

# IPI Turkey Symposium: Media Freedom and Freedom of Information (FoI)

# Introduction

Held on 21–22 May 2026 in Istanbul as part of the International Press Institute's 75th anniversary celebrations, the IPI Turkey Journalism Symposium brought together journalists, editors, lawyers, researchers, civil society representatives, and international experts to examine the state of journalism and press freedom from multiple perspectives.

The symposium was built around three interconnected pillars. The first focused on freedom of information (Fol), reflecting IPI Turkey's ongoing work in this field. Through discussions with journalists, lawyers, civil society actors, and international practitioners, participants explored the barriers to accessing public information in Turkey, shared practical experiences, and examined successful models from other countries.

The second pillar addressed some of the most pressing challenges shaping journalism today, including press freedom, the impact of artificial intelligence, reporting in times of war and crisis, cross-border collaboration, climate journalism, and the economic sustainability of independent media. Together, these sessions highlighted both the structural pressures facing journalists and the innovative approaches emerging in response.

Complementing these discussions was the IPI 75th Anniversary Exhibition, curated from the organization's extensive archives. By revisiting decades of publications and documentation on Turkey, the exhibition offered a historical perspective on the country's media landscape while revealing how many of the challenges confronting journalists today have evolved — or, in some cases, persisted — over time.

This impact report captures the key discussions, insights, and recommendations that emerged throughout the symposium. By bringing together diverse voices and experiences, the event sought not only to reflect on the current state of journalism but also to strengthen dialogue, encourage collaboration, and contribute to a more resilient and independent media environment in Turkey and beyond.



# Obstacles to the Freedom of Information in Türkiye



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LAWYER

Obstacles to the Freedom of Information in Türkiye addressed the systematic barriers that prevent journalists, NGOs, and citizens from exercising their constitutional right to access public data. The discussion highlighted how the state utilizes legal exemptions, administrative silence, and financial deterrents to shield public spending and human rights issues from transparency.

## Main Takeaways

**Effective strategies rest on three pillars: precision, timing, and solidarity.** Requests should be kept simple and directed at specific administrative units; deadlines must be actively tracked and silence should be treated as a trigger for appeal rather than a reason to wait. When refusals are vague or sweeping, journalists can challenge them directly, and given the prohibitive cost of litigation, collective action across newsrooms and civil society is key to turning individual disputes into the precedents that make systematic concealment harder to sustain.

**Authorities frequently exploit excuses** such as “commercial secrets,” to deny information requests, even when the requested data bears no relation to such categories. Rejections on these and similar grounds have become a routine mechanism for evading accountability. The deliberate withholding of critical information spans a wide range of public interest matters — from major infrastructure contracts and the use of taxpayer money to women's and children's rights — effectively shielding state policies from meaningful scrutiny.

**Beyond outright refusals, institutions frequently resort to simply not responding at all, or claim that the requested information does not exist in their records.** Experts suggest that journalists can push back against this by invoking the Right to Petition law, which legally obliges institutions to actively seek out the requested information rather than turning the request away.

**Legal action remains an option for challenging rejections but is often out of reach in practice,** as court proceedings are slow and losing a case in an administrative court can result in legal fees that amount to several months' salary for an average reporter.



# Lightning Talks: Stories from the Frontlines of Freedom of Information



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JOURNALIST

The Lightning Talks session showcased firsthand accounts from journalists and civil society representatives experiencing the practical challenges of exercising the right to information in Türkiye. Through diverse case studies ranging from environmental health to prison statistics, the speakers illustrated how the withholding of public data operates.

## Main Takeaways

**Freedom of information has become a system designed to discourage inquiry in practice.** A telling symptom is the routine use of identical, copy-paste rejections issued regardless of the nature of the request. Furthermore, institutions responded to requests with information that bears no relation to what was actually asked, substituting a convenient response for a relevant one. A more recent development has also seen institutions turn to AI-generated responses as a new form of evasion.

**Persistence in pursuing information can invite direct hostility.** Journalists who push beyond initial refusals sometimes find themselves redirected to non-standard application requirements designed to discourage follow-through. Those who push may face open intimidation, including hostile calls who question their standing to request public data or misrepresent legal protections to justify withholding it.

**Civil society's engagement with freedom of information tools remains strikingly low.** The vast majority of NGOs make no use of them, deterred by the expectation that requests will be rejected and that persistence will invite retaliation. This culture of resigned self-censorship has led many organizations to bypass legal channels altogether, relying instead on personal relationships with insiders to obtain the information they need.

