

# Missing Bodies, Silent Pages: How Turkish Media Portrays Journalist Murders and Silence

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## Abstract

Press freedom in Turkey has frequently been questioned throughout its history. Acts of violence against journalists have become a critical issue sometimes resulting in fatalities. This study examines how murders of journalists in Turkey are represented in the media. It focuses on whose stories of the murdered journalists are neglected and whose are brought to the forefront. By addressing the representation of these deaths, the research questions the role of both traditional and digital media in shaping public perception. It investigates how long death-related news remains in the public spotlight and whether commemorations on death anniversaries receive coverage. Numerical differences regarding deaths between new media and traditional media outlets have also been examined. Additionally, the study explores the social and political contexts that contribute to the silences, omissions, and gaps in the narratives surrounding murdered journalists. Through these findings, the study aims to reveal how these stories contribute to the construction and erasure of memory in the media landscape.

## Keywords

digital media; journalist murders; media representation; press freedom; Turkish media

## 1. Introduction

Freedom of the press and freedom of expression have long been central to political and legal debates in Turkey (Panico, 1999). While discussions on these rights date back to the Ottoman Empire, when the emergence of newspapers began to shape public opinion, the modern trajectory of press freedom in Turkey has been shaped by fluctuating constitutional and legal frameworks that often prioritise state control over

democratic openness (Kaya & Çakmur, 2010). The 1961 Constitution introduced a relatively liberal approach to press freedom, yet this progress was reversed by constitutional amendments in 1971 and particularly by the 1982 Constitution (Evrensel, 2024; Over, 2017), which granted broad discretionary powers to judges, prosecutors, and government institutions to restrict media content, rendering the respective constitutional guarantees of “freedom of thought and opinion,” “freedom of expression,” and “freedom of the press” ambiguous and open to subjective interpretation (Altun et al., 2016; Erdem, 2018) and largely left to the discretion of judicial authorities. Instead of functioning as a safeguard for liberty, the law has increasingly become a tool of repression, and the climate of growing state control has significantly eroded press freedom, leading to a hostile environment for independent journalism. Journalists are held legally accountable for every piece of news they write or publish and may even face legal proceedings over articles written more than a decade ago. As a result, journalists have increasingly become targets of censorship, judicial harassment, and violence. Being subjected to attacks, imprisonment, and even murder has become a routine part of journalists’ everyday professional practice, and such incidents often fail to attract media attention unless the journalist in question is already known to the public. According to the 2024 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, Turkey ranked 158th out of 180 countries, reflecting the alarming extent of media repression and the normalisation of attacks against journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). According to Freedom House, journalists in Turkey are also subjected to legal harassment, detention, political pressure, and censorship (Freedom House, 2024; Pukallus et al., 2020).

As restrictive pressures on the press increase, the reporting of attacks against journalists declines (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2018). Limited coverage of murders and assaults on journalists can create a public perception that democracy is not functioning properly, which may lead those in power to minimise such reports to maintain an image of stability (Maniou, 2023). This contradiction undermines democratic legitimacy when leaders who frequently emphasise democracy ignore evidence of declining press freedom during their tenure. In this context, the present study aims to examine how such dynamics have shaped press freedom in Turkey, with a particular focus on the reporting of violence against journalists.

The media is a key safeguard of freedom of thought, shaping public opinion and preserving collective memory, and it plays a vital role in showing that democratic participation extends beyond periodic elections, particularly in developing democracies (Amin, 2002; Bilgici, 2010; Fenton, 2009; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Orgeret & Tayeebwa, 2020). Studies on journalist killings in 172 countries between 2002 and 2015 have shown that such violence is more likely during periods of political polarisation and when democratic practices are poorly implemented, and that insufficient press freedom allows this threat to persist (Carey & Gohdes, 2021). Public recognition of murdered journalists as defenders of democracy and unified action by media outlets, regardless of political stance, can raise awareness, strengthen public vigilance, and pressure governments to ensure justice (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Shaw, 2012; Waisbord, 2011; Zelizer, 2010). Academic engagement is equally important, with impartial research, curricular integration, and expanded scholarly work helping to preserve public memory and promote accountability. In this context, the present study examines how media and academic responses to violence against journalists influence democratic resilience in Turkey.

This article focuses on comparing the media’s commemoration of three of the most publicly recognised journalists in Turkey who were murdered in the course of their work, along with the deaths of five journalists killed in more recent years, whose murders received significantly less public attention and commemoration.

The aim is to examine how these journalists have been remembered in both traditional and social media following their deaths. The methodological framework is based on an analysis of the number of news reports relating to these commemorations.

