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Journalist YouTubers: How Platformization Transforms Journalism in an Authoritarian System

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This article examines the rise of "journalist YouTubers" in Turkey's increasingly authoritarian media environment, where traditional journalism faces heavy government control. Drawing on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 14 prominent journalists who transitioned from mainstream media to YouTube, we explore how platform dynamics reshape journalistic practices and identities. Many of these journalists, formerly anchors and editors, now produce critical political commentary and often attract larger audiences than traditional outlets. While YouTube offers greater autonomy amid ongoing political surveillance and repression, it also imposes new constraints through opaque, algorithm-driven monetization pressures and nonnegotiable platform rules. Many interviewees reported practicing self-censorship and adjusting content to maintain visibility and financial sustainability. This study reveals how journalists adapt to and interpret YouTube's opaque systems while redefining journalism outside institutional confines. It contributes to debates on media platformization and journalism in authoritarian contexts, emphasizing the tension between independence and control, and raising urgent questions about journalism's future in illiberal systems.

Keywords: journalist YouTubers, Turkey, media capture, authoritarianism, algorithms, platformization

How does journalistic practice evolve in an authoritarian environment where a social media platform like YouTube becomes the primary medium not only for a significant portion of the population to access independent journalism but also for renowned journalists who previously worked in traditional media? With the rise of populist politics globally, questions about the conditions faced by traditional media institutions and the journalists working for them have come to the fore. However, in Turkey, the factors limiting journalists' ability to work freely in mainstream media have steadily worsened for nearly two decades. Many journalists seek refuge on social media platforms, where various forms of government intervention shape

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the media landscape. Consequently, the platformization of journalism accelerates, not merely as a choice, but as an urgent necessity.

However, the platform support comes with conditions, compelling journalists to create content that is not only compatible with the platform's format but also aligned with its financial interests (Foroohar, 2021). The impact of new technologies on online news storytelling necessitates a redefinition or a "re-articulation" and "re-negotiation of what is conventional and normal in everyday practices of journalism" (Matheson, 2004, p. 444). "You transform into someone that algorithms favor," said Fırat,[1] a prominent TV host who was forced to resign from the 24-hour news channel CNN Türk after criticizing the government on social media. He subsequently launched his own YouTube show. His words reflect the experiences of many journalists navigating this platform.

This study examines the effects of this transition within Turkey's news ecosystem, an environment marked by authoritarian control, by focusing on the experiences of "the producer," namely, journalist YouTubers. We define journalist YouTubers as professionals who previously worked in traditional media and later migrated to digital platforms, using YouTube to deliver news commentary and engage with audiences beyond the constraints of mainstream outlets. In Turkey, the key figures on this platform have been those who first gained recognition and prestige in legacy media, rather than individuals who aspired to launch their careers directly on YouTube. Similar to German journalist YouTubers (Lichtenstein, Herbers, & Bause, 2021) and their American and British counterparts (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Ross Arguedas, & Nielsen, 2024), Turkish journalists aim to shape public debates by fostering a conversational, intimate atmosphere in their broadcasts, catering to viewers who seek news and commentary.

Public service orientation, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethical codes, as described by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007), have long defined the norms of journalists' associations in Turkey. However, the objectivity norm (Schudson, 2001), which requires journalists to report facts impartially and without emotion, fairly representing all sides without commentary or bias, has increasingly been set aside. This trend is evident not only in pro-government media that openly engage in propaganda but also in significant segments of independent and critical newsrooms. Under authoritarianism, many journalists adopt advocacy journalism as a way to distance themselves from the pro-government mainstream. Janowitz (1975) argues that advocacy journalism positions journalists as engaged interpreters and representatives who give voice to groups lacking influential advocates. The collapse of mainstream media has created fertile ground for such practices. In Turkey, journalists now aim to shape public debate by creating a conversational and intimate atmosphere in their broadcasts, appealing to audiences who expect both information and commentary. Besides reporting on current events, they act as opinion leaders who blend reporting, analysis, and advocacy. As Ginosar and Reich (2022) note, many eventually transform into activist-advocacy journalists.

However, unlike their foreign counterparts, Turkish journalists broadcasting online do not merely complement traditional news sources; they have become "the new mainstream" for a broad segment of

[1] The interviewee's real name has not been disclosed.

the audience. By January 2025, Turkey's three leading journalist YouTubers—Fatih Altaylı,[2] Cüneyt Özdemir, and Nevşin Mengü—had emerged as key figures shaping public debate and political agenda. Collectively, they reach more people than traditional, print, and TV news outlets, with approximately 3.5 million subscribers and 800,000 daily views. This profound transformation within such a large media landscape raises a critical question: How do journalists with limited resources, working under authoritarian political pressure, adapt to and transform through YouTube's algorithms, technical infrastructure, and platform governance in a space where commercial and political constraints interact in new ways?