**Persistence may yield results, though often through indirect means.** A rejected request does not always mean a failed one: in some cases, the act of asking is enough to prompt corrective action behind the scenes. A freedom of information request can function as a signal in its own right — what the state chooses to quietly amend in its aftermath often reveals more than any formal response would.



# What can International Fol Experience Offer Us?



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The session explored the comparative landscape of Freedom of Information (Fol) practices across Europe, focusing on Germany, Spain, Italy, and the EU level. The discussion highlighted how international standards, digital intermediary platforms, and collective journalist actions can overcome bureaucratic resistance and the culture of non-disclosure that persists in various forms globally.

## Main Takeaways

**A crucial distinction shapes how freedom of information functions in practice:** Some frameworks, like the EU's, treat it as a fundamental right, affording it strong legal protection, while others, such as Spain's, reduce it to a mere administrative procedure — a difference that significantly affects how readily access can be denied and how effectively it can be challenged.

**Financial deterrents are not limited to less democratic contexts.** Even in countries like Germany, authorities have been known to impose fees per request, effectively pricing out individual journalists and citizens.

**Journalists are increasingly turning to crowdsourcing:** coordinating large numbers of citizens to file small, individual requests for fragments of a larger dataset, sidestepping refusals based on the volume or breadth of the request or prohibitive fees.

**Beyond obtaining data, even a refusal or an accidental reply can itself become evidence,** revealing a chain of unaccountability in which no authority is properly overseeing the use of public funds.

**Sustained public pressure is ultimately the most effective driver of meaningful transparency.** When institutions receive few requests, they have little incentive to invest in the infrastructure needed to handle them properly. It is the consistent volume of demands that compels the state to treat the right to information as a living practice rather than a dormant provision on the statute books.



# In Pursuit of Transparency in Journalism



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The In Pursuit of Transparency in Journalism session provided a critical examination of the systemic barriers to information in Türkiye, exploring how the lack of transparency in both public institutions and media ownership undermines the public's right to know. The discussion analyzed the shift from traditional reporting to digital platforms and the persistent struggle to hold power accountable in an increasingly opaque environment.

## Main Takeaways

**Türkiye's legal framework for the right to information is adequate on paper, the problem lies in its application.** Requests are routinely ignored or denied without valid legal grounds, and the institutions meant to uphold access instead treat it as discretionary. For journalists who choose to challenge these refusals, the path leads to legal proceedings that can stretch on for years.

**Digital tools were expected to increase transparency, but they are sometimes used to discreetly restrict access to data.** Data that was previously accessible in real time has been quietly removed or made harder to reach, with little official acknowledgment. In the absence of these sources, journalists are often left relying on expensive specialist publications that maintain their own relationships with public institutions — a costly and unequal workaround for what should be freely available information.

**Access to official information has increasingly migrated to informal channels, with WhatsApp groups becoming an accreditation system.** Journalists who publish stories deemed unwelcome find themselves quietly removed from these groups, cutting off their primary source of official briefings without any formal process or right of appeal.

**Commercial secrecy has been one of the most significant barriers to transparency, routinely invoked by public institutions to place major infrastructure contracts beyond scrutiny.** Projects involving billions in taxpayer-funded guarantees — bridges, highways, hospitals — are effectively hidden from public view, from parliamentary oversight, and even from the country's supreme audit institution.



# Press Freedom in Times of Crisis



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REPRESENTATIVE

Press Freedom in Times of Crisis session provided a stark assessment of the systemic challenges facing Turkish journalism, characterizing the current environment as one of suffocating legal and digital pressure. The speakers emphasized that the crisis is not merely about the rights of journalists, but a fundamental threat to the public's right to access the truth.

## Main Takeaways

Roughly 70% of press freedom violations in Türkiye are judicial in nature, with nearly half of all documented incidents occurring directly within courtrooms. In 2025-2026, Türkiye accounted for two-thirds of all journalist detentions and arrests across Europe.

The 2022 “Disinformation Law” (Article 217A) has become a central instrument for silencing investigative reporting. It is systematically used to prosecute journalists covering corruption, public officials, or economic policy.

Today's crisis involves information bombardment, unlike the 20th century, where censorship was about stopping the flow of info. The goal is to make the public doubt everything, effectively destroying a common perception of reality so that truth becomes indistinguishable from state-led narratives or AI-generated noise.

Financial sanctions also paralyze independent media. In 2025 alone, Türkiye's broadcast regulator, Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), imposed nearly 150 million TL in fines, targeting a handful of critical channels. Additionally, the Press Advertising Agency (BİK) uses public ad bans as a weapon, while the holding-based structure of media ownership allows the state to use tax penalties and state-appointed trustees (TMSF) to force editorial shifts.