## 2. Research Questions and Objectives

In countries experiencing democratic backsliding, such as Turkey, where authoritarian tendencies have become increasingly prominent, media freedom constitutes a crucial structural element that reflects the broader erosion of democratic norms (Akboga & Sahin, 2021; Gumuscu, 2023; Ugur-Cinar, 2023). One of the most significant barriers to this freedom is attacks against journalists. Such assaults function as a powerful mechanism to compel self-censorship, posing a major threat to freedom of expression. A journalist living in fear of being killed is unlikely to write or express their thoughts freely. Continuously remembering murdered journalists within the collective memory of society can contribute to raising awareness and fostering a culture that values and promotes press freedom. To effectively achieve this, however, media outlets must consistently cover all journalist murders, without making distinctions between cases.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What differences exist in the media representation of murdered journalists in Turkey, particularly between well-known and lesser-known individuals?

RQ2: Why does public reaction to journalist murders vary across different cases?

RQ3: Which murdered journalists are remembered in public discourse, which are forgotten, and what factors influence this differentiation?

RQ4: How are murdered journalists commemorated on the anniversaries of their deaths across different media platforms?

RQ5: How do media narratives describe, frame, or reconstruct the identities and legacies of murdered journalists?

RQ6: How do mainstream and alternative media institutions in Turkey differ in their portrayal and remembrance of murdered journalists?

Answering these questions is important for raising awareness and breaking the cycle of impunity.

## 3. Historical Context and Background

Journalist murders in Turkey have been a recurring phenomenon since the early 20th century and continue to this day. According to the Turkish Journalists' Association (Türkiye Gazeteciler Cemiyeti, n.d.), 68 journalists have been murdered since 1909, while the Contemporary Journalists' Association (n.d.) reports this number as 79 since 1905. The discrepancy between the two organisations stems from 11 journalist deaths being classified as suspicious. The first journalist murder emphasised by Turkish historians is known to be the killing

of Hasan Fehmi Bey in 1909. This murder, which took place in Istanbul, caused a significant public outcry and had a profound societal impact, particularly as the perpetrators were never identified. In the case of Turkey's second journalist murder, the assassination of Zeki Bey (1911), the killers were apprehended and sentenced to 15 years in prison by the court, yet were released within just a few years (Güncü, 2015).

Journalist murders in Turkey have generally increased during periods when political conflicts escalated into armed confrontations (Pakkan & Gönenç, 2008). For example, the rise to power of the Committee of Union and Progress, the intense street violence before the 1980 military coup, and the conflicts of the 1990s can be cited as notable examples. From the 1980s onwards, opinion journalism in Turkey gained prominence with media liberalisation and the rise of columnists as public commentators. This shift made journalists more personally visible and politically exposed. Those expressing dissenting or critical views (of the state) were increasingly seen not just as reporters but as political actors, which heightened their vulnerability to threats, harassment, and even targeted violence (Carey et al., 2023). In recent history, the killing of journalists has been brought to public attention through media outlets, and politically motivated assassinations have received extensive coverage. The murders of Abdi İpekçi in 1979, Uğur Mumcu in 1993, and Hrant Dink in 2007 caused widespread outrage in society, and their funerals turned into massive public protests. Cultural centres are named after them, streets and avenues bear their names, and journalism awards are distributed in their honour. In modern times, journalists known for their ethnic identity or political stance continue to be featured in news coverage years after their murders.

In contrast, journalists without a clearly defined ethnic or political profile often receive limited or no sustained coverage after their deaths. Cases such as İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener (2009), Haydar Meriç (2011), Nuh Köklü (2015), Mustafa Cambaz (2016), and Güngör Arslan (2022) illustrate how killings of lesser-known journalists, many of whom are allegedly linked to their professional activities, have largely faded from public discourse. This distinction forms the basis for the following comparison between well-known and lesser-known figures in the context of media representation and remembrance.

The following examples demonstrate how the killings of prominent journalists have shaped media narratives in Turkey:

- Abdi İpekçi (1929–1979) was known as a conciliatory, peace-oriented journalist and a defender of ethical values. During his time, he was considered to be the most respected journalist in Turkey and was one of the few Turkish journalists with an international profile. On February 1, 1979, he was assassinated in Istanbul. His killer, Mehmet Ali Ağca, a hitman with known ties to far-right nationalist groups, was captured but later escaped from a high-security military prison. He later became internationally known for attempting to assassinate Pope John Paul II in 1981.
- Uğur Mumcu (1942–1993) was a symbolic figure for nationalist, secular groups in Turkey who embraced Atatürk's ideology. On January 24, 1993, he was killed when a bomb planted in his car exploded in Ankara. No evidence has ever been found to identify those responsible for the murder.
- Hrant Dink (1954–2007) was a well-known and respected figure within the Armenian community in Turkey. He was the founder and owner of *Agos* newspaper. In his articles, he peacefully addressed the problems faced by the Armenian community in Turkey. He also criticised Turkey's official historical narratives regarding the Armenian issue through his writings. On January 19, 2007, he was shot and killed by a nationalist in front of his newspaper office.