To explore this, we conducted interviews with 14 prominent Turkish journalist YouTubers, whose channels together surpass 2 million subscribers, analyzing how they redefine journalism on digital platforms like YouTube while balancing the pursuit of online visibility with journalism's traditional watchdog role. This study aims to provide fresh theoretical and empirical insights into the global issue of journalism's digital transformation by investigating the news-related activities of journalists on YouTube and assessing how these activities reshape journalistic practice, particularly in contexts where press freedom is restricted.

The remainder of the article reflects on previous work on platformization and journalism, focusing on YouTube. Second, we elaborate on the political context of Turkish journalism and how the Justice and Development Party (JDP) regime currently controls the national mainstream media. The third section outlines our research method, while the fourth presents an empirical analysis of YouTube's rise as an alternative journalistic platform in Turkey and how journalist YouTubers view and use it.

Platformization of the Web, the Rise of YouTube, and the Transformation of Journalistic Practice

Social media platforms play a central role in the organization, production, and distribution of news, making them closely tied to the functioning of democratic systems (DeNardis & Hackl, 2015). The digitalization of news has drawn audiences to online platforms with the advantages of instant access, lower costs, and multimedia formats. These platforms have transformed everyday journalistic practices "without having produced or commissioned the content" (Gillespie, 2018a, p. 18). Platformization enables the simultaneous interaction of multiple actors, including producers, consumers, advertisers, and the platforms themselves (Bruns, 2018; Usher, 2021; van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018). As a platform, YouTube serves as a clear example of this multi-layered structure, operating as a multi-sided market that involves audiences, amateur and professional content creators, media partners, advertisers, new intermediaries, and third-party developers (Burgess & Green, 2009).

YouTube offers users a wide range of capabilities. It functions as a video-sharing service, a search engine (Djerf-Pierre, Lindgren, & Budinski, 2019), and a video content archive (Burgess & Green, 2018).

[2] Fatih Altaylı, one of the most popular journalists on YouTube and a frequent target of pro-government journalists and politicians, was arrested in June 2025 over remarks he made during a live broadcast. He was accused of "threatening" the president, though he insisted his comments had been deliberately taken out of context. At the time of writing, he was still in prison.

Launched in December 2005, it has since become the second most popular search engine and is used for news by nearly a third (31%) of the global population (Newman et al., 2024). A significant shift in the platform's nature occurred after its acquisition by Google in 2006. Until then, YouTube had been financed by investors; consequently, the platform's monetization model became centered on advertising revenue (Wasko & Erickson, 2009), introducing new rules for content distribution and production. By 2006, YouTube had already begun decentralizing and deinstitutionalizing the production and dissemination of news, as content uploaded to the platform was increasingly reaired by mainstream TV networks, and TV clips gained a lasting presence online (Naim, 2006). As van Dijck (2013) observed, YouTube was no longer an alternative to television, but a new "full-fledged player" in the media entertainment industry (p. 127), becoming the central stage "to define the terms and norms of digital communication" (Vaidhyanathan, 2012, p. 37). As YouTube's role in the media landscape expanded, so did opportunities for individual creators to position themselves as journalistic actors, blending news dissemination with strategies of social media influence. The news industry has undergone a discernable shift as YouTube's importance in the media environment has increased. On one hand, content creators have begun to aspire and undertake the roles traditionally held by journalists, while on the other, journalists—bombarded by influencer culture—have increasingly adopted new forms and languages of news reporting and commentary.

We use the term journalist YouTubers to refer to journalists who primarily engage with their audiences through YouTube. When asked about their perceptions of their professional roles (see Table 1), our interviewees described themselves using terms such as "broadcaster," "commentator," "storyteller," "digital content producer," "news analyst," and "journalist." They viewed their work as falling within the domain of journalism. Broadly, YouTubers are individual "digital content creators defined by their significant online following and distinctive public persona" (Duffy, 2020, p. 1). They exert significant influence on their followers through their personality-centered content (Lewis, 2020) and monetize it through commercial sponsorships and platform partnership programs based on advertisement revenue and audience metrics. They curate their online personas with the strategic management of their followers on digital platforms to build a meaningful reputation and trust relationship with their audiences through online self-branding (Gandini, 2016). All these aspects of social media influencers also apply to journalists on YouTube, rendering their news-related activities self-embodied, subjective, and centered around their persona.

