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Memento Mori: Noticing Death in Global Media

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Abstract

This introduction to the thematic issue examines the paradoxical position of death in contemporary media where it is simultaneously ubiquitous and unevenly represented, even while digital technologies are reshaping long-standing journalistic norms governing the visibility of the dead. The works—selected from different countries and regions of the world—emphasize the need for research that moves beyond exceptional cases to include diverse geopolitical contexts and everyday forms of mortality, particularly as social media broaden the spaces in which death, mourning, and posthumous presence circulate. The thematic issue aims to bring together scholarship on the cultural construction of death in various contexts and the resulting collection highlights how bodies remain sites of competing narratives, ethically charged decisions, and political contestation. The issue further investigates how linguistic, visual, and structural choices in news reporting determine whose deaths are counted, witnessed, or overlooked, and how these representational practices shape public understandings of mortality. Grounded in theories of social construction, national memory, and mediated visibility, the thematic issue explores the instability of death as an object of representation and the affective, moral, and epistemic negotiations underlying its portrayal.

Keywords

death; digital media; journalism; media; news; obituary

Death holds a prominent but contradictory place in today’s media: it is everywhere, but shown unevenly; constantly measured but often not pictured; even its physical reality is shaped and changed by different cultures and societies. Across journalistic practice, acts of counting the dead become forms of *recounting* through which the literal body—cadaver, corpse, or remains—emerges as a site of incompatible biography: an object with a history, but which no longer has a life. Prior research has shown that journalistic depictions of dead bodies have traditionally been infrequent (Fishman, 2017; Zelizer, 2010), yet the rapidly evolving

digital environment may be reshaping established norms of production, circulation, and reception. As digital and social media expand the spaces and logics of visibility, they simultaneously challenge and transform the conventions governing which deaths are shown, how they are framed, and whose bodies are rendered countable, or discountable, within public discourse.

While earlier scholarship has often concentrated on the mediation of exceptional death (Sumiala, 2022), there is a sustained need for empirical and also retrospective inquiry that encompasses a broader spectrum of deaths and geopolitical perspectives, and which offer local scholarly and professional viewpoints rather than outsider-ethnographic ones. In Lesley Mofokeng's (2025) study of black obituaries in the early South African press ("Convening Black Sociability Over a Corpse: Obituaries in the early South African Black Press") for example, there is a global celestial moment—the appearance of Halley's Comet in 1910—which Mofokeng and his central protagonist, journalist and author Sol Plaatje, use to explore the universality of mortality. The arrival of the much-anticipated comet heralds a "year of death," of kings and authors in the North, and of African chiefs and community leaders in the South. Plaatje's efforts to eulogise powerful and influential black African men, in the shape and form of Western literary-journalistic obituary, provides a remarkable example of the often unacknowledged minutiae and variations that exist within a "global" field of journalism that, then, was both well-established (as a form) and in its infancy (as a profession)—simultaneous processes that saw the dispersion of a "universal" model of journalistic practice, but one which was profoundly invested with Western and colonial values and ideologies (Sharra et al., 2025).

This thematic issue examines how different media in different times, contexts, and locations recognize or overlook the dead, how encounters with death shape journalistic practice, and how linguistic, visual, and structural choices influence public perceptions of mortality. It explores the diverse ways news media across the world investigate, portray, and narrate death and the dead through words and images. In the same context, these works also acknowledge that (digital) social platforms have increased the everyday visibility of death, mourning, and transformed the "presence" of the deceased; as these technologies become woven into daily life, they are fostering new forms of mourning practices. Chuanlin Ning's (2025) "You Have Not Disappeared: Digital Mourning Spaces After a Social Media Celebrity's Self-Obituary" examines how the viral 2022 self-obituary posted on the Chinese social media platform Bilibili by food blogger Yishiji (一食纪) sparked the creation of a sustained digital mourning space. Ning demonstrates that this evolving site of engagement, where users continue to converse, remember, and interact through diverse multimodal forms, constitutes a new, democratized mode of online mourning shaped jointly by user participation and platform algorithms. Ning's work, employing new computational methods to identify and analyse relevance within thousands of posts, shows how digital spaces become living eulogies/epitaphs.

The theoretical foundation for such inquiry draws on longstanding efforts to comprehend death as both culturally embedded and socially constructed. As Brussel and Carpentier (2014) argue, although definitions of death are shaped by cultural frameworks, the material transformations of the dying body impose constraints on how death can be conceptualised. Examining death and dying through the lens of social construction, they suggest, allows scholars to de-essentialise and critically interrogate concepts, practices, and assumptions that structure how individuals and communities confront "the only certainty in life." This perspective highlights the epistemic instability of death as an object of representation, as well as the political, ethical, and affective negotiations that attend its mediation.

Such negotiations are also central to the role of death in collective identity formation. Benedict Anderson (1983) famously noted that the deaths that structure “the biography of the nation” are selectively narrated: Exemplary suicides, martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and genocides are incorporated into national memory only insofar as they can be remembered, and forgotten, as “our own.” Here, death becomes a narrative resource, woven into the imagined continuity of the nation-state and mobilised to produce forms of belonging and exclusion.

In the contemporary mediascape, the corpse has emerged as a powerful and increasingly spectacular object—an affect heightened by rising forced migration, conflict, and climate change. As early as 2005, Klaver (2005) noted that the dead body, especially in visual form, was frequently cast as a dramatic, attention-grabbing figure. In his overview of how death appears in news media, Hanusch (2010) identifies not a disappearance but a transformation of the taboos surrounding death and its representation. Still, this heightened visibility matters greatly, since mass media are central arenas through which societal understandings of death are formed and reinforced. As Weber (2014) points out, for many viewers who have never entered a pathology department or witnessed an autopsy, mediated images offer the primary visual encounter with the dead body. Such depictions, therefore, carry significant pedagogical, affective, and normative weight, shaping what death looks like and how it is to be understood.

By including both historical and contemporary studies, the works of this thematic issue demonstrate how both language and technology diversify and transform our lexicon of public death notices and memorialisation. Laurence Stewart and Thandi Bombi (2025), in their article “The 1927 Mapleton Train Disaster, Memorialisation, and the Media’s Role in Narrating the Dead,” show how a train disaster in early 20th Century urban South Africa revealed profound racial inequities in how death and suffering were treated at the time. Injured black passengers were relegated to coal trucks for medical transport and those who succumbed were buried collectively, some unidentified; while in contrast white victims received immediate care and individual funerals. Drawing on archival records and a thematic analysis of newspaper coverage, the article investigates how multiple journalistic narratives framed the tragedy and shaped whose deaths were rendered visible, grievable, and historically enduring. Through the lens of bearing witness, the study shows that the media not only mediates public responses to mass fatality events but also produces hierarchies of remembrance that elevate certain lives while consigning others to obscurity.

The articles selected for this issue include studies of works produced in more than six different languages, including English, Turkish, Mandarin, Finnish, Setswana, and Spanish, extending geographically from the northernmost reaches of Europe to the southern tip of Africa, and from Türkiye to China, covering a time span of more than a century. Asking for work that looked at representations of death in global journalism, the issue sought to platform research that we believed would contribute towards challenging or expanding the ways in which media reports of death and dying inadvertently or deliberately heightened (Sumiala, 2022) or even flattened the phenomena of death into predictable, newsworthy packages; and which visited narratives, languages, frames, visual depictions, and professional practices in ways that exposed where difference and commonality co-existed or competed. In some instances, these dynamics become visible through contrasts between regions; in others, they unfold within the same context. A striking example emerges from the resonance between the separate works of Önder Deniz, Hüseyin Vehbi İmamoğlu, and Taybe Topsakal (2025)—a study of the memorialization of murdered journalists in Türkiye (“Missing Bodies, Silent Pages: How Turkish Media Portrays Journalist Murders and Silence”)—and Melike İşleyen and Barış

Çoban (2025)—an analysis of how gendered life and death are mediated in Turkish news reporting (“Mediation of Gendered Life and Death Within Intersecting Regimes of Patriarchy, Authoritarianism, and Necropolitics”). Together, these works illuminate the deeply rooted ideologies and power structures embedded in both media systems and the societies they serve. Deniz et al. (2025) trace the long-contested state of press freedom in Türkiye and examine how journalist killings are represented across traditional and digital platforms. Their analysis reveals whose stories are amplified or ignored, how long such deaths remain in the public eye, and how commemorations are handled, demonstrating that media narratives play a crucial role in shaping, yet also erasing, collective memory. Complementing this, İşleyen and Çoban (2025) investigate how news media mediate fatal violence against women, trans women, and travesti people, showing how intersecting power structures determine whose suffering is rendered visible. By comparing Islamist, pro-government, alternative, and queer feminist outlets, they reveal that dominant media often sensationalize women’s deaths or obscure trans deaths entirely while queer feminist platforms resist these exclusions through practices of care, remembrance, and political reclamation. Taken together, these studies expose how media representations not only reflect but actively reproduce structural inequalities, revealing the political stakes involved in who is remembered, who is mourned, and who is systematically forgotten.

Perhaps equally significant is the use of language as an internal indicator of ideology and publics, an effect seen in particular in the studies from Türkiye as well as from China, which, even in translation, point towards unique nomenclatures that would otherwise remain invisible to outside audiences. In their article “Celebrity Suicides in China: How Social Media Shapes News Framing,” Shiyu (Sharon) Zheng and Shiyi Zhang (2025) analyze how Chinese news media framed the suicides of celebrities Sulli and Coco Lee on Weibo, revealing three dominant and platform-shaped frames—mental health, gossip, and nationalism—that often blended responsible reporting with sensationalism. The findings show that social media affordances have shifted traditional gatekeeping and agenda-setting power, producing more dynamic yet less responsible narratives and highlighting the need for updated reporting practices.

Montse Morcate and Rebeca Pardo’s (2025) study on the “Cut-Off Low (DANA) in Valencia: Visual Representation of Death and Grief in Photojournalism” and Liia-Maria Raippalinn, Suvi Mononen, Markus Mykkänen, and Turo Uskali’s (2025) work on “Ethical Principles in the Portrayal of Death and Suffering: Finnish Photographers Covering the Russia–Ukraine War” look at complementary journalistic processes and practices in the context of reporting on and depicting mass disaster and conflict respectively. Morcate and Pardo’s (2025) study on front-page representation of the Valencia floods is an important contribution to a broader body of work that looks at how such visual choices replicate or reflect political ones: Where human death becomes vague and distant, where visual near-metaphors are preferred (the carcasses of cars rather than people), and how the material traces of catastrophe are used to stand in for human loss, allowing newspapers to gesture toward tragedy while avoiding the direct representation of death itself. Raippalinn et al.’s (2025) detailed interviews with photojournalists covering the Russian invasion of Ukraine offer a different perspective on how individual journalists navigate human choices in life and death or about-to-die situations, and how this endangers their own humanity at times. The honesty and intimacy of the participants’ responses will provide some valuable guidance for the surprising lack of standardisation and support in conflict reporting, particularly for photographers and multi-media reporters and editors.

Together, the selected contributions are important additions to a broader body of work that interrogates how news media perceive, represent, and hierarchise death, revealing the cultural logics, narrative

conventions, and power structures that shape whose lives are acknowledged, whose deaths are visualised or obscured, and how public memory is collectively constructed, contested, and sustained. Through this modest selection of works, coming from regions that often exist in the margins of the dominant journalism canon, the articles prompt important questions about *which* deaths are noticed, how they are reported, whose deaths are memorialised, and how deaths are disregarded or forgotten, either at the time or over time. By bringing together interdisciplinary scholarship on both historical and contemporary journalistic practices, this thematic issue aims to advance critical debates on the mediation of death in an increasingly digitised and globalised media environment—while also acknowledging that, in the archives of the global south, there remain many forgotten and/or under-explored records which are being rediscovered and re-imagined through often parallel efforts to decolonise and to digitise histories in more inclusive ways. Through these investigations and engagements, the assembled contributions illuminate how death is rendered visible or invisible, meaningful or mute, proximate or distant, and what these representational choices reveal about the societies and publics that produce and consume them.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

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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 Canbaz 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 Hayıresevener	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 Hayırsever, 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 Hayırsever 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 Hayırsever	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 Hayırsever	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 Hayırsever, 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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Celebrity Suicides in China: How Social Media Shapes News Framing

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media platforms has profoundly reshaped news reporting, particularly concerning sensitive events like suicide. This study investigates how Chinese news media framed the suicides of two high-profile female celebrities, Sulli and Coco Lee, on the influential social media platform Weibo. It examines the dominant reporting frames and explores how Weibo’s unique interactive environment influenced the framing process. Computational thematic analysis was employed to investigate dominant themes from Weibo posts published by verified news media accounts, and three primary frames were identified: mental health, gossip, and nationalism. While the mental health frame marked a shift from traditional Chinese reporting, it often remained superficial and was intertwined with sensational elements. The gossip frame, which centres on personal scandals and conflicts, aligns with the problematic sensationalism often observed in suicide reporting. The nationalism frame positioned the suicides within contexts of cultural comparison and national pride. Findings indicate that social media affordance significantly shaped these frames, resulting in more sensational and dynamically evolving narratives. This has shifted traditional gatekeeping and agenda-setting power, and potentially diminishes the quality and responsibility of reporting. This research highlights the complex interplay between journalistic norms, platform dynamics, and audience interaction in the digital news era, underscoring the need for updated approaches to responsible reporting on social media.

Keywords

audiences; gatekeeping; interactive framing; journalism; mental health; platform dynamics; social media; suicide reporting

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of the media landscape, driven by the ubiquity of social media, has altered how news is produced and diffused. In China, platforms like Weibo, a highly regulated microblogging site, have become increasingly important for public discourses. While broadly comparable to platforms like X (previously Twitter) with features like comments, reposts, and hashtags, Weibo possesses distinct characteristics such as an algorithmically curated “Hot Search” leaderboard. This feature acts as a powerful national agenda-setter and the intense competition for visibility on this list creates immense pressure on news media to produce viral content. This compels news organisations to leverage immediacy and foster audience engagement within an algorithmically curated environment (Baftiu & Dodds, 2023). This shift carries profound implications for the reporting of sensitive events, including suicide, where media portrayals can significantly influence public understanding and behaviour (McTernan et al., 2018; Phillips, 1974).

Media reporting of suicide across various contexts has often deviated from established guidelines on responsible reporting (McTernan et al., 2018; Raj et al., 2020) such as those suggested by the WHO (2023), like employing sensational language, focusing excessively on methods, or framing deaths in terms of individual failings rather than complex underlying issues such as mental illness (Banerjee, 2021; Duncan & Luce, 2022). In a Chinese context, suicide reporting has been limited and tightly controlled, often framed through lenses of interpersonal conflicts or broader societal issues rather than mental health, partly due to concerns regarding negativity and social stability (Kou et al., 2017; Lai et al., 2021).

The integration of social media introduces further complexities. News media need to understand and conform to the underlying mechanisms of social media platform functionality (Van Dijck et al., 2019) typified by connectivity, instantaneity, and popularity (Han, 2018). While these characteristics can complement the traditional news values like immediacy, the algorithmic emphasis on “popularity” often competes directly with the professional duty to cover important but less viral issues. They also need to compete in a timeline alongside influencers and ordinary users, tailoring their framing to what is likely to be algorithmically rewarded (Tsurriel et al., 2021). Within China’s unique digital ecosystem where platforms operate under state regulation while simultaneously leveraging advanced algorithms to foster user engagement (Ren, 2024), the dynamics of news framing become particularly complex. News organisations must balance journalistic norms, state directives, platform logic, and audience narratives (Guo et al., 2024; Jiang & Fu, 2018).

While existing research has examined traditional suicide reporting and the general impact of social media on journalism (e.g., Banerjee, 2020; Raj et al., 2020), a gap remains in understanding how the interactive and algorithmically driven environment of a major platform such as Weibo shapes the framing of high-profile suicide cases by news media within China’s specific socio-political context. To address this gap, this study analysed online news posts related to the suicides of female celebrities Sulli, a South Korean singer and actress who died in 2019, and Coco Lee, a Chinese-American singer who died in 2023, to determine if common patterns or themes emerged. Widespread discussions of suicide are limited on Chinese social media (Kou et al., 2017) due to the negativity. These two cases were selected as they represent the most prominent and widely discussed celebrity suicides on Chinese social media in recent years, making them useful for analysing media framing dynamics (S. Zhang, Zhou, et al., 2024).

This study employs framing theory (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) to investigate how Chinese news media outlets utilised Weibo to report on these tragic events. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the dominant reporting frames used by Chinese news media on Weibo in their coverage of the suicides of Sulli and Coco Lee?

RQ2: How does the interactive social media environment of Weibo shape the framing of female celebrity suicides by Chinese news media outlets?

By analysing the content and patterns of news reporting on Weibo surrounding these two cases, this study aims to illuminate the evolving nature of news framing in the digital age, identify the specific influence of social media practices, and discuss the implications for responsible journalism and media ethics in reporting sensitive issues such as suicide within complex digital environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Media Reports of Suicide

Media reports play an important role in shaping public understanding of suicide, but they often show persistent problematic patterns. The WHO has established clear international guidelines for the responsible reporting of suicide (WHO, 2023). However, empirical studies of journalistic practices consistently find that news reports fail to adhere to these standards (McTernan et al., 2018; Raj et al., 2020). This deviation often manifests as dramatic or sensational language, a focus on personal scandals, or excessive details about suicide methods, leading to an increase in subsequent suicide (Finkelstein, 2007; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2020), often referred to as the Werther effect (Phillips, 1974). A previous study by Kim et al. (2023) found a subsequent increase in suicides in Korea in the months following Sulli's death. Conversely, reporting on suicide that emphasises help-seeking and coping can have a protective influence (described as the Papageno effect; Domaradzki, 2021), but this approach is often neglected in favour of perceived newsworthiness and audience engagement (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2020; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

News stories tend to emphasise the most tragic or shocking aspects of a suicide case while neglecting its complexities (Duncan & Luce, 2022). This characterisation of features is a form of attribute agenda-setting, a process where media coverage influences how the public thinks about an issue by making certain attributes more salient than others (McCombs et al., 2018). For example, editorial choices frequently frame celebrity suicides around personal misfortunes or gossip (Banerjee, 2020), thereby setting an agenda focused on individual failings or sensational elements rather than underlying issues like depression or systemic pressures. This occurs even though journalists are often aware of responsible reporting guidelines and wish to follow them (Cheng et al., 2014), suggesting a powerful conflict between professional ethics and institutional pressure. This conflict often results in the neglect of preventive and supportive information (Sinyor et al., 2018). While the established newsroom practices in traditional media remain influential, social media platforms introduce new dynamics. The algorithmic curation and user-driven selection (Napoli, 2019) can create space for counter-narratives (Stockmann & Luo, 2017), but also intensify the pressures for sensationalism and risk the rapid spread of harmful details (Groshek & Groshek, 2013), which can negatively influence vulnerable individuals (Luxton et al., 2012).

In the Chinese context, media reporting of suicide exhibits some distinctive characteristics shaped by strong institutional gatekeeping (Pan et al., 2022). Open discussion of suicide in mass media has been limited and online discourse on the topic is tightly controlled due to concerns about its negativity and the potential to lead to social instability (Kou et al., 2017). Research indicates that Chinese news media often frame suicides as a result of interpersonal or social conflicts rather than mental health issues (Lai et al., 2021), such as family disputes, romantic frustrations, or workplace pressures. Moreover, the reports tend to adopt a “grand narrative” or macro-level focus, tying personal suicide cases to broader societal issues or moral themes while neglecting the specificities of personal struggles (Lai et al., 2021). For instance, a student’s suicide may be attributed to academic pressure within the education system, and a worker’s death might be framed as the social costs of industrialisation (Cheng et al., 2011; Ye et al., 2024).

2.2. Social Media and News Reporting

Social media platforms have fundamentally transformed news reporting practices, becoming indispensable tools for news organisations aiming to expand their audience reach and foster greater audience engagement (Baftiu & Dodds, 2023). Platforms like X and Weibo offer immediacy, interactive engagement, and real-time analytics, helping journalists adapt their content rapidly according to audience preferences and trends (Canter, 2013). Many news organisations have established specialised roles, such as social media editors, focusing on tasks like curating content specifically for digital audiences, managing online interactions, and incorporating user-generated content into their reporting process (Tsurriel et al., 2021).

The platform logic of social media has a profound influence on news production and dissemination (Tsurriel et al., 2021). The platforms prioritise information that increases public attention, and thus news media often tailor their content to this end (Civila & Lugo-Ocando, 2024). Moreover, the pace and real-time demands of platforms compress news cycles, pushing journalists to prioritise immediacy and virality over depth and fact-checking (Hermida, 2012). Meanwhile, audiences on social media platforms are no longer passive readers or viewers. Instead, they collectively act as a “participatory news network,” sharing information and sentiments that journalists often cannot ignore (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). Therefore, traditional gatekeeping is increasingly reshaped by social media, often forcing journalists to rely on user-generated content (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). Such integration blurs the lines between content producers and consumers (Ren, 2024; Valenzuela et al., 2021), accelerates news delivery, and diversifies eyewitness accounts (Bruns & Burgess, 2012; Hermida, 2012), but also heightens the risks of misinformation and compromises verification standards of journalistic professionalism (Newman et al., 2024).

The design and algorithms of platforms also act as powerful news gatekeepers (Van Dijck et al., 2019). Unlike traditional editorial judgement based on professional news values, algorithms prioritise content predicted to maximise user engagement (Napoli, 2019). This algorithmic logic amplifies sensational, emotionally resonant, or polarising content, potentially overshadowing less immediately engaging but civically important news (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Tsurriel et al., 2021). This pressures newsrooms to adapt their reporting strategies to these algorithmic norms, sometimes sacrificing depth and accuracy for immediacy and virality (Newman et al., 2024). This changing dynamic degrades news quality and diversity and increases risks of echo chambers and the spread of misinformation (Napoli, 2019).

In the Chinese context, the role of social media in news reporting presents a unique dynamic characterised by the interplay of state regulation, algorithmic curation, and user engagement (Tang & Sampson, 2012; Yin & Xie, 2024). Platforms like Weibo have created spaces for public discourse (Stockmann & Luo, 2017) and democratised news production and dissemination (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). However, the platforms also facilitate state-imposed regulation through a combination of human moderation and algorithmic manipulation (Ren, 2024). This context has given rise to a hybrid reporting style that blends innovative digital engagement strategies with cautious content framing. Sensational and emotional frames frequently dominate the reporting of celebrity incidents or socially charged topics to maximise audience interaction, yet these frames remain bounded by the imperative to maintain ideological conformity and social stability narratives promoted by state authorities (Guo et al., 2024).

2.3. *Framing Theory*

Framing theory, originating from sociological and communication studies, explores how issues are selectively presented and emphasised by media to shape audience perceptions and interpretations (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). According to Entman (1993), framing involves highlighting particular aspects of perceived reality to promote specific interpretations, moral evaluations, or recommended solutions. Frames operate as interpretative schemas, aiding audiences in understanding complex issues by simplifying and structuring information into recognisable patterns (Reese, 2010; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014). Scholars have categorised frames broadly into generic frames, which are widely applicable across contexts, and issue-specific frames, tailored explicitly to particular events or topics (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

In traditional news reporting, framing theory is closely linked to journalistic practices like gatekeeping and agenda-setting (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), demonstrating media power in shaping public discourse (Entman, 1993). Specifically, while first-level agenda setting determines what issues the public thinks about, framing is functionally similar to second-level agenda-setting which influences how the public thinks about those issues. For this reason, many scholars consider framing and second-level agenda-setting to be essentially the same concept (Weaver, 2007). In suicide reporting, traditional media tend to employ sensational frames, emphasising suicide-relevant details to attract public attention and engagement (McInerney et al., 2024). These frames often deviate from responsible reporting guidelines, prioritising perceived newsworthiness over ethical considerations (Niederkrötenenthaler et al., 2020; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), potentially leading to an increase in imitative suicidal behaviour following sensationalised reporting (Phillips, 1974). Furthermore, the failure to include preventive information or support resources in these frames represents another significant deviation from reporting guidelines (McTernan et al., 2018).

The emergence of social media has significantly transformed the framing landscape by decentralising framing processes. Non-traditional actors, like ordinary social media users, actively engage in framing, generating content independent from or even contrasting with traditional media gatekeepers (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). This has introduced a dynamic and interactive environment characterised by rapid, user-driven frame emergence and propagation and shaped by platform logic favouring sensational or emotional frames (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). These characters further complicate news framing, at times challenging or reinforcing traditional media frames (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022).

In the Chinese context, framing theory can be used to explore the interplay between authoritative state narratives, journalistic professionalism, and grassroots voices (Xia et al., 2022; Zhao & Wang, 2023). As the mouthpiece of the government, it is the duty of traditional media in China to understand public narratives, disseminate official narratives, and shape public opinion (Stockmann & Luo, 2017). Frames used by the media typically focus on social harmony, stability, and collective interests, frequently steering public conversations towards politically acceptable interpretations and away from contentious topics (Kou et al., 2017). The Chinese digital media context, on the one hand, facilitates a form of intermedia agenda-setting where alternative or subtle counter-frames occasionally gain traction, compelling state media to acknowledge and incorporate public sentiment into official narratives (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Du, 2013). This illustrates interactive and negotiated framing processes unique to China's socio-political context (Jiang & Fu, 2018). On the other hand, platforms and algorithms are also utilised by the state and news institutions to enhance their frames, thus reinforcing official narratives and ideological conformity (Ren, 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

This study aims to understand how news media on Weibo framed the highly publicised suicides of two female celebrities, Sulli and Coco Lee, through a thematic analysis of widely publicised online discussions of their deaths. In China, online discussions of suicide are subject to dual censorship by the state and the platforms due to their perceived negativity and misalignment with mainstream values (Kou et al., 2017). The cases of Sulli and Coco Lee are two of the most widely discussed suicide cases in China in recent years. Therefore, we conducted a study centred on Weibo conversations that emerged following the suicide of Sulli and Coco.

Data for this study were collected from Weibo, one of China's most popular microblogging platforms. A custom web crawler was developed using Python requests library as the official Weibo API has highly restrictive daily access limits, making it unsuitable for large-scale data collection. Utilising Weibo's archive of trending topics on 14th October 2019 and 5th July 2023 (the respective dates of Sulli's and Coco's deaths), topics related to Sulli's and Coco's suicide were selected based on the eight most-used hashtags (each exceeding 10,000 discussions): #Sulli confirmed dead# (#雪莉确认死亡#), #Sulli confirmed passed away# (#雪莉确认去世#), #No more peach on Earth# (#再无人间水蜜桃#), #Sulli depression disorder# (#雪莉 抑郁症#), #Coco passed away# (#李玟去世#), #Coco depression disorder# (#李玟抑郁症#), #Hong Kong media reports details of Coco's suicide# (#港媒曝李玟轻生细节#), and #Coco's husband# (#李玟老公#). The hashtags were fed into the crawler to collect posts from all user types, associated comments and reposts, publication timestamp, and the account's verification status within one month following the suicide cases. A verified type is an official designation from Weibo's system and it was programmatically extracted from Weibo's backend system during data collection rather than being coded by the authors. This initial collection yielded 31,422 posts for Sulli's death and 55,584 for Coco. The analysis focuses on three types of verified accounts: state-owned media organisations (e.g., Xinhua News and China Central Television), government agencies (e.g., National Health Commission and the Ministry of Public Security), and commercial media (e.g., Sina Entertainment and Phoenix Entertainment). Filtering for these sources resulted in a final dataset of 7,287 posts for Sulli's case (with 107,155 associated comments and 73,643 reposts) and 7,536 posts for Coco's case (with 84,344 associated comments and 44,934 reposts) for further analysis.

3.2. Data Analysis

The current study employed computational thematic analysis to investigate the framing of celebrity suicides by Chinese news media and the public discourse on Weibo. This method combines the strengths of thematic analysis with the capabilities of computational modelling to achieve robust and interpretable results (S. Zhang, Tsatsou, et al., 2024). The thematic analysis provides a systematic framework for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns of meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006), making it particularly well-suited for exploring complex qualitative data within the field of media and communication studies (e.g., Buehler et al., 2019; Castro, 2023). This allows for a deep understanding of the themes and narratives surrounding the news reporting of the suicide of Sulli and Coco. Transformer-based natural language processing has made it much easier for researchers to recognise patterns from data, making them mainly focus on reviewing and interpreting the topics generated from natural language processing (Wang & Luo, 2023). Contextualized topic model (CTM), a sentence transformer model that uses pre-trained representation language, has been able to generate coherent topics (Bianchi et al., 2020). In this study, frames were identified in a multi-stage process: First, CTM was used to generate topics (computational word clusters); second, these topics were manually interpreted into descriptive themes; finally, related themes were grouped into frames—the higher-level analytical constructs that organise the data into a coherent perspective.

The thematic analysis involves six steps: familiarising with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Traditionally, all the steps are conducted manually. With the help of CTM, the two steps (generating initial codes and searching for themes) can be conducted by natural language processing to identify patterns and clusters of words that frequently appear together in documents (Bianchi et al., 2020). Based on the guidelines from Braun and Clarke (2006), we first familiarised ourselves with the data by reviewing all the posts in the two datasets to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and making initial observational notes. Then, CTM was employed to generate N topics in the two datasets, and the coherence measure (a metric that scores the semantic similarity of words within a topic) was used to identify the optimal number of topics (N) and the topic model with the highest coherence score (Röder et al., 2015). The topic model with the optimal N was used to generate keywords for each topic and all the posts were assigned to a topic based on the results. In the third step, the keywords of each topic and the posts assigned to each topic were reviewed to identify the emerging patterns, and the themes were generated in this process. Subsequently, the themes were reviewed to investigate whether the posts within each theme have a coherent pattern, whether the themes are distinct from each other, and whether the themes can reflect the overall datasets. Finally, the themes were defined and named. The keywords of each topic generated by CTM and the defined themes can be found in the Supplementary File. Then, the reporting frames were identified from the themes. Throughout data analysis, we employed four procedures to ensure the validity of our findings: investigator triangulation, audit trail, referential adequacy, and exemplar identification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Detailed descriptions of the implementation of these four procedures can be found in the Supplementary File.

The thematic analysis of media posts was supplemented by a qualitative monitoring of user engagement. This involved reviewing the collected posts from ordinary users and the comments and reposts of the verified media posts to contextualise the media's framing choices. Moreover, temporal comparison was conducted to

chronologically examine posts to observe any evolution in framing strategies between the initial reporting and later coverage.

4. Findings

Computational thematic analysis identified eight themes from the Sulli dataset and four themes from the Coco dataset (Table 1). Based on the themes, three reporting frames were identified: mental health, gossip, and nationalism.

Table 1. Themes of Sulli's and Coco's cases.

No.	Sulli	No.	Coco
1	Smiling depression	1	Coco confirmed dead
2	Mysterious/pseudoscientific forces and depression	2	Coco's battles with depression
3	Ask users to assess whether they have depression	3	Coco's marital issues
4	Stress leads to depression	4	Netizen's outrage about Coco's husband
5	Cyberbullying and depression		
6	Personal family background and depression		
7	Systemic risk in the entertainment industry and celebrities' depression		
8	Celebrities in South Korea are more vulnerable to mental illness		

4.1. Mental Health Frame

A mental health frame, commonly employed by state-owned media and government agencies, explains the tragedies through a psychological lens. The initial reports focused on issues like depression and emotional struggles as key factors leading to the celebrities' suicides. For example, multiple news accounts reported that Sulli had experienced "severe depression prior to her death" (*Beijing News*, 2019; *Global Times*, 2019), citing statements from her agents and previous interviews. Such descriptions presented Sulli's suicide not as a sudden and inexplicable act, but as the culmination of an ongoing mental health battle that had largely been hidden from public view. In Coco's case, a similar focus emerged: News reports (e.g., *China News*, 2023; *The Cover*, 2023) noted that Coco had long struggled with depression in the years leading up to her death, even as she maintained a glamorous public image. Media accounts (e.g., *Caijing*, 2023; *Sina News*, 2023) referenced how Coco had sought treatment for her depression and recounted her past statements about enduring pain and sadness privately, underscoring mental illness as a root cause of the tragedy. The news media's rapid collection and dissemination of these details exemplify the platform's penchant for aggregating extensive user-generated and historical content, facilitating the construction of detailed yet superficial mental health narratives.

The emergence of a dedicated mental health frame in Chinese coverage marks a subtle shift, given the broader media context. Prior studies have observed that Chinese news reports on suicide often adopt a conflict orientation by focusing on interpersonal disputes or social tensions rather than highlighting mental illness as a cause (Lai et al., 2021). In this study, the reports did pay considerable attention to mental health issues in both cases. However, the mental health frame did not stand alone but was often intertwined with

more sensational elements. For instance, when discussing Sulli's reported mental illness, some accounts framed the entertainment industry of South Korea as a "meat grinder" with a "patriarchal ghost." Moreover, the reports lack follow-up information on mental health resources or prevention, a practice that directly contradicts a key WHO guideline which urges media professionals to provide accurate information on where to seek help (WHO, 2023). This reflects a persistent gap identified in the literature: Even when media acknowledge mental illness, they may still neglect preventive or supportive information (Banerjee, 2020; McTernan et al., 2018). A review of the data shows that no report provided information on counselling services or crisis hotlines in both cases.

As the online discourse evolved in the days following the deaths, the focus of news coverage shifted from event reporting to attributing the celebrities' mental illness to single causes, like cyberbullying and societal pressure, without recognising the multifaceted factors underpinning suicidal behaviour, which research has established as being complex and multifactorial (Nugent et al., 2019). For example, several posts on Sulli's suicide emphasised that relentless online abuse was solely responsible for her death, like "cyber violence is the biggest executioner" (Sina News, 2019). Some reports on Coco's case pointed exclusively to career pressures or family disputes as key factors, like "Coco was diagnosed with depression since her relationship with her husband began to deteriorate" (Sina Entertainment, 2023). The subsequent media focus on cyberbullying, career pressures, and family disputes was largely responsive to prevailing user discussions, which were the dominant debates among ordinary users following their death. These also suggest a potentially data-driven editorial adaptation and shift in agenda-setting power where content was shaped to align with what was capturing public interest. By reducing the causes of mental illness to isolated phenomena, these reports presented a superficial narrative that may ultimately not only oversimplify the complexity of mental health and suicide but also risk misguiding the public by obscuring the multifaceted interplay of individual vulnerabilities, social stressors, and structural factors (Sewall & Parry, 2024). The findings show that the reports, despite shifting their focus on mental health issues, are mainly superficially descriptive with limited emphasis on solutions.

4.2. Gossip Frame

A gossip frame, often found in commercial media, sensationalises events by focusing on personal and often lurid aspects of celebrities' lives such as interpersonal drama and scandals that could have led to their demise. This is consistent with previous studies that showed how media tends to frame suicide through a lens of intrigue and sensationalism (Banerjee, 2020; Duncan & Luce, 2022).

For Sulli, the gossip frame manifested in reports that fixated on her past controversies and relationships. For instance, news accounts, particularly the commercial media (e.g., Sina Entertainment, Phoenix Entertainment, and Toutiao News), revisited Sulli's much-publicised romantic relationship with a rapper, focusing on the details of their relationship such as producing photographs and songs with sexual innuendos. For example:

Following the rumoured romance with the older rapper, Sulli's recent collaboration—featuring provocative photographs and songs laden with sexual innuendos—has reignited public fascination with the scandal. (Sina Korean Entertainment, 2019)

Other reports under this frame emphasised Sulli's rebellious behaviours and the controversies that had surrounded her such as defying K-pop norms and facing conservative backlash for her feminist stances and lifestyle choices like not wearing a bra publicly (e.g., Pear Video, 2019; Sina News, 2019). Rather than treating these as context for understanding mental illness, some coverage presented them as sensational details, focusing on Sulli's celebrity persona and scandals. This aligns with the tendency in celebrity suicide reporting to prioritise distal factors while neglecting crucial mental health perspectives (Banerjee, 2020). This focus on sensational details was amplified by Weibo's interactive features. The use of comments and reposts attached user-generated speculation and judgment to media reports, creating feedback loops where the most sensational angles gained visibility and were reinforced by subsequent media coverage. It also suggests that a data-driven approach was employed by news media in report framing.

In the coverage of Coco's death, the gossip frame was equally evident, though it took on different contours. Chinese media reports swiftly turned the spotlight onto Coco's personal relationships and career dramas in the wake of her suicide. A dominant theme was Coco's marital issues. Coco had been married to a Canadian businessman, and rumours of an unhappy marriage had been circulating (e.g., Sina Entertainment, 2023). After her death, many posts, particularly those on entertainment and gossip-focused accounts, amplified these rumours. They reported that Coco's marriage had been strained in recent years, mentioning alleged marital issues and insinuating that a breakdown in her relationship or lack of support from her spouse might have contributed to her depression. Some reports even hinted at infidelity, echoing unverified claims from Hong Kong media that her husband had not been emotionally present. In addition, coverage of Coco often listed her professional struggles, such as her experience of being mistreated on a TV singing competition, *The Voice of China*. The sensationalised narration exemplifies the gossip frame's focus on dramatic, conflict-driven content. It resonates with the known pattern of Chinese online suicide reporting that favours sensationalism and clickbait headlines (Lai et al., 2021). This angle echoed the widespread user-generated discourse about the speculation of her marriage and anger towards those they perceived as having hurt her. This reactive reporting also suggests a rebalancing of traditional gatekeeping power, with the audience's agenda influencing media coverage.

The comparison between these two cases reveals that the gossip frame frequently centres on intimate personal drama, such as relationship conflicts, rebellious behaviours, marital strains, and career setbacks, aligning with the long-standing problematic practices in suicide reporting (Banerjee, 2020; Duncan & Luce, 2022). These narrative elements suggest that the reporting tends to isolate personal shortcomings or moral failings as principal explanations for the suicides, rather than engaging with the broader, multifactorial nature of mental health issues. For example:

Sulli's relentless defiance and inability to maintain stable relationships have long been cited as warning signs; it seems her self-destructive path was inevitable given her constant clash with societal expectations. (*Hunan Daily*, 2019)

Coco's ongoing marital conflicts and career pressures not only isolated her from meaningful support but also painted her as someone whose personal battles left her with no way out—her downfall appears to be a result of her own inability to cope. (Phoenix Entertainment, 2023)

The approach of these news posts echoes what Duncan and Luce (2022) describe as the “othering” of suicide victims. Specifically, by focusing on aspects of personal life and reducing complex psychosocial phenomena to individual attributes, the reporting implicitly reinforces a narrative where suicide is seen as an outcome of individual failure. This approach not only stigmatises the victims, distancing them from the collective experience of mental illness, but also undermines more nuanced understandings of suicide as the product of complex interactions among psychological, social, and environmental factors. Despite the sensationalised reporting having captured the audience’s attention, it came at the cost of the mental health frame frequently being overshadowed by the more tabloid-oriented gossip frame. This observation is consistent with the finding from Banerjee (2020) that media discourse around a celebrity suicide tends to be dominated by all that “followed a death,” like the scandals and sensational reactions, rather than the professional discussion of mental illness.

4.3. Nationalism Frame

A nationalism frame, also often observed in state-owned media and government accounts, includes the elements of national identity, cultural comparisons, and political subtext. While not as immediately obvious as the mental health or gossip frames, the nationalism frame emerged through subtle but significant cues in how the news was contextualised on Weibo.

In Sulli’s case, a South Korean celebrity whose death attracted significant attention in China, the nationalism frame emerged as Chinese news media positioned the tragedy within a foreign cultural context by comparing differences between South Korea and China. Many posts referred to the incident as part of a troubling pattern in South Korea’s entertainment industry, calling it a “South Korean entertainment industry suicide curse” (Sina News, 2019). The reports raised questions like “What’s wrong with K-entertainment?” (CCTV News, 2019) and tried to disclose the “darkness” in South Korea. On the contrary, the reports claimed that Chinese celebrities, by virtue of their cultural and institutional advantages, rarely experience similar mental health challenges. This form of nationalistic frame othered the event to some extent (Idevall Hagren, 2022). Such framing resonates with findings from studies of Chinese media that, in the context of a broader nationalist discourse, there is a tendency to assert Chinese superiority by denigrating foreign systems (Xinhui, 2023). In this context, the mental illness narrative in South Korea becomes a tool not only for explaining Sulli’s tragedy but also for advancing a critique of a foreign cultural model.

In Coco’s case, the nationalism frame took a different form, rooted in patriotism and national pride. Coco was an ethnically Chinese superstar who had achieved international fame, and Weibo news reports memorialised Coco by highlighting her identity as a Chinese singer who made her mark on the world stage, using phrases like “a light for Chinese people” (Jiemian, 2023). This celebratory recollection of Coco’s career, while part of honouring her legacy, also functioned as a nationalistic framing, suggesting that her death is a loss to China. Moreover, the discussion around improving conditions for artists and addressing depression was, at times, linked to calls for societal and governmental support, suggesting that caring for figures like Coco is part of a national responsibility. For this point, the nationalism frame was less about othering and more about nationalising the mourning.

5. Discussion: Weibo's Interactive Environment and Framing

Findings suggest that specific properties of Weibo significantly influenced which frames dominated and how stories were told, leading to notable deviations from traditional media framing practices. While issues like sensationalism and a superficial mental health focus exist in pre-social media reporting in China (Cheng et al., 2011; Lai et al., 2021), Weibo's algorithmic and interactive nature transforms the mechanisms behind them. Compared with global platforms like X, Weibo also represents distinct characteristics such as an algorithmically curated "Hot Search" leaderboard and operation within a system of state regulation (Ren, 2024). Therefore, the interrelated aspects that this study identified including platform logic, user-generated content, and data-driven strategies, are amplified and conditioned by these unique environmental factors, leading to the distinct framing outcomes observed.

