "bleeding wound All the doors of official sources are closed to us."

The government did surprise journalists with an uncharacteristic gesture of openness when the health minister, Fahrettin Koca, invited all media including those from independent media, to attend his regular briefings on the pandemic.

According to Bişkin, “The fact that members of the independent media organizations were able to attend the press briefings of the health minister was something we haven’t witnessed for a long time.”

However, this gesture was undermined when in September it was revealed that the Health Minister had been manipulating the pandemic statistics by using the figures for hospital admissions and presenting them as representative of all infections, thereby significantly underreporting the full spread and impact of COVID-19.

The managing editor of T24, Candan Yıldız described this as “obvious manipulation of the numbers of COVID-related deaths”.

Evrensel Editor-in-Chief Fatih Polat said that his paper (and many other media) had published dozens of headlines showing false government data misleading the public.

Health Workers as Primary Sources

Due of the difficulties in accessing accurate official information, reporters had to turn to health workers to verify official information. Medical staff organizations such as the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), the Istanbul Medical Chamber, and the Health and Social Services Workers’ Union (SES) have become the primary news sources.

Misket Dikmen, the owner and editor-in-chief of 9 Eylül, a local newspaper in İzmir, said that while it was very difficult to reach government officials such as the İzmir Health Directorate, they had no difficulty reaching health workers.

“Our main source was doctors and health workers, especially the Turkish Medical Association, which made a special effort to provide information beneficial to the public”, Ali Topuz of Gazete Duvar said.

Doğan Akin of T24 said, “The mainstream media ignored the press briefings of health workers. However, we could interview the health workers. Our communication with the doctors and health workers was extremely good.”



According to a Kurdish journalist from Diyarbakır, “Most of the times our only sources were TTB and its member doctors.”

The attention given to health workers and the startlingly different figures provided on the state of the pandemic provoked an inevitable government backlash. “The Turkish Medical Association was targeted by the officials as ‘enemies’”, İsmail Saymaz of the Sözcü daily said. “Doctors and health workers became afraid of getting arrested.”



The fact that members of the independent media organizations were able to attend the press briefings of the health minister was something we haven’t witnessed for a long time.

Hacı Bişkin, Gazete Duvar

Financial Challenges

When an economic crisis unfolds such as that caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the first budget item companies cut is advertising, causing an immediate cut in revenue for independent media outlets. In addition to all of the new challenges facing media in the pandemic, they also had to cope with the catastrophic collapse of their income.

Circulation figures, the other main source of income for print media, also collapsed. Readers were afraid to touch newspapers for fear of it spreading the virus, and for those readers who still sought newspapers, lockdown itself hindered physical distribution. Even when the distribution networks recovered, the demand for newspapers was very slow to recover.

Some independent media outlets such as T24 web site and Ege Telgraf newspaper were able to apply for the short-time working allowance to temporarily reduce staffing costs financial support during the economic turndown.

Ali Topuz of Gazete Duvar said, “We lost around 20 percent of our advertising income. Advertising agencies were already hesitant to place ads with media they think are unpopular with the government fearing it would put them in a difficult situation. Now the limited number of companies who were advertising on our site is further diminished.”

The daily newspaper Cumhuriyet was founded in 1924 and is owned by an independent foundation called the Cumhuriyet Foundation. Cumhuriyet Editor-in-Chief Aykut Küçükkaya reported “a dramatic decline in both advertising and circulation”.

“Before lockdown the circulation was around 30.000. After the pandemic struck circulation immediately declined to 20,000. Because the price of paper is very high, we had to reduce the number of pages from 20 to 16, then 14 and sometimes even 12 pages”, Küçükkaya added. Cumhuriyet has since been able to recover to produce the full 20 page newspaper and an extra Saturday supplement.

Aylin Süphandağlı, the owner and editor-in-chief of Ege Telgraf, a local newspaper in İzmir, said almost all advertising stopped and that the newspaper “could only survive with the advertisements from the Press Advertising Agency (BİK)”. Circulation also declined dramatically. “I don’t know how long we can survive like this”, Süphandağlı added.

The owner and editor-in-chief of another local newspaper in İzmir, Misket Dikmen from 9 Eylül, also confirmed they were able to survive thanks to advertising from BİK.

However, not all the independent newspapers receive revenue from BİK. Evrensel is a left-wing, pro-Kurdish daily that has faced numerous investigations and court cases for its reporting. The paper’s editor-in-chief, Fatih Polat, said that BİK had already stopped placing advertising with Evrensel and circulation declined significantly at the beginning of the pandemic. More positively, Polat reported that Evrensel’s online news site had doubled its visitors and was receiving advertising from municipalities run by the opposition parties.

The editor in chief of Sözcü, Metin Yılmaz, confirmed that Sözcü’s circulation had also declined dramatically. “Due to the curfew we couldn’t sell our newspaper anywhere. Our circulation dropped from 230,000 to 70,000 in one day. Meanwhile, pro-government newspapers claim to have increased their circulation! How is it possible? Our circulation numbers are real numbers. But according to the sales numbers of the distribution company (Turkuvaz Distribution company), newspapers that we have never heard of have circulations of 59,000, 60,000, 70,000. Their real circulation is maybe only 500. There is a huge deception and trickery here.”