Self-branding becomes an important aspect of a newly emerging alternative journalism, "entrepreneurial journalism" (Vos & Singer, 2016), which challenges the long-established separation between the editorial and commercial aspects of news media organizations and leads to a conflation of the previously separate roles of publisher and journalist. For publicity and monetization, journalistic influencers directly promote their work; deal with sponsors, advertisers, platforms, and market intermediaries; and coordinate their audiences toward personal and marketable objectives. To promote and differentiate themselves for commercial purposes, journalist YouTubers need to identify a target audience and craft their messages on live broadcasts to encourage "an economic and emotional attachment" to their journalistic content (Molyneux, Holton, & Lewis, 2017 p. 1386), so they can establish a relationship with news consumers and seek their loyalty and trust to survive in the market. They are likely to engage in self-branding, which usually involves mixing personal identity and information with professional appeals. Gaining the audience's trust through constant engagement with followers and tuning to their needs and desires means gaining their loyalty. Gaining their loyalty means gaining followers. This process involves actively

building and maintaining their personal brand without relying on a traditional journalistic institution for authority and legitimacy. Although the motto of journalism on YouTube is "independence," this does not mean that all the initiative lies with the journalist. On the contrary, it is the platform that sets the rules and imposes them on journalists.

Unlike traditional media, where content creation rules and expectations are set by editors, media executives, and political authorities, YouTube's governance is shaped by platform architecture, algorithmic logic, and corporate policies. The algorithmic determination of news consumption makes social media platforms new gatekeepers for journalists (Schiffrin, 2021), signaling a shift toward algorithmic governance (Just & Latzer, 2017). As Nechushtai (2018) argues, this leads to an infrastructural capture limiting the capabilities of an organization operating sustainably by making it dependent on certain resources and services of another organization, in this case, the platforms (p. 1045). This form of capture is an inherent characteristic of what Helmond (2015) describes as the platformized web, where fundamental rights are consensually exchanged for digital services (MacKinnon, 2012).

Algorithms, key tools for platforms as automated problem-solving mechanisms, are not neutral (Burgess & Green, 2009; Gillespie, 2018b). Sandvig (2015) further contends that algorithms are despotic, leading to "mysterious" decision-making processes. These opaque mechanisms, which prioritize certain types of content over others (Gillespie, 2016), are often safeguarded as trade secrets by platforms that play a significant role in shaping culture and everyday life as mediators (van Dijck, 2013). Revealing certain content while masking others, algorithmic processes generate a personalized menu of digital items curated by the platforms' "algorithmic circulation" (Airoldi, 2021, p. 4), with the aim of keeping its users on the platform longer. YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system proposes a list of videos shown to the user, and YouTube's recommendation algorithm drives 70% of what people watch on the platform (Kiros, 2022). By categorizing digital content as relevant or desirable for users and selectively presenting them, algorithms mediate and construct reality, orienting online users' everyday lives as an invisible governing force (Beer, 2009). This is how YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system creates digital echo chambers that tell its users what is happening in the world and how they should know about it. Algorithms, as powerful engines of this order (Rieder, 2020), shape the information practices of millions of social media users who follow recent political developments in Turkey and across the world. Scholars have long examined the detrimental effects of audience fragmentation driven by technological advancements and commercialization on democratic discourse (Katz, 1996; Mancini, 2013; Sunstein, 2007).

Algorithmic personalization exacerbates this issue by reinforcing preexisting beliefs and intensifying polarization (Peer & Ksiazek, 2010), while also interfering with freedom of speech by routinely distorting message distribution (Riemer & Peter, 2021). In the Turkish context, interpreting social media platforms like YouTube solely through the lens of audience fragmentation and algorithmic audience risks overlooking their potential as mediums for alternative content. Furthermore, journalists in countries like Turkey, who had already been struggling against severe government interference and political capture, initially considered the big tech-driven process an emancipating experience politically and economically (Finkel, 2021). Therefore, when assessing the influence and power of digital platforms in shaping news production and consumption, it is essential to consider the specific sociopolitical conditions of Turkey.

The Capture of the Media in Turkey

Turkey operates under an advertising-driven journalism model. While this revenue structure subjects journalistic content to market pressures, it can, in theory, also shield journalists from direct political intervention, enabling them to fulfill their watchdog function (Benson, 2013; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Vera-Zambrano & Powers, 2022). However, in Turkey, financial benefits, such as soft loans from state banks and lucrative government contracts awarded to media owners, serve as additional sources of economic gain. These incentives function as political instruments, allowing the state to exert influence over journalistic practices. Historically, the state has played a strong role in shaping the national news ecosystem. Political clientelism enables media owners to leverage their media enterprises as tools for securing stable alliances with political power, which is essential for the success of their broader business interests (Yeşil, 2018).