5.1. User-Generated Content and Interactive Framing

Unlike traditional media where framing is a one-way editorial decision in most cases, social media platforms foster a reciprocal environment (Han, 2018), promoting a two-way process in which audiences actively contribute to both the construction and dissemination of frames (Civita & Lugo-Ocando, 2024; Ren, 2024). The findings underscore that framing on Weibo, particularly concerning sensitive events like celebrity suicides, is not a unilateral process designed by news media but rather a dynamic, interactive negotiation influenced by user participation and platform dynamics. Our temporal analysis revealed that Chinese news media were responsive to prevailing user-generated discussions. By tracking timestamps, we observed that some user-generated content emerged and gained traction before being incorporated into a news report. Media outlets would then echo these sentiments, frequently quoting viral posts or comments as information sources to enrich their stories. This real-time interaction meant that certain frames gained visibility because they resonated with user discourse (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). In this way, the user-generated content provided raw material for the media's framing (Ren, 2024; Valenzuela et al., 2021). This could result in a more dynamic, crowd-influenced framing process than traditional top-down journalism (Moscato, 2016).

Moreover, this interactive environment allows news media to strategically leverage user-generated content to advance specific narratives (Hermida, 2012). China's news media have been actively engaged in fostering and amplifying nationalist content on social media (X. Zhang et al., 2024). In this study, many posts by ordinary users adopted nationalist discourse, blaming Sulli's suicide on the flaws in South Korean society and attributing Coco's suffering as a consequence of her marriage to a foreign husband. These user-generated framings were subsequently reinforced by news media through direct citation or by adding interpretative angles, such as a deep dive into the system of the South Korean entertainment industry and what happened to South Korean society (e.g., CCTV News, 2019; Sohu Entertainment, 2019). This interactive environment reveals a uniquely ideological dimension to platform logic in the Chinese context. News media frequently employ user-generated nationalist discourse to reinforce state-favoured narratives, creating a convergence between grassroots nationalism and top-down ideological positions. Additionally, news media posts frequently employed emotional and sensational expressions capable of mobilising fear, anger, and grievance by invoking nationalistic themes (C. Zhang et al., 2023).

While the interactive framing may democratise the narrative to some extent, it also carries significant risks. The pressure to engage rapidly with trending, often emotionally charged user narratives can lead to the

amplification of unverified rumours and speculation, blurring the lines between reporting and participating in gossip (Moscato, 2016). In this study, the news media's reports of certain speculative content, like the unconfirmed claims about Coco's husband, demonstrate shifts of power dynamics in news production on social media, with ordinary users gaining more power and traditional news media being weakened. However, it also demonstrates the tension between the platform's demand for immediacy and engagement versus traditional journalistic norms. In traditional media, editors might carefully investigate the claims before publishing them. While on social media, the pressure to join the trending discussion forced the media to reply to public discourses, even if those claims were still unconfirmed.

5.2. Data-Driven Strategies and Editorial Adaptation

The digital architecture of social media platforms provides news media with an array of metrics, such as the number of likes, shares, and comments, that serve as indicators of audience engagement (S. Zhang, Zhou, et al., 2024). These data points underpin a data-driven approach to framing where editorial decisions are increasingly informed by real-time analytics (Moscato, 2016). Although our study cannot directly measure editorial decision-making, the observed shift in reporting, from initial factual accounts to later coverage focusing on trending and sensational information, strongly suggests a data-driven approach to framing. This indicates that editors were using real-time analytics to adjust the framing with the most trending topics on Weibo, aligning with the concept of "social media monitoring" by news outlets proposed by Moscato (2016).

The findings can also be supported by the dominance of the gossip frame observed in the two cases. News media heavily emphasised Sulli's controversial history or Coco's marital issues in the posts aligning with the topics that were already trending or provocative on social media, thereby likely boosting the posts' visibility. Moreover, traditional media even participated in the emotive tone of the trend, like using sorrowful emojis, empathic punctuation, multiple exclamation marks, or ellipses, to convey a shared sense of grief and shock. In contrast, content that might be essential for responsible reporting but less viral, such as discussions of mental illness treatment, was downplayed since it is less clickable. In traditional media, an editor might have balanced these elements differently under professional norms but the platform logic on Weibo compels news producers to adapt their framing to ensure connectivity and exposure (Tsurriel et al., 2021). This interactive, metric-guided environment led to a fluid framing process where frames were not predetermined solely by the newsroom, but evolved as the story developed online. The evolution of frames over time can be found in the Supplementary File. This, on the one hand, could enrich the angles of news reporting, while on the other hand, it could result in a sensational and crowd-pleasing frame.

5.3. Shifts in Gatekeeping and Agenda-Setting Power

The dynamics of user interaction, platform logic, and data-driven adaptation observed on social media platforms can shift traditional notions of news media gatekeeping and agenda-setting power (Napoli, 2019). While traditional media may retain significant influence in the broader media landscape (Stockmann & Luo, 2017), in this study, we observed a significant rebalancing of power where platform features and public participation diluted the absolute gatekeeping control of news media. Due to the platform features and intense public participation, by the time news media publish their reports, dominant frames and narratives may already be circulating widely among users. This forces a change in the media's gatekeeping role from

one of pure content creation to one of curation and response, where they select and amplify frames already resonating online.

Moreover, the immediacy inherent in social media erodes the temporal advantage media once had in setting the narratives (Ren, 2024). Information, whether correct or not, spreads rapidly through online user networks, shaping initial public perceptions before formal news reports emerge (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This pressures news media to move beyond simple fact reporting (which users may already know) towards more interpretive, analytical, or emotionally resonant framing to add value and capture attention (Tsuriel et al., 2021). Our findings show that the news posts did not simply report the fact of suicide which has already been widely known via social media. They added angles like “why did it happen,” “what are people saying about it,” or trying to dig to find the backstories of the South Korean entertainment industry or Coco’s husband. This dynamic illustrates a fundamental shift from traditional, top-down gatekeeping to a more negotiated and networked process. News media are no longer the sole creators of narratives. Instead, they act as curators and amplifiers, where their selection of attributes for public attention, a core second-level agenda-setting function, is heavily influenced by pre-existing participatory framing processes.

However, this shift towards a negotiated, platform-influenced model of gatekeeping and agenda-setting has tangible consequences for the nature and quality of the resulting news frames. The prevalence of sensational frames observed in this study, particularly the gossip frame focusing on human interest and conflict, and the nationalism frame leveraging ideological sentiment suggests that this model can diminish adherence to responsible reporting standards. While frames rooted in sensationalism and nationalism are not new, our findings indicate that the mechanisms of these frames are transformed by the negotiated, platform-influenced model of gatekeeping. For example, the nationalism frame changes from a top-down broadcast into a participatory event, co-constructed and reinforced by users in real-time. These frames, likely products of the negotiation between editorial intentions and the imperative for audience engagement within an algorithmic environment, prioritise angles known to generate clicks and shares. Even when addressing mental health, the framing often remained superficial or sensationalised, focusing on dramatic portrayals of symptoms or speculated causes rather than providing systematic analysis or crucial information about treatment and support, which are key recommendations for responsible suicide reporting (WHO, 2023). The resulting news discourse, therefore, reflects a complex interplay where the journalistic agency is constrained and reshaped by the demands of visibility and interaction inherent in Weibo’s hybrid environment. This system, where the universal platform logic of engagement is bounded by state regulation and amplified by its distinct features like “Hot Search” list, helps explain why responsible reporting, already a challenge in the pre-social media era, is further complicated by these platform-specific pressures.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how Chinese news media on Weibo framed the suicides of two female celebrities, Sulli and Coco Lee, and how the social media context influenced these frames. We identified three key frames in the news media coverage: mental health, gossip, and nationalism. The findings indicate that the social media environment on Weibo engenders a complex and interactive framing process, shaped by traditional journalistic norms, user-driven dynamics, and underlying state power. Notably, the affordances of Weibo, such as immediacy, algorithmic curation, and real-time audience engagement, shape or influence the process of frame construction, news gatekeeping, and agenda-setting.

A key theoretical contribution lies in highlighting how Chinese platform logic extends traditional models of framing theory. First, the inherent affordances of Weibo compel news media to operate within the platform logic, which shapes editorial decisions through a data-driven approach. Moreover, the interactive environment of Weibo leads to a two-way framing process. Consequently, the news media's role evolved from solely setting narratives to also acting as curators and amplifiers of frames already circulating among users. This rebalancing of gatekeeping and agenda-setting power challenges traditional top-down models and extends frame theory by incorporating the influence of networked publics and big data analytics. Furthermore, the study illustrates a uniquely ideological dimension to platform logic in China where news media leverage user discourse to reinforce state-approved narratives. This convergence of grassroots nationalism and top-down ideological messaging underscores how Chinese media not only reconfigure frame construction but also operate within a political context that prioritises certain narratives.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on data from two high-profile cases which may not fully represent the broader spectrum of suicide reporting on Chinese social media. Second, the reliance on computational thematic analysis, although robust, may overlook subtleties in cultural context and intertextual nuance. Finally, the study demonstrates that shifts in traditional gatekeeping and agenda-setting power directly impact the production and character of news frames. However, it remains challenging to quantify the long-term influence of these platform-shaped frames on public perception compared to the effects of frames disseminated through legacy media.

Future studies should explore a broader array of cases and consider mixed-method approaches to capture both quantitative metrics and the qualitative intricacies of frame construction. In particular, investigations into how big data analytics continue to evolve and shape editorial practices on platforms such as Weibo will be crucial.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data is available from the author on request.

LLMs Disclosure

Gemini was used for language editing purposes.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Mediation of Gendered Life and Death Within Intersecting Regimes of Patriarchy, Authoritarianism, and Necropolitics

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Abstract

This article examines how Turkish news media mediate fatal violence against women, trans women, and those self-identified as travesti within intersecting regimes of patriarchy, authoritarianism, and necropolitics. Extending feminist and queer media scholarship, it argues that the Turkish case reveals a shift from spectacularized representation to epistemic erasure, in which silence itself becomes a necropolitical tool. Drawing on feminist visual framing and critical discourse analysis of nine femicide and transphobic hate crime cases (2021–2024), the study traces how Islamist, pro-government, and alternative outlets reproduce or resist these regimes. Queer-feminist journalism, by contrast, enacts a counter-hegemonic praxis of radical care and remembrance that re-inscribes life and grievability. The article contributes to existing research by conceptualizing “mediated grievability” and revealing how visibility, denial, and mourning shape media governance of life and death. Ultimately, it underscores the urgent need for trans and travesti inclusive feminist media practices that politicize loss and affirm marginalized lives.

Keywords

femicide; gender; hate crime; mediation; necropolitics; news media; queer feminist media; Turkey

1. Introduction

Violence against women, as well as the transgender and travesti community, shares a common political grammar, aiming to discipline nonconforming bodies and identities in line with patriarchal, heteronormative, and authoritarian systems (Zengin, 2019). Turkey presents a particularly telling case for analyzing the entanglement of media, gendered violence, and necropolitics, understood as the exercise of power through

the decision of whose lives are protected and whose deaths are tolerated, ignored, or rendered socially invisible (Mbembe, 2003, 2019).

Since its rise to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has combined pro-market neoliberalism with Islamist populism, embedding patriarchal, nationalist, and militarist rhetoric, framed as protecting family values, into state governance (Cosar & Ozcan, 2021). Scholars have described the resulting climate as “patriarchal authoritarianism” and “neoliberal patriarchy,” reflecting the fusion of Islamism, nationalism, populism, and militarism (Cosar & Ozcan, 2021). The AKP’s authoritarian consolidation accelerated after the failed 2016 coup attempt when states of emergency were declared, opposition voices silenced, and hundreds of journalists prosecuted or imprisoned (Sarac et al., 2023).

These dynamics have systematically constrained press freedom while mobilizing conservative gender norms to marginalize women and transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming communities (Güney, 2022; Zengin, 2024). The government’s 2021 withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, a Council of Europe treaty to prevent and combat violence against women, was justified through conservative claims that the treaty endangered family values and encouraged homosexuality (Güney, 2022; Zengin, 2024). Beyond symbolic withdrawal, state practices have been widely criticized for failing to prevent femicides and hate crimes with perpetrators often receiving reduced sentences on grounds of “unjust provocation” or “good conduct.” Protection orders are inconsistently enforced, reflecting the institutionalization of patriarchal impunity (Fincher, 2018; Özgenç, 2025).

Statistics underline the persistence of these dynamics. According to the We Will Stop Femicide Platform (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu, 2025), a women’s rights-focused Turkish civil society organization in Turkey, at least 394 women were murdered in Turkey in 2024, most by individuals known to them as partners, relatives, or male acquaintances. In parallel, the Kaos GL Association reported in 2024 that anti-transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming rhetoric and practices have become institutionalized (Özgenç, 2025). While exact numbers of hate crimes are unavailable, the report highlights systemic marginalization, particularly targeting transgender people and activists who face heightened risks of detention, censorship, and restrictions on assembly.

Within this context, the media becomes a key site where authoritarian and heteropatriarchal ideologies converge to shape public understandings of gendered violence. Over the past two decades, the AKP has consolidated control over traditional media through seizures, financial pressure, and intimidation, transforming once-mainstream outlets into instruments of state propaganda (Akser, 2025). As a result, the Turkish media landscape is polarized. Islamist and pro-government outlets reproduce state-aligned nationalist and patriarchal discourses while alternative, feminist, and queer media challenge these discourses by amplifying the voices of marginalized groups (Ataman & Çoban, 2023; Comeforo & Görgülü, 2022; Yeşil, 2016).

The media environment produces not only news but also discourses that determine which deaths are grievable and which lives remain disposable (Bayramoğlu, 2021; Zengin, 2019). However, scholarship often treats femicide and hate crimes as separate phenomena (Hazar, 2018), overlooking how discursive and visual strategies intersect to render some lives intelligible while others remain unrecognized (Adak, 2022). In line with Sumiala’s (2022) analysis of mediated death as a cultural and communicative act, this article addresses

these gaps by asking: (a) How do Islamist, pro-government, alternative, and queer feminist news media each mediate fatal violence against women and the transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming community? Moreover, (b) in what ways do these framings normalize, erase, or contest gender-based violence within Turkey's broader necropolitical and authoritarian context?

Through an integrated framework that primarily draws on mediated death and the concept of grievability, with supportive theoretical frameworks of necropolitics, queer necropolitics, queer feminist, and trans feminist scholarship, the article conceptualizes the mediation of death as a contested site of meaning-making, exclusion, and resistance. It employs a four-stage visual framing model (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011) in conjunction with feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA; Lazar, 2007, 2018; Mills, 1998) to examine how language and imagery shape the political intelligibility of gendered death. The study examines how visual and discursive strategies reproduce or resist necropolitical logics with a particular focus on queer feminist media practices as modes of witnessing and remembrance that contest erasure and foster coalitional resistance (Haritaworn et al., 2014; Zengin, 2016, 2024).

2. Femicide, Hate Crime, and Necropolitics in Turkey

Previous studies indicate a dramatic rise in femicide cases in Turkey since the early 2000s. Toprak and Ersoy (2017) found that motives such as separation, jealousy, and honor were captured as primary drivers of femicide between 2000 and 2010. An analysis of 1,744 femicide cases reported between 2000 and 2019 reveals that most victims were killed by current or former partners with similar motives (Erbaydar et al., 2022). Afsar (2016) draws a direct correlation between this trend and treating femicide as routine, acceptable, and unpreventable.

The media plays a crucial role in constructing public understanding of gender-based violence. Previous research has demonstrated that Turkish media tend to report such crimes with heavily sensationalist language, victim-blaming narratives, and other editorial and journalistic choices that serve to justify the perpetrators' actions (Basdogan et al., 2021; Genç & Aydemir, 2018; Koç, 2020). Such narratives trivialize violence and normalize it as part of everyday life. Sensational coverage often focuses on the forensic details of crimes while structural issues, such as gender inequality, patriarchal norms, or legal impunity, are frequently overlooked (Erükçü-Akbaş & Karataş, 2023; Yılmaz et al., 2015).

Hate crimes follow similar patterns (Demiryakan & Ensari, 2017; Güzel et al., 2025). Depiction of hate crimes against the transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming community in the Turkish media landscape, particularly violence targeting transgender people, often fails to address the underlying societal homophobia and transphobia that produce and reproduce such violence. Perry et al. (2020) note that when incidents involving transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming people are reported, coverage often emphasizes the perceived deviance of victims.

Pro-government media outlets' portrayal of gender-based violence reveals a particularly insidious form of media complicity. Unlike more general sensationalist reporting, these outlets consistently frame femicides in ways that align with government and patriarchal authority. Coverage often shifts responsibility away from perpetrators and toward victims by highlighting women's and queer people's lifestyles, choices, or relationships, subtly suggesting culpability. Relatedly, perpetrators' actions are rationalized through narratives of mental instability which depoliticize the violence and obscure the systemic conditions that

enable it. More broadly, pro-government reporting rarely situates these cases within structural patterns of gender inequality, state inaction, or intersecting vulnerabilities (Alat, 2006; Bas et al., 2022; Caltekin, 2022; Koç & Tunalı, 2021).

To fully understand the persistence of gender-based violence targeting women and transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming people, we must also examine how authoritarianism, media control, and patriarchal governance intersect to produce and sustain a culture of silence and violence.

3. Theoretical Framework: Mediation of Death

Beyond illustrating a neutral or objective act, the journalistic depiction of death is a form of mediation concerning state power, norms, and values embedded in society. This phenomenon is particularly apparent in media framings of violence targeting women and the transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming community who stand on the frontline of gender-based violence. In such cases, journalism plays a critical role in shaping the very conditions of witnessing the distant suffering of others (Sontag, 2003).

The death-and-mediation nexus arises at the juncture of biopolitics and necropolitics. Foucault's (1978) notion of biopolitics is crucial for understanding modern nation-states' power over populations through regulatory mechanisms. However, this management of life is also accompanied by decisions over death. Mbembe's (2019) theory of necropolitics expands on Foucault's (1978) analysis of biopolitics and biopower by emphasizing the sovereign's power to decide who may live and who may die. Necropolitics is not just about physical death but also about social death which is the symbolic erasure of individuals and groups from the domain of the public (Islekel, 2022). More insidiously, necropolitical regimes determine whose deaths will be rendered socially and politically legible.

Queer necropolitics expands Mbembe's framework by centering the everyday forms of violence that shape queer and trans death-worlds (Haritaworn et al., 2014). It shifts attention to the ordinary process—bureaucratic neglect, everyday discrimination, and social abandonment—through which queer and trans lives are treated as ungrievable. This means that their existence is often erased in daily life and becomes legible in public discourse mainly through exceptional and violent events. In the context of hate crimes, queer necropolitics helps to expose how death is mediated and normalized through social abandonment (exclusion, stigma, and neglect in everyday life) and political abandonment (state inaction, lack of protection, and legal impunity; Zengin, 2024).

In contexts where state and societal structures fail to protect women and the transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming community, the media's treatment of their deaths becomes a key site where these logics of abandonment are naturalized or contested (Kuntsman, 2014). These necropolitical regimes determine whose lives are socially recognized as worthy of grief. Tuchman's (1978) concept of "symbolic annihilation" captures the media's role in reinforcing this erasure through condemnation, exclusion, and trivialization. Building on this, Butler's (2004, 2009) theory of grievability underscores that mourning is a political act: For a life to be grievable, it must first be socially recognized as a life.

In this context, media narratives are crucial in shaping whose losses enter the public sphere and whose remain invisible. Feminist scholars have long emphasized how patriarchal ideologies shape media narratives

about gender-based violence, often through discourses that blame victims (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017), emphasize personal rather than structural causes, or frame violence as aberrational rather than endemic (Berns, 2017; Meyers, 1997). These framing mechanisms are not limited to textuality. Visuality is pivotal in shaping perception in today's media ecology, particularly on digital and social platforms (Bas et al., 2022).

While previous research has shown that direct images of the dead are relatively rare (Griffin, 2010; Zelizer, 2010), the visual elements in images of mourning relatives, protest scenes, and sanitized crime scenes carry substantial affective and ideological weight. As Zelizer (2010) argues, visual representations often operate in ambiguous ways, simultaneously revealing and concealing, inviting empathy while reinforcing norms about what is "appropriate" to see. Photographs help shape collective memory and political action (Chouliaraki, 2006; Sontag, 2003). Whether the death is perceived as a personal tragedy or an issue of social injustice is closely tied to the visual medium.

Images do not merely document events; they frame the moral and emotional terms through which suffering is interpreted and socially processed (Sontag, 2003). Chouliaraki (2006) argues that such framing often positions the suffering subject at a moral distance, rendering them an object of pity rather than an agent of political concern. The media's aestheticization of suffering can thus obscure and reproduce the structural conditions that produce violence.

Drawing on Zengin's (2016) concept of gender killings to foreground the structural conditions that produce women and transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming communities as killable subjects, this article adopts a queer feminist media critique, grounded in intersectional feminist and queer theoretical traditions, to explore the mediation of death. Zengin (2016) argues that overlapping regimes of violence expose how occupying a gendered position can constitute a threat to life under masculinist and heteronormative rule. As such, the category of gender must be rethought as a contested site of both violence and political alliance. Attentive to these entanglements, a queer feminist media critique enables an integrated analysis of gender-based violence and underscores the urgency of coalition.

As discussed earlier, the media atmosphere in Turkey is shaped by a complex interplay of neoliberalism, religious conservatism, authoritarian populism, and entrenched patriarchy (Kaygusuz, 2018; Tuğal, 2016). The result is a fractured media landscape in which journalistic mediation of death can variously reproduce dominant ideologies or offer space for counter-narratives. Therefore, this article proposes understanding the mediation of the death and grievability nexus with supportive frameworks of necropolitics, queer necropolitics, and trans feminist scholarship, so that we can move beyond a critical examination of the media landscape to reimagine journalism as a potential site of resistance and re-existence against the normalization of violence.

4. Methodological Framework

This study analyzes nine cases of fatal violence through thirteen news articles reported in Turkish media between 2021 and 2024, encompassing femicides and transphobic hate crimes targeting transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming individuals. It examines how Islamist, pro-government, alternative, and queer-feminist outlets construct, obscure, or politicize gendered death within an authoritarian context.

Engaging with Mbembe's (2019) concept of necropolitical governance—the symbolic control over who may live, die, or be grieved—the research explores how distinct ideological ecosystems shape representation, visibility, and power.

Unlike large-scale content analyses that prioritize frequency over meaning (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Richards et al., 2013), this study deliberately employs a small, strategically selected sample to enable interpretive depth and comparative synthesis. The limited number of cases is a conscious design choice rooted in feminist and queer critical discourse traditions, which privilege ethical witnessing, symbolic unpacking, and contextual nuance over statistical generalizability. Each case functions as a discursive microcosm, revealing how ideological orientations shape visibility, culpability, and grievability. This approach allows the study to foreground the relational dynamics between media polarization, necropolitical framings, and the (in)visibility of gendered death.

To ensure analytical transparency, Table 1 provides an overview of the nine cases and 13 corresponding news articles, listing victims' names, years, outlets, ideological alignment, type of violence, key framing features, and visual framing notes.

Table 1. Media representations of fatal gender-based violence.

Victim Name	Media Outlet	Type of Violence	Media Ideology	Key Framing Features	Visual Framing Notes
Serpil Gül	<i>Yeni Şafak</i> ("Türkiye'yi ayağa," 2024)	Femicide by husband	Islamist	Denotative: episodic street murder Stylistic: sensationalist tone, spectacle of death Connotative: emotional shock, male-centered narrative Ideological: symbolic annihilation, depoliticization, necropolitical erasure	ID-style portrait and panoramic crime scene images reduce death to spectacle; stylistic distance weakens public empathy; absence of institutional critique.
Sümeyye Yavlak	<i>Hürriyet</i> ("Sümeyye'yi markette," 2024)	Femicide by ex-husband	Pro-government	Denotative: intimate partner killing Stylistic: courtroom and witness dramatization Connotative: moral spectatorship, aestheticized remorse Ideological: patriarchal justification, depoliticization of systemic failure	Video uses close-ups on perpetrator's remorse; blurred police footage and emotional witness scenes frame murder as personal tragedy

Table 1. (Cont.) Media representations of fatal gender-based violence.

Victim Name	Media Outlet	Type of Violence	Media Ideology	Key Framing Features	Visual Framing Notes
Sümeyye Yavlak	<i>Demirören News Agency</i> (Kır, 2023)	Femicide by ex-husband	Pro-government	<p>Denotative: domestic crime scene</p> <p>Stylistic: sentimental realism, funeral imagery</p> <p>Connotative: privatization of mourning</p> <p>Ideological: individualized tragedy, absence of institutional critique</p>	Montage of family crying, funeral car arrival, and smiling victim photo dramatize grief but depoliticize gendered violence
Pınar Bektaş	<i>Hürriyet</i> ("İstanbul'un Sultangazi," 2023)	Femicide by ex-husband	Pro-government	<p>Denotative: domestic killing</p> <p>Stylistic: blurred imagery, narrative sequencing</p> <p>Connotative: moral spectacle, gendered pedagogy</p> <p>Ideological: syntactic erasure, depoliticization of femicide</p>	Blurred visuals of police cars and grieving relatives; cinematic sequencing emphasizes emotional shock over political context
Gonca Özdemir	<i>Evrensel</i> ("Darbedilmiş halde," 2024)	Femicide by husband	Alternative	<p>Denotative: repeated domestic abuse</p> <p>Stylistic: emotive detail, survivor testimony</p> <p>Connotative: empathy and victim humanization</p> <p>Ideological: oscillation between compassion and depoliticization</p>	Smiling portrait contrasts with violent death; visual humanization evokes empathy but isolates tragedy from systemic critique
	<i>Demirören News Agency</i> (Aytekin et al., 2024)	Femicide by husband	Pro-government	<p>Denotative: domestic gun attack</p> <p>Stylistic: sensational visual trauma (wedding dress)</p> <p>Connotative: hierarchy of sympathy (focus on husband's injury)</p> <p>Ideological: depoliticization, silencing of victim agency, romanticized symbolism</p>	Photo of coffin with wedding dress; visual symbolism sanctifies family values and aestheticizes the murder

Table 1. (Cont.) Media representations of fatal gender-based violence.

Victim Name	Media Outlet	Type of Violence	Media Ideology	Key Framing Features	Visual Framing Notes
Fadimana Ok	<i>Demirören News Agency</i> ("Damadına ateş," 2024)	Femicide by father	Pro-government	<p>Denotative: domestic gun attack</p> <p>Stylistic: sensational visual trauma</p> <p>Connotative: hierarchy of sympathy (focus on husband's injury)</p> <p>Ideological: depoliticization, silencing of victim agency, sensationalism, sympathy for perpetrator</p>	Graphic crime scene and hospital photos emphasize violence and pity without political or structural context
	<i>Yeni Akit</i> ("Kadını kocası," 2024)	Femicide by father	Islamist	<p>Denotative: fabricated account</p> <p>Stylistic: exaggerated sequencing</p> <p>Connotative: moral blame, victim culpability</p> <p>Ideological: punishment of female agency, narrative distortion, fabrication, victim-blaming, erasure of feminist resistance</p>	No verified visuals; textual sequencing implies the victim's refusal triggered her death, reinforcing patriarchal blame logic
Sevda Kuş	<i>Bianet</i> (Kepenek, 2024)	Femicide by ex-husband (police officer)	Queer feminist	<p>Denotative: institutional femicide</p> <p>Stylistic: protest-centered framing</p> <p>Connotative: affective witnessing, feminist solidarity</p> <p>Ideological: counter-memorial resistance, systemic critique, visual resistance, interpellation into feminist subjectivity</p>	Protest photo showing "No to the love that kills" sign; visualizes feminist resistance and politicizes grief

Table 1. (Cont.) Media representations of fatal gender-based violence.

Victim Name	Media Outlet	Type of Violence	Media Ideology	Key Framing Features	Visual Framing Notes
Kadir Murat Sözübir	<i>BirGün</i> ("Fatih'te trans," 2021)	Transphobic hate crime	Alternative	Denotative: trans murder, home setting Stylistic: minimalist visual restraint Connotative: isolation, cishnormative empathy gap Ideological: marginalization of the victim, lack of structural critique	Instagram photo of the victim alone in the parking lot; minimalist composition conveys isolation and social vulnerability
	<i>Demirören News Agency</i> (Atik et al., 2021)	Transphobic hate crime	Pro-government	Denotative: crime report with no victim image Stylistic: procedural neutrality Connotative: emotional distance Ideological: institutional dominance, cishnormative erasure, cishnormative framing	Generic police and street visuals; absence of victim imagery reinforces cishnormative erasure
Ecem Seçkin	<i>Bianet</i> (Yılmaz, 2024)	Transphobic hate crime	Queer feminist	Denotative: hate-motivated killing Stylistic: intimate, unposed imagery Connotative: everyday dignity, counter-visibility Ideological: grievability restoration, trans-feminist justice, radical care, everyday resistance, systemic critique	Intimate selfie; unposed and personal framing humanizes the victim, counters the transphobic spectacle, and invites relational witnessing
Sudenaz U.	Kaos GL (Tar, 2024)	Transphobic hate crime	Queer feminist	Denotative: home invasion and protest aftermath Stylistic: raw graffiti aesthetic Connotative: grassroots dissent, collective grief Ideological: queer necropolitical resistance, visual dissent	Photograph of graffiti reading "Trans murders are political"; a raw, activist aesthetic transforms the street into a political archive

4.1. Analytical Design and Theoretical Integration

Methodologically, the study combines visual framing analysis with feminist and trans-informed CDA. To ensure analytical consistency, each case was examined using a unified framework that integrates visual framing and feminist CDA, enabling systematic comparison across ideological media types.

The visual analysis follows Rodríguez and Dimitrova's (2011) four-stage model, interpreted narratively rather than enumeratively. First, the denotative level identifies what is literally depicted and who occupies the visual field. Second, the stylistic-semiotic level examines how photographic composition, cropping, lighting, and repetition shape the viewer's affective entry point. Third, the connotative level explores cultural, emotional, and moral associations evoked by the image, how gestures, colors, and spatial hierarchies mobilize empathy or distance. Finally, the ideological level analyses how the image, through its visual grammar, positions victims and perpetrators within broader structures of meaning, reproducing or challenging state and patriarchal narratives. The model's sequential logic, moving from visual literalness to ideological abstraction, allows causal interpretation: It demonstrates how formal visual decisions generate political effect.

The textual analysis applies CDA to reveal how power and ideology operate through language (Fairclough, 1995, 2001; van Dijk, 2008). Building on Mills's (1998, 2004) feminist adaptation of CDA, the analysis examines voice, agency, and interpellation to determine how narratives invite readers into specific gendered or ideological positions. It further draws on Lazar's (2005, 2007, 2018) feminist CDA, emphasizing the discursive mechanisms that sustain or contest patriarchal and state authority. These feminist approaches are extended through trans-feminist perspectives (Billard & Zhang, 2022; Pearce et al., 2020), which expose the epistemic and affective marginalization of trans and gender-diverse subjects, mainly where mainstream journalism produces sensationalism or erasure.

4.2. Data Collection

The dataset consists of publicly available online news published between 2021 and 2024, sampled across four editorial orientations: Islamist (*Yeni Akit*, *Yeni Şafak*), pro-government (*Demirören News Agency [DNA]*, *Hürriyet*), alternative (*Evrensel*, *BirGün*), and queer-feminist (*Bianet*, *Kaos GL*). Systematic keyword searches related to femicide, trans murder, and gender-based violence yielded 80 items. After deduplication and the exclusion of fabrications and derivative reports, the final corpus comprised 13 news articles covering nine distinct cases.

Case selection prioritized diversity in victim identity (cis woman, trans woman, travesti) and media ideology. The term travesti is a culturally specific identity common in Turkish and some Latin American contexts as a distinct self-identification. In contemporary Turkish LGBTQ+ activism, travesti and trans *kadın* (trans woman) are distinct but overlapping identities. While many individuals prefer trans women to affirm their womanhood, others consciously reclaim travesti as a marker of pride, visibility, and resistance against systemic marginalization. Therefore, it remains untranslated due to its culturally specific meaning (Goldberg & Beemyn, 2021).

Beyond their ideological and identity-based diversity, the selected cases were also chosen for their symbolic significance and their capacity to complement one another in illustrating the structural patterns of gendered

and transphobic violence across Turkey's polarized media landscape. During the sampling period, publicly accessible records predominantly documented murders of trans women and those who are self-identified as travesti. No confirmed reports of fatal violence targeting gay, lesbian, bisexual, non-binary, or intersex people were found. Following Zengin (2016), this absence is interpreted as discursive silence, a symptom of necropolitical erasure in state-aligned media.

Articles were coded using a unified codebook covering visual and textual variables, enabling cross-case comparison and ensuring analytical consistency. This structure allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and divergences in the mediation of gendered death. This methodological design connects micro-level framing choices to macro-level structures of authoritarian control, revealing how Turkish media enact the politics of grievability (Butler, 2009) and necropolitics of visibility (Mbembe, 2019).

5. Analysis and Discussion

In a media landscape fractured by authoritarianism, neoliberal populism, and entrenched patriarchy, the representation of fatal violence targeting women and transgender, travesti, and gender-nonconforming people in Turkey becomes more than reportage; it becomes a battleground of meaning. This section offers a critical cartography of how death is mediated, politicized, or erased across four distinct media ecologies: Islamist, pro-government, alternative, and queer-feminist.

Drawing on a curated corpus of nine emblematic cases reported between 2021 and 2024, the analysis traces how visual and textual strategies shape public recognition, moral legibility, and political accountability. To structure the analysis, the discussion is organized into three thematic subsections, each delineating a distinct mode of media representation and its political implications: Spectacle and Sentimentality, Erasure and Silence, and Counter-Visualities and Resistance. Each theme is developed comparatively to reveal how representational practices reflect and reproduce broader necropolitical logics, and how alternative and queer-feminist media intervene to disrupt them.

5.1. Spectacle and Sentimentality

5.1.1. Visual-Textual Aesthetics of Emotional Consumption

Across Islamist and pro-government media, femicide is consistently transformed into a spectacle of emotional consumption. Drawing on Chouliaraki's (2006) and Zelizer's (2010) insights into the aestheticization of suffering, these outlets frame women's deaths as tragic episodes rather than politically actionable injustices. Crime-scene panoramas, blurred police footage, forensic close-ups, and sentimental headlines position audiences as passive spectators rather than engaged witnesses to systemic failure.

As shown in Figure 1, *Yeni Şafak*'s coverage of Serpil Gül's murder ("Türkiye'yi ayağa," 2024) exemplifies this logic. The article presents distant, panoramic crime scenes and formal ID-style portraits. These stylistic choices depersonalize the victim and invite voyeuristic consumption. The connotative register evokes shock and pity, but not critique. Ideologically, the syntax "a brutal husband shot his wife in the head," foregrounds the male perpetrator as an active subject while rendering the woman a grammatical object (Lazar, 2007;

Mills, 1998). This framing privatizes femicide, recasting it as an isolated act of male rage rather than a symptom of patriarchal impunity (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Richards et al., 2013).



Figure 1. Islamist media newspaper *Yeni Şafak*'s visual framing of the Serpil Gül femicide case. Source: "Türkiye'yi ayağa" (2024).

Hürriyet ("Sümeyye'yi markette," 2024) and *DNA*'s (Kır, 2023) coverage of Sümeyye Yavlak's killing deploys what might be called sentimental realism. Their reports feature close-up shots of grieving relatives and remorseful perpetrators, alongside extensive quoting of the murderer's emotional justifications: "I was under the influence of drugs," "I seek your forgiveness." These choices humanize the perpetrator, portraying him as psychologically complex, while the victim is reduced to a tragic absence. This imbalance reproduces what Butler (2009) calls differential grievability: the man's remorse is legible, the woman's suffering abstract.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the visual emphasis on happy family scenes, smiling victims, family sorrow, and funeral rituals dramatizes grief but forecloses structural critique. These outlets fail to interrogate the systemic failures that enabled the murder, such as ineffective protection orders, the erosion of legal safeguards following Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, and the normalization of patriarchal violence. Instead, femicide is aestheticized as melodrama. The moral economy of mourning becomes privatized: Audiences are invited to empathize but not to act. This pattern is not incidental. Across the corpus, Islamist and pro-government outlets repeatedly center perpetrators' emotional states, use sensational visual grammar, and frame femicide as episodic tragedy. These strategies depoliticize gendered violence and obscure its structural roots. In contrast, alternative and queer-feminist media attempt to re-center victim subjectivity and institutional critique, though they too sometimes rely on affective templates, such as smiling portraits or symbolic imagery, that risk containment unless explicitly linked to systemic analysis.



Figure 2. Still image extracted from the video footage of DNA's Sümeyye Yavlak femicide case. Source: Kır (2023).

5.1.2. Mainstream Ambivalence and Ideological Containment

The case of Pinar Bektaş ("İstanbul'un Sultangazi," 2023) exemplifies how mainstream media domesticate femicide through linguistic and visual containment. *Hürriyet's* coverage describes the murder as an "argument that suddenly escalated," using phrases like "for reasons unknown" and "an argument arose." This language performs what Mills (2004) calls syntactic erasure; violence is narrated without agency, obscuring prior abuse and structural culpability. The framing isolates the event from broader patterns of gendered violence, rendering it episodic and emotionally charged but politically inert. The coverage reinforces a narrative of personal misfortune or an individualized tragedy (Brodie, 2020).

Visual strategies reinforce this depoliticization. *Hürriyet's* video montage includes blurred police lights, grieving relatives, and dramatic sequencing, which dramatize sorrow while suppressing institutional critique. The absence of historical context, such as prior threats, legal neglect, or ineffective protection orders, reflects a necropolitical logic in which women's deaths are mourned privately but not politicized publicly (Butler, 2004, 2009; Mbembe, 2019). This aligns with Lloyd and Ramon's (2017) concept of affective containment, where emotional excess substitutes for structural analysis.

Evrensel's coverage of Gonca Özdemir ("Darbedilmiş halde," 2024) offers a partial corrective. The outlet includes testimony from the victim's mother, detailing 17 years of abuse and threats, situating the death within a continuum of coercion and fear. However, even this progressive outlet leans toward sentimental framing, featuring a smiling portrait and domestic imagery that evokes empathy but risks aestheticizing suffering. DNA's coverage (Aytekin et al., 2024), by contrast, uses the symbol of a wedding dress placed on the coffin, a visual trope that fuses love, loss, and feminine virtue. While emotionally evocative, this image reaffirms heteronormative ideals of womanhood defined by sacrifice, echoing patriarchal scripts that obscure systemic violence.

In the case of Fadimana Ok, the contrast between *DNA*'s spectacle ("Damadına ateş," 2024) and *Yeni Akit*'s fabrication ("Kadını kocası," 2024) reveals two facets of patriarchal media governance. *DNA* foregrounds gore and police reenactment, transforming femicide into an affective commodity. *Yeni Akit* distorts chronology, implying that Fadimana's refusal to meet her husband provoked her death. This sequencing enacts discursive victim-blaming (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Gill, 2007; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017), framing female autonomy as a trigger for male violence. These coverages exemplify how media can reproduce patriarchal scripts that punish female agency and obscure the structural conditions of femicide, reinforcing necropolitical regimes that render women's resistance both invisible and punishable. Both outlets naturalize violence as reactive morality, reinforcing what Mbembe (2019) calls necropolitical pedagogy, the production of death as a social lesson that upholds patriarchal order.

Together, these cases illustrate how mainstream and conservative media deploy a grammar of ambivalence: They mourn women's deaths but refuse to politicize them. Through syntactic erasure, sentimental imagery, and moralized sequencing, femicide is reframed as personal tragedy rather than structural injustice. Even alternative outlets, while more critical, sometimes reproduce affective templates that risk containment unless explicitly linked to institutional critique.

5.1.3. Counterpoint: Politicizing Grief Through Feminist Reportage

In contrast to mainstream depoliticization, *Bianet*'s coverage of Sevda Kuş's murder (Kepenek, 2024) exemplifies feminist counter-spectacle. The protest image accompanying the report, featuring a sign reading "no to the love that kills," operates across multiple semiotic registers (see Figure 3). Denotatively, it documents dissent; stylistically, it isolates a solitary protester, symbolizing collective outrage through intimate scale. Connotatively, the phrase subverts romantic discourse, exposing "love" as a euphemism for patriarchal control. Ideologically, the image reframes grief as accusation, echoing critiques found in Fairbairn and Dawson (2013) and Lloyd and Ramon (2017) regarding the romanticization and depoliticization of gendered violence.



Figure 3. *Bianet*'s visual framing of the Sevda Kuş femicide case. Source: Cinsel Şiddet Haberleri İçin Görsel Arşiv (2020).

Beyond visual framing, *Bianet*'s textual strategy foregrounds trial monitoring and explicitly critiques the use of psychiatric defenses, particularly the "momentary madness" plea, as a recurring tactic to evade accountability. This narrative resists the normalization of male violence and exposes the structural leniency embedded in Turkey's judicial system. By naming these mechanisms, *Bianet* re-politicizes mourning and transforms individual loss into collective indictment.

Through this lens, narration functions as a feminist and queer strategy of critique, echoing Zengin's (2016, 2024) conceptualization of gendered death as a site of political contestation and memorial resistance. Rather than merely documenting violence, such narrative practices re-inscribe grievability and challenge the necropolitical erasure of marginalized lives by depending on a concept of queer feminist witnessing, a praxis that refuses to isolate grief from its political context. Rather than aestheticizing suffering, *Bianet*'s coverage interpellates the reader into a feminist critique of institutional justice (Cavallaro, 2020; Mills, 1998). The outlet's refusal to center perpetrator psychology or sentimentalize victimhood marks a shift from affective containment to political mobilization. In doing so, *Bianet* challenges the dominant media grammars that render gendered death mournable only within the confines of private tragedy. Its reportage insists that grief must be public, politicized, and structurally interrogated. This counter-discursive stance not only disrupts necropolitical norms but also affirms the possibility of media as a site of resistance and radical care.