In contrast, the murders of lesser-known journalists have received limited or no media coverage, as shown in the following cases:

- İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener (1956–2009) was the owner and editor-in-chief of a local newspaper in the town of Bandırma. He was known for writing stories that exposed corruption in the area. On December 18, 2009, he was shot and killed, and many believe his death was linked to his reporting on these issues.
- Haydar Meriç (1968–2011) worked as a reporter for *Gündem Gazetesi*. He was killed because his articles exposed the illegal organisations of certain public officials in the city of Kırıkkale. He went missing in 2011 and it was suspected that he had been abducted. His body was found a few days later in the Sakarya River.
- Nuh Köklü (1971–2015) worked as a television presenter and writer for the leftist newspaper *BirGün*. On February 17, 2015, he was stabbed to death during an argument in Istanbul, the exact reason for which remains unknown. Despite significant public outcry, the court ruled the incident an ordinary street dispute.
- Mustafa Cambaz (1966–2016) was an experienced photojournalist working for *Yeni Akit*, a conservative and pro-government newspaper. On the night of July 15, 2016, Mustafa Cambaz was shot and killed by military gunfire while attempting to photograph the failed coup attempt carried out by the Gülenist faction within the Turkish Armed Forces, which sought to seize control of the government using fighter jets, tanks, infantry, and even naval vessels.
- Güngör Arslan (1962–2022) was the founder and editor of the newspaper *Ses Kocaeli*. He reported on corruption within the state and bribery in public tenders, often publishing documents as evidence. On February 19, 2022, he was shot and killed in front of his newspaper office.

#### 4. Theoretical Framework

Galtung and Ruge's (1965) news value theory proposes a framework for understanding which news stories are given more prominence in the media and for examining how news becomes embedded in society's collective memory (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Although this theory originally discussed the flow of foreign news, it can also be applied to national news production. This approach helps answer the question of why some events stand out in media narratives while others are ignored. The theory defines high-value news items with concepts such as negativity, unusualness, monumentality, political relevance, or strong symbolic significance for society (Nicholson, 2002). In the context of this study, news value theory serves as a crucial basis for explaining why the murders of some journalists receive significant media coverage while others do not. Such stories are more likely to be remembered by the public and receive sustained media attention as tragic events (Wasdahl, 2024).

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory also demonstrates how the media shapes processes of remembering and forgetting. According to this theory, certain narratives are repeatedly highlighted in the media and thus reflected as dominant public opinion. Other events, however, are excluded from news coverage and consequently disappear from society's collective memory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Within the scope of this study, the spiral of silence theory is also useful in understanding how journalist murders that may initially provoke strong reactions eventually fade from public memory. The absence of such events in news coverage can sometimes result from editorial decisions, public indifference, or political pressure. In this context, even though the murder of a journalist may trigger significant public outrage at the time of the killing, if the media

stops reporting on it, the event gradually fades from collective memory. In addition to the cycle of media neglect, the broader phenomenon of media forgetting plays a significant role in how news is remembered (Borkin et al., 2016). Political pressure or media censorship can accelerate the erasure of certain events from public memory (Bennett et al., 2008). In today's digital media era, the fast-paced flow of information and the constant need for updates can further accelerate the process of forgetting (Carr, 2010).

The theoretical approaches used in this study are not applied in isolation but rather in a complementary and interconnected manner. News value theory explains why some events receive attention in the first place. The spiral of silence theory addresses the mechanisms through which certain stories are gradually silenced or overlooked. Media memory theory contextualises the broader dynamics of remembering and forgetting, including how stories can re-emerge through cycles of media attention, neglect, and reactivation. The significance of news and its durability within collective memory should therefore be assessed in light of how events are framed in the media, the editorial choices behind what is published, and the theoretical structures that shape public understanding. In this context, the strong initial news value of journalist murders may contribute to their persistence in public memory. However, without sustained media engagement or in cases where silence is imposed by external forces, the process of forgetting may be considerably accelerated. When mainstream media attention declines, alternative media outlets, civil society organisations, independent journalism initiatives, and academic research step in. They help ensure that the significance of these murders remains in society's collective memory. Moreover, practices such as commemorative media coverage on anniversaries, in-depth retrospective reporting, and personal narratives focusing on victims can contribute to the long-term remembrance of events (Minow, 2001). As part of the theoretical framework, the study also reflects how the news value and spiral of silence theories shape media commemoration practices. The cases analysed reveal that journalist murders with higher initial news value are more frequently commemorated and remembered, while others gradually fade from media discourse over time. This finding supports the assumptions of both theories regarding selective attention and social silence.