The foundations of the current political capture of the media in Turkey were established nearly two decades before the JDP came to power in 2002. By the early 1980s, as neoliberal policies drove up the cost of printing paper, the elimination of state subsidies for these essential services led to the disappearance of small- and medium-sized media owners (Sözeri & Güney, 2011). This economic restructuring resulted in the "conglomeration" of the sector, and by the late 1990s, a small number of business groups, whose primary aim was to secure "support for their other business ventures" (Kaya & Çakmur, 2010, p. 530), had come to dominate the media landscape. It did not take long for Erdoğan's Islamist-rooted government to exploit media bosses' corrupt ties with the state to "tame" them (Coşkun, 2020). The seizure of the Sabah-ATV media group by the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund of Turkey (TMSF), citing alleged financial irregularities and its subsequent transfer to a progovernment business group in 2007, was the first major intervention in the media sector. The massive tax fine imposed on Turkey's largest media company, the Doğan Group, in 2009 not only gradually curtailed the conglomerate's media investments but also sent a clear message to other media owners about who controlled the political and media landscape in this new era. In 2011, Doğan Group's newspaper Milliyet, one of Turkey's most established mainstream newspapers, was sold to the pro-government Demirören Group. The group went on to acquire all remaining Doğan-owned newspapers, including the flagship Hürriyet and its television channels, in 2018. Public banks extended favorable loans to finance this takeover (Över, 2021). As Akser and McCollum (2021) note, this intervention resulted in 90% of the Turkish media falling under government control.

Beyond financial penalties and coercive measures, such as the imprisonment of journalists and the shutdown of critical media outlets, the government also employed noncoercive strategies, including the withdrawal of state advertisements, the termination of subsidies, and the elimination of tax breaks, to exert control over the media (Yeşil, 2018). As of June 2025, Turkey ranks 159th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders (2025). According to data from the Journalists' Union of Turkey (2025), at least 18 journalists were serving prison sentences, and Turkey was classified as a "not free" country by Freedom House (2024). According to the European Center for Press and Media Freedom (2025), Turkey's top broadcasting authority, Radio Television Supreme Council (RTUK), acts as a government stick to punish opposition voices. As a result, the political capture of the media by the government has not only eroded journalistic values and created a highly biased media landscape (Akser & Baybars-Hawks, 2024) but has also driven many critical and independent voices to migrate to online digital platforms.

Methodology

This qualitative case study draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 14 journalist YouTubers in Turkey. Selected as micro and macro influencers with at least ten thousand highly engaged followers (Park, Lee, Xiong, Septianto, & Seo, 2021), they all have professional journalism backgrounds and produce content at least weekly. Between March and July 2024, we conducted one to one-and-a-half-hour online interviews, recording the sessions for transcription using online software. We chose to anonymize participants to protect them from potential legal, political, or social persecution. This measure was essential to ensure they could share detailed and nuanced insights without fear of personal or professional repercussions. By doing so, we upheld ethical research standards and preserved the integrity of the data collected.

Most participants, aged 38 to 60 (M = 48.8; Mdn = 52.5), are experienced journalists who gained popularity and prestige in traditional media before moving to digital platforms. Half have worked in the profession since February 28, 1997, the date of the last major military intervention that changed the government. Nine began practicing journalism before the JDP came to power in 2002. Later, most of them faced conflicts with powerful political forces, lost their jobs, and had difficulties finding new positions in the national mainstream media because of their critical voices. After leaving the mainstream media, they started to broadcast on YouTube, as they viewed the platform as an economic and professional opportunity.

We began interviews in March 2024 during Turkey's last local election, anticipating a period of intense journalistic activity as audience demand for political news and analysis would surge around and after the elections. Interviewing journalist YouTubers while they were engaged in long, demanding routines to produce frequent content on Turkish politics, the regime, and democracy was expected to yield comprehensive data with fresh details for our research.

Our interview questionnaire addressed three main themes: (i) journalistic roles and practices on YouTube compared with traditional mainstream media, (ii) the opportunities and limitations YouTube offers as a social media platform, and (iii) authoritarianism and the experience of being a journalist YouTuber in Turkey. The interviews comprised open-ended questions in four stages. In the first stage, we gathered the participants' educational and professional backgrounds. The second stage explored their reasons for moving to YouTube, their motivations, objectives, and self-perception as YouTubers. The third stage examined their experiences with YouTube's algorithmic and platform governance, including their interpretation and use of digital affordances, perceived technological challenges, and professional interactions with platform management. Finally, the fourth stage focused on pressure, censorship, and journalistic autonomy, asking participants to compare their experiences of editorial and political pressure and self-censorship in traditional media with their current independent journalism on YouTube.

Following the interviews, we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and identified five categorical codes derived from a subset of data in relation to our research themes: algorithmic experience, platform governance, journalistic role and purpose, pressure-censorship, and the digital-traditional comparison. This coding system helped us sift through the data set to capture (i) how journalists on YouTube, independent of traditional institutional constraints, evaluate their professional role and purpose

on the platform, (ii) how they evaluate the new risks and opportunities that the platform algorithms and governance bring for the preservation of journalistic autonomy and authority, and (iii) how they compare the previous case of being a news employee in a news organization with being a YouTuber in terms of their experience of political pressure and censorship. Examining these codes, we refined our research themes to develop insight into the transformation of journalism through a global video-sharing social media platform in an authoritarian political context.

Table 1. Research Participants.