5.1.4. Synthesis: Affect, Spectacle, and Necropolitical Mediation

Across Islamist and pro-government outlets, three interlocking mechanisms structure the mediation of femicide.

First, these outlets foreground male subjectivity through emotional testimony, psychiatric defenses, and legal drama. Perpetrators are portrayed as remorseful or psychologically unstable, while victims are rendered passive or absent. This narrative strategy aligns with Mills (1998, 2004) and Lazar (2007, 2018), who identify how patriarchal discourse privileges male voice and agency. Second, forensic imagery, blurred footage, and dramatic sequencing aestheticize death. Visual grammar amplifies affect while suppressing critique, producing what Zelizer (2010) might describe as cinematic logic. The spectacle of violence becomes a consumable event, detached from its structural causes. Third, emotional proximity is cultivated through images of mourning families and sentimental tropes (e.g., wedding dresses on coffins), yet these representations lack institutional critique. This kind of unpolitical empathy, which remains affective but fails to engage with structural critique or mobilization, reflects what Lloyd and Ramon (2017) term "affective containment," in which emotional excess substitutes for systemic analysis. It also aligns with Butler's (2009) notion of "privatized mourning," in which grief is confined to the personal sphere, foreclosing its potential as a site of political resistance.

Alternative media partially disrupt these grammars by including survivor testimony and contextualizing abuse histories. However, they often remain vulnerable to "affective containment"—where affective imagery and emotional narratives substitute for structural analysis and foreclose political mobilization. Only queer-feminist outlets like *Bianet* and *Kaos GL* consistently re-inscribe femicide as political violence, linking mourning to critique and resistance. Taken together, these patterns illustrate how Turkish media function as structures of necropolitical domination (Mbembe, 2019), regulating which deaths are narratable, mournable, and politically legible. Through selective visibility and framing, media outlets distribute grievability unevenly, reinforcing patriarchal-authoritarian norms and shaping the moral economy of public mourning.

5.2. Erasure and Silence

5.2.1. Uneven Visibility and the Necropolitics of Recognition

If cisgender women's deaths are spectacularized, trans and travesti deaths are often erased or misrepresented. This asymmetry is not incidental; it is a necropolitical performance. As Mbembe (2003) argues, selective visibility is a mode of governance: The state and its ideological apparatuses determine which lives are publicly mourned and which are rendered socially invisible. While cis female victims are framed as moral cautionary tales, trans victims are frequently misframed, minimized, or omitted altogether, producing what Butler (2004) and Zengin (2016) describe as ungrievability.

Mainstream coverage of Kadir Murat Sözübir's murder (Atik et al., 2021) exemplifies this dynamic. *DNA* reproduces the perpetrator's "trans panic" defense (Atik et al., 2021), quoting his claim that he "panicked when he realized." This framing casts trans identity as deception and danger, a discursive script identified by Billard and Zhang (2022) as legitimizing transphobic violence. *BirGün* version ("Fatih'te trans," 2021), while less sensational, remains entrapped in pro-government narrative structures. It emphasizes criminality and omits the structural conditions of transphobia, economic precarity, and social abandonment that shaped Sözübir's vulnerability.

Visually, *BirGün*'s use of Sözübir's Instagram self-portrait (see Figure 4), a solitary figure in a dimly lit parking lot, evokes isolation and marginality. While not overtly voyeuristic, the image reproduces a sense of affective distance. The absence of relational or communal context reinforces what Chouliaraki (2006) describes as a mode of moral spectatorship: The viewer is positioned to observe rather than act. The image aestheticizes loneliness but fails to politicize the conditions that produce it.



Figure 4. Alternative media newspaper *BirGün*'s visual framing of Kadir Murat Sözübir's transphobic killing. Source: "Fatih'te trans" (2021).

In contrast, queer-feminist outlets such as *Bianet* and *Kaos GL* transform this absence into critique. Their coverage foregrounds structural violence, judicial neglect, and community resistance. Through intimate

imagery, protest iconography, and explicit naming of transphobia, these platforms reframe mourning as political action. They resist the fragmentation of trans lives and insist on their legibility within broader necropolitical regimes.

5.2.2. Transphobic Normalizations and Journalistic Complicity

Trans murders in Turkey are rarely framed as hate crimes, and this omission reflects a broader pattern of journalistic complicity in transphobic normalization. The case of Ecem Seçkin, as reported by *Bianet* (Yılmaz, 2024), illustrates the transformative power of naming. The article quotes the perpetrator's courtroom claim that Seçkin "was not a woman," exposing how transphobia is embedded not only in social discourse but also in juridical reasoning. This framing reveals how gender nonconformity is pathologized and weaponized to justify violence, a discursive pattern that has been widely associated with trans-panic legitimization, and which aligns with broader critiques of media representation discussed by Billard and Zhang (2022).

Bianet's visual strategy resists this logic. The article pairs its critique with an unposed, everyday selfie of Seçkin, an image that restores her personhood without sensationalizing her death. This image is a casual, unposed, intimate, and resistant selfie. Denotatively, it is a photo of a young woman in a personal moment. At the same time, it stylistically resists the dominant media tropes that often frame trans women through spectacle, deviance, or tragedy (Bell-Metereau, 2019; Pearce et al., 2020). The connotative power of the image lies in its everydayness which invites the reader to relational modes of being, sensing, and witnessing. In other words, the image is carefully chosen to resist dominant visual regimes that shape how trans subjects are seen and interpreted, aligning with the representational critiques articulated by Billard and Zhang (2022).

By explicitly identifying the murder as a hate crime and condemning judicial neglect, *Bianet* interrupts the necropolitical logic of erasure. Its reportage links personal loss to structural abandonment, state inaction, lack of legal protection, and societal transphobia, demonstrating the power of feminist CDA to expose macro-level inequalities through micro-level textual and visual framing (Lazar, 2007, 2018). This approach exemplifies queer feminist witnessing: the act of transforming grief into political critique and resistance (Buscemi, 2023; Haritaworn et al., 2014; Zengin, 2016, 2024). In doing so, *Bianet* challenges the dominant media grammars that render trans lives legible only in death, and even then, only through distorted or dehumanizing frames. Its coverage insists that mourning must be politicized, and that justice requires not only recognition but structural accountability.

5.2.3. Writing Against Disappearance: *Kaos GL* and the Politics of the Wall

The murder of Sudenaz U., as covered by *Kaos GL* (Tar, 2024), exemplifies counter-documentation in the face of institutional silence. The graffiti image reading "trans murders are political" operates as visual testimony against the bureaucratic erasure of trans lives (see Figure 5). Denotatively, it captures unsanctioned public writing; stylistically, it is raw and immediate; connotatively, it transforms urban space into a site of memory and resistance; ideologically, it asserts collective refusal to accept invisibility (Haritaworn et al., 2014; Zengin, 2024).



Figure 5. *Kaos GL's* visual framing of the Sudenaz U's transphobic killing case. Source: Tar (2024).

In contexts where state institutions and mainstream media fail to record trans deaths, such imagery functions as a counter-archive of existence. It enacts what Mbembe (2019) describes as resistance to necropower, reclaiming visibility as a form of survival. The wall becomes a medium through which grief is politicized and silence is broken. *Kaos GL's* narrative embeds the graffiti within a broader critique of legal obstruction, including restricted case files and delayed indictments. The inscription is not merely aesthetic; it is a juridical protest. It challenges the mechanisms that render trans deaths administratively invisible and socially ungrievable. By situating the image within a discourse of state neglect and transphobic violence, *Kaos GL* transforms mourning into mobilization.

This act of public inscription resists the dominant media grammars that aestheticize or omit trans death. Instead, it affirms the political significance of naming, remembering, and demanding justice. In doing so, *Kaos GL* contributes to a queer feminist media praxis that refuses disappearance and insists on the visibility of lives systematically denied recognition.

5.2.4. The Epistemology of Silence

Comparative analysis of trans coverage reveals three systemic patterns of erasure. First, violence is justified through panic or self-defense claims, as seen in *DNA's* coverage of Kadir Murat Sözübir's murder (Atik et al., 2021). These narratives center the perpetrator's emotional state while casting trans identity as deception or provocation (Billard & Zhang, 2022). Second, reports omit structural factors such as systemic transphobia, economic precarity, and legal neglect. Even alternative outlets like *BirGün* ("Fatih'te trans," 2021), while less sensational, often fail to situate trans deaths within broader regimes of marginalization. Third, only sensational or exceptional cases receive coverage, while others vanish from public discourse. This uneven visibility reflects what Tuchman (1978) termed symbolic annihilation, now intensified by the logics of queer necropolitics (Kuntsman, 2014).

These omissions are not passive; they constitute an active discursive practice that sustains disposability. The refusal to name trans murders as hate crimes, to humanize victims, or to engage with structural violence enacts an affective economy of non-recognition. In this sense, silence is not absence but presence: a

necropolitical act that affirms the boundary between mournable and unmournable life (Butler, 2004; Zengin, 2016). Mainstream media's failure to document, contextualize, or politicize trans deaths reinforces the epistemic conditions under which violence is normalized and accountability deferred. By contrast, queer-feminist outlets challenge this logic, insisting that visibility must be paired with critique and that mourning must be mobilized toward justice.

5.3. Counter-Visualities and Resistance

5.3.1. Radical Care as Media Praxis

Within queer-feminist media platforms such as *Bianet* and *Kaos GL*, journalism becomes a practice of radical care (Mills, 1998; Pearce et al., 2020; Zengin, 2024), not as sentimentality, but as political labor. This form of care entails naming, witnessing, and archiving marginalized death in defiance of systemic erasure (Haritaworn et al., 2014; Zengin, 2024). It is a deliberate refusal to allow violence against trans/travesti/gender-nonconforming people to be forgotten, misframed, or depoliticized.

Through courtroom monitoring, protest documentation, and the use of intimate, unsensational imagery, these outlets transform reporting into a political ethics of mourning, in line with Butler's (2004) argument that public grief can resist derealization and affirm the grievability of marginalized lives. Mourning is not privatized or aestheticized; it is politicized. *Bianet*'s coverage of Sevda Kuş (Kepenek, 2024), for example, pairs legal critique with protest iconography, reframing grief as indictment. *Kaos GL*'s publication of graffiti reading "trans murders are political" (Tar, 2024) turns urban space into a counter-archive, asserting visibility where the state refuses recognition. This media praxis challenges dominant grammars of spectacle and silence. It insists that grief must be public, structurally contextualized, and mobilized toward justice. In doing so, queer-feminist outlets enact a form of journalistic resistance in which care is not passive empathy but active confrontation with necropolitical regimes.

5.3.2. Re-Inscribing Life: *Bianet*'s Feminist Witnessing

In *Bianet*'s coverage of Sevda Kuş (Kepenek, 2024) and Ecem Seçkin (Yılmaz, 2024), feminist witnessing emerges through three interlinked semiotic operations. First, *Bianet* uses unposed portraits and personal images to restore subjectivity. In Seçkin's case, the everyday selfie resists spectacle and affirms her identity beyond the moment of death. The image is banal in form but powerful in function, denotatively ordinary, connotatively present, and ideologically relational, aligning with Mills's (1998) feminist stylistic analysis and resonating with Billard and Zhang's (2022) critique of representational logics in trans media production. Second, the reporting explicitly names institutional failures, judicial leniency, psychiatric defenses like "momentary madness," and systemic transphobia. These critiques expose how legal and media systems reproduce impunity and invisibility. Third, mourning is reframed as a public protest. In the case of Sevda Kuş, the protest sign "no to the love that kills" transforms grief into accusation, recoding "love" as patriarchal violence. The image and its framing invite readers to engage not only emotionally but also politically.

Together, these strategies mobilize counter-memory practices that challenge necropolitical erasure, drawing on Zengin's (2016) trans/feminist critique of gendered violence and memorialization. *Bianet*'s feminist reportage refuses containment and insists on visibility, accountability, and structural transformation. It re-inscribes life not as spectacle, but as resistance.

5.3.3. *Kaos GL* and the Archive of the Street

Kaos GL's coverage of Sudenaz U. (Tar, 2024) extends queer-feminist media praxis into the public sphere where resistance is inscribed not only in text but on walls. The graffiti reading "trans murders are political" functions as a counter-documentation, an ephemeral yet enduring visual testimony against bureaucratic silence and juridical neglect.

The image, denotatively, captures unsanctioned public writing. Stylistically, it is raw and defiant, resisting aesthetic polish. Connotatively, it transforms urban space into a communal archive of dissent. Ideologically, it asserts a collective refusal to accept invisibility, aligning with Glissant's (1997) notion of the right to opacity and the rejection of state-sanctioned visibility regimes that demand respectability or victimhood for recognition.

Kaos GL's narrative embeds this graffiti within a broader critique of legal obstruction, including restricted case files and delayed indictments. The act of photographing the graffiti becomes a form of journalistic witnessing, blurring the boundary between reportage and activism. It affirms that to represent death ethically is to politicize it, to name it, to contextualize it, and to resist its erasure. In doing so, *Kaos GL* transforms mourning into militant memory. The wall becomes a medium of survival, a site where grief is not privatized but made public, insurgent, and enduring. This gesture exemplifies how queer-feminist media reclaim visibility as resistance, refusing the necropolitical logic that renders trans lives disposable.

5.3.4. Counter-Visualities as Necropolitical Refusal

Across queer-feminist media, counter-visualities operate through three interlinked processes that resist dominant necropolitical grammars.

First, these outlets foreground everyday, unsensational images—selfies, protest signs, intimate portraits—over forensic spectacle. This visual strategy restores subjectivity and challenges the aestheticization of death. Second, individual killings are explicitly linked to systemic transphobia, patriarchal impunity, and legal neglect. The coverage names hate crimes, critiques judicial defenses, and situates mourning within broader structures of abandonment. Third, grief is reframed as a public protest and collective indictment. Visual and textual elements invite readers to move beyond empathy toward accountability and mobilization.

These practices re-inscribe grievability, challenging the necropolitical division between visible and invisible suffering (Butler, 2004; Zengin, 2016). They also demonstrate the transformative potential of feminist CDA when paired with visual framing: Textual critique gains embodied resonance when coupled with affective imagery that demands justice rather than pity (Lazar, 2018; Rodríguez & Dimitrova, 2011). In doing so, queer-feminist media enact a refusal not only of silence but also of the terms under which recognition is granted. Their counter-visualities assert that to represent death ethically is to politicize it, to name its conditions, and to demand structural change.

5.4. Comparative Synthesis of Media Necropolitics and Feminist Interruption

The comparative synthesis of the case analyses and Table 1 reveals distinct ideological and visual regimes that structure the mediation of gendered death in the Turkish press. Across outlets, representations of femicide and transphobic killings operate as technologies of governance, producing a stratified visibility in which grief is selectively distributed and recognition is ideologically contingent. Islamist and pro-government media frame gendered killings through spectacle, sentimentalism, and moral pedagogy, transforming structural violence into private tragedy and aestheticized morality tales. Their reliance on crime-scene imagery, emotional spectacle, and perpetrator-centered narration sustains patriarchal authority while depoliticizing violence.

By contrast, alternative media offer partial disruption; they humanize victims and occasionally highlight systemic neglect yet remain constrained by affective containment and editorial caution. Their narratives oscillate between empathy and silence, revealing the limits of oppositional journalism within a polarized public sphere. In sharp contrast, queer-feminist outlets such as *Bianet* and *Kaos GL* produce counter-visualities that re-politicize death through protest, care, and collective mourning. Their use of graffiti, protest banners, and intimate imagery transforms mourning into a form of critique, reclaiming visibility for those rendered ungrievable.

This uneven terrain exemplifies what Mbembe (2019) defines as necropolitical governance: the regulation of life and death through symbolic and affective economies. Following Butler's (2004) notion of grievability, the data illustrate how Turkish media hierarchize which lives are mourned and which are erased, and how public empathy is rationed along ideological lines. The refusal to name trans murders as hate crimes, the centering of perpetrator psychology, and the privatization of grief all function as mechanisms that sustain this necropolitical order.

Methodologically, combining feminist CDA with Rodríguez and Dimitrova's four-stage visual framing model allows for a granular understanding of how micro-level textual and visual choices, lexical framing, source selection, and image composition generate macro-level effects of recognition and erasure. In doing so, the study extends previous femicide scholarship (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Richards et al., 2013) by integrating transphobic killings into a unified analytical matrix, revealing shared patterns of disposability across different embodiments of femininity.

Ultimately, this synthesis demonstrates that Turkish media do not merely mirror gendered violence; they mediate and moralize it, constructing hierarchies of life and loss. Within this regime, queer-feminist journalism emerges as a site of feminist interruption: it refuses the spectacle of death, archives marginalized lives, and reclaims mourning as a political act. When such journalism insists that "trans murders are political," it exposes the structure behind every spectacle and every silence, transforming journalism from documentation into resistance, from mourning into mobilization, and from witnessing into the practice of living politically against the machinery of ungrievability.

6. Conclusion

This article has critically examined the representational politics surrounding fatal violence against women and transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming communities in Turkey, arguing that such deaths are symbolically and materially embedded within a broader necropolitical regime. Our findings underscore how Islamist and pro-government media participate in these regimes not only through sensationalism or moral justification, but often through a more radical form of exclusion: outright erasure.

Unlike their sensational coverage of cis women's deaths, Islamist and pro-government media outlets frequently refuse to report on the deaths of trans and queer people at all, effectively denying their social existence. This strategy of omission resonates with Bayramoğlu's (2021) analysis of media discourse during the AIDS crisis, where queer people and migrant sex workers were framed as external to the imagined moral and national body. During that period, Islamist and nationalist media discursively quarantined queerness as a contaminating force. Today, that same media logic operates through silence rather than spectacle. This shift from hypervisibility to non-recognition represents not an improvement but a transformation in necropolitical strategy towards an epistemic and affective form of violence that renders inevitable deaths unreportable and ungrievable.

Even alternative media, while more willing to engage, frequently do so within the boundaries of heteronormative and nationalist respectability. As discussed above, alternative media often remain constrained by the foundational framings of state-aligned news agencies. Much like the earlier pathologization of queer subjects during the AIDS crisis (Bayramoğlu, 2021), current portrayals of murdered women and transgender people continue to obscure the political and systemic nature of their deaths. The repetition of such framings reflects a broader necropolitical order in which the lives of women and transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming people are continually exposed to violence and denied full recognition. This phenomenon reveals the deep entrenchment of hegemonic media logic, even in critical spaces.

Our most notable finding is how queer feminist alternative news media disrupt these dominant narratives by transforming both the language and visual aesthetics of reporting. Through gestures of radical care, protest, and the refusal to dehumanize or depoliticize their subjects, these platforms enact what we identify as a practice of "re-inscribing life and grievability." They offer counter-memorial spaces where those denied life, grief, and mourning in Islamist, pro-government, and even alternative media are symbolically and politically reclaimed. Rather than reinforcing the inevitability of death, these outlets articulate a vision of justice grounded in affective solidarity, collective memory, and structural critique.

However, queer feminist media initiatives remain structurally fragile, often lacking the financial and institutional resources to sustain robust journalism. As a result, their coverage is often restricted to trial monitoring and protest reporting, without entirely disrupting the dominant media grammars that depoliticize gender-based violence. Together, the strategic silence of pro-government media and the structural constraints of alternative media reveal the pressing need for a queer feminist media praxis, one that not only gives visibility to marginalized deaths but also politicizes them through intersectional critique.

Moreover, our cross-media, cross-ideological approach reveals how stories are told and the political economies of recognition, denial, and mourning that structure the media landscape in Turkey. In doing so,

we extend current debates by shifting the focus from representational fidelity to the affective power of media narratives in governing life and death. Nevertheless, this research only sheds light on the mediation of death in the context of fatal violence targeting women and transgender/travesti/gender-nonconforming people. As discussed, queer feminist media practices challenge dominant ideologies, reimagining journalism as a site of resistance, care, and collective survival in the face of systemic erasure. Ultimately, this research underscores the pressing need for further investigation into the shrinking space of alternative media and the intersection of media necropolitics, particularly its impact on systematically marginalized and gendered communities.

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Convening Black Sociability Over a Corpse: Obituaries in the Early South African Black Press

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Abstract

This article explores the significance of obituaries in the early 20th-century black press in South Africa, particularly focusing on how they served as a medium for memorializing black excellence within a context of colonization and oppression. Through textual and discourse analysis of obituaries that appeared in Solomon T. Plaatje’s newspapers *Koranta ea Becoana* and *Tsala ea Becoana*, the study explores how these tributes functioned as sites of resistance against historical erasure and affirmed black agency. This is done, in part, in the context of the global cosmological phenomenon of Halley’s Comet in 1910. The research situates obituary writing within the broader framework of memory, oral tradition, and entextualization, demonstrating how editorial choices and narrative structures elevated exemplary individuals as role models amidst systemic oppression. The findings reveal that these obituaries not only preserved collective memory but also actively contested colonial narratives by asserting black subjectivity and personhood. The study concludes by advocating for the inclusion of such commemorative texts in historical inquiry, recognizing their significance in the ongoing struggle for narrative authority and identity formation.

Keywords

black excellence; black press; entextualization; *Koranta ea Becoana*; obituaries; South African black press; *Tsala ea Becoana*

1. Introduction

The autodidact and polyglot Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (1876–1932), or Sol Plaatje for short, expanded his horizons when he leaped from being a court interpreter and clerk into the bustle of journalism in the outpost town of Mafeking, South Africa, in 1901. The town had come to prominence as a result of a bloody siege waged from October 1899 to May 1900 during the South African (Boer) War (with the war itself only ending

in 1902). Plaatje's venture, *Koranta ea Becoana* (hereafter *Koranta*; Bechuana Gazette in English), funded by Barolong (a subgroup of the greater Batswana nation) Chief Silas Molema, was marked as the first wholly black independent newspaper in South Africa (Willan, 2018). This gave Plaatje the editorial freedom and self-determination to fashion the bilingual newspaper, published in Setswana and English, into the form he wished; one that could convene an African public sphere and order conversations and narratives the way he deemed fit as "the spokesman of his people" (Salawu, 2023, p. 10). After ownership changes, *Koranta* collapsed in 1909 when its offices and facilities were auctioned off to cover some of the newspaper's many debts. Plaatje relocated to the diamond mining town of Kimberley and turned his attention to the newspaper *Tsala ea Becoana* (The Friend of the Bechuana) that was launched in 1910 and backed by a syndicate of Barolong. That same year also marked the establishment of the Union of South Africa and a deeper entrenchment of segregation and oppression of the black majority by a white colonial minority rule.

The Union of South Africa spelled doom for black Africans with its "racial intolerance and formalized discrimination" (Remington, 2013, p. 428), excluding them from the franchise, restricting them in land ownership, the civil service, and participation in shaping a common society. This was an onslaught on the African dignity and psyche where non-whites were barred from voting and the draft constitution made no commitment to legal equality between races (Johns & Gerhart, 2014, p. 18).

Within this hostile environment, Plaatje, who had become the de facto spokesperson of his people through his newspapers, focused on protest and black sociability and advocacy for gender equality (Salawu, 2023, p. 6), but faced a lack of resources, low literacy levels, and exclusion from any backing or subsidy from a state agency or a business conglomerate. Several changes of ownership, an accumulation of business debts, and Plaatje's own financial struggles led to him taking up the role of a labor recruiter in 1909 for the Mines Labor Supply Company (Willan, 2018, p. 210).

Tsala ea Becoana ran into financial difficulties, folded in 1912, and was renamed and relaunched three months later as *Tsala ea Batho* (hereafter *Tsala*; The People's Friend in English), with Plaatje as the sole proprietor (Salawu, 2023, p. 8). *Tsala*, published in multiple languages (initially English and Setswana, later also isiXhosa), played a significant role in covering and critiquing the Native Land Act of 1913 which restricted black land ownership to just 7% of the country and caused wide-scale disruption and devastation. Plaatje's efforts saw the newspaper circulation rise to over 4,000 copies but the publication began to falter while Plaatje was in England in 1914—as part of a political delegation protesting the Land Act—and published its last issue in July 1915. Plaatje continued to work as a journalist for several more years but became better known for his books, particularly *Native Life in South Africa* (Plaatje, 1982; first published in 1916), his novel *Mhudi* (Plaatje, 2021; first published in 1930), and his *Mafeking Diary* (Plaatje, 2023; first published in 1973) which, like some of his works, was published decades after his death.

2. Rationale and Aims

Both *Koranta* and *Tsala* carried obituaries that did more than mark the passing of notable individuals. They shaped a new narrative around black identity and achievement. These tributes captured evolving notions of black excellence, serving as both testaments and catalysts for communal pride and aspiration. By publishing these obituaries, Plaatje's black press actively worked to counter colonial injustice by upholding the names and legacies of the departed as models for future generations.

As Newell (2016) observes, through the biographies and obituaries of prominent individuals, early newspapers created an archive of African heroes, offering role models and anchoring local aspirations to personal accomplishment. These texts are, therefore, crucial for understanding the construction of identity and the affirmation of personhood within the colonial context, reflecting both resistance to erasure and the assertion of black agency.

While obituaries are central to shaping public memory and constructing communal identities (Newell, 2016), their role in the early South African black press remains underexplored in academic literature. Considerable scholarship has examined the press as a platform for political resistance and cultural affirmation in colonial contexts (Couzens, 1976; Limb, 2012; Masilela, 2013; Salawu, 2023; Xaba, 2017). But the specific function of obituaries as texts at the intersection of grief, commemoration, and cultural agency has been given little critical attention. This study seeks to address that gap by examining how obituaries published in a black-owned newspaper not only recorded individual lives but also contributed to the articulation of black excellence and the reimagining of identity under colonial rule.

The aims of this article are threefold. First, it is to examine the role that obituaries in the early South African black press played as sites for constructing, articulating, and commemorating black excellence, success, and identity in a colonial context. Second, to analyze the language, narrative structures, and editorial choices present in these obituaries to show how they functioned as instruments of resistance against historical erasure and as catalysts for communal pride and aspiration. Third, to contribute to the scholarly understanding of how media texts, particularly obituaries, mediate between oral traditions, communal memory, and the written archive, and shape collective memory while affirming black agency.

In the context of early 20th-century South Africa, where colonial policies and the emerging Union systematically marginalized black citizens, the black press became a vital forum for countering historical erasure. In these newspapers, obituaries were more than mere announcements of death but sites where narratives of achievement, values, and resistance were negotiated and preserved. For the black press, by foregrounding exemplary lives and constructing posthumous identities, obituaries in these publications functioned as both repositories and catalysts for collective pride, aspiration, and memory. In telling some of the stories, cosmology also came into play as a natural phenomenon influencing circumstance and time. This article responds to the need for a more nuanced understanding of how media texts, especially in the black press, mediate between oral traditions, communal memory, and the written archive. It situates the study of obituaries within larger debates on identity formation, resistance literature, and the politics of memory (Jamieson, 1995; Mbembe, 2019; Mokoena, 2016; Newell, 2016; van der Geest, 2000). By focusing on the language, structure, and narrative strategies of these texts, the research demonstrates how editorial choices and commemorative practices contributed to the formation of a counter-narrative to colonial domination.

The significance of this study is further underscored by its engagement with questions of representation and personhood. The gendered nature of obituary writing, the valorization of male leaders, and the selective commemoration of certain figures reflect both the possibilities and limitations of historical agency within oppressive systems. This investigation, therefore, illuminates how obituaries became instruments of nation-building, vehicles for affirming black subjectivity, and tools for resisting the silences imposed by colonial archives.

This article contends that the early South African black press, through the medium of obituaries, played a foundational role in documenting, contesting, and commemorating black excellence along with other sections that the newspapers offered. Its findings contribute to broader scholarly conversations about the intersections of black grief, memory, media, and identity, advocating for the inclusion of these texts in our understanding of both cultural history and the ongoing struggle for narrative authority. The idea of black grief is interesting as it evokes expressions not only of personal sorrow but also of communal loss and dignity. The obituary texts provided a platform for black South Africans to mourn publicly, assert their humanity, and honor their dead in a world that often sought to render them invisible. Black grief was intertwined with a spirit of resilience and resistance.

The key questions asked are:

- How do obituaries form part of the historical record?
- What is the role of historical context, class, and gender in practices of memorialization in colonial contexts?
- What are the typical styles, forms, and registers of early 20th-century obituary writing in black newspapers?
- What language is employed and what kinds of connections can be traced to nature and African cosmology?
- How is black excellence represented in the context of racial violence?

3. Black Excellence and the Black Press

The emergence of the black press was nothing short of revolutionary; it was a bold and determined act to confront and counter the oppressive currents of colonial society. Far from being passive observers, black newspapers in South Africa became active agents of empowerment, resilience, and historical preservation. They elevated the voices of their communities, chronicled the triumphs and tribulations of black lives, and, crucially, wrote the names of the departed into the annals of history, ensuring that they would not be forgotten or erased.

This deliberate act of documentation was more than just a service to the grieving; it was a profound declaration of Africanity, as Mafeje (2008, p. 111) describes it: a “historically-determined rebellion against domination by others.” Through the act of recording and celebrating black lives and deaths, the press nurtured a collective consciousness rooted in dignity, pride, and resistance. Gewin (2020, p. 320) echoes this sentiment, arguing that “the best way to combat white supremacy is to focus on black excellence.”

Calhoun (2020) identifies black excellence as “positive representations” of black people doing great things. This involves highlighting their accomplishments and positive actions that may be successes in athletics, academics, activism, the arts, business, and politics. In addition, she also considers and celebrates the everyday acts that “demonstrate the range of black people’s skills and set good examples for other black people” (Calhoun, 2020, p. 58). Sardinha (2022) alludes to the additional quality of resilience and looks to a reading of African folklore in the curriculum in order to understand “our present, our past and our future” (Sardinha, 2022, pp. 46–47). This resonates with the study of the obituary because, by their nature, obituaries provide a past and present perspective and the possibilities of the future.

In the context of the black press, every obituary, every remembrance, became an act of defiance “rejecting racial subordination,” as Mafeje (2008, p. 112) puts it. Death, within this framework, was not simply a moment of personal loss. It was a communal event—a rallying point where people gathered, performed rituals of mourning, and found solace in shared memory. These gatherings were fertile ground for storytelling. Tales of perseverance in the face of adversity, devotion to family and education, and unwavering commitment to justice became blueprints for future generations. In remembering the dead, communities drew strength to continue the struggle, embodying the very excellence and resilience that the black press so eloquently championed.

Moguerane (2024) argues that these practices reconstitute and revitalize a weakening solidarity of personhood. She points out that these practices are an “orientation of everyday life because they are essentially involved and concerned with how everyday practice facilitates our mutual recognition as persons, as quintessentially human” (Moguerane, 2024, p. 14). Applying Moguerane’s argument, one may look at obituary writing as a practice of nationalism that “confirm personhood” (Moguerane, 2024, p. 15). In a colonial context that privileges one group and dehumanizes others, obituaries tend to restore and confirm the personhood and the sense of community that emerges from the “intimate entanglements of oneself and another” (p. 15). Moguerane holds that, in colonial settings, societies attempt to negotiate their way out of situations that limit them “by assembling a new social infrastructure of personhood” (Moguerane, 2024, p. 17). We observe this negotiation with the establishment of newspapers as well as content such as obituaries of great men.

Throughout the formative years of South Africa’s black press, editors played an active role in shaping communal identity, using newspapers as platforms to assert personhood and nationhood against colonial oppression. Rather than maintaining journalistic distance, they became participants and advocates, especially through the writing of obituaries and memorial texts. These tributes went beyond mere announcements, chronicling the lives of elders, leaders, and everyday individuals in ways that modeled virtue and resilience. Drawing from Western and Southern African traditions, editors elevated the deceased as exemplars whose stories encouraged readers to find inspiration in their lives, framing grief as a source of strength and continuity. Obituary writing thus became a powerful mechanism for collective memory, fostering pride and hope while resisting historical erasure and shaping black identity within a colonial context.

This process of memorialization, termed “entextualization” as employed by Newell (2016), involved transforming oral or communal knowledge about death into enduring printed narratives with new social and political significance. Obituaries selectively highlighted achievements and virtues, crafting posthumous identities that aligned with cultural values and challenged prevailing colonial narratives. While there was a tendency to prioritize eminent personalities and elites, these texts also celebrated allies of the black cause—missionaries, merchants, and politicians—whose memorialization helped forge connections between Africa and Europe. Through these enduring textual artifacts, the black press created an anticolonial historical archive of role models, reinforcing communal pride and offering readers reference points for personal achievement and collective progress. As Guyanese historian Ivan van Sertima said, “we are ruled by the dead” (South Carolina ETV, 2025). This statement underscores the long-lasting impact of the deceased on the lives of the living and highlights why obituary writing held such significance for the black press.

4. Methodology

Postcolonial perspectives inform the analysis of obituaries, positioning them as sites of resistance and negotiation between local and colonial discourses. The narratives challenge colonial power structures within an Afrocentric media house, allowing for the reclamation of narrative authority by marginalized groups. The Afrocentricity lens advocates for the agency of the African, placing them at the center of the narrative, being a subject instead of an object in their history (Asante & Ledbetter, 2016). The obituaries then play a role in nation-building and act against colonial erasure, presenting the deceased as a cultural, social, or political legend.

In my analysis of the obituaries, I employ textual and discourse analysis to study the language structure and narrative conventions to reveal how the deceased are represented and cultural norms are reflected. This involves a close reading of the obituary texts, linguistic and thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, or even omissions. The main focus of the article is the interpretation of black excellence as a trait in an unequal colonial milieu. I examine how historical context and class played a role in the understanding of the death of exemplary figures.

The study is further divided into broader themes of identity construction and memory and legacy. Identity construction informs how the posthumous identity is crafted by highlighting and prioritizing certain information about the person's life to align with specific values. Under this theme, exaltation is examined, which is how language is used to elevate the account of lives and accentuate the contours of one's life. Veneration through colloquial language, idiomatic, and totemic expressions central to Setswana culture is also explored. Memory and legacy refer to how collective memory and public record are shaped, impacting how individuals are remembered. In memorializing a life, there are quirks about the deceased that humanize the person, stepping outside the formal mournful tone to engender an air of lightness and celebration. This thematic analysis provides insights into how obituaries serve as a form of historical record, preserving the memory of the deceased for future generations.

Using the Readex-NewsBank digital archive, which contains about 283 issues of Plaatje's newspapers as part of the African colonial press collection, an archival search and selection of obituaries was conducted. Five obituaries, published in *Koranta* in 1903 and in *Tsala* between 1910 and 1911, were identified for analysis. They were chosen based on the prominence of the figures and their importance in the communities. Their lives were identified as exemplary and worthy of emulation. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how obituaries construct identities and reflect cultural norms.

To analyze the obituaries, I conducted close readings using linguistic analysis and thematic analysis focusing on representations of the deceased and cultural values. I identified recurring motifs, rhetorical strategies, structural conventions, and notable omissions that pointed to social hierarchies (Titscher et al., 2000). Drawing from Gee's (2014) discourse analysis, Riessman's (2008) narrative inquiry, and cultural memory studies (Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011), I examined how obituaries construct social identities, inspire collective memory, and serve as performative texts reinforcing shared values. My approach also considered the role of the black press in commemorating resistance and dignity, following Newell (2016) and Peterson and Hunter (2016). This integrated methodology explores obituaries as tools for negotiating identity, power, and historical meaning, drawing on growing scholarship that treats commemorative writing as a site for these tools (Dlamini, 2020; Moguerane, 2024; Ngqulunga, 2025).

5. When Beggars Die, There Are no Comets Seen

The five obituaries analyzed are the Chief Jacobus Mamogale, who died in 1903 in Bethane, near Rustenburg in the Transvaal colony, and Joseph Masisi, a wealthy property owner in Thaba Ncho, in the Orange Free State colony, who died in the same year. They are followed by Chief Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe, the leader of the Bangwaketse nation in Kanye, Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana), and Veldtman Bikitsha of the Mfengu people in the Eastern Cape, who both died in 1910. And lastly, Chief Sebele Sechele of the Bakoena in Molepolole, Bechuanaland Protectorate, who died in 1911.

When Chief Mamogale died while seeking medical assistance in the town of Rustenburg, *Koranta* was sorrowful as it announced his passing. It noted that “truly a great man has passed” and further mourned that he was “a kind ruler” of his people. (“Ammaruri go tsamaile,” 1903). Mamogale identified only as “monna” (a man), which in totemic Setswana speak would be equal to a hero, was celebrated as a leader who fused staunch Christianity with black development, propelling his people to success by advocating for both academic learning and vocational training. His commitment to education was evident in his decision to send his sons to Lovedale College, a missionary school that played a prominent role in training black intellectuals. Notably, his obituary reports that Mamogale’s widow would preside over the affairs of the nation until his eldest son finished his education and could assume leadership—a further testament to the enduring value placed on education and tradition. Plaatje presents this as a model worthy of emulation by other Batswana rulers.

The legacy of businessman Joseph Masisi is equally powerfully evoked. Plaatje eulogized Masisi as a “very wealthy, influential and large-hearted Native gentleman of Thaba Nchu,” but notes that Masisi’s true greatness lay beyond material wealth. Most admirable, according to Plaatje, was his role as a “thorn in the sight of the newly imported white”—a protest against a system intent on marginalizing black entrepreneurs. Despite the prevailing belief, especially after the Boer War, that a Native could not own property, Masisi was the proprietor of two sizeable farms named Thaba Phachoa and Naauwpoort. In addition, he was the lessor of the Town Hotel site in the district of Thaba Nchu, in “whiteman’s territory.” Masisi’s achievements were a stand against business inequality but they came at a personal cost: He was imprisoned by the British during the Boer War “while carting home his grain” and charged with “conniving with the Federal Forces.” The charges were never proven and Masisi survived. Even in that hostile environment, he continued to earn the respect of both Boers and Africans. A supporter of the Wesleyan Church, Masisi was remembered as a good Christian and the tribute concludes with the wish that he might “rest in the bosom of Abraham” (“On Friday last week,” 1903).

By 1910, Plaatje was in Kimberley editing *Tsala* and was already seen as the de facto spokesperson of the Batswana (Willan, 2018). Even a traditional African society on the cusp of modernity, in a remote southern tip of Africa, could not escape the widespread panic that gripped the world engineered by the anticipation of Halley’s Comet. It was believed that the celestial visitor would collide with Earth resulting in an apocalypse (Clark, 2012). The cosmic phenomenon left a trail of heartbreak in what turned out to be a year of death. No less than eight deaths of historical figures within nine months, who either led nations, brought enlightenment, or simply inspired a people, were recorded in quick succession, triggering a belief that the universe had conspired to wipe out great men of that time. The predicted comet was detected in Earth’s skies at an observatory on 20 April 1910 and, in the following day, journalist and writer Mark Twain died. As the comet blazed its trail approaching Earth, King Edward VII of Britain died on 6 May, prompting Plaatje

to note that the Comet played a remarkable part in the King's death and funeral. He wrote: "It illumined the Eastern skies during His Majesty's lying in State and disappeared from view when the funeral took place, to appear again in the Western sky after His late Majesty was laid to rest" ("In view of," 1910). These international deaths were but a taste of things to come.

When a series of deaths hit Batswana society, as the presumed author of the obituaries, Plaatje looked no further than the cosmos to similarly make sense of the unexpected losses of his generation's greatest men.

The comet that Plaatje calls "*naledi ea setlhodi*" (the spying star or the abomination star) in Setswana holds cultural significance in African societies, often viewed as an omen linked to pivotal events and changes in leadership. For Plaatje, this celestial phenomenon was personally meaningful: Not only did he name his son Halley (born in 1910) after Halley's Comet, he also incorporated the comet into his literary work. In *Mhudi*, first published 20 years later as the first full-length novel in English by a black South African, Plaatje used the motif of the comet prominently as a literary device to explore the themes of colonialism and modernity (Plaatje, 2021).

This symbolism is evident when he announced the death of Chief Bathoeng, in July 1910, beginning with the quote: "When beggars die there are no comets seen. The Heavens themselves blaze forth the death of Princes" (Shakespeare, 2011). This line, from *Julius Caesar* (Act II, Scene 2), is spoken by Calpurnia as she warns Caesar of his impending assassination, suggesting that comets signify the death of those in power.

William Shakespeare uses Calpurnia's belief to foreshadow the tragic events of the play and highlight the cultural weight that natural signs can carry. Similarly, Plaatje invokes the comet to contextualize the series of deaths affecting his own community and the greater Empire to which they belonged, suggesting that such celestial events herald significant losses and foreshadow further challenges. The comet becomes a symbol—serving Shakespeare as a dramatic tool in a story of political turmoil and Plaatje as a way to articulate collective grief and foreboding amidst colonial upheaval.

In stark contrast to the later account given by Dr Silas Modiri Molema (1963), a respected historian of the Batswana, who downplayed the importance of Bathoeng as the chief of Bangwaketse, Plaatje offered a rich and celebratory portrait of the chief's leadership and character. While Molema described Bathoeng's reign as uneventful, claiming that "nothing that calls for attention happened in his time" (Molema, 1963), Plaatje instead emphasized Bathoeng's remarkable reputation and influence. He considered him second only to Khama III, the famed leader of the Bamangwato nation and the grandfather of Sir Seretse Khama, the first president of independent Botswana. Plaatje praised Bathoeng for his tact, geniality, and statesmanship, arguing that these qualities allowed him to thrive as a Christian ruler under British colonial oversight, a notable achievement given the complexities and pressures of colonial rule in southern Africa.

It is important to understand that Bathoeng leadership coincided with a period when British colonial authorities sought to reshape local governance and social customs, often using Christianity as a vehicle for change. Plaatje's tribute to Bathoeng highlights the chief's visionary approach to governance especially in matters of environmental stewardship. He recalls Bathoeng's youth among "large herds of heavy horned cattle which formed the wealth of the Bechuana" ("Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe," 1910), underscoring the economic and cultural importance of cattle to Batswana society. Unlike many leaders of his era, Bathoeng recognized the

dangers of overhunting and took concrete steps to protect biodiversity in the Bangwaketse reserve. Under his rule, he curbed the “foolish extermination” of wild animals by his regiments, ensuring that species such as buffalo, eland, zebra, and other large game continued to thrive. This approach was remarkably progressive for its time and counters long-standing stereotypes about African leadership and environmental care.