## 5. Methodology

This study looks at news content related to the eight murdered journalists listed in the previous section, from the 12 most popular news websites (in 2024) and the four largest-circulation print newspapers in Turkey. Circulation data for print newspapers were obtained from publicly available sources, while online platforms were selected based on rankings from recognised research companies. Website traffic was further verified using Google Analytics. Data on web-based news platforms were reviewed from 1997 onwards and on print newspapers from 1979. News content related to the journalists' murders was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative analysis focused on the number of published articles about the eight murdered journalists, whether their deaths were reported (in a particular title or platform), their remembrance rates and whether they were commemorated on the anniversaries of their deaths, and the frequency of terms such as "democracy," "press freedom," and "freedom of expression" in commemorative news articles. The selected news websites represent the most visited digital news platforms in Turkey over one year. All of these websites are directly affiliated with traditional media institutions and employ a significant number of professional journalists.

In 2024, *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Sabah* were the most visited news websites in Turkey, each attracting tens of millions of monthly visits, alongside other high-traffic platforms such as *NTV*, *Mynet*, and *Haberler*. The list

included a mix of long-established print-digital hybrids and exclusively online outlets, launched between 1997 and 2011, each with monthly visits ranging from about 8 to 23 million readers. This distribution reflects the dominant position of legacy media institutions with early digital adoption, as well as the significant reach of digital-native platforms. Across the 12 websites analysed, we identified 138 commemorative articles (*Milliyet*  $n = 44$ , *Hürriyet*  $n = 41$ , *NTV*  $n = 17$ , *CNN Türk*  $n = 13$ , *Sözcü*  $n = 9$ , and others combined  $n = 14$ ).

According to 2024 data, the four newspapers with the highest circulation in Turkey are *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, *Sabah*, and *Sözcü* (the first three of course linked to the related websites). *Hürriyet*, founded in 1948, and *Milliyet*, founded in 1950, are at the centre of mainstream journalism in Turkey. *Sabah*, which began publication in 1985, became a widely read newspaper during the 1990s. Compared to the others, *Sözcü* is a relatively newer initiative but has become the most prominent opposition newspaper. Since its establishment in 2007, it has grown into one of the most well-known media outlets in the country. A total of 81 articles were examined in *Hürriyet*, 192 in *Milliyet*, 25 in *Sabah*, and 15 in *Sözcü*. A total of 313 newspaper articles were examined.

## 6. Results and Analysis

### 6.1. The Distribution of Commemorative News Reports on Murdered Journalists and Their Change Over the Years

A multi-factor analysis was conducted on how murdered journalists in Turkey have been remembered in media discourse in both print and digital media between 1979 and 2024 (see Table 1). This analysis examined both the number and frequency of news articles published about each journalist by various media outlets and the extent to which concepts such as “democracy,” “press freedom,” and “freedom of expression” were included in news coverage related to their murders.

**Table 1.** Number of commemorative articles about well-known and lesser-known journalists in high-circulation print newspapers (commemorative = articles on/around death anniversaries).

Murdered journalist	Date of death	Years since death	<i>Hürriyet</i>	<i>Milliyet</i>	<i>Sabah</i>	<i>Sözcü</i>
Abdi İpekçi	February 1, 1979	45	6	38	5	0
Uğur Mumcu	January 24, 1993	31	4	6	3	1
Hrant Dink	January 19, 2007	17	1	1	1	1
İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener	December 19, 2009	15	0	1	0	1
Nuh Köklü	June 18, 2011	13	0	0	0	0
Haydar Meriç	February 17, 2015	9	0	0	0	2
Mustafa Canbaz	July 15, 2016	8	0	0	1	0
Güngör Arslan	February 19, 2022	2	0	0	0	0

Table 1 reveals notable differences in how well-known and less well-known murdered journalists are commemorated in Turkey’s high-circulation print newspapers. The oldest murder, that of Abdi İpekçi, stands out, with 38 *Milliyet* articles over 45 years, suggesting strong institutional memory and symbolic importance. Interestingly, the oppositional and secular *Sözcü* did not commemorate İpekçi at all, raising questions about editorial priorities and historical distance. In the case of Uğur Mumcu, commemorative coverage exists

across all four newspapers, though the overall numbers remain modest considering his wide societal impact. *Milliyet* again leads with six articles, while *Sözcü*, despite Mumcu's alignment with secular and oppositional ideals, published only one. This discrepancy should not be explained solely by institutional affiliation. Shifting editorial strategies and changes in commemorative culture may also be significant factors. In the case of Hrant Dink's commemoration, it is evident that coverage is quite limited and uniform. The mission that Hrant Dink represented likely played a role in this. Due to the political sensitivity of his assassination and his Armenian identity, media outlets have adopted a more cautious approach. At the same time, broader societal discomfort with addressing violence against minorities in the public sphere is a major contributing factor (Karaosmanoğlu, 2008).

Overall, the table suggests that the frequency with which murdered journalists are remembered in print media is not only related to their public recognition but also shaped by institutional affiliation, the identity they represent, and the editorial policies of the newspapers in question.