Despite the grim landscape, solidarity remains an effective counter-pressure. Unified support from professional organizations, combined with persistent social media campaigns and public presence at hearings, act as a decisive force against political pressure.



# The Precarisation of Journalism in Türkiye



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**GÖKHAN  
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PRESIDENT,  
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The Precarisation of Journalism in Türkiye session provided a comprehensive analysis of the eroding job security and economic instability within the Turkish media landscape. Our esteemed speakers explored how political pressure, legal loopholes, and a shrinking market have transformed journalism into a highly precarious and underpaid field.

## Main Takeaways

**A significant proportion of journalists work without specific legal protections and under precarious conditions, as only a fraction of media professionals are employed under the Press Labor Law (Law No. 212). Furthermore, the official unemployment rate for journalists also tells only part of the story – the real figure is estimated to be significantly higher, as many abandon their formal job search after several months.**

**Wages have plummeted relative to the cost of living.** In 2026, wages have failed to keep pace with the cost of living: pay raises for journalists, if any, were vastly outstripped by real inflation, eroding their standard of living. Average reporter salaries, when measured against soaring rents in major cities like Istanbul, left many unable to cover basic living costs on their own. The lack of security has led to a significant desire to leave the profession. Surveys indicate that a significant number of journalists would leave journalism immediately if they found a job with better pay.

**Despite this precarity, unionization among journalists remains remarkably low, and even union membership offers no guarantee of security.** The Journalists' Union of Türkiye (TGS) counts a few thousand members, yet only a minority of them are covered by collective bargaining agreements. Legal battles to compel major media outlets to formally acknowledge the union as a legitimate representative have dragged on for years without resolution.

**Media ownership in Türkiye has been reshaped in recent years, with the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) and state-appointed trustees emerging as the largest owners of media outlets in the country.** This concentration of ownership in state hands casts a shadow over job security, as journalists are reluctant to pursue legal action over their rights, fearing that taking a state-controlled employer to court will see them blacklisted across the industry.



# Finding Truth in the Age of Artificial Intelligence



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Finding Truth in the Age of Artificial Intelligence explored the dual nature of AI as both a catalyst for sophisticated disinformation and a potential turning point for media sustainability. The discussion analyzed how technological shifts, such as Google's new AI-driven search algorithms, are fundamentally altering the relationship between journalists and their audiences by threatening the "traffic-based" economic model.

## Main Takeaways

**While disinformation is not new, AI has made it more modular and specialized, with deepfake technology increasingly used to target vulnerable groups, specifically female politicians and journalists, to drive them out of the public sphere.**

**In an era of information fatigue and constant crisis, citizens increasingly view state regulation not just as censorship, but also as a proposal for order. This shift complicates the traditional freedom-versus-censorship binary, as support for the state regulations now spans across different political ideologies.**

**Google's shift toward AI-generated previews poses an existential threat to independent media. By providing short answers directly on the search page, Google reduces the need for users to click through to news sites, significantly decreasing web traffic.**

**The path to survival lies in breaking dependency on Big Tech algorithms and building trust-based relationships with smaller, loyal communities. Journalists should focus on creating resilient, independent financial structures — such as direct reader support — rather than chasing viral hits on platforms they do not control.**



# Cross-border Collaboration in Journalism



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The Cross-border Collaboration in Journalism session examined the impact of international partnerships on investigative reporting, specifically within the Turkish context. The discussion highlighted how these collaborations provide a mental shift for journalists, offering elevated editorial standards, vital financial resources through grants, and a protective professional network to tackle complex, globalized issues.

## Main Takeaways

Even stories that appear local often reveal an international dimension when investigated thoroughly. Collaboration across borders helps journalists surface these connections, transforming what might seem like a domestic issue into a story with global resonance.

Cross-border collaborations bring a more rigorous editorial culture, defined by multiple layers of scrutiny at every stage of an investigation. This structure encourages a shift away from pursuing predetermined conclusions, pushing journalists toward a more disciplined, evidence-led approach.

International collaborations also offer mentorship and a space to learn through experience. For freelancers and those working in restrictive environments without access to well-resourced newsrooms or established professional networks, these platforms provide a genuine alternative to costly training or the insider connections that conventional career paths tend to require.

International grants have become a lifeline for journalism, as traditional media outlets contend with financial pressures. For freelancers and small organizations in particular, such funding makes it possible to spend months on a single story, a commitment that is simply incompatible with the daily demands of a conventional newsroom.