Furthermore, Plaatje notes Bathoeng’s openness to Christianity which was spreading rapidly throughout southern Africa in the early 20th century. The adoption of Christianity was seen by many colonial authorities as a marker of “progress” and “civilization.” Plaatje venerates him as peerless; Bathoeng’s government, for example, banned certain traditional practices such as circumcision rites, which held great significance among the Batswana. Nevertheless, Plaatje’s assessment is nuanced: He acknowledges that “some stubborn boys and girls escaped across the Transvaal and Cape boundaries to undergo these rites with their Bahurutshe and Barolong confreres” (“Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe,” 1910). Those who were discovered practicing these rites within Bathoeng’s domain risked being fined an ox, a significant penalty in a society where cattle symbolized wealth and social status.

This tension between tradition and change, between the preservation of cultural practices and the pressures of colonial modernity, is at the heart of Plaatje’s writing. By celebrating Bathoeng’s foresight and adaptability, Plaatje challenges colonial-era narratives that depicted African rulers as either obstacles to progress or passive subjects of history. Instead, he presents Bathoeng as a leader who balanced respect for tradition with a willingness to embrace new ideas for the benefit of his people. This underscores the complexity and agency of African leadership at a time of profound transformation—reminding us that the story of colonialism is also one of local innovation, resilience, and cultural negotiation.

In Bathoeng’s eulogy, Plaatje holds up the Bangwaketse people as the ultimate model for Batswana. He notes the docility of Batswana was well known by ethnologists, and it is most prominently observed in Bangwaketse. While the histories of other Batswana nations had “thrilling stories of bloody encounters” with Basotho, Matebele, other Batswana tribes, and the Dutch, “with varying fortunes,” the Bangwaketse had not known war. Their peace was disturbed only once by the “ferocious” hordes of Mzilikazi and they retired to the “one common watering place of the Kalahari Desert,” where “emaciated by thirst and hunger after marching many days without water” they fell easy prey to their pursuers (“Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe,” 1910).

Bathoeng is marked as a tactical diplomat who seldom forfeited any friendship with an opponent. Even when the Bechuanaland Railway Company built a line to the North and expropriated Bangwaketse land, he maneuvered his way to maintain good neighborliness. His skillful diplomacy was also recorded during the Boer War and how it saved the Barolong. When some escaped from the siege at Mafeking, they “found a ready asylum on his peaceful reservations” (“Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe,” 1910).

At the end of the South African War, Bathoeng visited Mafeking and witnessed the effects of new education policies. Returning home, he enforced an additional tax of two shillings per hut for the benefit of schools, supplementing missionary efforts. This yielded good salaries for teachers and would attract the best to his towns. When it came to dispensing justice, Bathoeng was also celebrated for his gentle manner and sympathy, his sober-minded judgments dictated in each instance by justice and common sense. At the conclusion of the obituary, Plaatje crafts wishes of a “sweet repose to the Chieftain, the Christian, the gentleman and statesman” (“Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe,” 1910).

South of Bechuanaland, in the Eastern Cape, the news of the passing of Veldtman Bikitsha, the chief of the Mfengu people, stunned the black colonial world. Three tributes were penned by a clergyman, a military man, and a journalist in Reverend W. M. Baker, Major D. B. Hook, and Plaatje himself. In the obituary headlined “Death of Captain Veldtman,” by Baker, originally published in the English *Daily Dispatch* and reprinted in the isiXhosa newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu* on 30 July 1910, Bikitsha was identified as “one of the greatest, and perhaps the greatest man who has ever lived in the history of the Mfengu people” (“Death of Captain,” 1910). Born John Bikitsha but known as Captain Veldtman, Bikitsha had sustained a severe car accident a few months earlier that left him practically an invalid, confined to his bed. Readers were informed of the gradual demise of his health, noting that he died at 89 “having lived 19 years over the space allotted to man” (“Death of Captain,” 1910). Having lived a long and full life, Bikitsha is noted to have playfully discouraged prayers for his healing, quipping, “Why do they try to keep me here, why do they not let me go!” (“Death of Captain,” 1910). This indicates one who had made peace with their mortality, having contributed to the good of his people. The inclusion of this sentence serves as an achievement to inspire others to live a meaningful life so that when it’s their time to go, they will have no regrets.

The life of Bikitsha was particularly interesting because he was only a headman but died a chief. His obituary tells us that he secured the great chiefly position “by the force of his character, by the soundness of his judgment and his constant alertness and endeavors for the welfare of the Native people” (“Death of Captain,” 1910). So influential was Bikitsha that he earned the respect of the colonial government and officials in the Transkei region of the Eastern Cape as well as that of the white people. In another tribute by Hook, published along with Baker’s, it is said that nothing could be done without him in his capacity as the “principal mounted orderly,” scout or intelligence officer for Sir Walter Currie who was the Commandant of the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police in the region. This was no mean feat for a black man at the height of colonial oppression to occupy “a foremost place in native affairs,” the newspaper noted (Hook, 1910). It was under Bikitsha’s leadership that the Mfengu people encountered stability when they were relocated to a permanent home across the Kei River after their opponents, the Gcaleka people, killed their cattle following a conflict that characterized their troubled relationship.

During the Gcaleka War of 1877–1878, Bikitsha was appointed “Captain of Fingo Levies” and received full captain’s pay and allowance. He is noted to have done excellent service and earned a favorable opinion of the government. So impressed were the authorities that in 1873, the Acting Chief Magistrate of the Transkei was authorized by the government to present Bikitsha with a farm in the vacant territory “in recognition of the wise influence he had wielded over the Fingoes” (Hook, 1910).

The Setswana version of the obituary, modified by Plaatje and published on the same page as Hook’s, tells more about Bikitsha’s worldly feats, including a trip to England where Queen Victoria had elevated him to the position of officer as a leader of the Mfengu people when they dispersed the Xhosa people and the English in the Cape Colony. Bikitsha defended the lands of his people and engendered development from the time he was much younger. He instituted a tax on every man so that he could afford to pay teachers so that the young could be educated, and build roads and vehicles so that they would not be damaged from the bad roads of the Transkei. Once the changes came to his land and the benefits of the taxes started to be seen, some white lawyers influenced the people to stop paying because it was not legal.

Among his most powerful traits was public speaking. Bikitsha was memorialized as a fluent English speaker who had met the future King George of England in Cape Town in 1901. While Batswana chiefs were at the mercy of interpreters to carry on a conversation with the monarch, Bikitsha could hold his own unaided ("Captain Veltman Bikicha," 1910). He embraced Christianity earlier and rose through the ranks as a preacher, a church elder, and a steward of the Wesleyan church. These were wholesome values cherished by black colonial society. His loyalty to the British Government was unquestionable. And the commemoration of the emancipation of his Mfengu people was closest to his heart. "Good old Captain Veldtman!," the tribute concluded somberly.

Again, Plaatje evokes the narrative of Halley's Comet. He declares that the comet will only be seen again after 75 years, in 1985. He reminds the readers of their mortality as he points out that the "majority of the living [in 1910] will no longer be alive" and won't see the comet again. He offers a quick lesson on the celestial phenomenon bookmarking it with Biblical tales of the carnage of Sodom and Gomora, the floods of Noah, and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. He shares these stories to alert his readers to the fact that nothing good will come out of the sighting of the comet as the ages of time have proved even before Christ ("Naledi ea setlhodi," 1910).

Some months after Bikitsha's demise, Plaatje also pinned the death of Chief Sebele Sechele on the comet. By that time, the list of the notable dead had grown to include important missionaries namely: Heinrich Grutzner of the Berlin Mission Society, who advocated for the Native franchise at the South African Native Affairs Commission on 1903 ("Moshui Rev. H. Grutzner," 1910); Canon Crisp, a linguist in native languages who served Barolong from 1868 to 1886 and authored their grammar and orthography through numerous publications ("Death of Canon Crisp," 1910); and Albert Kropf, of the Lutheran Church who compiled the Xhosa-English dictionary during his 65 years of service ("Rev. Albert Kropf," 1911).

Sebele's death followed a long illness. He stood out for his formative years under the guidance of explorer Dr Livingstone at the London Missionary Society school in Kudumane, in the present-day Northern Cape province of South Africa. When his father died in 1892, Sebele took over the reins. The obituary highlights a trip Sebele undertook in 1893 to Cape Town to "see white people in their habitat" as well as seeing the sea. He crossed the same sea in 1895 in the company of Khama III and Chief Bathoeng to see Queen Victoria and her councilors, such as Joseph Chamberlain, Lord Gladstone, Selborne, and the Duke of Westminster. His passing finds Plaatje exasperated as he notes that there were no more words of comfort to share with the readers after the spate of deaths. He added that the deaths marked the end of an era of a cohort of African leaders, with Khama of Bamangwato (Khama III) the only survivor that he prayed would be saved from the slew of deaths ("Moshui kgosi Sebele," 1911).

Sebele was praised for his speaking abilities in local meetings with the whites. When the foundation stone was erected at Tiger Kloof Native Institution near Vryburg, a white newspaper had told the readers that Sebele was an excellent example of people and royalty. Sebele was also a modern, literate man of words, who took up a habit that was crucial in a colonial setting—he read Setswana newspapers, and newspapers in other languages such as Sesotho and English—understanding that to get ahead one had to read and be informed of developments in order to be part of the discussions and debates that shape a response. An astute supporter of Christianity, although he remained a polygamist, Sebele was held up as exemplary and had just completed building a strikingly beautiful church for the London Mission congregation. While sending condolences to his

eldest son, Kealeboga, along with his widows, children, and the nation, Plaatje concludes the obituary with a question: "When will the star (Halley's Comet) disappear?" This marks his exasperation at the loss of life triggered by the unwelcome celestial visitor ("Moshui kgosi Sebele," 1911).

Plaatje's meditation on the comet delves deeply into the interplay between celestial phenomena and the lived encounters of his community. In reflecting on the deaths of prominent figures, he cautions against dismissing the comet as "an idle and meaningless visitor," emphasizing that such cosmic events have long resonated with profound meaning in African societies. In the pages of *Tsala*, he writes that there are "many ominous traditions to stellar movements and cometary visitations in particular" ("In view of," 1910), revealing how these occurrences are woven into the fabric of cultural memory and interpretation. For Plaatje, the comet becomes both a potent symbol and a living presence, a harbinger that both mourns the departed and warns of possible turmoil ahead. By integrating these traditions and beliefs into his writing, Plaatje situates African cosmology alongside Western narrative strategies, suggesting that the heavens themselves participate in the historical cycles of loss and renewal that shape his community's destiny.

While he acknowledges that it is a superstition, he continues to ascribe its power in how it influences the worldview of the Africans. So strong is its pull that "it was by no means shaken by their (Africans) contact with missionaries; and their perusal of the Bible story of the visit of the Magi" ("In view of," 1910).

In the obituary of Bathoeng, Plaatje delivered a lecture about the cosmological developments through the ages that he believes show how inextricably linked Africans are to the cosmos:

Space will not permit our going as far back as the [1830's] and the [1850's] to record momentous events, in Sechuana history, which occurred synchronously with the movements of heavenly bodies. The appearance of Halley's Comet in April of this year found them disconcerted by thoughts of the impending Union of the South African States, and the possible inclusion therein of their territories. ("In view of," 1910)

Here, Plaatje attempts to present the evidence of cause and effect over many decades, but the tragedy is that, as the readers of the archive, over 100 years later, we have missed out on the recording of these "momentous events" that would have contributed to our knowledge and understanding of the wondrous spectacle. Also, before the deaths, the comet is seen as foretelling the impending doom that would befall the black races of South Africa with the establishment of the Union that would exclude them from the levers of political power. This can also be interpreted as death. It was tantamount to strangling them to death and reducing them to the "living dead" to borrow the expression from Achille Mbembe's (2019) idea of necropolitics. In this state, the Africans became victims of a contemporary form of subjugating life to the power of death (Mbembe, 2019). In the colonial context, sovereignty held the capacity to control the life and death of citizens by excluding them to the margins and leaving them in a status of social death, the very definition of Mbembe's necropower. It was in the obituaries that this social death was mitigated by the celebrations of exemplary lives.

5.1. A Cup, a Saucer, and a Horse Race

The obituaries studied contained some eccentric information about the deceased that humanizes them. It is recorded that when, on the trip to the UK in 1895, Chief Bathoeng noticed a fair-sized enameled cup and

saucer, he bought a sample and noted the address of the factory. When he was back at Kanye, he preached to his people and shopkeepers on the breakable nature of crockery and China, urging them instead to buy the durable enamel. He showed them the sample and shared the address for his traders to place orders and import stocks of the cup and saucer. As a modern chief who aspired to Western sensibilities, the cup and saucer story reveals a lot more than fashionable kitchen utensils but tells of a sophistication and a newness that, in the eyes of Bathoeng, would put his people on par with the whites in England. Taking tea from a cup and saucer is seen as a mark of superior etiquette and class in African societies to this day.

In Bikitsha's tribute, the reader acquires a sense of the high profile Bikitsha enjoyed. In his capacity as the principal mounted orderly for Sir Walter Currie, Bikitsha had accompanied Currie and Major Hook to Nomansland (Griqualand East) to settle the Griqua people of Adam Kok. While on that trip, Hook remembered how impressed and envious he was when Bikitsha and Currie mounted a special racehorse breed from Grahamstown and the two were in hot pursuit of the wildebeest on the Cedarville Flats with no one able to keep pace with them. Hook says Currie would swear at Bikitsha for being in the way in their escape from a lion which had emerged from some reeds, and "to save his dignity," he would respond in isiZulu which Currie could not understand. This joyous and playful scene depicted by Hook is a testament to Bikitsha's prowess, natural abilities, and talent. Furthermore, it shows off an unusual partnership of equals, instead of the expected superior and subordinate in a society obsessed with racial pecking order. Bikitsha had masterfully negotiated his place as a statesman who could stand shoulder to shoulder with the highest colonial offices in the land.

6. Discussion

These obituaries, written in the context of colonial and racial violence that undermined African indigenous systems, as observed in the concept of the living dead of Mbembe (2019) that privileged Western values at the expense of African practices, reflect a complex interplay between grief, memory, and identity construction. As set out in the aims, the study has examined how the early black press commemorated black excellence and inspired pride and located the obituary as a tool for collective memory and historical record.

The language observed in these obituaries is deeply influenced by cultural and cosmological beliefs. For instance, Plaatje's continued reference to Halley's Comet and its long-lasting effect on earthly living, in the obituaries from 1910 and subsequent years, indicates the connectedness of the African to cosmology even though he admits to it being a superstition. This celestial reference additionally serves to elevate the deceased's status, linking their lives to significant cosmic events and thereby reinforcing their importance within the global community.

The tributes also reveal a pattern of communal mourning and celebration. The communal gatherings around death allowed for the retelling of stories that inspired the living to achieve what the exemplary deceased had managed when they were still alive. This communal aspect of mourning is crucial in understanding how obituaries functioned as a form of resistance against colonial oppression. By celebrating the achievements of the deceased, the black press was able to assert the greatness of black individuals and counter the narrative of colonial injustice and oppression.

Furthermore, the obituaries serve as a form of historical record, preserving the memory of the deceased for future generations. This preservation of memory is not just about commemorating the deceased but also about asserting the significance of black contributions to society. The obituaries often include anecdotes and personal stories that highlight the deceased's unique qualities and achievements. These stories help to create a more intimate and relatable image of the deceased, which can resonate with the readers and strengthen their connection to the community.

The aspects of the texts that create a discourse around black excellence involve how these men managed to retain their influence and agency in the face of a racial onslaught. As chiefs and self-made leaders, they have inspired and set a standard for their people to follow.

7. Conclusion

The obituaries in the early twentieth-century black press were more than mere announcements of loss; they functioned as potent instruments for resistance, cultural affirmation, and the construction of a counter-history in colonial contexts. Through deliberate editorial choices and the strategic highlighting of accomplishments, these texts offered a corrective to colonial narratives, foregrounding black excellence and reinforcing communal identity at a time of acute systemic oppression. The process of entextualization, whereby fleeting oral memories are transformed into enduring printed narratives, is essential in preserving individual legacies and anchoring them within the collective memory.

These obituaries crafted idealized posthumous identities, celebrating moral character and perseverance, and embedding the deceased within a continuum of African achievement. The language employed, rich in metaphor and cultural allusion, served to humanize the departed, inspire future generations, and reinforce the connectedness of the living and the dead. Such memorialization, influenced by cosmological motifs and communal values, offered solace and continuity, situating grief within a broader social and spiritual framework.

However, this study also reveals notable limitations, particularly the gender imbalance in the obituaries examined—most celebrate male figures, and this reflects broader societal patterns of the period and highlights the need for further research. Expanding the scope to encompass a wider array of newspapers, regions, and time periods, as well as focusing on women's obituaries and the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, promises a more nuanced understanding of how black identities are constructed, preserved, and contested in the press.

Ultimately, early black press obituaries stand as crucial archival texts, not only commemorating lives lost but also actively shaping the contours of memory, identity, and resistance in the face of historical erasure. Continued scholarship in this domain is essential for illuminating the dynamic interplay between grief, memory, and the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice. Writing the deceased into history became a restorative act, embedding them in the social fabric and ensuring their achievements were preserved as sources of inspiration.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Lesley Mofokeng was a journalist for South African newspapers, namely *Sunday Times*, *City Press*, and *Sowetan*. He has authored several books and holds a PhD from Wits University where he teaches journalism. His thesis is on the form of Sol Plaatje's journalism and how it convened a Setswana public sphere.

The 1927 Mapleton Train Disaster, Memorialisation, and the Media's Role in Narrating the Dead

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Abstract

On 27 July 1927, a passenger train collided with a goods train near the town of Mapleton in South Africa. Twenty-seven black passengers and four white train staff died and scores more were injured in one of the largest train disasters in the country's history. Injured black passengers were transported to hospital in disused coal trucks and those killed were buried in “one large grave” near the scene of the accident, while the white train staff were quickly treated and those who died had individual funerals. This article uses the case of the Mapleton disaster to illustrate the media's role in narrating death and the relationship between history, journalism, and memorialisation. The study draws on archival documents and newspapers for two purposes: First to construct a history and second to conduct a thematic content analysis of newspaper articles that covered the tragedy. Using the concept of bearing witness, the study attempts to understand the role played by the media in preserving the memory of those who have died tragically, been buried, and are now forgotten. The study argues that although journalists play a vital role as servants of history, their privilege in creating narrative results in a historical construction and collective memory that quiets some voices while elevating others. This impacts the capacity for recognition and memorialisation. In addition, the case illustrates how, in the context of tragedy and mass suffering, the media can facilitate public agency and responses that are counter to the hegemonic structures in society.

Keywords

bearing witness; history; Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union; journalism; Mapleton train disaster; memorialisation

1. Introduction

At 16h30 on 27 July 1927, a “passenger train known as the ‘Kaffir Mail,’ collided with a goods train” near the small Transvaal town of Mapleton “in which twenty-[seven] Natives and four Europeans lost their lives” (*Workers’ Herald* [hereafter WH], 1927a). Many of the passengers were migrant workers, travelling from Natal through Mapleton to Johannesburg. Though in the days and months that followed several newspapers reported on the accident, today the memorial commemorating those who died, and the broader memory of the accident, is almost entirely forgotten.

While it is not the primary role of the media to preserve memory, news articles from the time of the accident play a crucial role in helping uncover this history and expose the media’s role in creating a narrative and repository for the event. The study uses archival documents and newspapers to reconstruct the history of the accident and analyses it in relation to journalistic roles of framing, bearing witness, and memorialising history. The article presents this in two ways: Firstly, a history of the accident is told. Secondly, a content analysis of newspaper articles is conducted to understand how different newspapers shaped the story of the disaster.

The study argues that although journalists play a vital role, their privilege in framing and creating narrative results in a historical construction and collective memory that quiets some voices while elevating others. This impacts the capacity for recognition and memorialisation which in turn illustrates the interplay between journalism and history. In addition, the accident and its reportage illustrate how, in the context of tragedy and mass suffering, the media can facilitate public agency and responses that are counter to the hegemonic structures in society. This article attempts to evince the voices of those killed and injured in the disaster, and whose commemoration has been inadequate and forgotten.

2. Journalists, History, and the Construction of Collective Memory

Lavoine and Motlow (1994) propose the idea that journalists are servants of history, a “figure who is conscious of producing raw material for future historians to work on” (p. 209). Journalism is therefore a “vital and critical” agent of memory (Cieslik-Miskimen & Robinson, 2022, p. 157) and plays a role in constructing memory across time and place (Zelizer, 2008, p. 80). Through this role, journalists are often privileged with the means to construct historical narrative, choose preferred sources, and wield “control over the portrayal of the past” (Cieslik-Miskimen & Robinson, 2022, p. 157).

Carlson (2007) suggests that “not everyone is in a position to do memory work” and that the power to do this is afforded according to “varying levels of cultural authority” that “legitimate some voices while excluding others” (p. 168). In the process of capturing events and reporting on them, journalists give meaning and establish social order through “marking [a] difference” (Hall, 1997, pp. 236–237; Thomas, 2016, p. 478). Through news construction, journalists present narratives that “reify dominant structures by emphasising acceptable interpretations of events” (Cieslik-Miskimen & Robinson, 2022, p. 158) and indicate to audiences “those who belong and those who do not” (Thomas, 2016, p. 478).

Historians engaging with public tragedy benefit from news accounts because these accounts perform four important roles that assist in the process of remembering such tragedies. Firstly, newspapers are able to present an initial draft of the history (Zelizer, 1992) and share the events as they took place. Secondly, they

play the role of media witness in which they systematically report “the experiences and realities” of those affected by the accident “to mass audiences” (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009, p. 1). Thirdly, journalists facilitate public action by creating space for voices of dissent and critique to emerge in response to the tragedy (Chouliaraki, 2010). And finally, they play a pre-eminent role in constructing the “collective memory” of the tragedy by providing the “first records” of a disaster and creating a lasting “version of the events that [can now] be used by historians” (Lavoinne & Motlow, 1994, p. 220).

These historian-frameworks share quite noticeable similarities with theories on media framing and framing effects. One interpretation of media framing understands the journalist as a constructor of meaning and interpreter of events through both individual frames and media frames (Scheufele, 1999). Framing, according to Entman (1993), “essentially involves selection and salience” to “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). The “individual frames,” which are the “information processing schemata” (Scheufele, 1999, p. 106) of the journalist, shape how they construct the media frames which later work as a “central organising idea...that provides [collective] meaning” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143) to an unfolding story. Through framing and constructing tragedy and death, journalists practise their power in “defining how [the event is] presented to society” and the meanings that are constructed to later shape the collective memory of the event. Collective memory is what “connects the present with the past to reinforce beliefs and a shared historical narrative” (Carlson, 2007, p. 168). How the stories of the injured and dead are represented and framed play a crucial role in how they are memorialised and remembered today.

3. Research Methodologies

The most important accounts of the Mapleton disaster are found in newspapers. It was through reading ICU’s newspaper, the WH (in the author’s possession), that evidence of the accident became known. Additional articles were found in the online archives of the now-defunct *Rand Daily Mail* (hereafter RDM), through the National Library of South Africa and Wits Historical Papers Research Archive.

The newspaper sample period includes articles published between 27 July 1927 (when the accident occurred) and 4 October 1927 (a month after the memorial was laid). In the case of RDM, commemorative references to the Mapleton accident were made in the newspaper one, two, and 50 years (i.e., July 1977) after the accident. Other newspapers included in the study are the Chamber of Mines-funded *Umteteli wa Bantu* (hereafter UWB), daily newspaper *Eastern Province Herald*, and the liberal newspaper *The Star* (hereafter TS). An attempt to access *Abantu Batho*, the mouthpiece of the African National Congress, was made to no avail. Black owned newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu* had missing archives for the sample period. Newspapers including *Ilanga Lase Natal* and *Ikwezi Lase Transkei* (based in areas where many of the migrant workers came from) were not in print during the sample period. The sample includes articles that were written in English, Sesotho, and isiZulu. No Afrikaans language newspapers were accessed.

In addition to newspaper articles, Government Native Labour Bureau and Justice Department archives were accessed. These archives are housed at the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria. The government-appointed commission of inquiry into the accident, which was held on 8–10 August 1927, is included in the Justice Department archives. The authors also visited the site of the Mapleton memorial.

Because the process of archiving is inherently political and exclusionary (Peterson, 2002), the interpretation of the archives and newspapers follows a process of both reading “along the archival grain” as well as “against it” to find “omissions” and “consistencies” and to reveal the contradictions, manipulations, and intentions within (Stoler, 2002, p. 100). An in-depth content analysis was conducted to determine how different newspapers framed and represented the accident. This was done in three stages. In the first stage of analysis, each article was read and tabled into a dataset detailing the date of publication, newspaper title, headline, key features of the article, quotes, and key codes. Articles that were not written in English were translated and added to the table. Secondly, key elements of the articles were coded and highlighted according to the identified codes. A crucial goal of this stage of analysis and coding was to develop “a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual and theoretical organisation” (Saldaña, 2014, p. 207). In the third stage, the codes were reorganised to develop a list of the themes that were present in the reportage; these are analysed in Section 5.

4. A History of the Mapleton Disaster

On 27 July 1927, train driver Pieter De Vries prepared to depart from Germiston heading to Natal on special goods train No. 729, with 30 empty trucks. He checked the notice board detailing new information about the route and didn’t notice anything remarkable. De Vries reported that he had felt “rushed” and left 12–13 minutes late. The guard on the train, A. J. Coetzer, whose duty it was to keep the train safe and timely, equally lamented his unsubstantial rest after a 12-hour shift the day before (Archives of the Justice Department [hereafter AJD], 1927b, p. 49, pp. 38–40). Despite this, the train left without much drama from Germiston. At around 16:26 the train entered the Mapleton–Glenroy section, which was “already occupied” by an opposing passenger train. The train, No. 196, with nine passenger coaches mostly transporting migrant workers from Natal, had entered the final stages of its journey to Johannesburg having left Glenroy station a few minutes prior.

The weather was poor on that day. Passengers and railway employees on both trains experienced low-hanging clouds and misty rain that inhibited visibility (AJD, 1927b, p. 16, p. 53; TS, 1927a). Wading through the mist and rain, 16-year-old Willem Early walked from his railway cottage and looked toward the track where he saw that the trains were on the same line and, sensing the disaster, put up his hands. The staff on the goods train had thought he was a poor white asking for coal, and the fireman told the driver, “bugger him, mate, he wants coal” (AJD, 1927b, p. 27).

Then, seeing that they were approaching another train, the gravity of the situation dawned on the driver. De Vries pushed the fireman out of the train before jumping out himself. At 16:35, the two trains collided. Unharmd, De Vries attempted to assist the injured, after which he galloped away on a grey horse to get help. Despite being in excruciating pain from a broken leg, the driver of the passenger train, Milton, saw that the engine had been damaged and heroically manoeuvred to open the safety valve. This released the built-up steam which averted a further loss of life. Milton then succumbed to his injuries (AJD, 1927b, p. 51; TS, 1927f, 1927w).

The Johannesburg district inspector for South African Railways (SAR) was one of the first at the scene. His report began: “dead-on collision...with serious results to life and property” (AJD, 1927b, p. 5). Mechanical superintendent, Cecil Lawson, visited the scene on the evening of the accident and found a “considerable amount of wreckage” with the two engines locked together (AJD, 1927b, p. 13). This wreckage

to train engines, coaches, and trucks is shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3. After the accident, operations to begin removing debris were started, and it was hoped that “within a few days little trace of the accident will be left” (TS, 1927g).

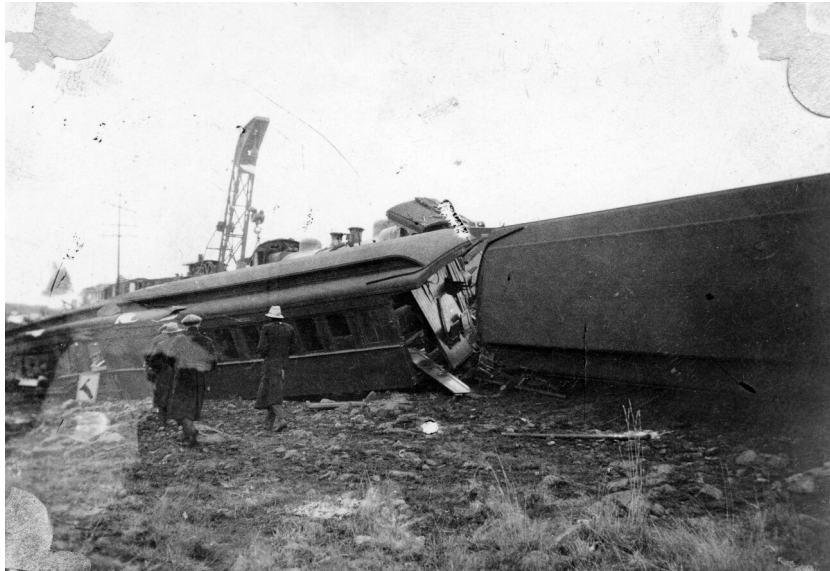


Figure 1. The wreckage of the passenger train. Source: SAR Publicity and Travel Department (1927a).

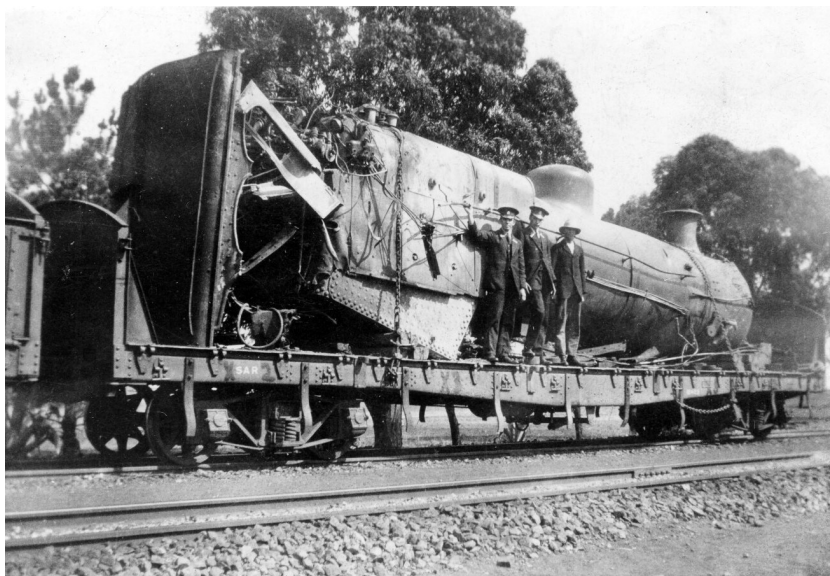


Figure 2. Clearing away the wreckage. Source: SAR Publicity and Travel Department (1927b).

On the passenger train, 21 black migrant workers, mostly men who were travelling from what today is the Eastern Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal, and one black convict were killed on impact. Two white train staff died immediately. After the accident, the white driver and warder on the passenger train died from their injuries, as did five further black migrant workers, including one woman. In total, 31 people were killed in the accident. On the passenger train, over 50 people, including convicts, a black policeman, migrant workers, and nurses were injured in the crash. On the goods train, it was only the fireman who was injured (AJD, 1927b, pp. 1–3).

Apart from the drivers and train staff stationed at the front of the trains, it was black passengers who were at greatest risk in the event of a collision. It was standard practice that coaches carrying black people would be placed behind the engine to avoid the increased risk of white passengers being injured (TS, 1927g). TS reported that the first two coaches where black migrant workers were seated “were telescoped and the wood and splinters brought death and agony to most of the passengers in these coaches” (TS, 1927b; TS, 1927d; see Figure 1). In contrast, a white passenger, who was sitting at the back of the passenger train, told a reporter that “the luggage was not even thrown out of the racks” (TS, 1927g). When questioned, a SAR official admitted that the coaches for black travellers were “not built as strongly” as the corridor coaches. This meant that “in practically every accident...natives have been the principal sufferers” (TS, 1927h).

When the collision happened, black passengers were “hurled left and right” which resulted in countless injuries and numerous deaths. Maimed and dead bodies lay in the veld and the landscape, sodden with winter rain, was “tinged with blood” (RDM, 1927a). For those who were lucky enough to survive, they waited in the cold for help to arrive (RDM, 1927a). Surviving passengers were taken to multiple hospitals across the Witwatersrand, owing to the large number of those injured and the severity of the injuries.

Nine convicts had been travelling on the train, supervised by policeman N. C. Njinga. On the day of the accident, rumours had spread that these convicts had escaped custody. The reality was far grimmer: Eight of the convicts and the policeman were taken to hospital along with the other passengers. John Macuba, Vrede Schlekela, and Busa Sikota endured serious injuries and, along with the others, were detained in a prison hospital. When rescuers searched the debris, they found a “handcuffed corpse” on the train. This was the body of a convict named Jan, with no further details provided (AJD, 1927c; TS, 1927g).

A doctor who arrived on scene looked for splints among the wooden debris of the passenger coach for passengers with broken bones, though few were large enough for that purpose. People suffered from “multiple injuries” to their legs, arms, backs, and heads. Migrant worker Manaze Gebang from Pondoland suffered from a fractured femur (UWB, 1927a). Both UWB and the WH published the details of these

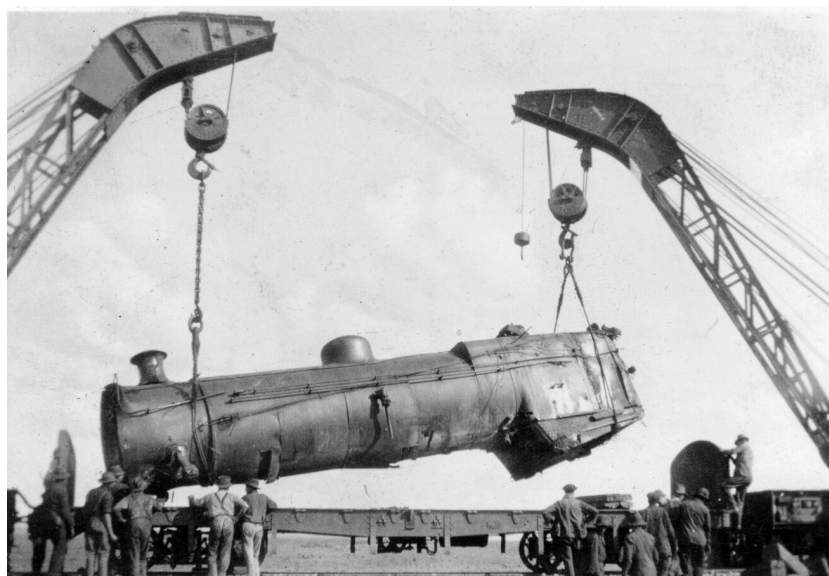


Figure 3. Clearing away after derailment. Source: SAR Publicity and Travel Department (1927c).

horrific injuries (UWB, 1927a; WH, 1927b). Unable to make usable splints, medical personnel decided that the debris would better serve as a large bonfire which helped to keep the injured warm. The injured waited in this way until members of the Red Cross arrived and several people were escorted to Heidelberg hospital. It later emerged that the Red Cross could have contributed more personnel had they been timeously called by the SAR administration (TS, 1927b, 1927i).

With the slow pace of state assistance, some railway medical staff, uninjured passengers, and those with medical qualifications helped (TS, 1927e). One traveller made bandages by ripping the fabric off of the train seats. Others used the bedsheets and linen for the same purpose (RDM, 1927b). The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), the principal movement for liberation in South Africa during the 1920s and 1930s, held a protest meeting in which they expressed "high appreciation of the heroic and humane assistance rendered...to the native passengers by the Europeans on board" on behalf of the 80,000 members of the ICU (RDM, 1927f).

When SAR Superintendent Cecil Lawson visited the scene at 20:30 on the day of the accident, he told the Board he had endeavoured to find passengers and staff who were injured; but, blinded by his colour prejudice, he saw the fireman of the passenger train and stated, "that was the only body I could see at all," despite many black people who were injured and dead around him (AJD, 1927b, p. 14). When TS reported on the accident, they expressed relief that "fortunately, the European section of the train escaped without severe shaking" (TS, 1927b). Such statements highlight the prevailing racism of the time. The accident also highlighted the double standards of the segregationist state, particularly with how the victims of the train crash were treated. The injured, strapped up with make-shift bandages, were marooned in the "bitterly cold" veld and thereafter subject to a "slow and agonising journey" to Johannesburg (TS, 1927k, 1927n, 1927p). One of the passengers who was taken to Vrededorp hospital summarised the treatment of black passengers:

The white men were taking our dead friends and placing them in a row beside us. It was terrible cold, and we cried out for blankets. The white men took pity on us and gave us blankets, but the rain continued to come down and the wind was very cold. After a while we were put into a truck that generally carries coal and the rainstorm came down....Our blankets were wet and there was no roof above us. We went...[to Germiston] then we were carried into trucks that had roofs and brought to Johannesburg. (TS, 1927q, p. 14)

The ICU called out the "callousness and brutality" of the railway department and demanded a commission of enquiry. The ICU questioned whether such a horrific condition had "been heard of before"—where "gravely injured people lying like sticks at the bottom of an iron coal-truck, exposed to rigorous weather conditions for 1 ½ hours" were transported at "snails' pace" to hospital (RDM, 1927f). In the WH, the ICU accused the government of lacking Ubuntu, with reference to how black passengers were treated, arguing that "the most disquieting aspect of the whole affair, however, was the manner in which the Railway Department conveyed the wounded Natives" (WH, 1927a).

Officials maintained that doctors had "approved" carrying the injured in trucks, where they were laid "on cushions taken from the passenger trains and covered with blankets" (TS, 1927m). The general manager of the SAR, Sir William Hoy, argued that placing the injured in closed trucks was impractical and dismissed reports that black passengers were cold and wet, saying that "they were all handled very gently" (TS, 1927o).

Yet questions from TS continued to probe the dearth of medical supplies and personnel, which should have been better considering that the accident happened during the day (TS, 1927e, 1927i, 1927j). Remarking on the lack of transport available to the injured, a WH writer suggested “what silly talk! Why could not one of the many suburban trains have been held up at Germiston and diverted to the scene of the disaster!” (WH, 1927a). TS similarly questioned why more suitable carriages, or ambulance trains, were not transported to the scene (TS, 1927l). Despite authorities insisting that sufficient medical personnel had been sent to the scene within an hour of the accident, the injured were only conveyed to the hospital after five hours (see Figure 4; TS, 1927m, 1927o).

MAPLETON RAILWAY ACCIDENT TIME TABLE	
4.35 p.m.:	Disaster occurred.
6.30 p.m.:	Relief train despatched from Johannesburg.
10.5 p.m.:	Johannesburg Hospital authorities notified that 30 cases would be arriving for treatment within from 30 minutes to 45 minutes from time of telephonic notification.
1.45 a.m.:	Relief train with wounded reached Johannes- burg.
2.0 a.m.:	First stretcher case arrived at Native Hospital.
5.5 a.m.:	Last of the wounded natives reach hospital in motor ambulance.
5.15 a.m.:	Ambulances return to Central Fire Station.

Figure 4. A chronology of the accident. Source: RDM (1927z).

TS highlighted that the accident happened in the middle of winter “in one of the coldest districts in the country” and stated: “Had they been Europeans, South Africa would today be ringing with indignation at an apparently uncontradicted assertion that a number of these injured passengers died, not from their wounds, but from exposure to rain and cold” (TS, 1927e, p. 12).

An article published in Sesotho in the ICU newspaper decried the racially unequal treatment of victims: “The carriages were staffed with healthy white people, and the trucks housed injured and displaced blacks” (WH, 1927a). A white passenger, Mrs Scott, spoke against this treatment of black passengers saying, “I cannot understand why they were not put into the second-class carriages beside the engine, which were quite empty” (TS, 1927g). According to the WH, upon arriving in Johannesburg, the trucks carrying the injured “halted opposite the luggage offices, but no attempt was made to get them under cover, as the doors of the trucks were kept locked....These natives had lain in the open for nearly twelve hours, and it rained!” (WH, 1927a, p. 2). One of the injured stated: “I felt so very cold during the night. There were too many of us...we had no food or drink until we arrived in the hospital. If we wanted anything, we had to buy it ourselves” (TS, 1927n).

Other injured migrants were taken to Modder B Central Native Hospital near Benoni. When interviewed by TS, they complained about being made to travel in open iron trucks (see Figure 5) and that they had lost their belongings and blankets. They were given wet blankets and complained about the exposure of their wounds

in the cold. They received milk but had no solid food until they arrived at Modder B Hospital 24 hours later (TS, 1927r). Some with minor injuries were taken to a municipal medical institution in Vrededorp (TS, 1927q). For the injured who were taken to Johannesburg hospital, their grievance was the length of time that they were exposed to the cold before treatment and the fact that their first sustenance was given at 6 a.m. (TS, 1927n, 1927r).