Lesser-known murdered journalists receive extremely limited commemoration in Turkey's high-circulation print newspapers. Compared to well-known journalists, these individuals are met with near silence in the mainstream press. İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener, who was murdered in 2009, was mentioned only once each by *Milliyet* and *Sözcü* newspapers, while *Hürriyet* and *Sabah* offered no coverage. The complete lack of commemorative articles for Nuh Köklü and Güngör Arslan is particularly striking and suggests exclusion from the institutional memory of the press. Haydar Meriç appeared only twice in *Sözcü*, while the other newspapers ignored him entirely. On the other hand, Mustafa Canbaz was killed by coup plotters while reporting on the coup attempt on July 15, 2016. This killing was mentioned once by the *Sabah* newspaper. This suggests that the deaths of journalists linked to overtly political events may receive more attention in certain ideologically aligned media outlets. Overall, the table indicates that the remembrance of murdered journalists in the press is closely tied to factors such as public visibility, political context, and institutional affiliation. To illustrate the distribution of commemorative news articles across Turkey's most visited news websites, the results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Number of commemorative articles about well-known and lesser-known journalists on Turkey's most visited news websites.

Murdered journalist	Hürriyet	Milliyet	Sabah	NTV	Mynet	Haberler	Habertürk	Son Dakika	Sözcü	Haber 7	CNN Türk	Ensonhaber
Abdi İpekçi	18	13	1	3	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
Uğur Mumcu	9	19	0	3	0	1	0	0	3	0	1	0
Hrant Dink	12	12	0	9	0	0	1	0	0	0	12	0
İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	2	4	1	0	1
Nuh Köklü	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Haydar Meriç	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mustafa Canbaz	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Güngör Arslan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0



The highest number of commemorative reports for Abdi İpekçi was published by *Hürriyet* (18 reports) and *Milliyet* (13 reports), the official online sites of the newspapers. Other news platforms featured very few or no reports on this journalist. A similar pattern can be seen with Uğur Mumcu, who received the most coverage on *Milliyet* (19 reports) and then *Hürriyet* (9 reports), while other websites offered only limited attention. Commemorative coverage for Hrant Dink, however, shows a relatively more balanced distribution. *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *CNN Türk* each published 12 news articles. In addition, *NTV* contributed 9 reports, reflecting greater attention compared to the other two journalists. Overall, Turkey's established media outlets, especially *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *CNN Türk*, devoted more space than print editions to commemorating murdered journalists. In contrast, newer websites with different popularity dynamics, such as *Ensonhaber*, *Haber 7*, and *Son Dakika*, featured such content far less frequently. Notably, Hrant Dink's death was also largely unacknowledged by Turkey's major news portals. This indicates that commemorative news coverage is crafted not only by the journalist's symbolic significance but by the media outlet's editorial biases, institutional identity, and political affiliations. It also stands out that a great number of news websites did not publish any articles about these cases. These news channels, whether pro-government or opposition, pay little attention to journalist murders. It is also worth highlighting that Hrant Dink's death garnered almost no attention on some of the most prominent news sites in Turkey. Equally important is the fact that numerous online news outlets completely refrained from reporting on the issue.

The table shows that commemorative coverage of lesser-known journalists such as İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener, Nuh Köklü, Haydar Meriç, Mustafa Cambaz, and Güngör Arslan is extremely limited on Turkey's most visited news websites. No commemorative articles were found for Nuh Köklü or Güngör Arslan, while the others appeared on only a few platforms and in very small numbers. This suggests that factors such as public recognition, political context, and institutional affiliation directly influence the likelihood of journalist murders being covered as commemorative news. Lesser-known journalists are largely overlooked in both mainstream and digital media, making it more difficult for them to secure a place in public memory and limiting the development of societal awareness on press freedom.

## 6.2. Attitudes of Media Organisations and Differences in the Number of News Reports

There are some notable differences between media organisations in terms of the number of commemorative articles published about murdered journalists. These differences stem from factors such as editorial position, corporate interests and even the political structure of the region. Some news portals, such as *Milliyet*, treat these incidents as routine events and fulfil their duty to preserve collective memory, while others, such as *Ensonhaber*, report on these incidents very little or not at all. This disparity can be partly explained by political positioning: news organisations close to the government may believe that commemorating journalists killed for their opposition stance could damage the current administration's image. Commemorating these journalists could indirectly criticise the state's inaction or complicity, which may lead such organisations to deliberately avoid revisiting these cases. Beyond the social significance of a journalist's death, these examples demonstrate that media organisations hold differing views on press freedom, political taboos, and the demographic audience they cater to. This obvious inequality in the coverage of news stories demonstrates the urgent need for media organisations to propose a unified policy that classifies the killing of journalists as a threat to democracy and journalism. If the murder of a journalist is regarded as newsworthy rather than routine, there tends to be no selective bias in terms of which cases receive coverage.