Name	Follower numbers	# of videos	Declared monthly (YouTube) revenue	Previous role	Experience (years)	Role perception
Ada	602k	1.9k	Approx. $10,000	TV reporter, anchor	20	Broadcaster
Ahmet	348k	598	Between $15,000–20,000	Journalist, TV manager, editor-in-chief, anchor	43	Journalist
Bünyamin	254k	329	$5,000	Columnist, writer	31	Commentator
Cem	180k	294	No monetization yet	TV reporter, anchor	29	Storyteller
Cemal	178k	2.8k	Not stated	TV reporter, anchor	22	Journalist
Ceyhun	162	3.9k	Not stated	TV reporter, TV bureau chief	35	Journalist
Erdem	151k	453	Not stated	TV reporter, anchor, TV manager, influencer	33	Digital content producer
Fatih	123k	805	$2,500	Radio host	18	Digital content producer
Fırat	65k	71	No monetization yet	TV reporter, anchor	25	Producer
Gülin	39k	286	Not stated	TV reporter, anchor	17	Journalist, broadcaster
Kemal	30k	174	Approx. $600	Foreign news reporter, editor, columnist	31	News analyst
Melike	23k	471	Between $600–700	Foreign news reporter, columnist	22	Journalist, commentator
Meltem	35k	1,073	No revenue	Reporter, editor	18	Independent journalist, content producer
Zeynep	14k	1,700	No revenue	Reporter, TV presenter	32	Journalist, broadcaster

The Rise of YouTube as an Alternative News Source in Turkey

For most participants, YouTube serves as a refuge from political pressures and limitations. The digital space gives journalist YouTubers creative freedom, the ability to reach diverse audiences, and greater control over content and audience relationships by bypassing traditional gatekeepers and hierarchies. The intimacy and authenticity of digital platforms are seen as advantages over the more formal, constrained nature of television.

While traditional news outlets are losing trust, journalist YouTubers are gaining credibility. This is partly because news audiences rely on news personalities rather than on media companies. This phenomenon contributes to the rise of journalist YouTubers and the demise of the institutional structure and role of traditional journalism. The journalistic institution is a factory-like production setting (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009) where different actors occupy different but interdependent positions within a division of labor to produce and report the news. It is a bureaucratic organization with its hierarchies, rules, conventions, and norms (Gans, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). In the power network of a news organization, journalists feel the pressures of their editors, managers, and media owners to produce journalistic work in the organization's editorial line. Most of our research participants emphasized that YouTube enabled them to be free of such internal pressures and practice independent journalism without any institutional or political bias.

Erdem, who worked for years as the editor-in-chief and anchorman of a 24-hour news channel, said that the polarized media system of the past decade and the institutional transformation did not fit his "understanding of independence." Melike, a prominent foreign policy correspondent and commentator specializing in the Middle East, argued that government pressure on the news channel she worked for led to institutional censorship and hurt her journalistic integrity. She said, "If I had my YouTube channel, like now, I could have said things that the JDP government would never like (. . .) I can criticize Turkish policies. I can approach the news topic holistically from all perspectives." Both Bünyamin, an influential political commentator with more than 250,000 subscribers, and Cem, a popular TV anchor who voluntarily left his television career, praised the platform as a medium free from the many constraints of traditional media, not only those imposed by pro-government newsrooms but also by pro-opposition ones. Cemal's political talk show on a major news channel was suspended by the channel's managers in 2014. He believes this was a politically motivated decision and underlines the external pressures that led to self-censorship: "(. . .) I practiced self-censorship to avoid getting the channel fined. If a penalty against the owner would affect the entire institution and the livelihoods of so many employees, it wouldn't be right to be selfish about it."

Ceyhun is one of the pioneers of journalistic YouTube broadcasting with more than 160,000 subscribers. He was a political correspondent and news editor for 24-hour news channels, but later left the industry for YouTube and has been broadcasting daily for the last 10 years. He underlined the advantages of working alone: "Working in a newsroom is extremely challenging. It requires taking responsibility for others (. . .) I'd rather do it myself—so if there's a mistake, it's mine alone." However, when journalists migrate to YouTube, they also move away from editorial oversight, which typically provides a common-sense framework. As a result, they must self-navigate sensitive issues under constant pressure.

Transformation of Journalistic Practice and Culture on YouTube

Erdem, who had previously been the editor-in-chief and news anchor at one of the leading news channels, said:

> What I miss most is the mode of production where people with different areas of expertise come together, based on a professional division of labor and focused on continuous output. Because there were countless meetings held and repeated every day (. . .) Those meetings consistently generated good and novel ideas.

The sense of longing reflected here pertains both to the division of labor in journalism and to the very essence of the profession itself. Journalist YouTubers' practice causes the conflation of traditionally separate roles: journalistic, publishing, administrative, and technical. It is not just the disappearance of the teamwork essential for quality journalism; all these additional tasks and responsibilities also limit the time they can devote to journalism. In the interviews, our participants complained about the heavy burden of managing their channels' finances, bureaucratic paperwork, and business transactions with hired personnel, tasks traditionally handled by different people in a news organization. Ada, Cem, Ahmet, Gülin, and Erdem seek sponsors, which requires them to understand the advertising market, PR logic, and business strategies to attract funding.