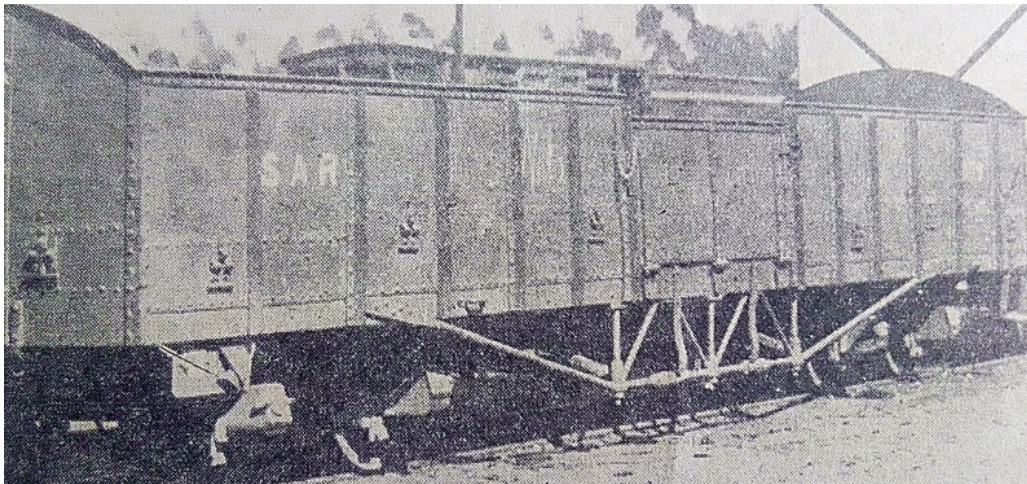


Figure 5. Image of the coal trucks that transported injured black people. Source: TS (1927aa).

While many of the injured were operated on at the scene, one migrant worker, “Slako,” did not have his fractured collarbone addressed until the next morning. Another passenger was given splints for his broken arms and then was made to sit on the balcony of the carriage with wet blankets while suffering acute pain until Johannesburg (TS, 1927r).

On the morning after the accident, a local farmer complained to the Minister of Justice Tielman Roos that by 10h00 there were still bodies “lying beside the railway line” (AJD, 1927a). Later in the day, the 21 dead black passengers were buried in “one large grave” at the scene of the accident. By Friday 29 July, George Sokele’s body still lay in the veld. He was an employee at Johannesburg General Hospital. Sokele wasn’t buried in the mass grave like the other passengers because his “brother arrived and explained that he was making his own arrangements” for a funeral (TS, 1927g). Historian Charles Van Onselen notes a similar practice of burying black train victims in mass graves after a 1949 accident in Waterval Boven (Van Onselen, 2019, p. 180).

In contrast to the “collective burial” of migrant workers, white passengers had adorned, individual funerals. Multiple memorial services were held for the deceased. For example, driver Milton was buried shortly after the accident in Johannesburg’s Brixton cemetery surrounded by family and dignitaries (TS, 1927v, 1927f, 1927x, 1927t, 1927u, 1927g).

On Saturday 31 July 1927, the ICU held a protest at its headquarters in Johannesburg. The meeting began solemnly, as a first resolution was passed “expressing sympathy with the relatives of the deceased” who were thought of as “like ourselves, workers.” The chairman of the meeting, H. D. Tyamzashe, then on the WH editorial team, stated: “We are assembled under the shadow of a terrible calamity” (TS, 1927s). The ICU vociferously criticised the railway department and demanded that, in addition to the commission of enquiry

into the causes of the accident, a public commission of enquiry be established regarding the treatment of the injured. He continued, "I am at a loss as to why the most obvious necessities were overlooked" and expressed "humanitarian motives alone call for the fullest investigation" and for reasonable compensation to be given to the families of the deceased (RDM, 1927f; TS, 1927s).

Attempting to garner more support for the victims, it was suggested by local ICU members that Clements Kadalie, the general secretary of the ICU who had travelled abroad, raise the issue of the accident overseas (RDM, 1927k). This plea was made as the ICU sent a letter to Prime Minister J. B. M. Hertzog demanding adequate compensation. The letter presented the accounts of four victims, highlighting their mistreatment. The ICU had made arrangements for evidence to be submitted and for legal representations (TS, 1927y; WH, 1927a). The issue of compensation would be raised with the minister of justice. Fifteen months later, the three widows of the slain white train staff were collectively given £5,100 compensation for the loss of their husbands. For black migrant workers, there is no record of any compensation (RDM, 1927o, 1928).

On the same Saturday the ICU held its protest, government officials established a public commission of enquiry into the causes of the accident. The commission into the treatment of the injured victims, initially proposed by the ICU, was blatantly left out of proceedings (RDM, 1927o). UWB explained that an inquiry would be the only way to determine "on whose shoulders the blame rests" (UWB, 1927b; see also RDM, 1927p). The newspaper positively affirmed the frustration cast towards the railway department by both white and black people (UWB, 1927b). With similar sentiments to those expressed by the ICU, a flurry of letters appeared in RDM expressing shock at the cruelty experienced by black passengers (RDM, 1927e). Further condemnation was expressed over the competence of railway officials and the department (RDM, 1927l, 1927m).

The commission into the causes of the crash was held two weeks after the accident, on 8–10 August, and gathered the testimonies of those involved (AJD, 1927b). The driver and the guard both blamed poor visibility for the accident, and both complained about being rushed. Coetzer expressed that railway officials disincentivised taking extra rest by being put on laborious jobs like shunting duty. De Vries argued that he had not seen the notice of Mapleton being declared a station on the notice board. The fireman corroborated that they "hadn't an idea to stop at Mapleton" and hadn't been on the line for at least a year, during which Mapleton was upgraded from a railway siding to a station. Fellow railway officials shot down these excuses. They maintained that, though the weather was "very dull," there was sufficient visibility and further suggested that no matter what the status of a station was, drivers were obliged to approach cautiously (AJD, 1927b, pp. 1–7, 14, 23–30, 38–52).

The inquiry blamed the driver, the fireman, and the guard of the goods train. The commission stated that the accident "was due to the negligence of engine driver P. De Vries...in that he failed to stop at Mapleton station," where he only had staff authority to proceed to and where he had been told to cross passenger train No. 196. The fireman, a 22-year-old graduate named Norton, was blamed for not reminding the driver that the train's "staff authority only carried them as far as Mapleton" (AJD, 1927b, pp. 2–4). Finally, Coetzer had not looked for a "warning order," which indicated whether the train should have proceeded or not (AJD, 1927b, pp. 2–4). De Vries was suspended and Coetzer was placed on injured duty (TS, 1927g). Charges of homicide were brought against the train staff (RDM, 1927t). The court eventually acquitted driver De Vries and fireman Norton, while the guard Coetzer was found guilty of homicide (RDM, 1927x, 1927y).

With the causes of the accident ascertained, newspapers published an anonymous letter which drew attention to a “hidden enquiry”—that investigated the treatment of the injured—which the SAR had determined would be held in private (RDM, 1927q, 1927r). One anonymous passenger “deplored” the secrecy of the railway department, saying that people, like himself, knew how the injured were treated (RDM, 1927s).

Over a month after the accident, it was declared that a memorial stone would be consecrated in memory of those killed (RDM, 1927u; UWB, 1927c). The stone was consecrated on the afternoon of Sunday 4 September 1927 (see Figures 6 and 7). The ceremony was well-attended and emotional, as captured by the RDM (1927w, p. 7): “It was while the sun was setting late yesterday afternoon, opposite the stone in that saucer of veld, that some 3,500 white and native people were emotionally stirred at the dedication of the memorial.”



Figure 6. Dedication of the grave by Bishop Kearney. Source: UWB (1927e).



Figure 7. A 1927 photo of the grave and memorial stone. Source: TS (1927ab).

People arrived to visit the “veld grave” where the memorial stone was erected. They came from far and wide on three special trains, bicycles, cars, and ox-wagons (RDM, 1927w; WH, 1927c). In spite of their complicity in the treatment of the injured, both the manager of SAR and the Director of Native Labour, Major H. S. Cooke, attended. Members of other government departments were present as were an extensive collection of church representatives and political groups including those of the ICU and the African National Congress (RDM, 1927w; UWB, 1927d). Bishop of Johannesburg Dr Arthur Kearney consecrated the burial ground after which the crowd broke into singing a hymn *Rock of the Ages*. The state representatives then placed wreaths on the memorial stone in remembrance of those killed. Heads of the Gaza-Zimbabwe Ethiopian Church of Rhodesia and other black church leaders then came forward to sprinkle soil on top of the wreaths, after which a large crowd broke into Enoch Sontonga’s hymn *Nkosi Sikelel i’Afrika* (God Bless Africa) and spontaneously joined the process of putting soil on the grave. People broke the police barriers and “swamped on and around the graves” (RDM, 1927w; TS, 1927z).

In an article published in the WH (1927d, p. 4) after the memorial, the ICU called out the hypocrisy of officials:

What upset most of the working class, however, was that the business was dominated by the Predikants and Bishops, whereas in the first instance when the accident took place these people took very little or no public interest in protesting against the treatment of the injured.

Although nameless, it was noted that the memorial stone atop the grave would serve as a reminder of the accident to “generations unborn” (UWB, 1927d). Today, the monument stands at Mapleton relatively forgotten. The areas surrounding Mapleton provide little evidence of the accident. When attempting to find the memorial in April 2022, we spoke to workers, cattle herders, waste pickers, residents, and old farmers who had traversed the area for generations. Nobody knew that the train accident had happened, never mind the site of this disaster. The monument, eventually located, sits below several Australian Beefwood trees, which shade the burial ground and memorial. Themselves a product of migration, they signpost the memorial in the hundreds of kilometres of barren veld alongside the railway line. Yet, it is journalists who first signposted the complexity of this disaster.

5. Media Frames and Representation of the Accident

“Bearing witness,” “critique,” “racial solidarity,” “naming,” “recognition,” and “othering” were key codes and thematic categories in the news framing of the disaster. Journalists who covered the accident fulfilled their role as servants of history by bearing witness and creating an accountable public. This process was significant enough to incite public action and facilitate a moment of communal grieving and racial solidarity. There were, however, contradictions in the coverage. Although the suffering of African passengers was foregrounded and acknowledged, their names and individual details were only published in black and black working-class newspapers. This indicates a crucial shortcoming that has had an impact on the collective memory surrounding the train crash.

5.1. Bearing Witness and Inciting Action

When it comes to mass mediation, journalists are seen as being able to appeal “to an audience to share responsibility for the suffering of others” (Tait, 2011, p. 1233). Journalistic reporting transcends normatively

based eye-witnessing and becomes *bearing witness* when it “involves an attempt to change the witnessed reality by eliciting an affective experience that incites the audience’s action” (Pantti, 2019, p. 5). This kind of journalism is driven “by a moral purpose” and is not only focused on the facts of an event (Pantti, 2019, p. 5).

All the newspapers were instrumental in providing emotive accounts of the event and inciting their audiences’ action. This was done using stirring or provocative headlines in the reportage, the use of survivors’ testimonies, and publishing protest and critique of the SAR administration. Audience response to the reporting was to write in—to complain about the suffering that the surviving passengers had endured—and attend the memorial service of those who died and were buried at the scene of the accident.

As daily newspapers, TS, RDM, and *Eastern Province Herald* were the first newspapers to report on the accident. They had multiple reports that relayed information about the crash. All three newspapers lamented the deaths of “European” passengers but only TS and RDM mentioned the deaths and treatment of surviving African passengers. These newspapers published the names and positions of the injured and dead white passengers while providing only the numbers of injured and dead black passengers.

The ICU pressed the government to release the list of those injured and killed soon after the accident. While the organisation secured the release of the list, the WH was not yet in print and weekly newspaper UWB published a list of all African passengers who were killed and injured 10 days after the accident on 6 August 1927. The article “Mapleton Railway Disaster: List of the Killed” (UWB, 1927a) provided information including the names, surnames, pass numbers, hometowns, and hospitals that the injured were taken to after the accident. This was the first time in the coverage that black passengers were named and given recognition. Monthly newspaper WH is the only other newspaper that published and publicised the specific details of the black passengers. This newspaper published articles that bore witness to the suffering of the passengers by acting as a mouthpiece of the ICU. The ICU was vocal and present in all of the other newspaper coverage and their work, critique, and protest informed the WH’s framing of the disaster, without which “the event might have drifted into the limbo of things forgotten” (WH, 1927d, p. 4). The WH was also unique in that they directly critiqued the railway administration in their articles as opposed to the other newspapers which quoted and published the ICU’s critique but never spoke against the administration themselves.

On 28 July 1927, TS published an article in which it expressed deep regret and sympathy to the families of those who were killed in the accident. A day later, TS published articles that indicated that more could have been done to help the African passengers and limit their suffering. The newspaper revealed that coaches for white passengers were built more strongly than those that black passengers travelled in. Some of the subheadings of the reports include “deaths from exposure,” and “dying natives in the rain” (1927g). On 1 August 1927, the reportage included a section that detailed the strongly worded protest from the ICU about the conditions that African passengers were exposed to after the accident. TS (1927s, p. 8) published a telegram from the ICU’s headquarters that read: “This Union strongly protests against the callousness and brutality displayed by the railway department in conveying wounded natives in the Mapleton disaster, and demands rigid inquiry and that those responsible are dealt with.”

A similar process takes place with regards to RDM’s reportage of the accident. The newspaper’s first article appeared on 28 July. In this report, the newspaper used subheadings that include “grim rows of bodies in the

veld,” and “Natives hurled left and right” (RDM, 1927a). The newspaper also published a reader’s letter which expressed concern over the way African passengers were transported to hospitals. By 1 August, RDM had published more readers’ letters which were concerned about the cruelty experienced by African passengers and prisoners who “should not have been handcuffed during the journey” (RDM, 1927e).

The data shows that by 1 August 1927 an intricate and involved process of bearing witness had taken place. Tait (2011, p. 1233) explains that bearing witness involves journalists eliciting affect, “to move the body to participation.” This includes “hearing the appeal, being affected by it, and translating that affectedness into emotions that moralise public action” (Tait, 2011, p. 1233). The interaction between the audience and the journalists covering the story highlights a complex process of witnessing that took place. This process is underpinned by the prevalence of a public that responds. In their initial reports, the newspapers interviewed victims of the accident to relay information about their treatment. TS explained how the African passengers were not given food until they got to the hospital—12 hours after the accident—and how the journey was long and harsh. TS (1927q, p. 14) wrote:

The natives...told The Star representative that...it was raining fairly hard, and all the clothes they had on were those they were wearing at the time of the collision...what little they had on was wet and a cold, harsh wind chilled them.

The account serves as a good example of what Pantti (2019, p. 6) explains as “reconstituting and communicating other people’s experience of pain...in ways that encourage the receivers of the message to take action in response to situational or structural violence.” Such structural violence, highlighted by the reportage, was symbolic of the racism present on the railways. Van Onselen argues that railways were a site of “unacknowledged racism” which could be traced from “the functioning of the system as a whole—which gave preference to white passengers” (Van Onselen, 2019, pp. 173–174). Mbem (2018, p. 112) reflects that “railway entities cemented who belonged and who was alien to the infrastructure,” which was most visibly demonstrated through the unequal treatment of passengers but also included the use of railway employment to appease Afrikaner patronage networks (Freund, 2019). The travel experiences of the African working classes into industrial areas were characterised by “unsanitary carriages that were far below human standards,” in which railway officials viewed black migrants not as passengers but as “goods, or ‘human freight’ ” (Mbem, 2018, p. 112; Pirie, 1993, p. 729; Van Onselen, 2019, p. 7).

The publication of the experiences of African passengers, the protest from the ICU, and the subsequent criticism of the SAR illustrate the suffering of African passengers at the hands of a racist railway service. The process of bearing witness is not only in relation to the train disaster but also to the racism on the railways. The reportage of the treatment allowed the suffering to “gain entry into public knowledge and collective memory” because the journalists had “judged [it] worthy of knowing, caring [about] and remembering” (Pantti, 2019, p. 6).

This reportage played a crucial role in moving those responsible into action. By 30 July 1927, both TS and RDM had published a response by the general manager of SAR. The manager replied to criticisms on the treatment of African passengers as well as all the critiques that had been published in earlier reports. This journalistic work was so significant that by 24 August, RDM published an article in which the minister of transport said that criticisms of his department symbolised the “very worst traditions of journalism” and alleged a “misuse

of journalistic privilege” (RDM, 1927v, p. 9). The minister’s rebuttal speaks to the power that the newspapers have “of selecting and highlighting some aspects of a perceived reality” to frame the accident and provide guidance on how to interpret the event (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The framing of the accident as not just a tragic event but rather as the racialised inhumane treatment of African passengers forced public officials to account for their actions and to answer to the public.

This framing of the problem also suggests a remedy for the public to deal with the aftermath of the accident. This remedy is presented as a call to look beyond the racism of the time and acknowledge the suffering of African passengers.

5.2. Non-Racial Solidarity as a Public Response

The accident occurred in a time of burgeoning state and citizen racism, which included stringent segregation laws (see e.g., Breckenridge, 2007; Dee, 2020). For a brief moment, however, the tragedy stimulated non-racial opinion and thought pieces in newspapers and in the speeches of public officials. The newspapers played a critical role in representing the accident in a way that moved citizens to action (Chouliaraki, 2010) and elevated ideas of non-racial solidarity in the public discursive space.

Literature on catastrophic events like natural disasters or war indicates that such events can engender cooperation, while at the same time being laden with racial and class prejudice (Anthony Oliver-Smith, 2020; Zack, 2009). The “aesthetic quality of representation” of the Mapleton disaster was “inextricably linked to the moral stance toward suffering” that pushed the public towards writing letters to the editor (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 612). The media, therefore, cannot only be understood through the racist “habitus” or segregationist “hegemony” prevailing at the time. Rather, the media must be understood through the options it makes available for moral action (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 612).

Newspapers across the political and racial spectrum elevated such alternative ideas. The newspapers illustrated that African lives should be recognised as “fully human and grieveable” (Pantti, 2019, p. 6). Their representations of suffering incited a moral stance among their readers and subsequently facilitated the public’s “moral agency” through publishing the readers’ letters (Chouliaraki, 2010). While it remains unclear whether these responses were superficial or a genuine moral response, it is clear that the newspapers played an essential role in facilitating this process of reflection.

On the back of the horrendous treatment of the injured, the ICU published an article in the WH which brought the racism of the administration into sharp focus. The newspaper noted: “It is these kinds of brutal and unchristian acts of a certain class of white man of this country that have widened the breach of friendship and respect between white and black” (WH, 1927a, p. 2).

Although racism was widely exhibited and instrumentalised on the railways, the accident evinced a startling wave of co-operation. In the same article that the ICU criticised the government, they expressed thanks on behalf of the relatives of the victims: “To those European passengers and staff of the dining saloon who tendered such humane assistance, and the heroic act of the deceased driver, Milton,...we tender our sincerest thanks” (WH, 1927a, p. 2).

At Milton's funeral, he was remembered for his "self-sacrificing spirit" for averting further injury (TS, 1927w). At the ICU's protest meeting on 1 August 1927, they remarked that it was the "conduct of the European passengers that was the most consoling aspect of this catastrophe" (TS, 1927s, p. 8). Appreciation from other quarters was also cast to the "station officials and labourers," both white and black, who managed to free the injured from the train and clear the accident (RDM, 1927i).

There were numerous expressions of sympathy highlighted in the newspapers and readers' letters. In a letter to RDM (1927c, p. 10), a white Johannesburg resident wrote that "I am no native worshipper, but I do believe in common humanity." He continued that "surely a state department that can squander millions on electrification and elevators" could have provided better relief to the injured, "be they white or black" (RDM, 1927c, p. 10). Similarly, a Pretoria resident said that "my heart bleeds" for the victims of the accident and the apparent silence on the treatment of the injured was telling, given that "an ignorant native gets three months for ill-treating a horse, whereas nothing more is said in this case" (RDM, 1927d, p. 8).

RDM published a collection of readers' criticisms (RDM, 1927d, 1927g, 1927h, 1927j, 1927n) aiming to gauge public outcry over the treatment of victims. One railway worker criticised the general manager of the SAR saying he showed a "lamentable lack of knowledge of the character of the ordinary South African traveller" (RDM, 1927g, p. 8). The manager had said that it was a "moot point" to suggest that uninjured white passengers ought to prolong their own journey by allowing the injured black passengers to go first. Another resident from Johannesburg felt that "surely they could have been removed to the warmth of the waiting and tea rooms at Johannesburg station" (RDM, 1927j, p. 8). Others bemoaned that hot drinks and food were not provided to the survivors. These statements sought to undermine the prevailing segregationist logic, if only briefly. Reverend Kidwell, a Johannesburg priest, felt that the treatment of the injured reflected "great discredit on our country," and the ICU called into question the government's "reproach to civilisation" and lack of Ubuntu (TS, 1927s; WH, 1927c).

The praise of inter-racial cooperation was highlighted by WH as well as UWB. UWB published that though the blame was difficult to apportion, it was "gratifying to observe the spirit of indignation manifested by European and Native communities in the unfortunate plight of the native victims" (UWB, 1927b, p. 2). The newspaper quoted Tyamzashe, who had expressed that "death is the great leveller" (UWB, 1927b). This sentiment was the overarching feeling expressed by mourners at the consecration of the grave.

Reverend A. B. Jack of the Church Council of Johannesburg expressed that "although the people of the earth are different as to colour of skin, we have one common heart and one common need" (TS, 1927z, p. 12). The special correspondent of UWB (1927d, p. 3) wrote:

But here in the Valley of the Shadow of Death our souls were stirred, not so much by the sight of that grave of sorrow as by the humanity of those Europeans who came to pay their last tribute to our dead.

The correspondent was struck by white and black, women and children, who were standing "side by side." They felt the lonely grave would stand as an indelible "monument to the goodwill between the races" and would one day be discovered as a symbol of cooperation (UWB, 1927d, p. 3).

5.3. Naming, Recognition, and Othering in the News

Chouliaraki (2010) argues that it is important to interrogate power where media representations prioritise “certain sufferers” while “leaving others outside the scope of such engagement and action” (p. 612). According to Scott and Peña (2023), naming in journalism is a “shorthand code for differentiating between people who are worthy of personhood...and those who are viewed simply as bodies, illustrations, props, or stand-ins for a story unfolding” (pp. 209). When journalists write the first drafts of history, the choices they make when naming sources have implications about how historians understand the events and who is remembered as being important to the story. Scott and Peña (2023, pp. 209) point to the hegemonic power such exclusions may indicate, especially if such inclusions and exclusions are based on “axes of social difference.” These choices tend to signify who is part of “an ingroup, worthy of identification and who is part of an outgroup, or other” (Scott & Peña, 2023, p. 209). The act of naming, therefore, is an exercise of power.

On 29 July 1927, TS published a list of casualties, listing each of the white passengers killed and injured by name and referring to the killed and injured black passengers simply as “natives,” a collective unidentifiable mass (see Figures 8 and 9; TS, 1927c). A similar inclusion and exclusion practice is seen in RDM and *Eastern Province Herald*. They do not provide the names of the African passengers, even when quoting them in an article. Here, stark divisions appear between the liberal press and the working-class, black press over the value placed on the lives of the victims. The WH and UWB provided dignity to the black passengers by listing every single passenger killed or injured in the accident (UWB, 1927a; WH, 1927b).

Mapleton Railway Disaster

LIST OF THE KILLED.

<p>Unknown. Cabane, No. 8. Pass No. 263514 issued at Umzimkulu.</p> <p>Unknown. John Mhlunyana, Tax Receipt No. 444-356 issued Mount Fletcher.</p> <p>Moses Thomas, Pass No. 286624, Mount Frere.</p> <p>Unknown. Itbin—Nonakasha, Mount Frere.</p> <p>Unknown. Jack Manhowe, Pass No. 421042 issued Masinga.</p> <p>Till Soldier, Tax Receipt No. 129591.</p> <p>Bekunyana Charlie, care Long's Hotel, Johannesburg, P.P. No. 401632.</p> <p>Lanana Mbelana, Pass No. 205091, Mount Fletcher.</p> <p>Tweshe Gabane, Pass No. 361718, issued Umzimkulu.</p> <p>Medlali Jim, Pass No. 444122, c/o A. C. Mailes, Midland Grd. and Debris, Johannesburg.</p> <p>Bonakaliso Nkomo, Tabankulu, Pass No. 452869.</p> <p>Mdodi, Pass No. 285592, Mount Frere.</p> <p>Sotwiche, Pass No. 285532.</p> <p>John Hanga, Standerton Convict No. 227.</p> <p>Fatampoko, Pass No. 285612, Mount Frere.</p> <p>Neidani Lusikisiki, Pass No. 401965.</p> <p>Lindani, Pass No. 285620, Mount Frere.</p> <p>George Sokele, No. 5956, General Hospital, Johannesburg.</p>	<p>Magogwane Ponga (Male Pondo). Mount Ausini, Pondoland, head in- juries.</p> <p>Sani (Male Pondo), Colana, Mount Frere, concussion.</p> <p>Njinga Geabatshe (Male Zulu). Police, Pinetown, Natal, injury to right ankle.</p> <p>TRANSFERRED TO MUNICIPAL</p> <p>NATIVE HOSPITAL, VREDE- DORP.</p> <p>Xukuku (Male Pondo), Mount Frere, C.C., fractured leg, right and head injuries.</p> <p>Makokoza (Male Baca), Lusikisiki, C.C., injury left leg and right foot.</p> <p>John (Male Baca), Mount Frere, C.C., injury to ear and neck.</p> <p>Samuel (Male Msutu), Matatiele, head and right eye.</p> <p>Nongutyana (Male Pondo), Lusikisiki, eyes and head.</p> <p>Makinzi (Male Pondo), Mount Frere, lacerated foot.</p> <p>Giligile (Male Pondo), Mount Frere, injury to right foot and head.</p> <p>Motsetse (Male Msutu), Matatiele, lacerated leg.</p> <p>Pongela (Male Baca), Mount Frere, injury to head and back.</p> <p>Wetaba (Male Zulu), Masinda, Natal, head and left leg injury.</p> <p>Tom (Male Pondo), Lusikisiki, simple fracture clavicle and right ankle injury.</p> <p>Mpini (Male Zulu), Esocourt.</p>
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Figure 8. List of the killed and injured in WH. Source: WH (1927f).

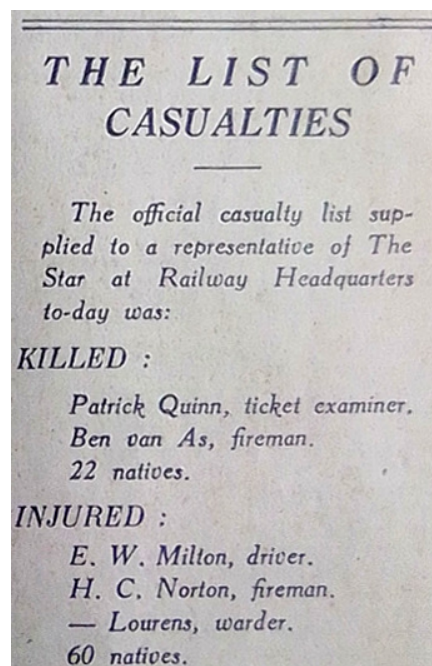


Figure 9. List of the killed and injured in TS. Source: TS (1927c).

Names alone cannot be equated to complex personhood, but they work toward enabling that construction. When they are left out of news reports and replaced with fillers such as a man or, in this case, “natives,” it obscures the audience from engaging with the person as fully human. Names are important to allow the audience to “develop symbolic and perhaps, even interpersonal relationships” (Scott & Peña, 2023, p. 210).

Such exclusions have implications for how the accident was memorialised. On the memorial stone (see Figure 10), not a single passenger has been listed, nor have any of the train operators been mentioned. In an isiZulu article in the WH, this was criticised: “Shame on you, really. The stone does not even have the names of its people” (WH, 1927e, p. 8). On the list of the dead published by the WH, there is one person listed as “unknown” who, although acknowledged, cannot truly be part of the collective memory (Hartman, 2008, p. 2). In the case of the 1949 train accident in Waterval Boven, Van Onselen (2019, p. 180) notes that “six of the victims could not be identified and, to this day, are listed simply as unknown.” He laments how such omissions construct incomplete, “more often imagined, versions of the past” (Van Onselen, 2019, p. 13). At risk of the names being forgotten and lost by unattentive government bureaucrats, it was the ICU’s WH and UWB that made public the list of those killed, those known and unknown, and allows us today to know by name those killed and injured (see the Supplementary File). Beyond simply naming those who were killed, UWB also published a poem in Isizulu entitled “Imbub’o Yase Mapleton” (The Mapleton Tragedy) in October 1927 (UWB, 1927f).



Figure 10. The memorial stone today.

6. Conclusion

This research sought to investigate the role played by the media in preserving the memory of the 1927 Mapleton train accident which took 31 lives. After consulting archival documents and conducting a content analysis of the coverage of the accident, this research was able to present a chronological history and findings related to the framing and representation of the accident and its victims. The research found that all the newspapers that covered the accident played a key role in bearing witness to the dead, the suffering of the surviving victims, and creating moral witnesses of their readers. This process enabled public criticism and outrage levelled towards the railway administration. While both white and black newspapers promoted non-racial solidarity as a public response to the treatment of the black victims, only the black and working-class press gave recognition to the personhood and human dignity of the African passengers through publishing their names and personal details. The work of the union-cum-protest movement, the ICU, played an important role in highlighting the injustice faced by black passengers through demanding an inquiry, writing editorials and publicising their identities. This research has shown that it is useful to engage with how past events have been depicted by the media. This process allows us to fill the gaps in history where records are often insufficient and memorials tell partial stories. Building histories through journalistic accounts and critically reflecting on these histories enables researchers to understand events, their social dynamics and the role journalism plays in capturing—accurately or inaccurately—those narratives. This reciprocity between journalism and history is an important part of building collective memory. We hope that this article feeds into a renewed collective memory of the disaster, as we approach 100 years since it

happened, and that it inspires thorough and conscientious journalistic work that understands its role as servants of history.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The majority of the data is freely accessible in the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria, at the Pretoria campus of the National Library of South Africa, and at the Wits Historical Papers Research Archive. Secondary sources, including books and journal articles, are available online and in libraries. The *Workers' Herald* is not available in any of the above. It is in the authors' possession in digital format.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Ethical Principles in the Portrayal of Death and Suffering: Finnish Photographers Covering the Russia–Ukraine War

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Abstract

Since the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the war has been a central interest of the Western media. Eye-witnessing is considered vital, but to what extent is what is seen on site ultimately conveyed to the public? Regarding graphic images, publishing decisions are based on reconciling news value, privacy protection, and audience protection by adhering to formal media policies, informal organisational culture, cultural conventions, audience expectations, and the proximity of the object. However, little is known about the enactment of ethical principles in crisis journalists’ work and the filtering of suffering through the journalistic process. This article investigates ethical decision-making in Finnish newsrooms from orientation to photographing and publication. Based on 26 interviews with photographers reporting from Ukraine during the Russia–Ukraine war, we ask how central ethical principles—the duty to inform and the ethics of care—are reconciled and enacted in the portrayal of death and suffering. Our analysis shows that ethical principles are weighed differently depending on the phase of the process and the genre of journalism (conflict/feature) and are compromised by practical limitations: time, money, safety, and access. While ethical responsibility is distributed in newsrooms, tensions exist regarding the portrayal of suffering. Several journalists interviewed for this study perceived the conventional limits of violence representation as being too tight, distorting the audience’s perception of war. In addition, potential bias in the portrayal of suffering in the media imaginary, resulting from limited access and the cultural and political proximity of the war, causes ethical uncertainty.

Keywords

crisis photography; journalism ethics; portrayal of suffering; Russia–Ukraine war; visual journalism

1. Introduction

While the current Russia–Ukraine war started as early as 2014, it gained wider attention after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, ending a long period of stability and peace within Europe. For the Finnish audience, the war strikes a particularly emotional chord due to Finland’s geopolitical position and its history of wars with neighbouring Russia. As with many modern conflicts, the Russia–Ukraine war has stimulated global discussions about media practices (Mortensen & Pantti, 2024), including concerns about showing dead or injured civilians in graphic detail (Farhi, 2022; Greenwood et al., 2024).

A number of studies have already been published on the textual and visual framing of the Russia–Ukraine war in news media (Khalдарова, 2021; Martikainen & Sakki, 2024; Nygren et al., 2016; Ojala & Pantti, 2017; Ojala et al., 2017; Szulich-Kałuża & Wadowski, 2024; Young & Omosun, 2024), including research on framing the dead and injured (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Nygren et al., 2016) as well as on viewer preferences in relation to graphic images (Greenwood et al., 2024). Research also exists on visual framing and visual narratives (Männistö, 2024; Pantti, 2019; Tilton & Agozzino, 2023; Yarchi, 2025) and the visual framing of death (Hamarowski & Lompe, 2024; Tschirky & Makhortykh, 2024) on social media platforms. However, little is known about the journalistic process of filtering images and portraying death and suffering, at least beyond the editorial desk where final decisions on publication are usually made.

In this article, we examine these processes in Finnish newsrooms based on 26 interviews with Finnish photographers reporting from Ukraine between 2014 and 2024. We focus on the photographers’ ethical decision-making regarding portraying death and suffering and ask how central ethical principles—the duty to inform and the ethics of care—are reconciled and enacted in the journalistic process. To get a fuller picture of the process, we also consider the role of narrative and visual frames and practical limitations (such as access) in portraying war, death, and suffering.

The representation of war, suffering, and death in the news media is a common topic in journalism research (Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Fishman, 2017; Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003), but less research exists on the journalistic processes through which these representations are produced (e.g., Fahmy, 2005; Fahmy et al., 2024). Correspondingly, while graphic images are widely discussed in journalism ethics (Dahmen, 2015), little is known about the practical enactment of ethical principles in photographers’ work (Miller & Dahmen, 2020). Building on existing research on ethical decision-making in the journalistic process (De Smaele et al., 2017; Mäenpää, 2022; Miller & Dahmen, 2020), we contribute to the discussion on ethical principles in crisis journalists’ work and the filtering of death and suffering through the journalistic process.

Decisions concerning the publication of graphic images are typically based on ethical criteria and audience preferences. The traditional question is, “If the photograph violates the principles of compassion or taste, does its social or news value outweigh the other values it violates?” (O’Brien, 1993, as cited in Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003). Journalists feel a sense of duty to inform the public, which is linked to “people’s right to know”—while simultaneously being held back by concerns related to protecting the audience from violent and/or graphic images (Fahmy et al., 2024; Mäenpää, 2022). The media mainly make publishing decisions based on news criteria (see Galtung & Ruge, 1965), but their audiences also play a part in them (Mäenpää, 2022; Young & Omosun, 2024). Although journalists act as gatekeepers, in digital news ecosystems driven by media logic, audience preferences might influence image production (Mäenpää, 2022, p. 2245). Audience expectations and

acceptance of graphic images vary depending on culture and customs (Damanhoury & Saleh, 2025, p. 142), whereas the cultural, political, and geographical proximity define a conflict's newsworthiness and coverage (Damanhoury & Saleh, 2025, p. 152; Greenwood et al., 2024).

Perlmutter and Wagner (2004) state that photographs have sociopolitical significance, as the media's representation of issues and events can activate and establish mental schemas that subsequently influence what we consider to be newsworthy, shaping our perspectives. For example, victimisation portrayed in images makes the reader engage more with the story (Zillman et al., 2001, as cited in Coleman, 2010, p. 243). Contradicting the traditional perception of news photographs' significance as evidence, Perlmutter and Wagner (2004) suggest that photographs provide "cut-out frames of a fraction of a second" (p. 104). A photograph is a narrow view that has been affected by a multitude of factors and decisions: What events are witnessed by the photographer, what pictures are taken, of what section of the reality, which ones are sent forward, and which ones get published? (Perlmutter & Wagner, 2004, p. 104).

In the context of conflict, national interests, such as the level of military involvement and public opinion in the country, further shape news coverage (Cozma, 2021; Fahmy & Kim, 2008, p. 458). News frames reflect the media's cultural and political context (Ojala & Pantti, 2017) and indicate editorial and journalistic choices to provide a desired image of a conflict (Szulich-Kałuża & Wadowski, 2024). In media coverage of the war in Ukraine, visual frames are shown to be biased and provide a clear indication of victims and aggressors (Fernández-Castrillo & Ramos, 2025; Szulich-Kałuża & Wadowski, 2024). Suffering is one frame among many (Szulich-Kałuża & Wadowski, 2024), and Young and Omosun (2024, p. 31) suggest that instead of images of suffering, the Western media publish images depicting the human cost of war to make the justification of military and financial support in the West easier. According to Greenwood et al. (2024, p. 14), audiences prefer symbolic representations of death and injury. The audiences favour showing the impact of war on the living and images that convey resilience despite loss or injury.

War photographs can generate affective engagement with the pain of others, potentially leading to emotional investment or a call for an ethical response to suffering. Audiences become witnesses to wartime adversity, which compels them to acknowledge what is happening (Midberry, 2020, p. 4419). Visuals play an essential role in depicting humanitarian crises, and news professionals recognise that images of tragedy trigger moral engagement in audiences by bearing witness (Kamal, 2025, p. 12), appealing to the audience to share responsibility for others' suffering in a way that elicits affect and moves the body into participation (Tait, 2011, p. 1233).

The media's focus on the human cost of war aligns with the "emotional turn" (Pantti, 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) in journalism in the 2010s. Unlike reporting observed facts, touching stories and personal narratives appeal to audience emotions (e.g., Midberry, 2020). Emotions have increasing significance in journalistic texts and audiences (Kotisova, 2019) and guide journalists' situational ethical considerations in crisis contexts (Stupart, 2021). The role of emotions has been strengthened in journalism studies and is recognised as part of journalistic knowledge production (Kotisova, 2025).

The Finnish news media landscape is restricted with respect to graphic images (Mäenpää, 2022). The National Press Photographers Association's and Society of Professional Journalists' ethics direct journalists to report events accurately, be respectful of the subjects, and minimise harm to the subject and the public (Council

for Mass Media in Finland, 2024; Greenwood et al., 2024). Mäenpää (2022, p. 2245) argues that publication of graphic images may be prevented by media market logic, and as a result, journalism is failing in its key responsibility of showing the world as it is—even the gruesome reality of war. Images of death and violence are used infrequently, typically only when they serve an evidential role in informing the public, as demonstrated in the coverage of the Bucha massacre in March 2022, which featured unusually graphic imagery (see Kortenieniemi, 2025). Decisions on publication are made by newsroom editors when the obligation to inform outweighs audience protection (Mäenpää, 2022, p. 2237). There is a lack of industry-wide ethical policies (Greenwood et al., 2024), and the ethical framework is often decided upon within media houses while adhering to the laws of the country (Kamal, 2025, p. 8).

2. Theory: Enacting Ethical Ideals in Journalistic Practice

Journalism balances two ethical ideals: the duty to inform and the ethics of care (Mäenpää, 2022; Miller & Dahmen, 2020). In our analysis, we build on earlier research on these ethical principles and their enactment in journalistic work. In particular, we refer to Miller and Dahmen's (2020) work on photojournalists' ethical reasoning and decision-making and their three-tier approach to care ethics, and Mäenpää's (2022) and De Smaele et al.'s (2017) works on distributed ethics in journalistic production and the selection of graphic images.

Miller and Dahmen (2020, p. 20) propose that reporting graphic events includes decision-making reasoned by the ethics of justice (informing) and the ethics of care (avoiding harm). The duty to inform relates to the ethics of justice (truth and fairness)—a non-consequentialist ethical framework that photojournalists use, for example, to justify taking and publishing graphic images—and is counterbalanced by the ethics of care—a consequentialist ethical framework oriented to minimise doing harm to their subjects (Miller & Dahmen, 2020, p. 26). Miller and Dahmen (2020) investigate the work-related ethical reasoning and decision-making of prize-winning photographers and demonstrate that photographers view their role as two-faceted: to tell the truth and to facilitate the subject's story to be heard (p. 23). While believing that images have the power to impact, the photographers' primary motivation is to document and tell the truth—limited by their duty of care (Miller & Dahmen, 2020, p. 28). However, in the photographer's decision-making, care for their subjects outweighs both the duty to inform and the responsibility to protect the audience from shocking images; their focus is directed primarily to the subject and the process of taking photographs, and only secondarily towards the audience and market logic (Miller & Dahmen, 2020; see also Mäenpää, 2022, p. 2238).

Miller and Dahmen (2020, pp. 26–28) suggest that in photojournalists' work, the ethics of care related to graphic images comprise three levels of consideration. The first level is obtaining permission from the subjects to be photographed. Obtaining permission is a continuing negotiation, including ethical evaluation that also covers the post-publication stage. The second level entails assessing situated harm and uneasiness potentially caused to the subject when taking pictures. These considerations may result in refraining from photographing or affirming permission in a sensitive situation. The third level is selecting pictures for publication. Not all taken pictures can or should be published. Thus, photographers conduct part of the ethical consideration afterwards, before sending their images to photo editors. We apply Miller and Dahmen's three-level model (obtaining permission, assessing harm, selecting pictures) to analyse Finnish photographers' reporting from Ukraine during the Russia–Ukraine war to recognise ethical frameworks and analyse their on-site implementation in journalistic practice.

Photographers' work and ethical decision-making are shaped by the collaborative dynamics of the organizational context and the media production team—in our case including the writing journalist and the local fixer as well as editors and editorial chiefs. Therefore, we place the three-level approach within a wider analytical framework depicting the journalistic process in which the photographs are produced (Figure 1). Mäenpää (2022) and De Smaele et al. (2017) emphasise the processual in portraying death and graphic images. Ethical decision-making is distributed between different actors in the journalistic field: For instance, senior editors in news outlets make decisions on which events to photograph, (local) photographers take the pictures and choose which to send forward, picture agencies select pictures according to their customers' preferences, and the media outlet makes the publication decision (Mäenpää, 2022; see also Rupar, 2020). Ethical decision-making is also dispersed within media outlets. Journalists typically make their decisions in alignment with the organisational framework; the limits of graphicness are implicitly shared and internalised by employees through the process of professional socialisation (De Smaele et al., 2017; see also Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2014; Rupar, 2020). Ethical ideals are enacted situationally and contextually, guided by the understanding of the organisation's standard practices, outlet style, perceived audience expectations, cultural and political environment, narrative context, and market logic in the media ecosystem (De Smaele et al., 2017; Mäenpää, 2022). As noted by Thomson and Greenwood (2017), photographers only have full control over about one-tenth of the interaction during photographing encounters; for instance, decisions regarding location, time, and publication format are typically negotiated between the photographer, the subject, and the broader team. The analytical framework extends the focus beyond individual photographers' ethical decision-making to include the preceding orientation and the final publication decision. These elements filter what is seen from the war and define the conditions in which journalists make their ethical decisions.