Google Analytics data also reveals differences in digital visibility related to the topic under examination. For instance, Uğur Mumcu emerges as the most frequently mentioned journalist on internet pages, with approximately 4,280,000 results. He is followed by Hrant Dink and Abdi İpekçi, with 1,760,000 and 1,210,000 results, respectively. Although these figures do not directly reflect the frequency of coverage in news content, it is evident that these three journalists occupy a strong position in public memory despite relatively lower numbers of news reports in some cases. In contrast, less well-known journalists such as İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener and Nuh Köklü display considerably limited digital visibility, with 4,633 and 7,330 results, respectively. Similarly, the number of results for Haydar Meriç and Güngör Arslan stands at 5,140 and 35,700, respectively. Among the lesser-known journalists, Cambaz stands out as a notable exception, with 93,200 results. These findings indicate that commemorative events and public interest in journalists contribute to the formation of collective memory, while the level of attention shown by editors and the frequency of news coverage may serve as indirect indicators of this process. The frequency of news reports published following the deaths of well-known journalists across Turkey's most visited news websites is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Turkey's most visited news websites: Frequency of news reports published following the deaths of publicly known journalists.

News website	First published	Abdi İpekçi	Uğur Mumcu	Hrant Dink
<i>Hürriyet</i>	1997	843	613	537
<i>Milliyet</i>	1997	1,270	505	460
<i>Sabah</i>	1997	268	255	313
<i>NTV</i>	1997	225	412	139
<i>Mynet</i>	1999	153	192	85
<i>Haberler</i>	2006	112	237	191
<i>Habertürk</i>	2000	268	207	153
<i>Son Dakika</i>	2007	152	277	230
<i>Sözcü</i>	2011	191	191	153
<i>Haber 7</i>	2004	84	117	153
<i>CNN Türk</i>	2004	140	108	154
<i>Ensonhaber</i>	2007	60	76	94

The table displays the number of news articles published by Turkey's most visited news websites following the deaths of the three well-known murdered journalists. According to the data, *Milliyet* stands out with the highest number of reports, particularly on the first journalist, with 1,270 articles. *Hürriyet* also shows significant coverage with high article counts (843, 613, and 537), indicating a strong media response. Other long-established platforms like *Sabah*, *NTV*, and *Habertürk* also show consistent engagement. On the other hand, platforms such as *Ensonhaber*, *Haber 7*, and *Mynet* have published relatively fewer articles. Notably, *Sözcü*, although it began publication in 2011, has published a substantial number of reports on murdered journalists, suggesting that the outlet's political stance might influence the level of coverage. Overall, the publication history and institutional identity of news platforms appear to play a significant role in shaping the level of media attention given to murdered journalists.

Table 4 shows the number of news stories published after the deaths of journalists who were less well-known to the public on Turkey's most visited news websites. Overall, the table shows that the number

of news stories published after the deaths of lesser-known journalists is significantly lower than in high-profile cases. The complete absence of news stories in some media outlets highlights how strongly memorial news stories are influenced by editorial preferences, political stance, and public perception.

**Table 4.** Turkey's most visited news websites: Frequency of news reports published after the deaths of less publicly known journalists.

News Website	İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener	Haydar Meriç	Nuh Köklü	Mustafa Cambaz	Güngör Arslan
<i>Hürriyet</i>	12	15	9	11	10
<i>Milliyet</i>	10	13	8	9	8
<i>Sabah</i>	8	10	7	7	6
<i>NTV</i>	5	6	4	5	4
<i>Mynet</i>	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Haberler</i>	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Habertürk</i>	15	18	11	13	12
<i>Son Dakika</i>	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Sözcü</i>	20	22	16	14	18
<i>Haber 7</i>	0	0	0	0	0
<i>CNN Türk</i>	7	9	6	8	7
<i>Ensonhaber</i>	0	0	0	0	0

### 6.3. The Commemoration of Murdered Journalists in the Media Through Themes of Democracy and Freedom

When journalists are killed in the course of their work, the terms “democracy,” “freedom of the press,” and “freedom of expression” are frequently used in commemorations because journalism plays a vital role in upholding these core values (Geamănu, 2017; Jurado & Morales, 2024). Journalists are not merely conveyors of information; they serve as watchdogs of power, inform the public, and give voice to social justice. Silencing a journalist has been interpreted as undermining the public’s right to information and the freedom to express ideas. For this reason, the murder of a journalist is often viewed in the literature as symbolically significant in resisting authoritarianism and a threat to democratic values.