# Covering Conflicts: Journalism in Times of War



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The session provided an outlook of the evolving and increasingly dangerous nature of reporting from frontlines. The speakers discussed the shifting paradigms of access — notably in the context of Gaza, Ukraine, and Afghanistan — where the traditional role of the journalist as a protected observer has been replaced by a reality where they are often treated as targets.

## Main Takeaways

A significant shift in conflict zones is the erosion of the “Press” badge as a shield. Hitherto, marking oneself as a journalist provided a level of protection. However, badges often turn the reporter into a visible target for snipers, tanks, or drones today. In 2025-2026, journalist deaths reached record levels, with a notable increase in the use of autonomous weapons like drones to target media professionals, leading to a climate where many journalists now feel safer hiding their professional identity while in the field.

Embedded journalism is an imperfect tool, but in conflicts where independent entry has been foreclosed entirely, often the only one available. Its risks to editorial independence are real but manageable, provided journalists maintain their critical instincts, verify what they witness independently, and actively seek out local voices that offer a perspective no military escort can provide.

The demand for 24/7 live news cycles has damaged conflict journalism, by prioritizing brave live hits in front of smoke and explosions over in-depth storytelling. True war journalism is not about reporting which side hit which target, but about entering homes, morgues, and shelters to document how the conflict shatters individual lives and daily existence.

Being a woman in a conflict zone offers unique reporting advantages that are often overlooked. In culturally conservative societies like Afghanistan, women journalists can access private spaces — such as homes, kitchens, and birth clinics — that are strictly off-limits to male colleagues. This access allows them to capture the domestic and social realities of war, providing a more holistic view of the conflict’s impact.



# Journalism in Türkiye on the Road to COP 31



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The Journalism in Türkiye on the Road to COP 31 session examined the professional and political challenges facing environmental reporting as Türkiye prepares to host the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 31) in Antalya in November 2026.

## Main Takeaways

**Hosting COP 31 will be a major test for the Turkish media.** To cover the summit effectively, journalists must master UN diplomacy language and secure accreditation, which allows direct access to international negotiators and government ministers who are otherwise unreachable. This presents a rare opportunity for local journalists to pressure officials and build international networks.

**Environmental journalism in Türkiye carries serious personal risks.** Coverage that displeases the authorities can result in imprisonment, and journalists, activists, and local politicians alike have found themselves behind bars for their work. This climate of intimidation raises concerns about the conditions under which Türkiye hosts the summit.

**A major barrier in Turkish media is that climate and environmental stories rarely reach the front page,** unless they involve physical conflict or corruption. Newsrooms often ignore the slow-moving catastrophe of climate change, only finding value in a story when there is a visible scandal or violence, which fails to provide the public with necessary expert analysis on energy transitions.

**There is a severe lack of specialized climate and energy reporters in both mainstream and independent media.** Most journalists covering these fields are self-taught and lack institutional support, as media outlets are reluctant to invest limited resources in specialized training. This capacity problem makes it difficult for reporters to navigate complex data, leaving them vulnerable to greenwashing.



# IPI Archive Exhibition

As part of the Symposium, an exhibition drawn from IPI archives' page-by-page review, spanning 1950 to 2005. Press clippings, correspondence, and political cartoons relating to Turkey were organised into four main themes.

**The first was the weaponisation of the judiciary against the press.** IPI archives documented how judicial pressure on journalists has recurred in Turkey across decades, with the materials making clear that the mechanisms of repression, however their form has varied, have followed a structural continuity across different governments and eras.

**The second theme was impunity and violence against journalists;** the extensive coverage of the assassination of Abdi İpekçi in the archive made a particularly strong impression. **The third was IPI's institutional relationship with Turkey:** initiatives bringing together Turkish and Greek editors to reduce bilateral tensions, contributions to the development of press ethics codes, and IPI general assemblies held in Turkey all featured as landmarks in this history, illuminating the depth and breadth of IPI's role in Turkish media life. **The fourth theme was Turkish-origin advertisements appearing in IPI publications,** placed by prominent institutions and organisations of their time. These offered a compelling window into Turkey's visibility within the international press community and the character of its relationship with IPI during those years.

**The political cartoons drew particular attention from participants, standing out for a narrative power that transcends specific events and resists the passage of time.** More broadly, the exhibition demonstrated that the IPI archive is an indispensable collective memory for the history of the press in Turkey. The materials also pointed to a striking pattern: press freedom violations in Turkey have exhibited structural continuity, recurring across changing governments and political orders, all the way to the present day.



## **IPI Turkey 2026 Media Symposium Impact Report**

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