We analyse the application and enactment of different ethical frameworks—the duty to inform and ethics of care—as taking place in three phases: orientation, on-site implementation, and publication. Drawing from De Smaele et al. (2017), Mäenpää (2022), and Miller and Dahmen (2020), we approach image production as a complex professional evaluation process, as described in Figure 1. The process starts with newsrooms determining coverage and the topics of news stories (1. Orientation), followed by photographers working on site with their teams and selecting the images to send forward (2. On-site implementation), and finally the newsroom producers' decisions on which images to publish (3. Publication). In the context of On-site implementation, we apply Miller and Dahmen's three-level model to examine the enactment of different aspects of care ethics: obtaining permission, assessing harm, and selecting images. However, in our framework, "assessing harm" covers both harm caused by the photographing situation and harm caused by publication. In addition, to emphasise that much of the selection is carried out while photographing, we integrated "selecting images" in the On-site implementation phase and reframed it as "considering representation," including ethical reflection related to producing "cut-out frames of a fraction of a second" (Perlmutter & Wagner, 2004, p. 104)—that is, authentic and respectful representations of death and suffering. These adjustments were made during the analysis process.

Ethical decisions about depicting death and suffering balance the duty to inform with the responsibility to care. These duties are weighed based on the situation, available resources, and limitations. In crisis journalism, the local context and insecure working conditions also strongly influence ethical decisions (see Fahmy et al., 2024).

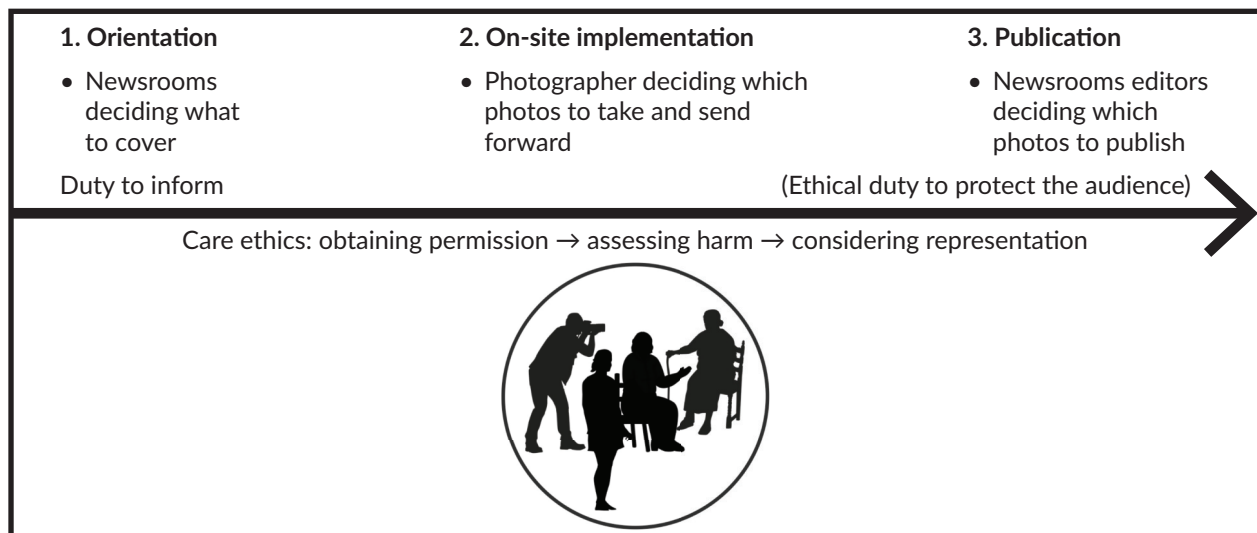


Figure 1. Analytical framework: The duty to inform and the care ethics in the image production process. Sources: Framework developed based on De Smaele et al. (2017), Mäenpää (2022), and Miller and Dahmen (2020).

3. Data, Method, and Research Ethics

The data used for this study are based on 26 interviews with Finnish photographers. The interviews are part of a larger data set consisting of 57 open-ended in-depth interviews conducted in 2023–2024 with Finnish war correspondents and photographers working in Ukraine during 2014–2024. The participants worked for Finnish broadcasting companies, news/picture agencies, tabloids, newspapers, and magazines. While concentrated, the Finnish media ecosystem is characterised by high levels of press freedom, public trust, and professional integrity (Lindén & Grönlund, 2024). Journalistic processes differ between media outlets, and they have been impacted by the ongoing process of digitalisation during the 2014–2024 timeframe covered by the data (see Lindgren, 2025). Regardless of media outlet, the photographers' work in Ukraine was marked by similar team dynamics: While some worked independently as multimedia- or photojournalists, typically they teamed up with writers and reporters, who usually led the process. Almost invariably, the journalists worked with fixers (Kotisova, 2025; Palmer, 2019) who possessed local expertise, organised practicalities, arranged and translated interviews, found protagonists, and worked as cultural mediators (Palmer, 2019).

The participants produced imagery across diverse media platforms in various forms, but for the purpose of this study, we refer to the participants as “photographers.” Most did not identify as crisis photographers, and many worked primarily with domestic news and/or portrait photography. Eight participants were women and 18 were men. A little over 65% of the participants had been assigned to work in Ukraine during the war from one to five times, 15% from six to 10 times, 8% between 11 and 15 times, and 12% had been assigned 20 times or more. Approximately 23% of the photographers had over 20 episodes of experience covering crisis events, 4% from 16 to 20 times, 11% from 11 to 15 times, 31% from six to 10 times, and 31% from one to five times. Their journalistic experience ranged from five to over 40 years, with an average of 21 years of experience. A third of the participants had worked in Ukraine for the first time after 2022, which reflects the news media's growing interest in the Russia–Ukraine war after 2022.

We conducted thematically structured in-depth interviews that lasted for approximately three hours and included topics such as perceptions of the war, working processes in Ukraine, ethics, emotions, safety, coping at work, and information and communication technology. The recorded interviews were transcribed using an AI transcriber provided by the University of Jyväskylä. After transcription, the recordings were reviewed and the transcripts were corrected, pseudonymised, and coded using the ATLAS.ti software. The initial codes were formed based on the data and refined as the analysis progressed.

The analysed data set consists of 81 text samples retrieved from parts of the interviews related to portraying death and suffering or associated ethical issues. The text samples were analysed using the template in Figure 1. We identified descriptions of how photographers apply different ethical frameworks in their decision-making and organised the samples into the corresponding process phases (Orientation, On-site implementation, and Publication). Furthermore, we applied the adjusted three-facet model of care ethics to examine the enactment of its aspects in the On-site implementation phase, which occurs in an interpersonal context. To get a better grasp of the practical limitations and the Orientation phase, in which the photographers rarely participated in initial decision-making, the analysis was complemented with observations of the whole data set (57 interviews), particularly the parts of the interviews characterising the Russian-Ukrainian war and its coverage, organisational and working practices, and the choosing of the topics of news reports.

The analysis is structured in the following three sections (Sections 4 to 6), covering the Orientation, On-site implementation, and Publication phases, respectively. On-site implementation is presented in two parts: (a) obtaining permission and avoiding harm, and (b) producing authentic and respectful representations.

Due to the sensitivity and emotional intensity of the topic, and potentially encountered trauma (Feinstein et al., 2018), the research was approved by the ethics committee of the university. The researchers were trained in the trauma-informed research approach (see Alessi & Kahn, 2023; Isobel, 2021). To protect the privacy of the research participants, limited background and contextual information is provided. The participants are referred to using AI-generated pseudonyms and the gender-inclusive pronoun “they.” With direct quotes, the type of media outlet (broadcasting, tabloid, magazine, newspaper) is mentioned. News/picture agencies are included in newspapers for privacy protection. Considering the small size of Finnish media ecosystems, directly indicating participants’ genders or media outlets would jeopardise their anonymity. To reduce the combinability of data (e.g., media publications), detailed descriptions of actual working conditions, processes, and outputs are avoided. Quotes are translated from Finnish, and some details have been changed or generalised.

4. Orientation: Driven by the Duty to Inform

The exceptional news value of the Russia–Ukraine war has resulted in intense media presence and coverage, as indicated by the number of Finnish journalists and photographers reporting from Ukraine ($n > 100$). Across media outlets, presence in Ukraine has been considered vital to witness and obtain first-hand accounts, provide trustworthy information, produce reliable and relatable news, and interpret the events for the Finnish audience:

In the history of Finland and the history of journalism, [it is] the biggest thing that has happened during my lifetime. How can such things happen in the 2020s in Europe, goddamn? (Rexo, newspaper)

Having taken the photos yourself, you can be sure they are trustworthy....Observing is important, that there is a professional journalist who observes what happens, documents it in notes, audio tapes, photographs, videos....Interviews on site, in the situation and in the moment are extremely important. You have gone on site and have first-hand knowledge. (Silo, tabloid)

The journalists' presence in Ukraine is driven by the duty to inform but limited by practical constraints and resources: safety, access, finances, and time. Journalists are obliged to ensure the safety of locals, their teams, and themselves, and newsrooms are reluctant to send their employees to risky environments. Access in Ukraine is restricted, and only reporters accredited by the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces are given permission to enter limited areas; the frontline and the border with Russia are out-of-bounds "red zones," while "yellow zones" are only accessible when accompanied by a press officer (Węglińska et al., 2024, p. 11). Not many Finnish journalists have sought to enter the yellow and red zones, and time spent in Ukraine is kept rather short, from three to 10 days, to reduce possible risks. These constraints influence how the war is covered and shape both what is witnessed on site and what is ultimately conveyed to the public.

Intensive reporting from Ukraine has resulted in "softening" the genre of war journalism and extending the category of war photography. Covering major news events, such as Russia's full-scale attack in February 2022, the liberation of Bucha in March 2022, and the breaking of the Kakhovka Dam in Zaporizhzhia in June 2023, was described as traditional conflict reporting, seeking to make sense of actual, ongoing news events. However, this kind of reactive, fast-paced crisis/news reporting has been coupled with human-interest and feature journalism focusing on the experiences of common people and seeking to create an understanding of the human costs of war. Close and diverse reporting on everyday life was considered vital to counterbalance the "strategic war game" consisting of war events, moving frontlines, and death tolls in daily news. However, maintaining the audience's interest and securing financial resources require finding new angles and shifting frames, as continuous reporting creates a fear of news fatigue (see Newman et al., 2022, 2023). Consequently, in Finnish media coverage, frames of death, destruction, and suffering have been coupled with hope, resilience, and agency:

There are some clichés that have developed during these two years. Like the crying granny. There must be something more in the story than just one crying granny. For example, a granny who is tilling a potato plot is much more descriptive than some indistinct sorrow....We must consider whether this is already too familiar. (Sivo, tabloid)

Reporting the ordinary in addition to war events resonates with the shifting practice of journalistic witnessing in crisis journalism discussed by Burchell and Fielding (2024). If meeting the obligation to inform traditionally meant mediating journalists' own observations to the audience—live or recorded—in Finnish reporting from Ukraine, the duty is being increasingly carried out by giving voice to people enduring the war and its multiple effects and bearing witness to these experiences. Here, bearing witness means communicating the accounts to the audience, providing them a way to understand what has been seen and experienced (Burchell & Fielding, 2024, pp. 134–135):

We must be at the average Joe's level. That is the meaning of the experience that people go through. Because it is unexpectedly easy to relate to when you think common people like you and me have lost everything. (Jeka, broadcasting)

The genre of war journalism/witnessing shapes the way photographers negotiate the duty to inform with care ethics. The interviewees agreed on the primacy of documenting breaking news events (see Rupar, 2020), particularly war crimes. Being the first ones on site, their photographs would bear witness for the future (Burchell & Fielding, 2024, p. 135). However, first-hand testimonies are increasingly distributed through user-generated content in social media (Chouliaraki, 2024; Chouliaraki & al-Ghazzi, 2022); journalists witness events and their impacts afterwards. Most of the interviewees had not encountered death directly in their work; instead, it was present and portrayed indirectly through the losses experienced by the protagonists. Freed from bearing witness to the original events, the photographers felt even more obliged to weight the consequences of their photographing and to select the images they produce: “We have to select, but the testimony comes from the people, social media, or the media that was first on the scene. It [the testimony] is just documenting the scenario” (Cami, broadcasting).

5. On-Site Implementation: Reconciling the Duty to Inform and the Responsibility to Care

The practical restrictions (safety, access, finances, and time) together with the genre of war journalism/witnessing are the first filters for what is seen on site, and they set the scene for ethical reconciliations. Broadly, when covering ongoing news and conflict events, photographers emphasised the straightforward documentation of events (the duty to inform) and shot more freely, leaving considerations of journalistic value and privacy for later. In contrast, when working on feature or human-interest journalism, or when covering a preplanned story, photographers placed a greater emphasis on the ethics of care. In situations involving close contact with people experiencing war, violent death, fear, suffering, grief, and potential trauma, the photographers were more likely to ask for permission to photograph, avoid capturing sensitive and graphic material, and highlight the subject's privacy. When they captured and selected pictures, they also weighed how the visuals related and added to the textual narrative of the news story.

5.1. Obtaining Permission and Assessing Harm

The first two levels of care ethics in Miller and Dahmen (2020) are obtaining permission and minimising harm caused to the subject during the shoot. In our data, obtaining permission and avoiding harm were closely interrelated, so they are discussed together, the latter including all potential harm caused to the subjects of photography during and after the photographing situation. While considered essential for justifying the act of photographing, assessing harm and permission proved complex and varied depending on the situation:

Everything in life can be photographed, even death and suffering. It is more about your own relationship with the topic. Do you have permission from the people you are surrounded by? You don't always need to ask for permission directly....It doesn't even need to be accepted. This is complicated, darn it. (Uino, newspaper)

The appropriate level of consent varies situationally and cannot easily be generalised, although the more sensitive the context, the clearer the permission needs to be. In crisis environments, journalists often work visibly, authorised by the legislated freedom to photograph in public spaces and other unrestricted areas (see Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2023, Art. 34). The task of a crisis photographer is to get as near to the event as possible (see Kamal, 2025, p. 8) without delimiting the photographing (Yero, newspaper). For a photographer, taking photographs constitutes the reason for being on site (Luma, newspaper), and in public places, consent is

based on subjects being aware that they are being photographed: “People will let you know if it’s not allowed, and we don’t push ourselves into their space. I don’t know how suffering should be photographed, but it must be; otherwise, reporting the war becomes just numbers” (Meko, tabloid).

In more intimate situations, obtaining permission may involve both verbal and nonverbal communication with the subject. Getting close to vulnerable subjects and photographing them without clearly given permission left some photographers feeling uncomfortable; one interviewee described themselves as a “bad photographer” for putting down the camera if permission was unclear (Rimo, newspaper). Some photographers had been given instructions to continue photographing despite the subject’s refusal: “It does not feel right” (Rila, magazine). In contrast, directly asking for permission provided journalists with the access and confidence to photograph situations otherwise deemed too private, such as a funeral. Sometimes permission was repeatedly reaffirmed (Velo, tabloid; Cami, broadcasting), particularly in intimate, sensitive, and emotional situations: “I always try to remind people that they can set their boundaries and tell us if they are uncomfortable....They can control the situation” (Cami, broadcasting).

A few photographers voiced their concerns that their presence may make people reveal things they otherwise might not want to share. Obtaining permission from people with trauma, in acute shock, or in an overwhelming emotional state was particularly tricky: Do these people understand what they are consenting to? While many Ukrainians were willing to share their stories and experiences, publishing photographs of sensitive circumstances required a situational evaluation (Nura, tabloid; Rimo, newspaper; Ysta, newspaper). People experiencing shock or acute trauma may relate to the journalist as a friend or a confidante rather than as a media professional publishing their personal story (Nura, tabloid). Children were considered especially vulnerable; caregivers can give permission without asking the children, who may not understand that they, too, have the right to reject the authority of a (adult) media professional (Velo, tabloid).

Images of death were considered challenging due to the lack of consent from subjects and possible harm to their loved ones, which often resulted in the editorial practice of excluding the images. Personal items were not regarded as fair game, either:

When I went closer [to a destroyed building] to take photos, I saw personal belongings, photographs and such....I had a feeling I didn’t want to show the picture, when there was someone who could be recognised....I felt like whoever it was...they also had a right to privacy, even if they were not there to stop me. (Cami, broadcasting)

Assessing emotional and psychological harm requires sensitivity and empathy towards people and their experiences. In news situations, the starting point for experienced crisis journalists is to photograph uncensored “anything at all, however horrendous” (Luma, newspaper), but this must be accompanied by respectful treatment of the subject. Being outsiders who were unfamiliar with the people and their past experiences, the photographers emphasised being discreet: “It is rude to push the camera right in their face; it makes people feel uncomfortable” (Velo, tabloid). Empathy provides access to protagonists’ experiences on an interpersonal level (Glück, 2016). Intruding on their subjects’ personal spaces (see Thomson & Greenwood, 2017, p. 632) raised questions about the justification of what they were doing; for example, whether the information could be acquired without doing harm to people already in a vulnerable position. Particularly when using a large video camera, giving space and interpreting subjects’

nonverbal communication was accentuated (Jeka, broadcasting). The appropriate approach was determined situationally, and the team's approach was adjusted:

We spent three days with an older person, as at times they were just crying, crying, crying [due to the loss of a loved one]. We had to understand it, drink tea for an hour, and just watch as they did their chores, and then we could continue, with extreme sensitivity. (Jeka, broadcasting)

The photographers adapted to sensitive situations in various ways, such as turning away from subjects, staying in the background, giving time, focusing on details (rather than the person), or putting aside the camera. Alternatively, they used their professional situational awareness to consciously foster the subject's trust and familiarise them to their presence, for instance, by snapping numerous photos, knowing that they would be of no use, in order to continue photographing in more emotional moments without seeming intrusive (Leno, newspaper).

The photographers explained that photographing dead bodies was not as emotional as seeing the grief of the living; for the dead, their suffering was already over (Luma, newspaper). However, photographing the dead in a dignified manner could be seen as a form of care. On a few occasions, reporters had to compromise their ethical perceptions, for instance when asked by the head of news to produce an Instagram story from a mass grave. A photographer pondered the ethical justification of pictures taken on an organised tour: While cruelty and violence had obviously occurred, their purposeful demonstration by Ukrainian authorities felt unnecessary, and the context had to be made visible to the audience. Describing the context, the organised tour, in the news text would not have been enough; it had to be shown in the photographs too.

In crisis circumstances, minimising harm also requires the ability to function in stressful situations and ensure both personal and team safety. Stereotypical "photographer-heroes" taking unnecessary risks were mentioned as examples of both "bad journalism" and unethical behaviour. Additionally, anonymous interviews and unrecognisable photos could be used to protect subjects' safety and privacy—dead or alive—and photographs could be edited to remove identifiers such as buildings or landforms indicating the location. Ignoring photography restrictions given by the Ukrainian authorities on, for example, military bases, industrial plants, and sites that had been targeted recently could result in military attacks and more deaths (see Shevchenko, 2024).

5.2. Producing Authentic and Respectful Representations

The third level of care ethics in Miller and Dahmen (2020) refers to selecting images to send to photo editors. Here, we include ethical considerations related to producing authentic and respectful representations of death and suffering. From this perspective, producing a considerate portrayal is a continuum of choices on what and how to photograph and which images to use for what purpose.

The participants in our study indicated that they considered journalistic photography to have high documentary value, representing reality as it is without exaggeration or sugar-coating (Fika, newspaper). To credibly fulfil a journalistic vision, the picture should be straightforward and make the message clear (Sivo, tabloid): "In that situation, we have a responsibility. We have to keep as close to the truth as possible, so you don't create something that doesn't exist. You don't make too much of it or belittle it" (Jeka, broadcasting). Simultaneously, journalistic photography must respect the privacy of the subject. Unjustified violations of

privacy when representing death and suffering were referred to as “war porn” (Luma, newspaper; Teka, tabloid) or “gluttony over grief” (Cami, broadcasting; Teka, tabloid; Sivo, tabloid; Leno, newspaper), “sensationalism” (Silo, tabloid), and “gory indulgence” (Jeka, broadcasting; Dara, newspaper). The more graphic, sensitive, and private the topic, the more symbolic presentation was preferred. Typically, death was represented from a distance or through carefully chosen details: Bloody shoes, a suitcase, or a watch provided a discrete portrayal of death, and unlike with the dead bodies, the audience could easily identify with these everyday objects.

Some photographers explicitly adopted the role of a gatekeeper, particularly those actively involved in editing videos and selecting images. Represented details were chosen based on the photographer’s overall understanding of the situation and the situational and contextual justification for showing violent or graphic images. Often, their decisions aligned with their organisation’s internalised limits of graphicness: “It is mostly our decision; I don’t remember a time I’ve needed to justify the purpose of an image. I did not capture the bloody baby strollers I saw; that crosses the line” (Jeka, broadcasting).

Images portraying loss in conflicts allow for the depiction of the human cost of war without traumatising audiences, while also giving voice to the ones who are grieving (Midberry, 2020). When the immediate threat is over, a representation of hope for the future becomes possible, despite the remaining sorrow (Burchell & Fielding, 2024, p. 145). While the human subject was often represented as a symbol of the population under attack, many photographers emphasised portraying subjects in a way that would respect their agency and gain their acceptance. The photographer’s job was to be present and depict the subject’s feelings discreetly and in the correct context, facilitating a subject’s agency and empowerment through visibility—a dynamic also identified by Miller and Dahmen (2020). However, giving a spotlight to people (ethics of care) did not necessarily contradict the willingness to show the harsh and violent implications of war: “When being in close contact with people [in Ukraine], it all becomes personally meaningful and important to show” (Ailo, broadcasting).

Photographic witnessing means balancing between documenting reality, giving voice to the protagonists, supporting the journalistic narrative, and fulfilling audience expectations. Journalists in a war context strike a balance between detachment and immersion (Kotisoa, 2025), as journalistic witnessing requires both experiencing the reality and delivering the facts (Cottle, 2013). Depicting protagonists’ subjective experiences and emotions was considered essential for a truthful portrayal of war. The photographers worked to access, capture, and mediate accurate moods, experiences, and emotions. They deployed their own emotions, embodied presence, and empathy to make the subject feel confident and enable them to show their emotions to the camera (Fika, newspaper).

Positioning the subject of photography in an authentic environment was considered important for producing genuine visual narratives. However, the sites of events were often far away, did not exist anymore, or had been renovated, or physical injuries had been healed and life had “normalised.” While past events turned easily into textual narratives, their visual presentation was considered tricky. Journalists rely on multiple witnesses and the verification of their accounts to establish credibility, whereas photographers record the informant recounting the events and capture their emotions as testimony. Capturing a subject’s gestures and facial expressions accurately and sensitively in a way that supported the story was demanding within the tight schedule determined by writing journalists and organisations’ prerequisites.

From both an ethical and a professional standpoint, the interviewees agreed that the amount of time they had to complete their work was insufficient. They stressed that journalists should be well informed and prepared to witness injuries, violence, or death, as well as to encounter people who have been traumatised. Some stories had been rejected because ethical integrity and informed consent could not be confirmed, and to encounter people with trauma and to mediate their experiences truthfully and respectfully would have required more time. Thomson and Greenwood (2017, pp. 634–635) found that photographers view time as essential for ethical and authentic representation, yet often lack control over their own use of time. Also, in our research, several photographers expressed that they lacked the time to make powerful visual journalism, commenting that capturing an authentic, respectful, and powerful image requires time, understanding, and devotion—“crawling through the crowd”, as Coro (broadcasting) described:

Making impactful war journalism means that you are ready to do, crawl, and live the everyday life to understand different sides....It is mainly understanding the wider frame and living there in particular. In my opinion, this is how good journalism is done. That we really understand in a concrete level, what we are talking about. (Coro, broadcasting).

Rimo (newspaper) stated it was all about time. Many interviewees would have preferred to stay longer to see real life and give people time to adjust; they felt they were not really able to capture and bear witness to people's experiences within the deadline-driven journalistic process.

6. Publication: Protecting the Audience From Graphic Material

In the publication phase, graphic images constitute a major ethical concern. Corpses or wounded bodies were shown only for exceptional reasons, balancing the duty to inform with audience protection on a case-by-case basis. Overall, the interviewees regarded Finnish media imagery as respectful, tasteful, and safe for the audience; it was deemed suitable to be presented in “family media,” viewed while eating breakfast or commuting to work (Luma, newspaper). However, many photographers felt that more graphic material should be published to accurately mediate the ugly realities of war:

War is boring as hell and ugly as hell; it is wrong to clean it up with decisions....Death, violence, and war, it is not like a videogame....I think it is extremely clean, the imagery....I'm not implying making a spectacle out of it....After all, a journalist does not flaunt. They put the image there, since it is justified, because it communicates the essential point. (Sivo, tabloid)

Some experienced crisis reporters produced and sent controversial material back to their newsrooms (e.g., Bari, broadcasting). Whereas editors trusted the professional and ethical quality of the photographers' work, photographers, knowing the limits of graphicness in the publication, trusted the editors to do the final filtering. On the other hand, due to these conventional limits, the photographers disclosed they were not able to present to the audience what they had witnessed on site, and this caused them both ethical and psychological distress. The interviewees considered some unconventionally graphic images as necessary and justified. For example, the prize-winning shots of a Finnish photographer, Sami Kero, of a wounded Ukrainian soldier on a field hospital's surgery table were frequently raised as capturing the pain, urgency, and critical nature of the situation. They were perceived as powerful images expressing human dignity and respect for individual privacy. Similarly, AP photos from Mariupol children's hospital in March 2022 were

perceived as iconic and compared to “Napalm Girl” by an unknown photographer in 1972 (see Mullin, 2025). This is exemplified by a participant referring to the prize-winning photograph of Irina Kalinina taken by AP photographer Evgeniy Maloletka:

It's crucial that the atrocity of war is depicted just as it is, all the horror. But if one becomes desensitised to it, does it still serve its purpose then? Or is it more important to present just that one image of a dead mother with a dead child inside them, which burns into one's memory?....It condensates the absurdity. (Velo, tabloid)

While suffering is too important a subject to take unnecessary photographs of (Sivo, tabloid), the photographers agreed that people must see war to understand its impact. Photos were assumed to affect political decision-making and public opinion; some claimed (Runi, broadcasting; Meko, tabloid) that the violent images from liberated Bucha in April 2022 impacted the way “the West” started to support Ukraine in the war. For many of the interviewees, Bucha, with its mass graves and dead civilians lying in the streets, represented a turning point where the incomparable cruelty created exceptional news value and broke the conventional limits of graphic representation while still protecting the privacy of the subjects:

It doesn't invade anyone's privacy if a photo [from a mass grave] where no one is recognisable is being published. It simply shows the cruelty and evil that have occurred. (Nura, tabloid)

The picture of the painted nails of a dead woman in Bucha, although there was some discussion about it, was a proper way to show the point. (Dovi, magazine)

The interviewees believed that ethical principles safeguard journalism from publishing harmful and unnecessary images. Accordingly, published images could be considered reliable, harmless, and justified by journalistic standards. Simultaneously, they perceived Finnish news media as responsible for the public image of the war, and that, to depict the realities of war, it is necessary to both publish graphic images and highlight the persistence of normal life amid the war. Cami (broadcasting) emphasised this by stating: “We need to give it some thought, what we leave out, what kind of reality our stories create for people!”

While it is generally acknowledged that the Finnish media omits graphic images for audience protection, the information gaps, due to cultural bias and absence of Russian representation, are often overlooked. A few photographers expressed ethical concern over partiality and bias regarding what is eventually shown in the news media. Finnish reporters work in Ukraine with local fixers, and there is no access to the Russian frontline or Russian-occupied territories. Life in the eastern parts of Ukraine remains rather invisible in the Finnish media, and the images of soldiers' lives and warfare on the frontline are predominantly determined by the Ukrainian authorities (Coro, broadcasting). It is recognised that Ukraine utilises the Western media as a form of soft power (see Männistö, 2024); even Ukrainian accreditation states that the task of foreign reporters and photographers is to report on Russian war crimes. In addition, for the Finns, the Russia–Ukraine war strikes close to home geopolitically, culturally, and historically; in the Finnish media and cultural imagination, the Russia–Ukraine war is often compared to the Winter War of 1939–1940, in which Finland fought against the Soviet Union.

The interviewees characterised the Finnish media as pro-Ukrainian. They noted that the Russia–Ukraine war is represented as clear-cut, and nuances are consciously downplayed in relation to the unjustified intrusion

into a sovereign state: “It is obvious to me that the side has been chosen. This is valid and justified, but it challenges the principle of objectivity” (Jeka, broadcasting). While perceived as justified, the situation evoked ethical concern: “Taking Ukraine’s side should not have too much effect on the reporting” (Meko, tabloid). In particular, the representation of dead soldiers raised ambiguity. As Silo (tabloid) observed: “Death is always a tragedy, and human dignity belongs to all bodies and sufferers.” However, equal representation of deceased Russian and Ukrainian soldiers was not consistently maintained:

Ukraine did not allow us [journalists] to photograph their dead or suffering soldiers. Here [in Finland], they [the media] mostly showed dead Russian soldiers, and at times, it took on a somewhat macabre tone. Whoever it is in that picture, they still deserve human dignity. (Dovi, magazine)

Bearing witness to suffering in mass media appeals to the audience through affect and emotion (Tait, 2011, p. 1233). As stated by Tait (2011, p. 1233), in this socialisation process, “empathy for the sufferer may be displaced by hatred for the perpetrator, reproducing the mechanisms of violence rather than facilitating processes of reconciliation.” The photographers were wary of the glorification of war, the militarisation of the public sphere, and a loss of sensitivity towards the human dignity of the enemy. Particularly on a personal, human level, the cost of war for Russians should be equally recognised. However, even if access to the Russian side existed, it was considered that, for example, an equal portrayal of *babushkas* grieving their lost ones would be problematic:

If we started to move in the middle [and produce more equal representations], it would be going against oneself, because the public opinion is what it is. Then we’d be [called] Russian bootlickers and whatever else, [which is ironic] considering we are those who shaped the public opinion [in the first place]. (Jeka, broadcasting)

7. Conclusions

Graphic images and decisions related to their publication have been a major topic of debate regarding both the representation of death and journalistic ethics. However, they are only one part of the processes that are involved in the portrayal of death and suffering in the media. Practical issues and news frames impact these depictions throughout the journalistic process, and major ethical choices take place as ethical principles are enacted situationally and contextually in the practice of doing journalism.

In this study, we investigated the portrayal of death and suffering in the context of the visual image production process by Finnish photographers reporting from Ukraine during the Russia–Ukraine war in 2014–2024. We adopted a processual approach to investigate how portrayals of death and suffering are filtered throughout the journalistic process, from orientation to on-site implementation and publication, and to examine how the dynamics between the duty to inform and the ethical responsibility to care play out situationally within the journalistic process (Figure 2).

In the Orientation phase, the dominant ethical principle was the duty to inform, which fuelled the presence in Ukraine and the search for new angles and frameworks to keep the audience interested. The historical, geopolitical, and cultural closeness of the Russia–Ukraine war has increased its news value, resulting in substantial coverage by the Finnish news media. It has also produced what may be described as a new

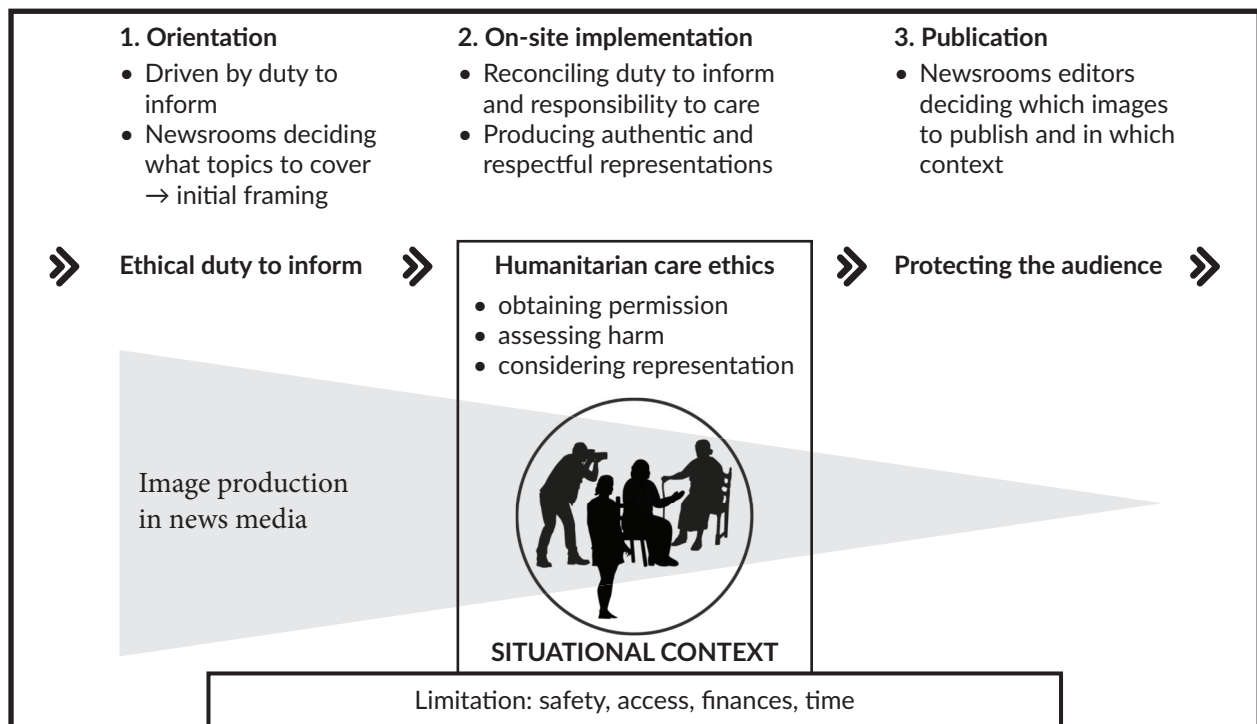


Figure 2. Ethical facets in the image production process.

generation of crisis journalists and transformed the traditional characteristics of war journalism as traditional war reporting has been accompanied with human-interest and feature journalism, covering the everyday lives of common people. Reporting is limited by safety, access, time, and financial constraints. There has been no access to the Russian side, and Ukrainian authorities have limited the media's access to, for example, military zones/hot spots and the frontline. Whereas large international news outlets and photo agencies have global reach, better access, and more resources than Finnish news media companies, Finnish journalists, who rarely directly witnessed violent or graphic scenes in the course of their work, contributed to the war reporting by interpreting and depicting the human cost of war and producing tailored content for the Finnish audience.

The dominant ethical principle during the On-site implementation phase was care ethics: obtaining permission, assessing harm to the subjects, and considering issues of representation to produce authentic and respectful images. The photographers applied various strategies to strike a balance between informing and care ethics, and two approaches emerged from the analysis. When producing news photographs in public spaces, photographers were less likely to limit their photographing, as for them, the absence of rejection was taken to imply consent. When concentrating on covering subjects' experiences, photographers emphasised obtaining and reaffirming permission, and they were also more likely to refrain from photographing in unsettling situations. On the other hand, clearly given consent enabled them to enter intimate situations. For both the news and feature photography approaches, assessing safety risks and photographing people who had been traumatised were central points of reflection, and truthful representations, including emotions, were considered vital when photographing suffering. However, truthful and sensitive representation of emotions presented substantial challenges because the images were produced in a limited timeframe and under high pressure.

In the Publication phase, the major ethical concern was graphic images. Only occasionally did the duty to inform exceed the conventional limits of protecting the audience. Even though the final decisions on publication were made by editors in the newsroom, the photographers followed the internalised cultural and organisational conventions of their news media companies in producing images. Generally, the symbolic representation of suffering was preferred, being perceived as both respectful and effective. However, some photographers did send forward graphic and violent images that they considered important. An obvious underlying tension existed between the published images and the reality of the war. Therefore, many interviewees stated that they would be willing to show more to increase public awareness of the true nature of war. Simultaneously, however, death and suffering were balanced with subjective stories on the human cost of war and the co-occurring resilience and hope evident in everyday life.

Many photographers were perplexed by the obvious partiality of the Finnish media, contradicting objectivity and impartiality as ethical principles of journalism. Limited access to the frontline and a black-and-white perception of the war can result in a biased presentation of the war, for example “humanising” Ukrainians and “dehumanising” Russians. While all human suffering and all dead soldiers and civilians should be treated with similar dignity, based on our interviews Ukrainians and Russians are not represented equally, and the recurring portrayal of Russian aggressors and Ukrainian victims has led to a one-sided portrayal of death and suffering in the Finnish news media. However, it is currently impossible to cover both sides of the war.

This study has several limitations. First, the data focused on photographers’ perspectives, leaving out, for instance, writing journalists’, local fixers’, and newsroom editors’ points of view. Including their perspectives would give a fuller picture of the journalistic process and interpersonal, team-related, situational interaction within the process. In particular, studying the context of a journalistic team is necessary to form a holistic view of the working conditions and dynamics of ethical decision-making on site. In addition, more attention could be given to differences across media outlets and distinct contextual factors, for instance the impact of gender. Heavily restricted by the primacy of protecting the privacy of participants, detailed exploration of working contexts might require a different research design. Second, the study did not explore the visual content of Finnish news media. Future studies should investigate whether analysing the visual news media content of the Russia–Ukraine war supports or challenges the results and insights of this study. Finally, further investigation should seek deeper insight into ethical decision-making concerning images and narratives of everyday life beyond suffering or death.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, they are not publicly available. Upon completion of the research project, the data will be archived at the University of Jyväskylä for restricted access.

LLMs Disclosure

The AI transcriber used in this study utilises Whisper, which is an automatic speech recognition (ASR) model developed by OpenAI, trained on a large dataset of diverse audio.

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You Have not Disappeared: Digital Mourning Spaces After a Social Media Celebrity's Self-Obituary

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Abstract

On May 5, 2022, a food blogger named Yishiji (—食纪) with over 700,000 followers on the Chinese social media platform Bilibili, posted a farewell video expressing his struggles as a gay man and his lack of attachment to the world. Shortly thereafter, it was confirmed that he had died by suicide, sparking widespread discussion across social media. Over three years later, his self-obituary continues to foster significant engagement, leading to a unique digital mourning space. Drawing on theories of obituary and digital mourning, this study analyzes the digital mourning spaces generated by self-obituaries on social media platforms through a case study of Yishiji. Employing multimodal discourse analysis and latent Dirichlet allocation thematic analysis, the research identifies four key features characterizing this emergent digital mourning space: sustained spatial content production; precise spatio-temporal dialogue, notably through the danmu feature; functional zoning of semi-open spaces; and its profound capacity to facilitate self-communication and connection among mourners. The study argues that such digital mourning spaces formed by self-obituaries are not merely extensions of traditional physical mourning rituals; rather, they constitute a novel democratic memorial institution co-constructed by the deceased's obituary, user-generated content, and the platform's algorithmic logic. This research enhances our understanding of how digital platforms transform mourning practices. It emphasizes the potential of digital mourning spaces to foster inclusive environments for expression and connection, providing valuable insights into the evolving nature of grief in the digital age.

Keywords

Bilibili; danmu; digital mourning; digital obituary; digital space; mourning; obituary; online mourning; self-obituary; social media; Yishiji

1. Introduction

Prior to his suicide, the Chinese food blogger known as Yishiji (一食纪) posted a final video on the social media platform Bilibili. In this farewell message, he reflected on his life with these poignant words:

My first half of life has been marked by failure....In comparison to my regrets, I have more apologies to offer, and more gratitude to express, but no lingering attachment to this world. Everything I possess will likewise depart with me, and that is perfectly fine, it's fine.... (Yishiji, 2022)

The farewell video, entitled “Thank You, Goodbye,” was made public through a scheduled posting feature at 10 PM on May 5, 2022. Unlike his typical food-making videos (see Figure 1), this presentation showcases a solitary scene: his meticulously organized kitchen where he generally prepares his meals. Accompanied by the instrumental piece “The Last Meal,” the video contains over four minutes of subtitles in which he articulates feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction, particularly reflecting on his disappointment with the world as a gay man. He conveys a sense of acceptance, having let go of past attachments, while extending wishes for happiness to all and encouraging viewers to savor their meals. Following the video’s release, it incited substantial discourse within social media. Remarkably, in the nearly three years since the posting of this self-obituary, users have continued to engage actively with the video’s interface. They have expressed condolences, shared personal reflections, liked and reposted content, and sent virtual gifts, indicating that the creation of diverse forms of content has not diminished with the blogger’s passing. As of May 14, 2025, the self-obituary video has garnered over 5 million views and received more than 50,000 comments. This sustained engagement offers a valuable case study for understanding the roles of self-obituaries in digital contexts and the development of digital mourning spaces.