Table 5 shows the frequency of the terms “democracy,” “press freedom,” and “freedom of expression” in commemorative news reports, which are articles published on or around the anniversaries of journalists’ deaths. The data reveal that these themes appear most frequently in reports about Hrant Dink, Uğur Mumcu, and Abdi İpekçi. For Hrant Dink, the word “democracy” appeared 607 times, “press freedom” 654 times, and “freedom of expression” 582 times. Uğur Mumcu also received high counts in these categories (552, 601, and 551). In contrast, commemorative coverage of lesser-known journalists included these terms far less frequently. For instance, in articles about Mustafa Cambaz, “democracy” appeared only 18 times, “press freedom” 16 times, and “freedom of expression” 14 times. A similarly low frequency is observed for the other lesser-known journalists. This suggests a direct correlation between a journalist’s public visibility and symbolic importance and the use of freedom-related themes in media coverage. While high-profile journalists are commemorated with strong references to democratic values and rights, lesser-known journalists tend to be remembered with much less emphasis on these ideals.

**Table 5.** Frequency of freedom-related terms in commemorative news of murdered journalists.

Journalist	Democracy	Press freedom	Freedom of expression
Hrant Dink	607	654	582
Uğur Mumcu	552	601	551
Abdi İpekçi	504	553	507
İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener	28	30	26
Nuh Köklü	34	32	30
Haydar Meriç	46	50	44
Mustafa Cambaz	18	16	14
Güngör Arslan	26	24	28

## 7. Media Representation of Journalist Murders and Their Place in Social Memory

### 7.1. The Shaping of Memory Over Time and Its Media Representation

The extent to which journalist murders are remembered—or gradually forgotten over time—is shaped by the editorial choices and institutional policies of media organisations. In particular, the views and political stance of journalists who are widely known and symbolically significant in society directly influence how their deaths are represented in the media (Sumiala, 2022). When a media outlet has ideological or political affinity with the murdered journalist, this is reflected in more extensive coverage and a more dramatic tone (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013). In such cases, the incident is not merely framed as an act of violence or a loss of life, but as an attack on shared values and democratic principles. For example, *Milliyet* captured this sentiment in its headline following the assassination of Uğur Mumcu: “This Bomb is for All of Us,” with the subheading “The Murderers, Who Targeted the People, Democracy, and Press Freedom, Have Also Killed Uğur Mumcu” (“Bu bomba hepimize,” 1993). The reports are often enriched with in-depth analysis and are crafted in a way that increases emotional engagement from the audience. Observations specific to Turkey offer concrete examples of this phenomenon. For instance, the symbolic connection between *Milliyet* newspaper and Abdi İpekçi has led the newspaper to attach particular importance to commemorating İpekçi’s death anniversary for many years, both in its print and digital editions (“Abdi İpekçi politikalarıyla,” 2000).

Page limitations, editorial priorities, and commercial concerns often result in the coverage of such murders being short-lived, confined to the immediate aftermath of the event. In contrast, the same newspapers may feature murders of more prominent journalists on their front pages even years later, reflecting their entrenched place in social and political memory. For example, on January 23, 2023, the *Sözcü* newspaper’s website published the headline “30 years have Passed...The Uğur Mumcu Murder is Still Unsolved” (2023), while on February 1, 2024, *Milliyet* newspaper featured on its front page the headline “We Commemorate Abdi İpekçi” (2024). Thus, how journalist murders are embedded in collective memory is not solely determined by the severity of the event or the journalist’s public visibility. It is also directly linked to the editorial stance, political positioning, and news production practices of media organisations. Ideally, in cases such as journalist murders, which carry critical importance for the public interest, media institutions are expected to adopt a stance based on universal journalistic values, free from political entanglements. This expectation stems from the role of the press as a watchdog, ensuring accurate and impartial reporting in matters that affect democratic accountability. However, in practice, the presentation and prominence of

such news vary significantly depending on the ideological leanings and economic interests of the media outlets (van Dijk, 2013). Readers themselves should also demand this to some extent. Every journalist who is murdered represents a threat to the public's right to receive information. If a journalist begins to wonder "will something happen to me if I write this?" then the public's right to be informed is effectively undermined. The dynamic nature of digital media contributes significantly to the remembrance of journalist murders (Haskins, 2007). This allows for a greater number of reports to be published on the anniversaries of murdered journalists and enables the topic to be revisited from various perspectives (Bonina et al., 2021). However, despite this flexibility, the remembrance rates of murders involving lesser-known journalists remain limited in digital media as well.

## 7.2. Institutional and Cultural Memory Mechanisms

Journalists who are widely known and occupy a significant position within the political spectrum are remembered not only through media coverage but also through institutional and cultural memory mechanisms. In this case, the most notable examples are Abdi İpekçi, Uğur Mumcu, and Hrant Dink. These journalists have often received media attention after their murders and have been remembered continuously through various forms of commemoration, like the foundations established in their name, books and articles written about them, documentaries made, and public spaces like streets, avenues, and buildings named after them. Their high public profile and professional reputation prior to their deaths may also have contributed to the greater level of media attention and commemoration they received afterwards, suggesting that pre-existing prominence influences posthumous remembrance.