Journalist YouTubers are also compelled to manage their audience engagement using the live chat box and after-broadcast comments on their YouTube pages. They analyze and respond to audience engagement and reactions using detailed metric analyses provided by YouTube Analytics. Our participants said that they must invest time and energy in these tasks, whether they like them or not, to learn audiences' expectations and needs and to tune into their desires for professional success. They are aware that their public visibility and impact depend on their efforts to increase viewership, and subscriber base in an attention economy ruled by algorithms; otherwise, they implicitly or explicitly express their fear of vanishing.

At most, they employ one or two assistants to edit videos, or in one case (Bünyamin), the assistant moderates the broadcast, creating a conversational and intimate atmosphere with the YouTuber. Almost all participants receive the assistance of what they call "tech-savvy young people" to produce YouTube shorts, Instagram reels, and sometimes TikTok videos to advertise their content and maximize audience attention. Many participants underlined that the lack of a master-apprentice dynamic, a staple of traditional newsrooms, is detrimental to the profession's future in these "micro news corners." As Ahmet put it:

> Somehow, one needs to get into a place as an intern and be trained alongside what we call senior professionals (. . .) Now that everyone is digital on YouTube, I think young people will have difficulty developing themselves from the ground up in this way.

Journalist YouTubers also promote their content by differentiating themselves and establishing business models to gain journalistic authority and popularity for material profit and public impact. We

analytically used the term "self-branding" to refer to self-promotion and asked them about their strategies for this. They explained what sets them apart from other YouTubers as follows:

1) Strong trust relationship with audiences (Meltem and Fatih).
2) Deep and comprehensive news analysis (Ada, Melike, and Kemal).
3) A wide network of news sources (Ada, Melike, Fatih, and Kemal).
4) Ability to reach out to a massive audience, including opposing political segments of society (Ahmet, Bünyamin, and Cemal).
5) Courage to voice their true opinion (Ahmet, Bünyamin, Kemal, Cemal, Cem, and Ceyhun).
6) Practicing critical journalism without falling into the trap of sensationalism and populism (Ceyhun and Cem).
7) Objectivity through the inclusion of contradicting perspectives in content and the critique of every politician, political side, or ideology (Bünyamin, Cemal, and Fatih).

These definitions demonstrate that journalists, in addition to claiming the universal core principles of their profession, also appropriate certain qualities attributed to commentators and, at times more broadly (as YouTube channel managers), embrace the slogans of media organizations. While these strategies of differentiation and self-branding aim to create credibility and audience loyalty, they also underpin the multifaceted professional identities that journalist YouTubers have developed to sustain their work.

We argue that journalist YouTubers have embraced a three-dimensional role consisting of a news aggregator, a commentator, and an opinion leader. As news aggregators, they collect various content from different news sources and "rebundle" them (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 52). This mostly relies on disparate pieces of open-access information that they quickly gather from other news sources, validate, and present to the online public, like a typical news aggregator (Coddington, 2020). Additionally, they sometimes package the exclusive information received from their exclusive sources within political parties, the bureaucracy, and the government. Erdem, Ada, and Melike occasionally host guest speakers to provide their viewers with news details or expert knowledge on a news topic. They even sometimes go to the field to gather information and produce journalistic videos from there. Except for them, all our research participants broadcast solo on their YouTube channel, presenting a complete commentary-based narrative using the staged performance of a news anchor. Blending factual reporting with commentary and public advocacy, journalist YouTubers' content often takes the form of political analysis, reflecting their desire to intervene in events and influence national politics by shaping public opinion, motivating political action, and suggesting political moves to mostly opposition politicians.

Algorithms, Infrastructure Capture, and Journalistic Autonomy

The interviews with journalist YouTubers highlight the tensions and power imbalances inherent in the producer-platform relationship. Most of the YouTubers mentioned the challenges with YouTube's platform governance and transparency. YouTube has its own rules and strategies for journalistic success, and YouTubers need to adapt to them. Our research participants, however, are senior journalists who, over years of professional experience in traditional mainstream media, internalized specific rules and conventions of what news is, why a certain story is chosen, and why it is written and presented in a certain way. Those

rules and conventions guide journalists in fast-paced decision-making processes that involve the qualification and legitimization of newsworthiness, the speedy and automated conduct of news work, the assessment of news output, and interaction with audiences (Schultz, 2007). During their employment in traditional news institutions, our research participants consciously or unconsciously developed a practical understanding of which journalistic practices their bosses, editors, competitors, and coworkers saw as advantageous, desired, and expected, and oriented their work toward this practice to thrive in the market (Ananny, 2018, p. 89).