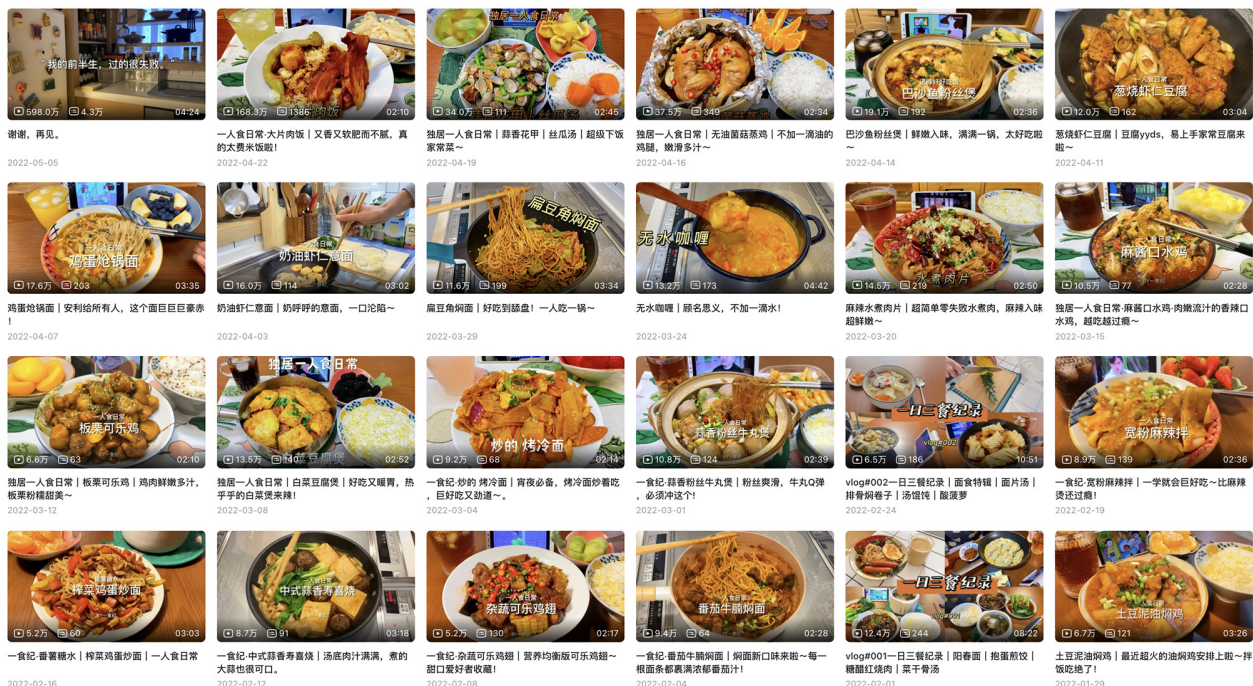


Figure 1. Screenshot of blogger Yishiji’s channel homepage on Bilibili. Source: Yishiji (n.d., retrieved September 25, 2025).

The digital mediation of death and remembrance has profoundly altered traditional mourning practices, giving rise to novel forms of posthumous self-representation and collective grieving (Doyle & Brubaker, 2023; Giaxoglou, 2020). Within this evolving landscape, the phenomenon of the self-obituary, particularly when disseminated through social media platforms, presents a compelling yet under-explored nexus of individual agency, technological affordance, and communal response (Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Moore, 2022; Wagner, 2018). Indeed, the emergence of self-obituaries provides individuals with the opportunity to script their own life stories, challenge traditional narratives, and allow for more personalized reflections on life and legacy. This shift effectively democratizes the obituary genre, enabling previously marginalized voices to be heard and their narratives to achieve a sustained symbolic presence, accomplished significantly through such discursive means. This study approaches the term “self-obituary” with critical sensitivity, recognizing that at its core, Yishiji’s video is an expression of immense pain culminating in self-harm. However, I argue that to label it solely as a suicide note is to overlook its equally significant function as a deliberate, pre-authored act of memorialization and legacy-building made possible by digital media. This dynamic, where online mourning on social media platforms can embed the digital self into the lives of mourners and challenge the norms of physical connection (Kasket, 2012), takes on a unique dimension when initiated by the deceased themselves. While existing scholarship on digital mourning has significantly advanced our understanding of online memorials (Brubaker et al., 2013; Walter et al., 2012), continuing bonds in cyberspace (Klass & Steffen, 2018), and the algorithmic shaping of grief (Robards & Lincoln, 2017), a critical gap remains concerning the specific dynamics through which a deceased individual’s own pre-scripted, self-authored farewell initiates, structures, and sustains a distinct digital mourning space via ongoing, multimodal user engagement. This case, therefore, offers a unique and crucial lens to scrutinize how such self-orchestrated digital departures not only mediate bereavement but also fundamentally reconfigure the architecture of memorialization, challenging traditional control over posthumous narratives and fostering new forms of participatory remembrance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Obituary and Self-Obituary*

Obituaries have long served as public announcements of death, functioning as a vital social mechanism for commemorating lives and reinforcing collective memory (Connerton, 1989; Fowler, 2004). Traditionally, they highlight the social and cultural capital of the deceased, acting as a public valuation of a person’s life and achievements (Perreault et al., 2025). However, the advent of the internet and social media has precipitated a significant transformation in these commemorative practices (Walter et al., 2012). Digital obituaries are unbound from the linear, non-interactive architecture of print media, allowing for richer, more dynamic forms of engagement. This digital shift has facilitated a crucial devolution of editorial gatekeeping, transferring considerable agency from institutions to individuals (Graham, 2017). Consequently, this empowers the bereaved to craft deeply personalized tributes, circumventing the status-inflected or exclusionary tendencies of legacy media and fostering a more participatory, networked form of collective remembrance (Hume & Bressers, 2010; Murrell et al., 2023).

Within this evolving digital landscape, the self-obituary emerges as a particularly potent form of posthumous self-representation. Distinct from obituaries written by family or journalists, the self-obituary grants individuals complete authorship over their final public statement (Bonsu, 2007). At its core, it is an exercise

in narrative sovereignty (Smith & Watson, 2010) driven by a desire for agency and control in shaping one's own legacy (Drought & Koenig, 2002; Kasket, 2019). This is especially pertinent for individuals who feel their unconventional lives might be misunderstood or whose identities might not fit neatly into traditional obituary templates (Srihari, 2022). Social media platforms, with affordances like multimodal content (video, text, sound) and scheduled posting, provide the ideal infrastructure for individuals to pre-author their final narratives, transforming a static final message into an enduring site of interaction and remembrance (Brubaker & Callison-Burch, 2016).

This study employs the term “self-obituary” as a necessary analytical framework that, while sensitive to the tragedy of suicide, captures how Yishiji's final video transcends the traditional suicide note. Although it contains the hallmarks of such a note, namely the expressions of unbearable psychological pain (Lester, 2010; Shneidman, 1993), its deliberate, digitally mediated construction distinguishes it in three critical ways. First, its public audience of over 700,000 followers contrasts sharply with the private address of a typical note. Second, its controlled temporality, achieved through a scheduled posthumous release, frames it as a premeditated performance of self-narration rather than an impulsive final cry (French, 2023). Third, its curated multimodality, a polished video with a specific soundtrack and visual setting, establishes it as a complete aesthetic and affective artifact designed for public consumption (Turner & Turner, 2013). These features collectively justify its analysis as a self-obituary. It is this deliberate fusion of private despair and public performance that pushes the genre into the territory of the digital self-obituary. The act of suicide communication becomes inextricably linked with an act of public memorial curation. This framework allows us to capture the video's crucial dual function: It is at once a poignant cry of despair and a final, authored statement of identity which together catalyze the formation of the unique digital mourning space at the heart of our analysis.

2.2. Social Media and Digital Mourning Space

The immutable reality of death and the human need to mourn have found new expression in the digital age. Social media platforms, initially designed for social connection and information sharing, have increasingly become significant digital mourning spaces (Lingel, 2013). They offer new ways for grieving, remembrance, and the creation of digital legacies, providing comfort and enabling individuals to manage their grief actively (Morse, 2024; Wagner, 2018). Users repurpose these platforms for funerary and memorial purposes, turning personal profiles into virtual tombstones or interactive shrines. This transformation is fundamentally underpinned by the technological affordances of social media which not only serve as communication media but also shape social interactions and cultural practices, including how users innovatively combine diverse semiotic resources for meaning-making (KhosraviNik, 2022). Key affordances facilitating practices in digital mourning spaces include: (a) accessibility and reach, transcending geographical barriers for collective condolence (Walter et al., 2012); (b) asynchronous communication, allowing grief expression at an individual's own pace (Brubaker et al., 2013; Paulus & Varga, 2015); (c) multimodal expression, enabling rich, diverse tributes through text, photos, videos, and other formats (Ai et al., 2024; Proust, 2024); (d) persistence, which creates enduring digital legacies (Brubaker & Callison-Burch, 2016); and (e) the fostering of community and social support through shared experiences and validation (DeGroot, 2014). These affordances contribute to a more democratized and universalized landscape for commemorative acts in the digital age.

When the deceased is an individual known to a wide audience primarily through mediated platforms, the grief expressed by their followers necessitates a distinct theoretical lens. This phenomenon is best understood through the framework of parasocial interaction and grief (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial relationships are the one-sided, mediated connections that audiences form with media personae. The death of such an individual can trigger genuine feelings of loss within their audience despite the lack of a reciprocal, personal relationship (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Social media environments in particular can intensify these parasocial bonds by fostering a perceived sense of intimacy and authenticity between content creators and their audiences. Therefore, the digital mourning space that emerges in such cases is not evidence of personal attachment persistence but rather a site for the collective performance of parasocial grief by a networked public. To fully understand these digital mourning practices, it is crucial to analyze the affordances of the platform itself—how technological features invite, constrain, and shape user behavior. Recent scholarship emphasizes that digital platforms are not neutral containers for grief but active agents in its ritualization. Sumiala (2021) argues that death in the digital age is performed through media rituals where technologies become tools for vernacular commemorative acts. Furthermore, as Navon and Noy (2023) suggest, a single social media page can function as a constellation of “social media sub-platforms,” each with distinct affordances and social functions. This study adopts these theoretical perspectives to analyze how the specific affordances of Bilibili, particularly its danmu feature and zoned interface, shape the performance of parasocial grief and co-create a unique memorial institution.

Bilibili, a leading Chinese video-centric social media platform highly popular with Gen Z, is distinguished by its ecosystem built around professional user-generated video which constitutes 94% of its views. It significantly influences Chinese pop culture and is consistently top-ranked by QuestMobile as a preferred app for this demographic (Bilibili, n.d.). Through interactive features such as viewing, liking, commenting, sharing, tipping, and especially its signature danmu (bullet comments), Bilibili cultivates a novel mode of video consumption and engagement, fostering a participatory online community centered on user interaction (Wang, 2022). This video-centric digital multimodal discursive space has consequently garnered significant scholarly interest, evidenced by studies such as multimodal discourse analyses of Hanfu videos (Cui, 2023) and videos by Chinese male beauty vloggers (Li & Wu, 2025). While scholarly attention to death and mourning on Bilibili is emerging, it remains limited. Existing research compares mourning remarks between virtual and human uploaders (Mou et al., 2023). However, there is a discernible gap in studies specifically investigating digital mourning spaces as distinct phenomena within this platform.

Based on existing literature, it can be asserted that both online obituaries and self-obituaries are intrinsically linked to the formation of digital mourning spaces. Digital mourning spaces coalescing around such announcements reflect a paradigm shift in contemporary memorial practices, wherein the temporal and spatial boundaries of grief are reconfigured through networked connectivity. Indeed, online obituaries and self-obituaries transcend simple death notices; they function as rich textual sites where individual lives intersect with broader social and cultural narratives. The self-obituary, in particular, affords individuals the agency to craft their final story, engage in profound self-reflection, and potentially challenge established norms. Consequently, digital mourning spaces arising from online self-obituaries possess a distinct significance, representing the deceased’s final address to the world and potentially evoking a more profound mourning response. However, research specifically addressing self-obituaries on social media and the digital mourning spaces they engender remains notably scarce. This study, therefore, investigates the digital mourning space that emerged following the timed release of Yishiji’s self-obituary on the Chinese social

media platform Bilibili. The primary research objectives are to characterize the features of the digital mourning space generated by Yishiji's self-obituary and to explore how this specific case enhances our understanding of mourning practices within contemporary social media contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data

The primary data for this research were drawn from the digital mourning space that emerged around a self-obituary video posted by Yishiji on the Bilibili social media platform. The video, entitled "Thank You, Goodbye," has a duration of 4 minutes and 24 seconds. It is accompanied by the instrumental piece "The Last Meal," composed by LIN Shengxiang, which served as part of the soundtrack for the 2017 dark comedy film *The Great Buddha+* (directed by Huang Xinyao). This film, focusing on the often-overlooked lives of lower-class individuals, encourages contemplation on the meaning of life and societal pursuits. The self-obituary video itself features Yishiji's monologue presented as on-screen text (subtitles) over a static visual of their clean kitchen, a familiar setting from their previous cooking videos. Notably, at approximately the 55-second mark, the visual transitions from color to black and white.

Utilizing multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), the dataset includes the self-obituary video, along with user-generated content such as comments, danmu, and observations of the platform's spatial and functional layout in relation to this content. Furthermore, to analyze the substantial volume of textual comments within this digital mourning space, a web scraping process was conducted on April 15, 2025, using Python. This yielded a corpus of 50,214 valid comments. These comments were subsequently analyzed using latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) to identify predominant thematic categories. It is important to acknowledge that due to privacy settings or platform limitations, the collected comments may not represent the entirety of all comments posted in response to the video.

3.2. Analytical Approaches

3.2.1. MDA

MDA is an analytical framework that extends traditional discourse analysis by examining how meaning is constructed and communicated through the orchestrated interplay of multiple semiotic modes such as linguistic text, visual images, sound, gesture, layout, and color (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; O'Halloran, 2011). This approach moves beyond a purely linguistic focus to understand how these various modes combine to create coherent and persuasive messages within specific socio-cultural contexts. MDA is significantly rooted in social semiotics, which aims to identify signs and interpret their meanings and interactions across various levels (Irimiás et al., 2024; Kress, 2009; van Leeuwen, 2021). Therefore, the social semiotics-based approach to multimodal analysis offers a uniquely valuable lens for understanding meaning-making and communication. According to van Leeuwen (2005), social semiotics scrutinizes how individuals utilize semiotic resources to produce communicative artifacts and events and subsequently interpret them within specific social contexts and practices. Multimodal social semiotics, more specifically, concentrates on the complex array of resources employed in meaning creation. It involves analyzing the detailed practices of how these resources are combined to generate meaning within communicative artifacts

and events as well as how semiotic resources enable and constrain interactions and the construction of meaning across diverse socio-cultural settings (Liu & O'Halloran, 2009).

In contemporary digital environments, particularly social media, "space and discourse are increasingly enmeshed and mutually constitutive" (McIlvenny & Noy, 2011, p. 147). Social media platforms, with their diverse semiotic tools and functionalities, empower users to innovatively employ and combine various semiotic resources for meaning-making, identity construction, and interaction. Given the significant role of digital spaces as both a resource and a precondition for social life and meaning construction therein, a social semiotics-informed MDA becomes particularly pertinent for understanding communicative phenomena on these platforms (Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018). It offers an analytical lens to investigate how various modes synergistically create meaning, thereby facilitating a deeper comprehension of cultural practices and social dynamics within digitally mediated spaces (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2024). Therefore, to address the research questions, this study adopts a social semiotic multimodal approach to investigate the digital mourning space that emerged around Yishiji's self-obituary. The analysis will primarily investigate the salient modal forms present and their intermodal relationships to characterize the digital mourning space which is understood as being constituted by the invocation of multimodal resources, technological affordances, and cultural forms of mourning. This analysis further seeks to elucidate the socio-cultural significance of the digital mourning space generated by self-obituaries and how these dynamics may reshape our perceptions of loss and memory in the digital age.

3.2.2. LDA Themes Analysis

To systematically uncover latent thematic structures within the textual comments collected from the digital mourning space, this study employed LDA, a widely recognized probabilistic topic modeling technique (Blei et al., 2003). LDA operates on the premise that documents are a mixture of underlying topics and each topic is characterized by a distinct distribution of words. By analyzing word co-occurrence patterns across a large corpus, LDA can identify these latent themes without requiring prior human annotation, making it a powerful tool for exploratory data analysis (Gründer-Fahrer et al., 2018). The analytical pipeline commenced with data acquisition followed by rigorous pre-processing. For the textual data, this involved segmentation using the Jieba library along with the removal of punctuation and stopwords to isolate substantive, content-bearing words. Subsequently, a bag-of-words representation was constructed by creating a dictionary and then a corpus from these processed texts, utilizing the gensim library in Python. A critical step in LDA modeling is determining the optimal number of topics (K). This was achieved by employing a dual-metric approach by evaluating models across a range of K values based on both perplexity and topic coherence. Perplexity assesses the model's ability to generalize to unseen data with lower scores generally indicating a better fit. Topic coherence, conversely, measures the semantic interpretability and internal consistency of the identified topics; higher coherence scores suggest that the words within a topic are more semantically related and the topic itself is more meaningful. After careful evaluation of these metrics across various K values, an optimal K of five topics was selected. This number was chosen because it offered a favorable balance, achieving a high degree of topic coherence for human interpretability while maintaining a reasonable model fit (low perplexity) and thus yielding distinct and meaningful themes. The finalized LDA model, configured with five topics, then yielded two primary outputs: (a) the characteristic keywords defining each of the five identified themes, and (b) the probability distribution of these topics across each individual comment. To further enhance the interpretability and exploration of these discovered themes,

interactive visualization was facilitated using the pyLDAvis tool. Figure 2a displays the distribution pattern of five topics within a two-dimensional semantic space, while Figure 2b shows the top 30 related terms for Topic 1.

Additionally, the study examines the top 100 comments by likes under each topic to gain insights into the representative content and expressions of different comment themes within the digital mourning space. This enriches our deep comprehension of the characteristics of this space.

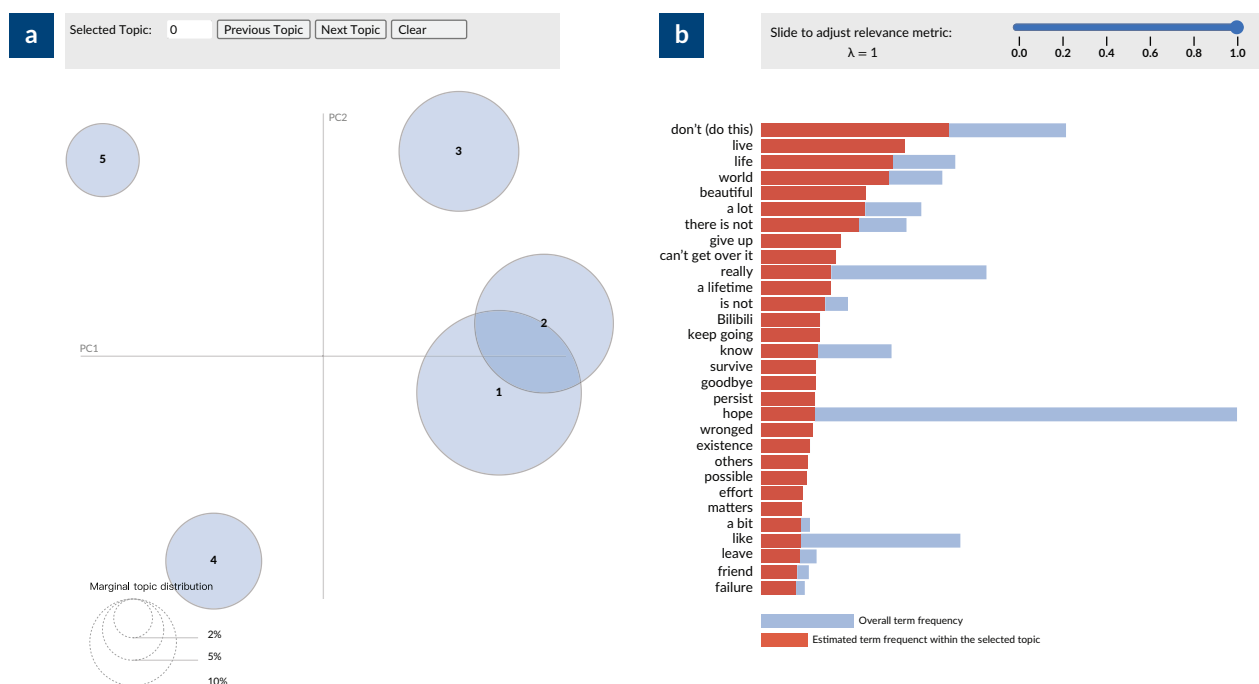


Figure 2. Topic mining and visual analysis with LDA model where (a) is the intertopic distance map (via multidimensional scaling) and (b) is the top 30 most relevant terms for Topic 1 (26% of tokens).

4. Findings

4.1. Sustained Spatial Content Production

Since Yishiji released the self-obituary video in May 2022, user interactions and content production surrounding this self-obituary have been continuously updated. In addition to shares, likes, collections, and the sending of virtual coins (a form of appreciation for videos on Bilibili), related comment data has been consistently refreshed. Figure 3 shows the temporal distribution of 50,214 valid comments collected. It is evident that the highest number of comments, totaling 43,290, occurred in May 2022, the month the self-obituary was released. Although the number of related comments sharply decreased in subsequent months, there have been relevant comments generated every month from May 2022 to April 2025, with a noticeable upward trend in comment volume after 2024. This indicates that users' mourning interactions in this digital space have persisted with the intensity of interaction fluctuating over time rather than consistently declining.

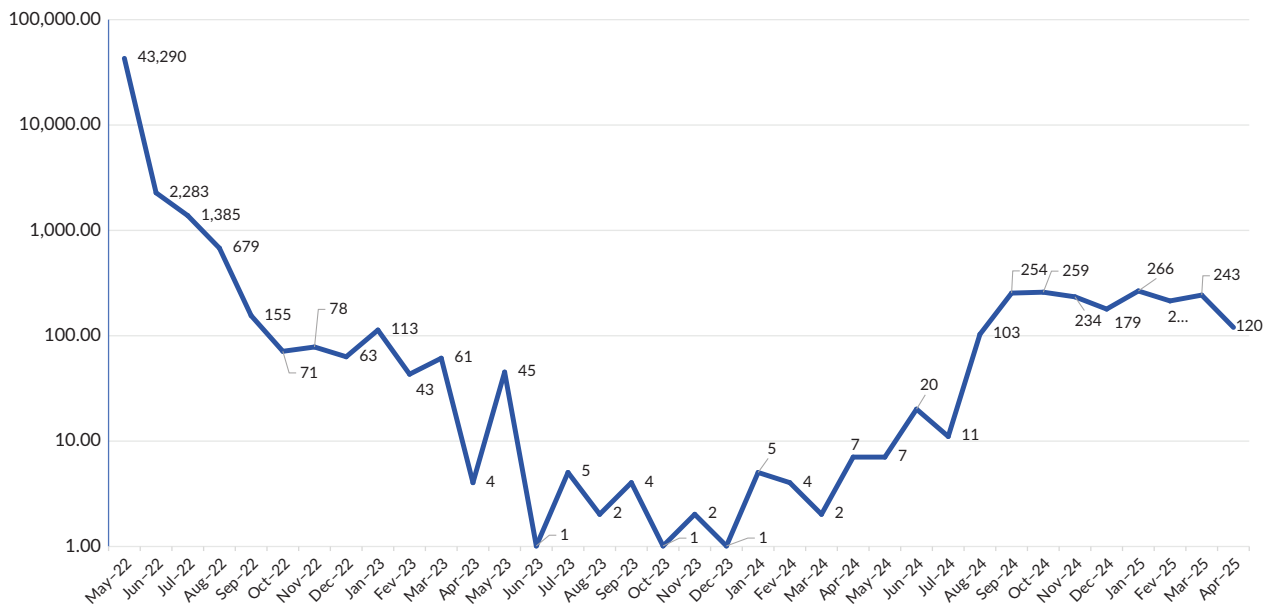


Figure 3. Temporal trends of comments.

Focusing on the types of comment content produced, the results from the LDA analysis are presented. Table 1 details the top 10 keywords for the five predominant topics identified. Through an examination of the specific comments aligned with each topic, this study has distilled five overarching themes, each directly corresponding to one of these topics.

Table 1. Top 10 terms for the five themes.

Theme	Topic number	Top 10 terms (English)	Top 10 terms (Mandarin)
Theme 1: Lamenting and mourning death	1	don't (do this); live; life; world; beautiful; a lot; there is not; give up; can't get over it; really	不要; 活着; 生活; 世界; 美好; 很多; 没有; 放弃; 想不开; 真的
Theme 2: Remembering and appreciating the deceased	2	hope; come back; like; video; thanks; miss; baby; happiness; sad; cook	希望; 回来; 喜欢; 视频; 谢谢; 想念; 宝贝; 快乐; 难过; 做饭
Theme 3: Narrating personal stories prompted by feelings	3	story; video; love; bless; feeling; my family; gay; remember; OMG; certainly	故事; 视频; 爱; 祝福; 感受; 我家; 同志 (同性恋); 记得; 啊啊啊; 一定
Theme 4: Critiquing an unsatisfactory world	4	sobbing; bad; way; unsatisfied; this kind of; situation; meaning; message; don't (do this); sorry	大哭; 坏的; 方式; 不满; 这种; 环境; 意思; 消息; 不要; 抱歉
Theme 5: The living find solace in shared resonance	5	hug; good night; Aji; brother; cuddle; safe and sound; hello; baby; Linyi; passerby	拥抱; 晚安; 阿纪; 兄弟; 抱抱; 平平安安; 你好; 宝贝; 临沂; 过客

Notes: Aji is a nickname used by users for Yishiji; Linyi is the city where Yishiji lived, located in Shandong Province, China.

The first theme identified is “lamenting and mourning death.” These comments were predominantly posted in the immediate aftermath of the self-obituary’s publication. This theme encapsulates comments expressing profound sorrow, disbelief, and regret surrounding Yishiji’s passing, reflecting the immediate emotional impact

of the self-obituary. Many commenters expressed incredulity at Yishiji's passing and attempted to dissuade him from suicide with their texts often employing numerous exclamation or question marks: "Damn! Don't! You can't! I really love your videos!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" (User A, 2022; the usernames have all been anonymized); "?? What's happening? But your cooking is super delicious!!!!" (User B, 2022); "!!! Aji, don't!!! I've liked you since you had over 10,000 followers, don't scare us, you have to be okay!!!" (User C, 2022). Furthermore, users attempted to draw the platform's attention by tagging the official Bilibili account, among other means, in an effort to intervene in Yishiji's suicide attempt and save his life. After his passing was confirmed, numerous users expressed their lamentation and mourning: "Cried for a long time. I felt your despair towards the world....I hope we never have to say goodbye" (User D, 2022); "I don't know why I'm so sad, I hope you could have lived well" (User E, 2022); "I hope that after your rebirth, you can be happy forever and be loved by everyone" (User F, 2022).

The second theme is "remembering and appreciating the deceased." Comments under this theme focus on cherishing memories of Yishiji, expressing gratitude for his life or perceived impact, and offering blessings or well wishes for Yishiji in the afterlife. For instance: "Thank you for leaving this video to let us know your final news. I like your videos, and I won't stop liking them because you're gay...I hope you can live more happily and joyfully in another world." (User G, 2022); "Thank you for the healing you brought me as a content creator. Good night, I wish you happiness in your next life." (User H, 2022); "Aji, thank you for all the warmth and touching moments you brought me. Regardless, I respect your choice..." (User I, 2022).

The third theme, "narrating personal stories prompted by feelings," highlights instances where commenters, moved by Yishiji's self-obituary, were inspired to share their own experiences, reflections, or struggles, often related to similar emotions or life situations. In response to the content of Yishiji's self-obituary, various users identified with similar identity markers or life experiences, which in turn triggered their desire to narrate their own stories. For example, such user comments often began with phrases like "I'm (I've) also":

I'm also gay. Last year, I was depressed and almost did something stupid, but then I thought about how many things in this world I haven't seen...love is love...We have to live well; the good things that will happen in the future need us to verify them ourselves. (User J, 2025)

I'm also gay. My first love was a woman five years older than me. Due to societal pressure, my parents' misunderstanding, and colleagues gossiping behind our backs, we still broke up...I also thought about ending it all.... (User K, 2022)

I've also been caught in this kind of emotion, I know that no matter how much others say, it's useless.... (User L, 2022)

I'm also very lonely, have no friends, even with four people in the dorm, I always feel out of place, like I'm isolated by the whole world. (User M, 2022)

The fourth theme is "critiquing an unsatisfactory world." This encompasses comments that extend beyond personal grief to reflect on broader societal issues, express dissatisfaction with societal pressures, or critique aspects of the world perceived as harsh or contributing to distress:

The prejudice and worldly views in this world can sometimes really make people break down....Everyone has the right to love and be loved....I also hope there are fewer people in the world who wear colored glasses (judge others). We're all human for the first time, there's no need to be so judgmental....May there be no more prejudice in the world. (User N, 2022)

In this world, it's really, really hard to be a "special" person....But this society, and even family, they won't understand you. You have to face it; your surroundings will constantly remind you that you are an outsider.... (User O, 2022)

We should all unite to build a society where all sexual orientations can coexist equally and harmoniously. We should resolutely oppose all discrimination based on sexual orientation and prevent such suicides from happening again! (User P, 2022)

The fifth theme, "the living find solace in shared resonance," captures the emergent sense of community and mutual support within the comment section. It reflects how individuals connect over shared emotions, find comfort in knowing they are not alone in their feelings, and offer encouragement and a sense of collective understanding to one another in the wake of the loss. Beyond finding resonance with experiences and emotions in Yishiji's self-obituary, users also sought resonance and interaction with other commenters in the comment section. This involved affirming others' comments or offering comfort and advice. For example, one user left a reply under another's comment stating: "Please live a little more selfishly, love yourself a little more. The world won't change for anyone..." (User Q, 2022). Others would add supplementary content or build upon fellow users' comments. Indeed, the comment section also evolved into a distinctive discussion space, where debates among users regarding views on life, death, and the world took place.

4.2. *Precise Spatio-Temporal Dialogue*

A significant finding concerning the formation and sustained engagement within Yishiji's digital mourning space is the phenomenon of precise spatio-temporal dialogue, primarily facilitated by Bilibili's distinctive danmu feature. Unlike traditional, static comment sections typically located below or adjacent to a video on social media platforms, danmu are user-generated text overlays that scroll horizontally across the video screen. These comments are precisely timed, either designated by the user or automatically synchronized, to appear at specific moments within the video playback. This feature enables viewers to inject their comments directly into the temporal and visual fabric of the video content itself. In the context of Yishiji's self-obituary, danmu allows mourners to engage in a unique form of perceived dialogue with the deceased. Viewers' danmu comments are not merely general reactions to the video as a whole; instead, they are often triggered by, and meticulously timed to coincide with, specific utterances, visual cues, or narrative segments within Yishiji's self-obituary. For instance, at precisely 0 minutes and 44 seconds into his self-obituary, Yishiji discloses his identity as a gay man and expresses his disillusionment with societal norms, stating:

I am gay.

It feels good not to have to hide anymore.

But even if I weren't,

I wouldn't get married and have children.

The secular world, life, has brought me too much unhappiness.

I don't want to bring another life to go through it all. (Yishiji, 2022)

In response to this highly personal disclosure, numerous danmu appear at this exact timestamp, with users sharing their own similar experiences, offering words of solidarity, or expressing empathy for his struggles (see Figure 4). Similarly, at the 3-minute and 59-second mark (Figure 5), as Yishiji delivers the final sentence of his self-obituary, "May you all be happy for the rest of your lives" (Yishiji, 2022), a dense wave of danmu floods the screen. These comments serve as a collective farewell from the mourners, offering reciprocal blessings, expressing their grief, and articulating their sorrow at his departure.



Figure 4. Screenshot of the danmu at 44 seconds in Yishiji's self-obituary video. Source: Yishiji (2022, retrieved on May 14, 2025).



Figure 5. Screenshot of the danmu at 3 minutes and 59 seconds in Yishiji's self-obituary video. Source: Yishiji (2022, retrieved on May 14, 2025).

These danmu, which vary in content from expressing disbelief at his passing, sharing analogous personal situations, conveying profound sadness, to offering blessings and condolences at contextually appropriate moments—appear on screen at the precise moment they become relevant for subsequent viewers. This process creates a layered and dynamic viewing experience where Yishiji's original message is continuously interwoven with the evolving, real-time reactions of the audience, fostering a powerful sense of communal grieving and interactive remembrance.

The dialogue is precise because it directly addresses the content being presented at any given moment. Mourners use danmu to “speak to” Yishiji in response to his specific words. This specificity transforms the passive act of watching into an active, responsive engagement with the nuances of Yishiji’s final message. Spatially, the danmu comments are superimposed directly onto the visual field occupied by Yishiji. This visual co-occurrence creates a powerful sense of shared space where the mourners’ words are literally alongside Yishiji’s digital presence. This juxtaposition can foster a heightened sense of immediacy and connection, as if the mourners are co-present with Yishiji in the moment of his recording, offering their thoughts and feelings directly to him. This precise spatio-temporal dialogue allows for a form of asynchronous, yet seemingly direct, interaction. While Yishiji cannot respond, the act of placing a danmu at a specific point in his narrative allows mourners to feel as if they are participating in a conversation, reacting to him in the “here and now” of his video.

4.3. Functional Zoning of Semi-Open Spaces

Further analysis of Yishiji’s self-obituary page on Bilibili reveals that the emergent digital mourning space is not a monolithic entity but is characterized by a distinct functional zoning (see Figure 6). This refers to the way different sections of the platform interface, in and around the self-obituary video, serve distinct yet interconnected functions in the mourning process. This space is aptly described as “semi-open” due to a dual characteristic: On one hand, the content of the self-obituary video itself is fixed and unalterable by users post-publication; however, mourners can continuously generate new spatial content around this immutable core text. On the other hand, while the Bilibili platform provides the overarching architectural layout and

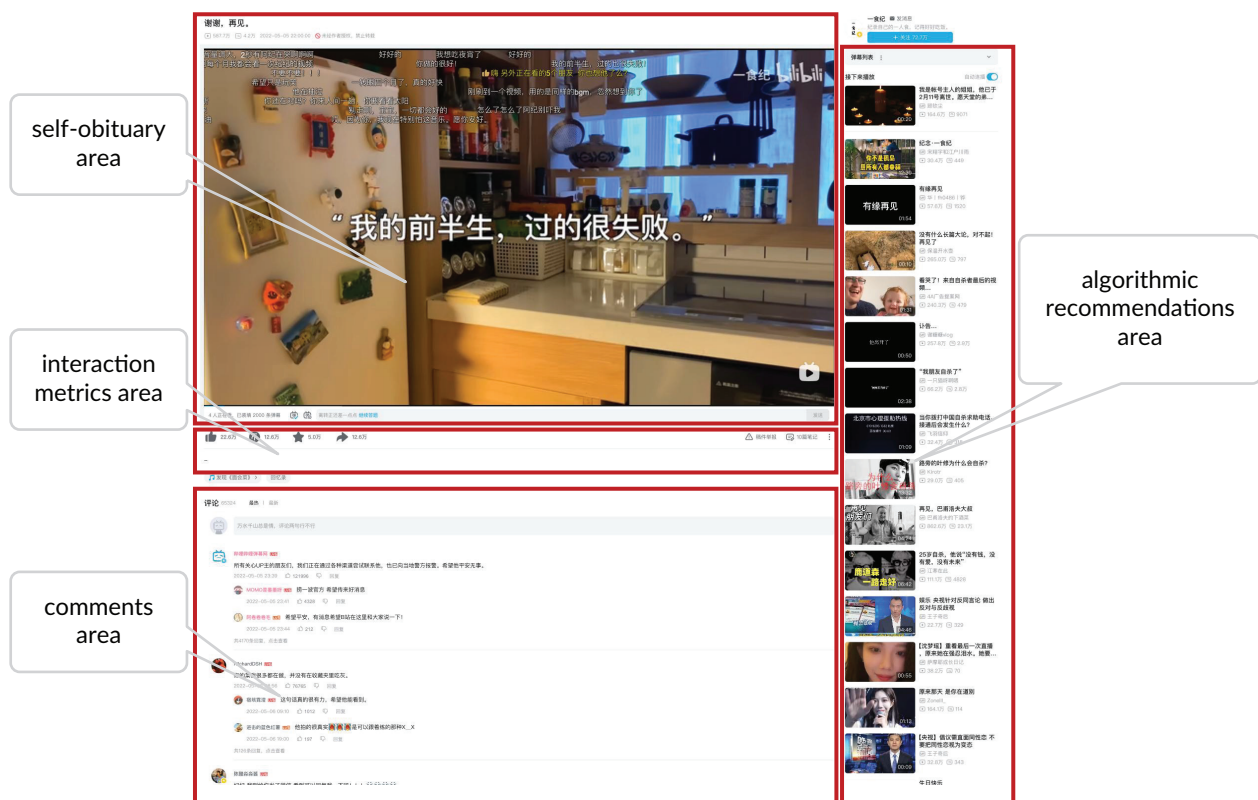


Figure 6. Screenshot of the digital mourning space. Source: Yishiji (2022, retrieved on May 14, 2025).

technological affordances, the specific content and the nature of interactions within these zones are co-created by the deceased (through the initial self-obituary), the users (mourners), and the platform's algorithmic influences.

The self-obituary area constitutes the central zone, prominently displaying the video content originally published by Yishiji and serving as the primary artifact left by the deceased. Its principal interactive affordance within the video player itself is the danmu system. As discussed previously (Section 4.2), users engage in a precise spatio-temporal dialogue here, overlaying their immediate reactions, messages of support, or expressions of grief directly onto the unfolding visual and auditory narrative of the deceased.

Directly beneath the video player lies the interaction metrics area, featuring standardized platform buttons such as "Like," "Send Virtual Coins," "Collect," and "Share." These tools allow users to perform quick, affirmative actions that signify engagement and appreciation. Such interactions not only provide visible metrics of collective sentiment but also contribute to expanding the influence and reach of the self-obituary and, consequently, the digital mourning space.

Below the video and the interaction metrics is the comment area which functions as a forum for more traditional, asynchronous textual communication. This zone facilitates longer-form expressions of grief, detailed personal narratives, tributes to Yishiji, discussions about themes raised in his video (such as LGBTQ+ struggles and mental health), and direct interactions between mourners (e.g., replies, threaded conversations). It serves as a repository for collective memory and evolving communal interpretation, often becoming a site for more deliberative and reflective mourning practices distinct from the ephemeral immediacy of danmu.

Finally, the algorithmic recommendations area, typically found on the right-hand sidebar or in a subsequent feed, represents the platform's curatorial periphery. This zone displays a list of related videos suggested by Bilibili's recommendation algorithm generated based on the content of Yishiji's video, the individual user's viewing history, and the aggregated behavior of other users who have watched this video. While this zone can extend the mourning experience by suggesting other relevant content, it also possesses the potential to divert users' attention. User interaction here is primarily passive viewing or active selection, navigating either deeper into related themes or away from the immediate mourning context.

4.4. Self-Communication and Connection

Yishiji's digital mourning space excels in facilitating deep self-communication and connection among participants primarily through the intricate interplay of multimodal semiotic resources: visual, textual, auditory, and interactive. The video serves as a powerful multimodal catalyst while his self-obituary forms a complex sign system. Mourners actively engage with these signifiers, interpreting the signifieds such as Yishiji's pain, identity struggles, and emotions. This engagement prompts critical self-reflection on their own experiences, identities, and feelings of anomie, as his narrative acts as a mirror for their internal landscapes.

Furthermore, user-generated content, such as danmu and comments, serves as a vital mechanism for symbolic articulation and self-definition. The act of externalizing internal thoughts and emotions into tangible semiotic forms—be it textual content, ideographic emojis, or indexically timed danmu—constitutes a

crucial step in self-communication. This process enables individuals to articulate, and often clarify, complex emotions, engaging in an internal dialogue as they process their reactions to Yishiji's death and its implications for their own lives. For instance, one user's poignant comment on Qingming Festival vividly exemplifies this dynamic of self-communication and the space's role as an emotional resource:

Today is Qingming, I've come to see you, Jiji. Whenever I feel despair, I revisit your Bilibili videos and the comment section. Seeing so many heartfelt comments encouraging you, reminding me of the preciousness of life, I can't help but let go of despair. I love the gentleness of your video's comment section. I'll come see you again next time, Jiji. (User R, 2022)

Here, the user not only articulates their personal struggle with despair but also chronicles their process of seeking and finding solace by engaging with Yishiji's digital legacy and the collective responses within the comment section. This act of commenting itself becomes a testament to an acknowledged aspect of their self and a means of navigating their emotional landscape.

Finally, interpersonal connection within this space emerges from the shared interpretation and application of these multimodal signs, fostering a collective semiotic repertoire. When participants recognize and utilize this shared repertoire, it cultivates a powerful sense of connection and a common social identity as mourners. Importantly, the inherent multimodality of this environment, which extends beyond textual content to include the affective dimensions of Yishiji's presentation and users' varied multimodal responses like visual floods of danmu, generates an affective attunement among individuals. This attunement, in turn, facilitates deeper emotional resonance and connection than purely textual exchanges could typically achieve.

In summary, the digital mourning space surrounding Yishiji's self-obituary transcends its function as a mere repository of messages. Through the nuanced use and interpretation of a wide array of multimodal semiotic resources, it becomes a dynamic environment where individuals engage in critical self-communication by reflecting on their own lives in light of Yishiji's and forge meaningful connections with others who share in the grief and the search for understanding. The symbolic labor performed by users in this space is central to its profound and enduring significance.

5. Discussion

Yishiji's self-obituary on Bilibili, and the digital mourning space it fostered, offer a compelling case study of an emergent memorial institution. This institution is co-constructed through the deceased's final narrative, sustained multimodal user engagement, and the platform's distinctive logics. However, its foundation lies not in personal intimacy but in parasocial relationships. The phenomenon signifies a fundamental reshaping of how grief, remembrance, and community are enacted, particularly when the deceased is a public figure with whom mourners share a mediated, yet emotionally significant, connection. What emerges is a dynamic interplay where personal testimony and collective emotional labor coalesce, creating a potent site for both self-communication and the performance of parasocial grief. Central to this evolving digital space is Yishiji's self-obituary, a multimodal declaration whose power to evoke emotion stems from both its content and presentation. Through a deliberate orchestration of visual, auditory, and textual elements, specifically the calm visual of his kitchen set against a somber melody, he presented an intimate, unmediated account of his life. The message's affective pull lies in its specific texture: a blend of raw vulnerability (his disclosure of

being gay and the resulting unhappiness) and a gentle, almost paradoxical altruism (his final wishes for others' happiness). This act of self-authoring must also be understood as a direct confrontation with societal stigmas. In challenging conventional narratives, he provided a framework that encouraged participants not only to grieve but to engage in deep introspection. This is a clear example of what Recuber (2023) describes as legacy-crafting in the digital age, where a final message becomes a means to assert control over one's own life story and have the last word. By presenting his pain with such quiet sincerity rather than anger, Yishiji created an approachable narrative that fostered connection, not just pity. This process of using his carefully crafted story to navigate their own emotions aligns with theories on how digital self-representations cultivate empathic connection and critical self-awareness (Papacharissi, 2010). The strong affective response from the community can thus be attributed not only to the tragedy itself but to a sense of solidarity with his candid, final act of self-definition.