Yetvard Danzikyan, the editor-in-chief of the Armenian minority newspaper Agos, said his paper was sold mainly through “subscriptions with a modest distribution network”. In addition to the familiar problems with distribution he added: “One of our main income was advertising by small Armenian companies and death announcements from the Armenian community. This has decreased with the financial turndown.”

How can Turkey's Independent Media Survive COVID-19?

How to Tackle the Financial Challenges

Most independent media outlets are used to surviving on small budgets. But the pandemic has made their financial challenges acute. Boosts in online traffic have failed to compensate for drops in circulation and a collapse in advertising.

If independent journalism is to survive it must be supported by the reader/viewer, editors and journalists say. The public needs to pay for news, buy newspapers, or subscribe to online news sites. The public needs to be reminded of the importance of receiving fair, balanced and objective news based on truth and the public interest.

Aykut Küçükkaya of Cumhuriyet said reader loyalty is the most important source of support. "We have witnessed the loyalty of our readers in this process and it made us very happy. We are one of the last resorts where journalists write freely for print media and we will continue our resistance."

Ali Topuz of Gazete Duvar said journalism associations, unions and chambers should cooperate through a partnership to solve this financial crisis.

Doğan Akin of T24 said his site is diversifying work models and income sources. "To save journalism we need to diversify the opportunities. We are expanding our journalism, producing special videos and developing production projects for private companies. A journalist has the ability to do this. This way we can diversify our income."

The Hurriyet's former ombudsman, Faruk Bildirici recommended a paywall and digital membership. "If media can improve their digital membership with a low membership price, then they can also save on printing costs", Bildirici added.

Is the Failure of Mainstream Media an Opportunity for the Rise of the Independent Media?

Most of the independent journalists interviewed believe the failure of mainstream media in covering the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity for the rise of the independent media; but only if they can solve their financial issues.

The need for a more independent media with a more neutral, balanced and fair reporting was, of course, evident long before the pandemic.

As the managing editor of Cumhuriyet, İpek Özbey, said more than 90 percent of the “mainstream media” is pro-government media. Readers and viewers long ago lost confidence in the mainstream. “Even the AKP’s own constituency has stopped following these outlets.”



The loss of trust in mainstream media has helped alternative, independent media to flourish. “A new media has started to emerge in recent years. What we call ‘critical, independent media.’ And in the middle of this transformation came the pandemic. The public is feeling vulnerable and they want to receive real news. So it is only natural for them to turn towards the independent media”, media ombudsman Faruk Bildirici said.

Ruşen Çakır, editor-in-chief of Medyascope, said the failure of mainstream media is an opportunity: “But we need to have financial revenues to improve and grow.”



Çakır added that despite the modest conditions Medyascope has been reaching a wide audience. “There is a huge interest in free and independent media. Our monthly budget is maybe equal to the daily budget of mainstream media outlets. Despite this, their ratings are falling through the floor. This shows if we had better opportunities and financial support, then we would have had a much wider audience”.

Conclusion

2020 has been a very difficult year for the whole world. But especially for the media sector, where unprecedented challenges have emerged.

In Turkey, as elsewhere, journalists have risked their health and safety in covering the pandemic.

According to the IPI COVID-19 Press Freedom Tracker, journalists have also faced official pressure for reporting critically on government handling of the pandemic.

Turkey is not alone in this, of the 539 violations reported in 2020 globally, 19 came from Turkey.

Many of these took place in states with existing authoritarian tendencies and already chequered media freedom records. Most notably, China sought to aggressively shut down any independent coverage of the virus, while governments from Cambodia to Russia introduced stricter penalties for “fake news”. Dozens of journalists in India faced criminal investigations for their reporting on the pandemic. There were also serious problems in Europe, including highly problematic “fake news” laws (Hungary) or disproportionate restrictions on access to information in a number of EU or EU candidate countries.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the COVID-19 pandemic for the independent media were financial challenges arising from the collapse of advertising income and circulation.

The Turkish government may not have actually imposed specific COVID-19 censorship but several broadcasters received heavy fines and penalties for their reporting and the government wilfully manipulated the statistics on the virus. It also destroyed the small improvement in trust resulting from the Health Minister’s surprise decision to allow access to independent media.

The mainstream media’s refusal to report the figures of the Turkish Medical Association meant that huge swathes of the population were denied access to reliable health news

further undermining confidence in the mainstream media. Will this help drive a renaissance for the independent media? There is a unique opportunity but it will require immense effort and support to realize it.

As Ruşen Çakır of Medyascope put it, the independent media were hampered by a lack of sources, lack of budget, lack of press freedom. “But we were not crushed by this shockwave either.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the independent media hard in Turkey like everywhere else. Despite all the difficulties, journalists working for these media outlets have risen to the challenge to do their jobs when they were most worth doing.



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