Now, on YouTube, the journalists must learn and orient their content production toward new elements that platform governance and algorithmic logic supposedly bring to the fore as advantageous, desired, and expected. One of the challenges they face is the lack of information about how YouTube's algorithms work. They are all eager to adapt to the algorithms to enhance their online visibility in YouTube's recommendation system. To do that, they have developed some shared strategies, such as advertising, regular and systematic live broadcasting every day at the same hour, using sensational rhetoric, monitoring Google Trends and X (Twitter) to identify popular topics, using popular keywords, and crafting clickbait-style titles and thumbnails. These are the basic rules of visibility, and our research participants tend to consider these strategies to be some sort of tacit professional code of YouTube to amplify content and attract viewers. Many of them stated that they "unwillingly" preferred sensational titles over the calm and "cool-headed" ones typical of traditional media. One recent study offers similar findings. Following a framing and sentiment analysis of 810 video titles produced by the top three Turkish journalist YouTubers, Uzunoğlu (2025) found that 72% exhibited negative or highly negative sentiment, suggesting that "emotionally charged language" was strategically employed to maximize algorithmic visibility (p. 14). Yet, beyond these shared basic strategies, algorithmic logic remains largely a black box (Pasquale, 2015) to all our participants. There is a perception among some of our research participants that "YouTube likes" (in their words) content that includes hotly debated political issues and political controversy, whereas some argue that more niche and original human-interest stories are likely to draw more audience attention. Fatih, a former radio host turned YouTuber known for his pro-government stance, unlike other journalist YouTubers we interviewed, claims that algorithms do not treat every broadcaster equally and argues that this algorithmic inequality is driven by platform managers' choices. Similarly, Kemal, and Ceyhun assign agency to algorithms themselves, believing that these systems are actively manipulated. Ceyhun stated:

> They [the platform management] try to convince us that the algorithm doesn't prioritize political content. Not true at all. However, if the person speaking in a political broadcast is a true journalist and occasionally engages in so-called "boring" journalism, then that mighty algorithm suddenly changes its behavior [and buries the content].

Participants also expressed frustration with YouTube's monetization policies. Advertising revenue is a critical income source, yet many have described unexplained demonetization, shadow banning, and content suppression, especially for sensitive subjects like war, sexual abuse, and humanitarian disasters. While such topics are highly newsworthy in traditional journalism, YouTube's algorithmic governance appears to penalize them. Zeynep said:

> When I talked about [sexual] abuse, when I mentioned rape, a friend (. . .) said there was a problem [with videos] on their end (. . .) YouTube displayed "under review" for the title I had written (. . .) I thought that title might be causing the issue, so I changed it, and it got resolved.

Former TV anchor Gülin, in reference to the unexpected low rating of her content about the 2023 earthquake in Turkey, said, "The content, which is about people dying (. . .) a tough choice for algorithms." Kemal said his videos with titles including the word "Gaza" not only had fewer views than normal but also faced monetization issues:

> [The warning on the platform] says, "advertisers may not want to place ads on this content" (. . .) When you activate the monetization, it turns green automatically at first, but (. . .) after uploading [this] (. . .) that dollar sign suddenly switches from green to yellow.

Such experiences underline the perceived loss of journalistic autonomy. Algorithms act as techno-social agents (Latour, 1992), shaping what is visible, accessible, and ultimately considered news. This dynamic encourages journalists to internalize an "algorithmic imaginary" (Bucher, 2016), forming speculative assumptions about what content algorithms value. Journalist YouTubers suggest that YouTube's algorithm effectively sets its own news agenda, distinct from journalism's public-service mandate.

Ahmet has fought for ratings for years, not only as a journalist but also as a TV channel manager. At the time of the interview, he was making daily broadcasts to his nearly 350,000 followers. He reflected on resisting the platform's logic: "Friends who want to push themselves forward in the algorithm aren't necessarily wrong, but in doing so, they let general [public] trends dictate the format of their content." Similarly, Bünyamin believes that the algorithmic preferences that set the news agenda are mainly shaped by the viewing habits and profiles of online users.

Ultimately, most participants stressed that YouTube's algorithmic logic is incompatible with traditional journalistic norms and values. They remain concerned that platform systems may not sufficiently prioritize quality journalism. Instead, they perceived YouTube's recommendation architecture as potentially weakening journalistic culture and limiting their capacity to independently define and pursue their professional agendas.

Censorship and Self-Censorship on YouTube

YouTube might relieve journalists from institutional and editorial pressure, but not entirely from political pressure. Whether or not the traditional institutional structure of journalism is present, journalists and media personalities in Turkey, including YouTube journalists, face challenges and limitations related to freedom of expression and legal repercussions.