The vitality of this digital space is sustained by the specific affordances of the Bilibili platform, most notably its danmu feature. This feature functions not merely as a comment system but as what Sumiala (2021) terms a vernacular ritual technology. Its key affordance, the precise spatio-temporal anchoring of comments, enables viewers to perform their grief collectively and in real-time response to Yishiji's message. This process transforms a solitary viewing experience into a layered, participatory media ritual where each comment contributes to an evolving tapestry of collective grief and remembrance. This technologically enabled performance generates two crucial outcomes. First, it creates a profound sense of asynchronous co-presence: New viewers are not only watching Yishiji's video but are also witnessing and participating in an ongoing, layered conversation with past mourners. This starkly contrasts with the detached nature of static comment sections (Wang, 2022). Second, this shared, moment-to-moment engagement cultivates a powerful affective attunement among participants (dos Santos, 2022), fostering a sense of *communitas*. Therefore, the precision of this spatio-temporal dialogue is a critical mechanism that both constructs and sustains the affective intensity of the space, allowing individuals to process their parasocial grief by "interacting" simultaneously with Yishiji's testimony and the like-minded community anchored to his narrative.

This dynamic is further nuanced by the platform's architecture which is best understood not as a single page but as a constellation of interconnected "social media sub-platforms" (Navon & Noy, 2023). While Yishiji's self-obituary video forms an immutable core, the surrounding digital territories—including the danmu overlay, the comment section, interaction metrics, and algorithmic recommendations—function as distinct sub-platforms. Each possesses its own affordances and social logics perpetually reconfigured by user activity and platform governance. This "semi-open" architecture, reminiscent of Margry's (2016) "performative memorials," positions users as active co-creators of the memorial. However, their agency is not absolute; it operates within the structures and algorithmic influences defined by the platform (Gillespie, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013), highlighting the complex interplay between user participation and platform control. Crucially, this structured environment serves a vital social function. It provides distinct spaces for varied forms of emotional articulation from immediate, ritualized reactions in the danmu to more deliberative narratives in the comments. This process enables the formation of a shared symbolic repertoire, which reinforces a collective identity among mourners and validates individual grief within a supportive, networked framework.

Viewed holistically, Yishiji's digital mourning space exemplifies a novel memorial institution characterized by its participatory nature, multimodal richness, and profound technological mediation. It contributes to a

democratization of memorialization by providing a platform for individuals, including those from marginalized communities, to author their own final narratives and legacies. This process contests traditional power dynamics in commemorative practices, allowing for more nuanced, personal, and even critical reflections on life and society to emerge and be collectively navigated. The sustained engagement, notably facilitated by features like danmu, transforms the self-obituary from a static artifact into a dynamic site of continuing bonds (Klass & Steffen, 2018) where the deceased remains an active presence and the community of mourners finds solace, shared understanding, and a space for ongoing dialogue.

Such digital mourning spaces carry considerable implications. They reshape perceptions of loss by rendering grief more visible, public, and collectively experienced, potentially destigmatizing open expressions of sorrow. They also establish social media platforms as integral infrastructures for contemporary bereavement, their specific affordances and algorithmic logics subtly yet powerfully shaping how individuals and groups remember, mourn, and connect. This case, therefore, calls for sustained critical inquiry into the evolving dynamics of digital communication, the socio-technical co-construction of memory, and the ethical considerations inherent in these emergent forms of collective grieving and online memorialization.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Yishiji's digital mourning space on Bilibili represents a novel memorial institution distinct from mere extensions of traditional bereavement. It is co-constructed through the interplay of his poignant self-narration, sustained multimodal user engagement (notably through danmu and thematic comments), and the platform's inherent affordances. The space facilitates profound self-communication and fosters a palpable sense of "communitas" among participants via shared semiotic practices. Its significance lies in democratizing memorialization, particularly for marginalized voices like Yishiji, thereby challenging conventional commemorative narratives and reshaping understandings of loss and memory in digital contexts. This research thus contributes to digital sociology and media studies by illuminating the evolving role of social media in contemporary mourning and collective remembrance.

This research concludes that the digital mourning space surrounding Yishiji's self-obituary on Bilibili represents a novel and dynamic memorial institution, co-constructed through the interplay of his poignant self-narration, sustained multimodal user engagement, and the platform's distinct affordances. Key findings demonstrate how diverse user-generated content (characterized by thematic expressions of grief, remembrance, critique, and shared experience) transforms the self-obituary into a living archive. This process is significantly enhanced by platform-specific features like danmu, which enable precise spatio-temporal dialogues, fostering a unique sense of connection and perceived interaction. Furthermore, the functional zoning of the platform interface, alongside the rich interplay of multimodal semiotics, creates an environment conducive to profound self-communication and the forging of a strong collective identity, or "communitas," among mourners. Moreover, this study demonstrates a robust and replicable methodological framework. By integrating MDA with computational methods like LDA, it offers a practical approach for analyzing complex, user-generated digital mourning phenomena, providing a clear blueprint for future research and demonstrating the utility of such integrated programs in studying digital cultures. Ultimately, this study elucidates how such digital spaces not only facilitate innovative forms of mourning and continuing bonds but also democratize memorialization, offering a potent platform for individuals, especially those from marginalized communities like Yishiji, to author their final narratives. This underscores the evolving role of

social media in shaping contemporary bereavement practices and the societal understanding of loss, memory, and collective grieving in the digital age.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data analyzed in this study were collected from the publicly accessible social media platform, Bilibili.

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used GPT-4 for the purpose of grammar checking and language polishing.

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Cut-Off Low (DANA) in Valencia: Visual Representation of Death and Grief in Photojournalism

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Abstract

This article examines front-page images from a selection of newspapers portraying the loss of life, grief, and destruction caused by the cut-off low that hit the Valencian community, Spain, on 29 October 2024. This climate-related disaster was the first national catastrophe to take place since Covid-19 and resulted in at least 237 fatalities, leaving a devastated social and physical landscape. The research analyses images from a selection of regional, national, and international newspapers in the first few weeks following this disaster, examining graphic portrayals of the dead, the recovery of bodies, scenes of people in grief, and other unsettling images to explore possible underlying narratives, biases, and absences. The framework follows previous research on images of the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to ethics and the current context of instant image sharing, the effects of globalization, and the contemporary practices connected to the visibilization of death which vary depending on the nature of the crisis and the relationship to those affected. This article aims to contribute to broader discussions on the ethics of visual representation and the construction of meaning in times of crisis.

Keywords

climate-related disaster; death; flood; grief; news images; newspapers; photojournalism; Spain

1. Introduction

On 29 October 2024, several parts of Spain, especially areas of the Valencian community, were struck by an extreme, catastrophic weather event caused by an “isolated depression at high levels” (DANA, for its Spanish acronym *depresión aislada en niveles altos*), a type of cut-off low-pressure weather system. Although frequent

in the region, the DANAs have become more frequent and intense due to climate change (Climate Central, 2024; Faranda & Álvarez-Castro et al., 2024; World Weather Attribution, 2024).

This climate-related disaster was the first large-scale catastrophe to hit Spain since the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the official website of the Spanish government (La Moncloa, 2025), it caused at least 237 fatalities (including 229 victims in Valencian community, seven in Castilla-La Mancha, and one in Andalucía) and left a devastated social and physical landscape. The DANA brought torrential rain, overflowing rivers, wide-scale flooding, and overwhelmed social and structural support, making it one of the deadliest meteorological events in the country's recent history.

Despite the existence of official alerts, institutional response mechanisms failed to activate as expected. The reasons for this apparent breakdown remain under investigation at both political and judicial levels. On 23 October, the Spanish State Meteorological Agency had reported that the DANA would hit the Mediterranean coast the following week. On the afternoon of 28 October, the University of Valencia, like many other institutions, cancelled activities for the following day due to the adverse weather forecast. On the morning of 29 October, the Spanish State Meteorological Agency issued a red alert for heavy rainfall in the inland areas of Valencia. At midday, the Júcar Hydrographic Confederation (Confederación Hidrográfica del Júcar) warned of abnormally high water levels in rivers and ravines in the south of the province after which the rivers began to overflow and the Valencian government's Emergency Coordination Centre triggered a hydrological warning. Although a level two emergency flood plan had been decreed throughout the province of Valencia, civil protection alerts were only sent to residents' mobile phones by around 8:10 p.m., when rivers and ravines had already overflowed into different towns. The flooding resulted in hundreds of deaths, destruction of infrastructure, and a collapse in services, supplies, and support, sparking a wave of national solidarity with Spaniards arriving in large numbers to volunteer their help. The exchange of accusations between central and regional governments regarding management failures, shortcomings in the public warning system, and the lack of preventive measures gave the disaster additional political significance, intensified by the fact that the Spanish government is currently led by the social democrat Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, while the Valencian government is led by the conservative Partido Popular.

During this time, hundreds of local, regional, national, and international media outlets covered the disaster. Spanish media reporting initially emphasized the scale of the tragedy, human losses, and personal stories, but soon shifted alternately towards political criticism, scrutiny of institutional decisions, and accounts of solidarity. Images played a key role in spreading the story worldwide with the terrifying scale of destruction visually represented in international media through striking images of piled-up cars; on social media, accounts circulated citizen-recorded videos of people, cars, and belongings swept away by the water.

This article aims to explore ethical aspects of representation of crisis and disaster and the existence of possible bias in the creation and selection of visual narratives in news media through an analysis of front-page images which appeared on the front pages of the print editions among a selection of local, national, and international newspapers portraying the loss of life, grief, and destruction caused by the DANA in the Valencian community. The article is built on previous studies and discussions on the ethics of representation and the construction of meaning through press photography, following several debates raised by images depicting the Covid-19 pandemic in the Spanish media (Morcate & Pardo, 2022; Pardo & Morcate, 2022).

2. Theoretical Framework

The massive floods caused by the DANA and its aftermath were captured in a series of dramatic photographs depicting everything from washed-out bridges to thousands of vehicles piled up, collapsed car parks, entire neighbourhoods and towns flooded with water and mud, blocked roads, destroyed infrastructure, as well as rescue operations and the massive influx of volunteers to help out. These images echoed photographs taken during the Covid-19 pandemic, the eerily abandoned roads of the pandemic versus the impassible streets of the floods, piled up with the wreckages of hundreds of cars; people wearing face masks and personal protective equipment while disinfecting versus cleaning up rubble. To date, limited scholarship exists on photographic representations of victims and those affected by these kinds of non-conflict crisis events. In this context, this research explores the media's role in the construction of narratives around the DANA and its victims. This kind of approach makes it possible to examine differences and unique aspects in the representation of death, grief, and destruction in particular contexts, such as natural disasters and climate change, while also identifying specific visual resources.

2.1. *Death and Grief in Mass Media*

The way in which death and grief are visually represented has changed since the earliest uses of photography in the 19th century. In the early days, images of death, such as postmortem and funeral photographs, that had a memorial function within the intimate or family contexts (Morcate & Pardo, 2019; Ruby, 1995).

However, profound shifts in the cultural, political, and technological context, along with changing attitudes towards death and grief, have influenced the kinds of images used and how they are deployed in this context (Walter, 2015). These days, explicit images of death are rare in family archives, although certain practices, such as those related to perinatal loss (Ramirez et al., 2019), are becoming more common. In the public sphere, such images tend to be limited to coverage on state funerals or funerals of prominent public figures (Sumiala, 2013), as seen after the recent death of Pope Francis.

There is ongoing discussion about how death is represented in the media and there are notable differences in how natural and violent deaths are portrayed. However, most scholars agree that images of death, especially explicit ones, scarcely appear (Aaron, 2014; Hanusch, 2008, 2010, 2013; Taylor, 2000; Walter et al., 1995). As John Taylor (2000, p. 130) points out:

For the most part, the press errs on the side of caution in depicting horrible but newsworthy events. It is careful to write more detail than it dares to show. When the press decides to picture dead bodies, the imagery tends (with notable exceptions) to be restrained. Newspapers do not disgust audiences for the sake of it.

However, the emergence of the internet and social media, along with the proliferation of images generated and shared on digital platforms, has made analysing these trends more complex. While the visibility of death online has increased, linked to practices of memorialisation and tribute (Morcate & Pardo, 2019), there remains a notable tendency in the traditional Western media to shield images of deceased individuals who, as mentioned by Sontag (2003), are considered “our dead.” Both Sontag (2003) and Moeller (1999) have noted a tendency to depict grief and death when culturally distant while special care is given to victims who seem to be closer.

Sontag (2003) raises the question of whether images affect us more when they depict “our dead,” stressing that such images are not the same as those of others’ dead, since they would be even more difficult to confront and accept.

These concepts should be considered more critically in the context of Spanish media’s representations of death and the corpse, not only in relation to natural disasters but also to acts of mass violence. Spain’s recent history is marked by numerous terrorist attacks perpetrated by ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna or “Basque Homeland and Liberty” in the Basque language) between 1968 and 2010, resulting in continued, mainstream publication of photojournalistic representations of death and violence in domestic locations (Morera Hernández, 2021; Parejo Jiménez, 2008). Parejo Jiménez’s (2008) analysis of representations of the corpse and violence during the ETA years shows a distinct transformation over time, starting with press images in which the violence of the attacks was *not* explicitly shown under the Franco dictatorship due to strong state censorship. After the death of the dictator, a period marked by democratic transition and freedom of the press started. Here, the corpse and violence were displayed more literally and graphically. By the 1990s, incidents such as the murder of Miguel Ángel Blanco (a young Partido Popular councillor) in 1997, which received unprecedented media coverage and generated mass social revulsion, marked a break in the representation of violence and death, prompting a photojournalistic approach in which images of memorialization and protest prevail over portrayals of the dying or the dead body.

The presence of images of dead bodies as part of media coverage of other high-profile national crises in Spain would continue to be very limited after the 2000s. In this regard, some notable exceptions such as the image taken by Pablo Torres after the terrorist attacks on the Madrid trains on March 11, 2004, and published by *El País*, showing several injured people and an amputated limb, or the more recent image taken in 2020 by Alberto di Lolli, published by *El Mundo*, showing a person (with the face pixelated) who had died from Covid-19 were the subject of controversy and analysis (Fontcuberta, 2010; Morcate & Pardo, 2022).

2.2. Visual Representation of Climate Change and Natural Disasters

The consequences of historic catastrophes and natural disasters have been portrayed by photographers in diverse ways. Some of the earliest examples include: images of the 1871 typhoon in Kobe, Japan, captured by Felice Beato, best known as one of the first war photographers; pictures of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake taken by Edith Irvine, a young photographer who happened to arrive at the city a few hours after the event; and footage of the 1908 Messina earthquake in Italy by Luca Comerio, a pioneer of the Italian film industry. Over the course of the 20th century, photojournalism saw these kinds of images become more widely disseminated through the press (Frizot, 1998) and photographs began to raise awareness of mass disaster events among the general public, shaping people’s perceptions of their severity, magnitude, and impact.

The visual treatment of natural disasters differs from that of other violent or traumatic events such as wars, attacks, and murders (Moeller, 1999; Taylor, 1998) and uses specific visual narratives and tropes that merit a separate analysis. Using historical and contemporary examples from Japan, Morse and Havinga (2015), for example, show a longstanding tradition of portraying natural disasters by focusing on their impact on the land, the destruction of human-made structures, and the scale of the tragedy, establishing a more symbolic narrative that makes it easier to avoid depicting victims and the deceased. Despite the number of large-scale natural disasters that have occurred in the 21st century, including the cyclone in Mozambique in 2000, the

Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, and the Japanese tsunami in 2011 to name a few, academic studies that have systematically analysed the photojournalistic visual coverage of specific cases have been relatively limited. Prominent scholarship includes: Fahmy et al.'s (2007) comparison of front-page photographic coverage of hurricane Katrina disaster by US newspapers versus images distributed by international newswires; Hanusch (2012) looked at photographic coverage of death in the wake of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, examining press accounts from 15 countries with the aim of identifying differences and possible influences such as religious backgrounds; Thomson (2021) analysed different national and international photojournalistic approaches on front pages depicting the Australian bushfire season between 2019–2020.

Society's growing awareness of climate change means that photojournalistic representations of certain natural disasters can no longer be understood solely as isolated, inevitable natural events but must also be seen, at least in part, as consequences of political inaction and the unchecked consumption fostered by capitalist systems. This more complex perspective influences how photojournalists approach such events visually but also extends to other agents involved in photography, such as photo editors and press photo competition juries. An example of this trend is the notable presence of award-winning images of natural disasters and climate change in recent editions of the annual World Press Photo Contest (World Press Photo, 2025) for photojournalism and documentary photography, which reflects growing interest in their coverage. For example, the 2024 Southeast Asia and Oceania Singles category was won by Eddie Jim for his photograph "Fighting, Not Sinking" which depicted the unstoppable sea level rise on Kioa Island, Fiji, while Southeast Asia and Oceania Open Format winner, "A Lost Place" by Aletheia Casey, portrayed the Australian wildfires. These two examples were followed in 2025 by the World Press Photo of the Year finalist "Droughts in the Amazon" by Musuk Nolte, "Aircraft on Flooded Tarmac" by Anselmo Cunha in the South America Singles category, and "Brazil's Worst-Ever Floods" by Amanda Maciel Perobelli in the South America Stories category, the latter two portraying the worst flooding in the history of Rio Grande do Sul.

In addition to more traditional visual approaches such as inhospitable landscapes (deserted, flooded, burned, with damage and debris) resulting from natural disasters or climate change, there is a growing focus on individuals within images of mass disaster events which raises questions about how to approach them and the roles they represent, whether as "victims, villains, or changemakers" (Nurmis, 2021, p. 174). Coverage of natural disasters—which are, by definition, unforeseen—has the added complexity of how to portray victims, particularly corpses, when fatalities are involved. In this regard, it is essential to analyse photojournalistic images that directly convey the presence of death and grief through the visibilisation of dead bodies, coffins, funerals, or grieving individuals, as well as the use of other visual elements that symbolize or replace more graphic images of death while also portraying the devastation and impact on the land and resources.

2.3. Photojournalistic Approaches in Other Recent Crises

The 21st century has already seen a number of mass disaster crises, the largest of which is arguably the Covid-19 pandemic which, as Maddrell (2020) explains, helped to produce "new geographies of death" including having a major impact on Spanish society and media. An investigation of almost 9,000 images published in Spanish newspapers during the first lockdown (Pardo & Morcate, 2022) reached several key conclusions. On the one hand, disease and death were virtually invisible during the first lockdown (from the first declaration of a state of emergency in Spain, on 14 March 2020, to the de-escalation plan adopted from

28 April 2020). Explicit images in the three newspapers analysed—*El País*, *El Mundo*, and *La Vanguardia*—were rare, in line with the findings of this research. Even when deaths were occurring on a daily basis, only 1.8% of press images depicted death or grief while just one image of a clearly visible corpse (with a pixelated face) was published on the front page during the period analysed. Meanwhile, there was a marked overrepresentation of positive and/or everyday aspects, such as scenes of teleworking, children studying at home, people clapping on balconies, and empty streets. This created a “positive” yet metaphorical visual narrative which did not reflect the severity of the health crisis by failing to include images that accurately reflected the situation lived in nursing homes, funeral homes, and hospitals. These images contrasted with the headlines sharing alarming figures of deaths and contagions which contributed to a visual narrative that minimized the seriousness of the health crisis.

Scolari (2020) suggests that the narratives and visual metaphors employed during the first lockdown in Spain were designed to reassure the public and make sense of the situation by simplifying the chaos and reducing the uncertainty. This gave rise to a visual narrative that could be described as “sterile” with images that avoided direct depictions of suffering, pain, and death.

It should be noted that, for many audiences, crises only exist if they appear in the media (Joye, 2010, p. 593). This, coupled with the fact that events are communicated both by their absence and by their presence (Richardson, 2007, p. 93), reminds us that what is omitted or excluded also has meaning and contributes to the construction of the narrative. Joye (2010) highlights the importance of the underlying political and ideological implications of absent images or news.

To understand the connotations and meanings of images of death, however, it is necessary to situate them within the cultural context in which they were produced and circulated (Campbell, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2010). In this line, Chouliaraki (2010) introduces the notion of the “regime of pity” linked to nationalist discourse and the way the visibility of death is culturally managed and often sublimated. Chouliaraki and Vestergaard (2022) also analyze how images of people-in-need mobilize emotion (empathy or indignation), catalyzing communities of feeling.

2.4. On Ethics and Visual Representation of Suffering and Death

The ethical and strategic considerations in relation to the explicit visual representation of issues such as violence, suffering, and death, especially in times of crisis, are far from straightforward. Complex issues such as the limits of representation (Butler, 2007a, 2007b; Grønstad & Gustafsson, 2012; Sontag, 2003; Tagg, 1988; Zelizer, 2010) and the effects of overexposure to violence or suffering (Moeller, 1999) must be addressed, alongside the political implications (Azoulay, 2008; Linfield, 2010). As a result, numerous debates remain ongoing among both practitioners and theorists (Morcate & Pardo, 2022).

Some images of suffering and violent death are extremely raw and explicit and, in certain cases, challenge the ethical boundaries of photojournalism in particular and visual representation more generally (Tagg, 1988), even when they are used to raise awareness of issues such as human rights (Linfield, 2010). As Butler (2007a) and Grønstad and Gustafsson (2012) point out, it is essential to balance the right to information with respect for human dignity.

On the other hand, there are additional issues related to ethics, such as the control of access to information that can have a major impact on the visual narrative of an event. As an example, during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, photojournalists in Spain faced severe restrictions in accessing hospitals, morgues, and care homes, which limited their ability to document and report on the events and raised concerns about the right to information (Pardo & Morcate, 2022). Photojournalists who were interviewed condemned the institutional censorship often generated by the communication offices of different institutions which impacted their ability to show the true impact of the crisis.

However, the severe shortage of explicit, as well as symbolic or metaphorical, images depicting the gravity of the situation raises concerns about how these gaps in the documentation of this era and the incomplete and biased visual narrative might impact collective memory and history (Morcate & Pardo, 2022; Pardo & Morcate, 2022).

When addressing ethics in contemporary media coverage, issues of the excess and trivialisation of suffering, known as “compassion fatigue” (Moeller, 1999), are present along with the visual saturation and the spread of disinformation. In addition to this, in the case of media coverage of disasters, especially those that are traumatic for the community affected and cause social disruption due to their nature or scale, Joye (2018) highlights “the important social role that news media can play in disaster situations and events involving human suffering” (p. 24). He also notes how the particular nature of a disaster can trigger specific news discourses (Joye, 2018). Certain types of coverage additionally shape perceptions of the affected population. Argiñano and Goikoetxea Bilbao (2020) point out the importance of certain images in reinforcing feelings of solidarity and a sense of community during the Covid-19 crisis, as happens with new approaches to visual representations of natural disasters.

For example, in the Spanish context, a study on residents’ perceptions of the media coverage of the 2021 eruption of the La Palma volcano in the Canary Islands concludes that:

In general, the perception of those surveyed was that the images of destruction caused them discomfort and disapproval. Journalists and the media focused more on the spectacular nature of the geological phenomenon and the drama than on the human aspect and on demanding solutions for the affected population. (Meneses-Fernández & Martínez Torvisco, 2024, p. 287)

From an ethical perspective, it is essential not only to consider which images effectively convey the scale and consequences of the tragedy to the audience but also to strike a balance between focusing on those affected and avoiding their re-victimization and overexposure.

Regarding ethical codes, it is notable that images, especially those depicting death and tragedy, occupy limited space within journalistic guidelines. In the context of Spain, the ethical code of the Association of Journalists of Catalonia (2016) does not specifically mention crisis and disaster coverage but does provide recommendations for covering war and armed conflicts (Annex D of the document), which could be applicable. There is a small annex specifically devoted to images in photojournalism, but this focuses solely on manipulation.

Keith et al.’s (2006) earlier study of US journalism ethics codes found that, while most contemplate the use of images, only nine (out of 47) addressed the treatment of images of tragedies and violence. They also noted that

many had become outdated, partly because they fail to address how to handle disaster images captured by survivors or witnesses using digital cameras or mobile phones and the use of photojournalistic images online. They emphasize that “if codes neglect broad categories of journalistic activities, such as visual reporting, those omissions may indicate that in the culture in which the codes were written, those types of journalism are not seen as being ethically problematic” (Keith et al., 2006, pp. 256–257).

More recent reports from NGOs such as the *Dóchas Guide to Ethical Communications* (Dóchas, 2023) and the Code of the Spanish coordinator of non-governmental organisations (Coordinadora de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales para el Desarrollo España, 2022) incorporate explicit references to the visual representation of crises and disasters. They emphasize a careful approach that avoids sensationalism and distortion of reality, respecting the dignity of those affected by portraying them as equals and active agents rather than passive victims and stressing the importance of informed consent. However, there is no code or guide that addresses specific issues regarding the photojournalistic representation of crises “at home.”

3. Methodology

This research combined quantitative and qualitative analysis (Campos Arenas, 2009; Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014), including bibliographic and documentary reviews and image analysis, in line with previous research.

The analysis period spans from the onset of the DANA on 29 October 2024 to the day after the official tribute to the victims, on 10 December 2024. This timeframe was chosen to encompass both the immediate impact of the disaster and the full cycle of public mourning and societal response.

To this end, all images associated with headlines about the DANA in Valencia were analysed across 12 newspapers, distributed as follows:

- Four local newspapers: The most widely circulated general-interest and relevant daily newspapers in the Valencian Community (*Levante*, *Las Provincias*, *Mediterráneo*, and *Información Alicante*) were chosen according to the “2024–3ª Ola” (third and last period of data) from the *Estudio General de Medios* by Avante Comunicación (2024).
- Four national newspapers: *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC* were selected as the best-positioned general-interest, non-free daily national newspapers according to the *Estudio General de Medios* by the Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación (n.d.).
- Four international newspapers: Four foreign newspapers were selected for this study based on their leading positions in the SCImago Journal Rank (2024) with the filters: “General + Newspapers + 2024 Winter Edition.” The first-ranked newspapers from the United States (*The New York Times*), the United Kingdom (*The Guardian*), France (*Le Monde*), and Latin America (the Peruvian publication *El Comercio*) were selected. This also provided a diverse international perspective by including major Anglophone and Francophone media, as well as the Latin American context, which is culturally and historically linked to Spain.

The front pages were accessed through various platforms such as Kiosco y Más, SAPO, and the newspapers’ own websites.

This methodological approach allows the identification of recurring patterns and ethical tensions in the depiction of death and suffering in this crisis. All images associated with headlines about the DANA in Valencia on the front pages of these newspapers were analysed. A proprietary taxonomy was developed based on previous research on visual data and inductive image analysis that addressed the representation of illness, death, and grief, such as that conducted for the study of Covid-19 in Spain (Morcate & Pardo, 2022; Pardo & Morcate, 2022). This was established to classify the images according to their most prominent visual elements, with clear prioritization of representations of death and grief/mourning, consistent with the study's focus and the main areas of interest covered by the media. Certain secondary categories were specifically defined such as: cars, due to their visual prevalence and strong symbolic association with death, as many victims were found trapped inside motor vehicles; and volunteers, given the significant role they played. When classifying the images, explicit visual cues were prioritized: first, depictions of death and grief/mourning, and second, volunteers and destroyed vehicles. In cases of ambiguity, the dominant element guided the categorization process. This method allowed for consistent classification while preserving the complexity and symbolic richness of the visual content.

4. Results

A total of 393 front-page images on print edition newspapers (Table 1) linked to the DANA tragedy were analysed across the 12 newspapers (four regional, four national, and four international).

Table 1. Total number of photographs published on the front pages of the 12 newspapers by categories.

Category	Images by Newspapers												Total Images
	REGIONAL				NATIONAL				INTERNATIONAL				
	Levante	Información Alicante	Mediterráneo	Las Provincias	El País	La Vanguardia	El Mundo	ABC	The New York Times	The Guardian	Le Monde	El Comercio	
Death (human losses)	2	1	1	1	3	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	11
Grief/Mourning (consequences of human losses)	15	6	5	9	2	1	2	2	0	0	0	0	42
Material Destruction	12	4	10	13	4	5	4	2	1	1	0	1	57
Reconstruction	14	4	5	19	4	6	9	6	0	0	2	0	69
Authorities and Management	48	29	22	26	3	6	6	5	0	1	0	1	147
Other Images	22	7	12	21	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	67
Total Images by Newspaper	113	51	55	89	18	18	24	17	1	2	2	3	393

The strongest presence was observed in local press coverage of the disaster: *Levante* (113), *Información Alicante* (51), *Mediterráneo* (55), and *Las Provincias* (89). In the case of front-page coverage by national newspapers, the following results were obtained: *El País* (18), *La Vanguardia* (18), *El Mundo* (24), and *ABC* (17). The international newspapers devoted the following numbers of front-page images: *The New York Times* (1), *The Guardian* (2), *Le Monde* (2), and *El Comercio* (3).

The taxonomy identified six central themes for the images: Death (human losses), Grief/Mourning (consequences of human losses), Material destruction, Reconstruction, Authorities and Management, and Other Images. These proposed categories allow an analysis of the visual communication of a natural disaster event in a more complex approach that takes into account its political, social, and economic aspects. There was a high percentage of front-page images (Table 2) showing portraits of politicians and disaster management in the Authorities and Management category (37,40%) with 16 images depicting demonstrations. Also, a high percentage of images fell into the Reconstruction category (17,56%), with many images associated with volunteers (20) and the actions of those affected (9), as well as into the Destruction category (14,50%) with a significant number of images focusing on piled-up cars (16). A final category, Other Images includes 67 images that do not bear analytical relevance to the study's main focus and which have therefore not been further subdivided or highlighted. These were images that served mainly to offer visibility to peripheral topics related to the DANA, such as people buying cars or lottery tickets weeks after the disaster, or advertising upcoming special supplements on the DANA.

Table 2. Share of photographs by category.

Total Photographs by Category: 20 October 2024–10 December 2024		
Category	Number of Photos	%
Death (human losses)	11	2.80%
Grief/Mourning (consequences of human losses)	42	10.69%
Material Destruction	57	14.50%
Reconstruction	69	17.56%
Authorities and Management	147	37.40%
Other Images	67	17.05%
Total	393	100%

It was estimated that 6.3% of the images could be classified under more than one category. In this case, visual elements linked to the central theme of the study (death, grief/mourning, and their metaphors) were prioritized. In other cases, where the representation was ambiguous, the headline and caption were used as guidelines. Regarding the proposed categories, 10.69% of images would fit in the Grief/Mourning category with a higher share of images linked to tributes and funerals for the victims. By contrast, only 2,80% of the images were linked to direct representations of death with just one image (Table 3) showing a corpse that was covered (Figure 1).

Table 3. Total images by themes.

Total Photographs by Themes: 20 October 2024–10 December 2024			
Category	Themes	Number of Photos	%
Death (human losses)	Corpses	1	0.25%
	Coffin	0	0%
	Funeral vehicle	2	0.51%
	Search for missing persons/dead	6	1.53%
	Others	2	0.51%
Grief/Mourning (consequences of human losses)	Expressions of grief	9	2.29%
	Funerals	9	2.29%
	Tributes	21	5.34%
	Others	3	0.76%
Material Destruction	Transformed landscape	7	1.78%
	Cars	16	4.07%
	Streets, homes, and businesses	7	1.78%
	Damaged infrastructure (bridges, roads, and railways)	9	2.29%
	Others	18	4.58%
Reconstruction	Machinery and operational equipment	16	4.07%
	Volunteers	20	5.09%
	Active victims (cleanup and reconstruction)	9	2.29%
	Others	24	6.11%
Authorities and Management	Politicians and institutional coordination	125	31.81%
	Demonstrations	16	4.07%
	Others	6	1.53%
Other Images	Other images	67	17.05%
Total	Total images	393	100%

5. Discussion

The results reflected a marked absence of literal representations of death in the media in the context of this disaster and in accordance with other studies (Aaron, 2014; Hanusch, 2008, 2010, 2013; Walter et al., 1995). Out of all the images linked to death (11), only one image, published by *El País* on 3 November (Figure 1), five days after the tragedy, showed a fully covered corpse being transported by members of the Civil Guard on a stretcher.

Indirect representations of the deceased appear in six images depicting the search for missing people (Figure 2), two of which were published on 3 November: one by *El Mundo* and the other by *Mediterráneo*, which refers to a search for “lifeless bodies.” *Levante* published one more image on 7 November, with the caption referring to a “search for the deceased.” There were two further images in *El País* (9 and 11 November) and, finally, the newspaper *Las Provincias* published a front-page image on 21 November which highlighted the search for the last remaining missing people. Therefore, images of corpses were evoked through images of specialized teams working amid water and mud. Despite the high death toll, no images of coffins appeared on the front pages.



Agentes de la Guardia Civil retribran ayer un cadáver del aparcamiento de un supermercado de Benetússer. CLAUDIO ÁLVAREZ

Figure 1. The only image showing a corpse (fully covered) being transported by members of the Civil Guard on a stretcher, published by *El País* on 3 November. Source: *El País* (2024a).



Figure 2. The six front pages with photographs of missing persons: *El Mundo* (2024, 3 November), *Mediterráneo* (2024a, 3 November), *Levante* (2024, 7 November), *El País* (2024b, 2024c, 9 and 11 November), and *Las Provincias* (2024a, 21 November).

Levante and *Información Alicante* each featured two images showing a vehicle recovering the body of a deceased worker during reconstruction efforts, but none appeared in the first few days following the DANA.

Finally, one photograph published in *El Mundo* showed relatives waiting in the street for the body of a loved one to be recovered from their home. The image evoked the presence of the deceased out of frame but without depicting them directly, instead conveying the gravity of the moment through the survivors. The deceased was never shown directly but appeared instead through archival images. A unique photomontage published in *ABC* on 24 November showed the decaying portraits of some of the deceased lying in muddy water, an image that gave the victims visibility while also reflecting the scale of the tragedy and paying tribute to them by replacing anonymous figures with recognizable faces.

This scarcity of images depicting death also extended to more human-centred photographs such as those linked to the survivors' grief and mourning (9). Few images depicted pain and loss in a more graphic way. In the first few days following the tragedy, *El País* published a group photo showing a young man, covered in mud, comforting another upon learning that his father's body had been found, while *Las Provincias* featured a close-up of a man seen from behind, crying as he waited for his sister's body to be recovered. These were the only two front-page images in which grieving victims appeared as the main subject. In both cases, the treatment respected their privacy and anonymity, with their faces either fully or partially obscured.

Images of the authorities' controversial visit to the epicentre of the disaster in Paiporta, which was covered by all national and regional media on 4 November, focused on the political tension. However, *Levante*, *Mediterráneo*, and *Información Alicante* all chose to feature the same image of the king consoling a victim while the third showed a photo of Queen Letizia in tears, an image also published by *Las Provincias*. In doing so, they avoided addressing the victims' negative reactions to the visit and instead used the images to convey institutional support while also showing the victims in a more indirect manner. Out of the 42 images related to grief and mourning, most (21) concentrated on public tributes to the victims, especially at sporting events, while nine depicted the official funeral for the victims reported in the press on 10 December. All media outlets focused on representing the victims by showing the king and queen, either in frontal shots as the main figures or in close-ups, interacting with the victims' families but without showing any explicit moments of grief. Only *El País* departed from this approach by presenting a shot of several attendees with the focus on a photo of a victim held by a relative, thus positioning the deceased as the protagonist and making them visibly present.

A month after the tragedy (30 November 2024), *Las Provincias* and *Levante* published a photograph accompanying a tribute in which residents from the hardest-hit towns took part in a candlelit vigil. The latter's headline, "Mourning and protest over the flood," reflected a progressive political stance that highlighted the errors made in managing the disaster.

The limited presence of images depicting death was offset by images focusing on material destruction. The extensive devastation caused by the flood resulted in vast amounts of debris, mud, and accumulated objects and cars. Indeed, the image of piled-up cars (Figure 3) dominated the front pages of most newspapers on 31 October, the date the high death toll was confirmed, with the exception of *The Guardian* which published it the following day and *Le Monde* which that day featured a shot of a muddy street and volunteers instead. Thus, images of the hundreds of wrecked and piled-up cars, shown in varying close-up

shots, served as a metaphor for destruction and death, thereby reflecting the scale of the tragedy (over 120,000 cars were wrecked). In the days that followed the DANA, the link between these images and the unseen dead grew stronger as fake news and speculation about hundreds of victims trapped in cars and car parks spread.



Figure 3. Front pages showing photographs of piled-up cars in regional newspapers (up) and in international media (down). Source: *Mediterráneo* (2024b), *Las Provincias* (2024b), *Información* (2024), *The New York Times* (2024), *The Guardian* (2024), *El Comercio* (2024).

This representation, along with other images of material destruction, recurred throughout the coverage of the disaster, in accordance with a classic photographic tradition. It is worth noting that only regional newspapers mentioned the risk posed by the DANA on the actual day of the disaster. *Información Alicante* and *Las Provincias* referred to the DANA threat, the latter with a headline announcing cancelled classes and warnings of heavy rain and flooding, but neither included images. Meanwhile, *Mediterráneo* published a credited photo of a car stranded on a flooded road with a headline stating that the DANA had intensified and that the worst was expected that afternoon and overnight.

A significant number of images (69) fell under the Reconstruction category, including 20 that prominently featured the thousands of volunteers who had rushed to the affected area, especially on 2 November. Thus, the front pages' visual narrative provided extensive coverage of the reconstruction efforts and highlighted the active, cooperative attitude between those affected by the DANA and volunteers, thus reflecting a more human and nuanced perspective of the disaster, in line with more contemporary natural disaster coverage.

The presence of 147 politically themed images, including portraits of politicians and scenes from demonstrations, was significant. Some front pages featured photomontages combining multiple portraits which increased the total number of such images. A progressive tone emerged in the coverage, focusing on the management of the DANA and the institutional response, with special emphasis on images of mass protests and Carlos Mazón, then president of the Valencian Community, who was heavily criticized and whose presence varied according to each newspaper's editorial stance. This high number shifted the visual narrative of the event towards more political ground, especially in the weeks following the DANA, which reflected the impact it had on Spanish politics following allegations that part of the high death toll could have been avoided. In this way, the coverage of a "natural disaster" was reframed as both a social and a political issue.

It is worth noting that, despite the scarcity of images showing grief and mourning, three of the four regional newspapers included the image of a black ribbon from 31 October or 1 November until the end of the period analysed, with the exception of *Las Provincias* which did so for a month. The national newspaper ABC included it only on 31 October.

Finally, several headlines clearly referring to the scale of the tragedy were accompanied by images that had no connection whatsoever, such as the headline in *El País* on 15 November (Figure 4), "Half of those killed by the DANA were over 70 years old," accompanied by a photograph of a child kicking a ball around in a muddy street. This fact reflects the complex role that images representing death and dead bodies play in the media.



Figure 4. Front page of *El País* newspaper. Notes: The headline reads "Half of those killed by the DANA were over 70 years old"; the caption reads "A child plays with a ball on a street in Paiporta after the recent rains." Source: *El País* (2024d).

6. Conclusion

The representation of death and corpses on the front pages of newspapers covering the DANA disaster was very limited, as were images that directly depicted grief and mourning, identical to what has already happened in previous crises (Aaron, 2014; Hanusch, 2008, 2010, 2013; Morcate & Pardo, 2022; Taylor, 2000; Walter et al., 1995). The deceased were represented indirectly through images of the search for missing persons, off-frame evocations, the presence of family members, or archival photographs portraying the deceased. However, visual metaphors for the dead were used frequently, especially symbolic images of piled-up cars, which was a recurring theme throughout the period analysed.

The photojournalistic coverage followed the precedent set during the Covid-19 pandemic in Spain by minimizing explicit images of death and grief while preserving the identity of both victims and their loved ones, in accordance with ethical concerns. Among the differences in these two visual narratives of national crises lies the use of distinct visual metaphors: during the pandemic, the empty streets conveyed isolation and collective fear through absence and stillness; whereas in the case of the DANA, the piled-up cars and debris embodied material devastation and the tangible aftermath of destruction. This contrast illustrates how, in both cases, visual metaphors (whether through the emptiness of urban spaces or the material traces of destruction) were used to evoke the magnitude of loss and fear while avoiding more explicit depictions of death.

The coverage of this natural disaster partially presented a visual narrative in line with the photographic tradition of extensively depicting material and territorial devastation while also adopting a more contemporary approach to visual coverage that complexifies the notion of natural disaster by addressing natural, social, and political aspects. This approach highlights the impact on the population and the response capacity of those affected, volunteers, and institutions, while also portraying the political leaders responsible for disaster management and public discontent, including debates over preventive measures that could have averted some of the deaths.

This study provides an inclusive analysis of visual depictions of the DANA crisis in Spain, from the initial tragedy to the official funeral for the victims, and offers a detailed examination of photojournalistic coverage of selected newspapers. While this research focuses solely on newspapers, future studies could further enrich these findings by comparing them to coverage in other formats, such as the ongoing ethical debate on behalf of NGOs about the coverage of humanitarian crises, and the influence of other images and videos disseminated through television and social media. Such an approach would allow for a more in-depth exploration of the different narratives and potential biases within the wider media landscape regarding the representation of death and grief during crises.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

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