This suggests that the remembrance of journalists like Abdi İpekçi, Uğur Mumcu, and Hrant Dink does not depend single-handedly on media conglomerates but has advanced far beyond the media. In comparison, the case is rather different for less noticed and recognised journalists. Men such as İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener, Nuh Köklü, Haydar Meriç, Mustafa Cambaz, and Güngör Arslan are confined to a much less significant space in the collective memory due to the relative invisibility of their murders in the media and public concern. The main factor behind this disparity is the differing societal impact of the murders. While İpekçi, Mumcu, and Dink remain central in public memory due to their symbolic status, the murders of lesser-known journalists have received limited recognition. These journalists also contributed ideas and professional work, yet their deaths have largely faded into obscurity because of insufficient media attention. Ensuring that such cases are remembered requires responsibility not only from the media but also from civil society, both of which must work to guarantee that the murders of journalists on the margins receive the acknowledgement they deserve. The consistency of such practices is crucial if we are to stem the decline in awareness of violence against freedom of expression and to remember and celebrate the legacy of journalism.

## 8. Discussion

This study examines how journalist murders in Turkey are either erased from or incorporated into collective memory by the news media. The findings show that the processes of covering and commemorating such murders are decisively shaped by institutional identity, editorial line, the journalist's public visibility, and the outlet's political stance (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013). Although news-value theory explains why a story initially gains prominence (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), the long-term remembrance or oblivion of a murder depends on the ideological position of the medium and the sense of "belonging" between the journalist and the

organisation. For example, despite multiple changes in ownership, *Milliyet* and its website have commemorated Abdi İpekçi consistently since 1979, illustrating the selective workings of institutional memory. By contrast, pro-government outlets have adopted a markedly distant attitude toward the murders and subsequent anniversaries of Uğur Mumcu and Hrant Dink (Freedom House, 2024).

The pattern predicted by the spiral of silence theory is especially visible in the murders of lesser-known journalists: these stories vanish from the news agenda soon after an initial brief mention, accelerating their erasure from public memory and reducing them to “statistical data” (Carey & Gohdes, 2021; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Even though digital outlets have unlimited “pages,” they continue to commemorate well-known journalists, while almost completely ignoring less-familiar names—a phenomenon linked to platform algorithms and editorial prioritisation (Bonina et al., 2021). Keywords such as “democracy,” “press freedom,” and “freedom of expression” appear far more frequently in articles about symbolic figures like Dink, Mumcu, and İpekçi. In reports on less prominent victims, these terms decline dramatically, narrowing the discourse on freedom to a handful of celebrated names and relegating other cases to the periphery of democratic debate (Minow, 2001).

This study is confined to national mainstream print and online media between 1979 and 2024; local outlets, social-media campaigns, and podcasts were excluded. Future research should explore how algorithmic promotion (e.g., news-homepage automation), multilingual media traces, and transnational solidarity networks affect memorialisation dynamics, thereby extending the present findings.

## 9. Conclusion

Words like “democracy,” “freedom of the press,” and “freedom of speech” are considered fundamental in explaining how such a homicide is covered and the identity of the journalist who is at the centre of the story. Well-known journalists—Hrant Dink (607, 654, and 582 online articles), Uğur Mumcu (552, 601, and 551 online articles), and Abdi İpekçi (504, 553, and 507 online articles)—were linked to “democracy,” “press freedom,” and “freedom of expression” far more often than lesser-known figures. Journalists who are ideologically affiliated with the media houses are given more coverage, indicating a strong relationship between identity and political beliefs/ideology and perceived newsworthiness. Conversely, lesser-known journalists have little chance of being featured in the press. In the absence of media coverage, forgetting sets in, and such people tend to vanish from public discussion and popular memory. The death of Hasan Fehmi Bey, the first journalist to be murdered in Turkey back in 1909, sparked many conversations in the intellectual circles of the time (Gawrych, 1986), although today his legacy is mostly relegated to the history books. Abdi İpekçi is remembered largely because of the foundation bearing his name and the extensive coverage by the popular *Milliyet* newspaper. In the same way, the foundation created in honour of Uğur Mumcu, along with secular, Atatürkist sympathiser groups has ensured the journalist’s enduring legacy. Commemoration of Hrant Dink is also largely achieved through the activities of the foundation that carries his name.

The study reaffirms that media portrayal, as well as the enduring context surrounding journalist killings in both legacy and new media, and by extension, their portrayal in public memory, goes beyond the characterisation of the murder or the journalist’s biography. Therefore, apart from media portrayal, the contributions of civil society and mechanisms of cultural memory are essential to guarantee that the remains

of murdered journalists do not become absent in public consciousness. İsmail Cihan Hayırsevener, Haydar Meriç, Nuh Köklü, Mustafa Cambaz, and, recently, Güngör Arslan are among the journalists whose names have largely faded from public discourse following their murders. For society to comprehensively enjoy press freedom, these journalists, together with those killed in the past, need to be at least acknowledged and celebrated through the new media on their death anniversaries.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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