Our interviewees also described experiencing direct pressure from political authorities, constant legal scrutiny through never-ending lawsuits, and the need for self-censorship to avoid potential consequences of their statements in the digital realm, including jail time. This forces them to carefully

consider their words and avoid crossing perceived "red lines" so that they can leverage the relative openness of digital platforms to express their views and hold power accountable while still exercising caution. Zeynep is a journalist with more than 30 years of experience. She worked mostly for TV channels in her career and runs a YouTube channel where she mostly interviews experts on hot topics. She spoke about the "red lines" in this digital realm:

> This isn't such a free space after all. It's a place where everyone is monitored, files are compiled on people, and you can be sued today for something you said in a video 10 years ago. So, I'm not entirely at ease.

Melike had similar concerns:

> I still realize that I practice self-censorship (. . .) There are certain taboos in Turkey. For example, no one can directly say anything about [President] Erdoğan because even the most unrelated remark can lead to a lawsuit for insulting the president, one of the most troublesome things for a journalist. No one wants to get into trouble with the police. I don't want to lose my passport either. After all, I'm a foreign news reporter.

Ceyhun claimed that he had been constantly reported for allegedly insulting the president or Turkish identity, although none of them had turned into formal legal investigations at the time of the writing. For Cem, the platform is like a rose with sharp thorns:

> A single word you say on YouTube can be taken out of context and twisted into something else. Then, by midnight, a troll army starts tweeting, calling for Cem to be arrested. Three hours later, at 5 a.m., the police show up at your door and take you away.

Ada, one of the most popular journalists on YouTube with more than 600,000 followers at the time of the interview, had been given a prison sentence because of a political interview, but the court postponed the execution. She was a very popular anchor of a mainstream news channel, but was forced to leave the channel after being criticized by the government for her comments. She said her freedom of speech was more restricted now than when she worked for the news channel: "When you go back and watch it, it's like, 'Whoa, man, how did we say that? I wonder if we're thirsty for death or something."

Conclusion

In countries like Turkey, where the media is under intense pressure and journalists face significant challenges in working in newsrooms that safeguard freedom of expression, platforms such as YouTube have emerged as vital alternatives for protecting the public's right to information. These platforms allow journalists to generate income through advertising revenue-sharing mechanisms provided by large technology companies (in this case, Google) while enabling audiences to access voices that are otherwise silenced. However, the platform economy presents inherent limitations that prevent it from serving as a genuine alternative to traditional media.

First, structural inequalities embedded in the traditional media landscape are not only reproduced in the digital environment but are also often intensified by algorithmic dynamics. Prominent media figures, particularly anchors and presenters, can leverage their existing popularity by transferring their followers to digital platforms, securing greater visibility and income than lesser-known journalists and reporters. In this system, visibility becomes a decisive metric, reinforcing existing inequalities.

Second, the opaque and algorithm-driven nature of platforms shaped by the logic of the attention economy casts a shadow over freedom of expression. The competition for visibility influences agenda setting, headline choices, and content labeling, potentially distorting journalistic priorities. According to our interviewees, algorithms tend to prioritize content that is technically polished and deemed "interesting" over content that holds journalistic value, thus sometimes affecting the visibility of exclusive journalistic content delivered in a traditional way with poor production techniques. Furthermore, despite operating on YouTube, journalists are not immune to the broader repressive environment that limits press freedom in the country. While censoring YouTube may be more difficult than targeting national media outlets, self-censorship among journalists appears to intensify.

Journalism, by its nature, is usually grounded in a division of labor for the production and delivery of news and is acquired not only through formal education but also through experience and collaboration with experienced professionals. This raises important questions about the extent to which journalism can remain true to its core principles within micro-level YouTube newsrooms, often operated by only a handful of individuals. In general, production teams tend to consist of two to three people, while five out of the 14 interviewees manage their operations entirely on their own. A model shaped by such economic constraints not only imposes new administrative, financial, and bureaucratic burdens on journalists but also detaches them from field reporting, effectively confining them to studio-based production. This shift accelerates the transformation of journalism from fieldwork into studio commentary and, in some cases where there is no flow of fresh news, into forms of opinion leadership. In contexts such as Turkey, where journalism within traditional media is significantly restricted and struggles to follow technological advancements, this "new mainstream" trend leads to a profound shift in journalistic practices.

This study contributes to the literature on journalism under authoritarian systems by showing how platform-based practices simultaneously resist and reproduce structural inequalities. It underscores the paradox of YouTube journalism: While providing a partial refuge from state repression, it remains constrained by the logics of visibility and the attention economy, reshaping journalistic labor and professional norms. In this way, the analysis extends existing debates on media capture and alternative media by underscoring the new dependencies and vulnerabilities generated by platform capitalism.

To better understand and interpret the transformation of journalistic production and the evolving social function of news in this new organizational context, further research is essential. In addition, content analysis, possibly including comparative studies, can offer valuable insights into how closely the content produced aligns with the components of news value as defined in a universal framework, thereby making a meaningful contribution to the existing literature.

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