

Media and Political Information Environment in Turkey

Background Information on the Turkish Media and Politics

The history of Turkey's media has been characterized by intertwined relations with state control, democratization with technological improvements, assassinations of oppositional journalists in the name of state's interests, clientelism, conglomeration, record journalist imprisonment, exploitation of press laws to silence opposition and strict regulation on social media (Mat, Vivona, 2019). This situation further deteriorated since the 1980s under neoliberal policies up until today through controlling media ownership and editorial content.

After AKP came to power in 2002, it quickly captured media outlets from business owners such as Cem Uzan who criticized AKP and Erdoğan. In 2008 and 2009, journalists and military personnel were charged and imprisoned with coup attempts and terrorist propaganda during political investigations of Ergenekon and the KCK (the Union of Kurdistan Communities). Other important court trials for the criminalization of journalists were the Cumhuriyet Trials (propaganda for Kurdish and Gülenist terrorism), Kurdish Media cases and the Cases of Gülen linked media.

Also, the coup attempt in 2016 was a turning point for the media. After coup attempt in 2016, new legislation was passed under the state of emergency which allowed the collection of personal data from state institutions and private companies. Therefore, the last 20 years of AKP's rule in Turkey have illustrated us media control of dictatorial intimidation tactics against media owners, and reporters range from media capture to imprisonment. Hate speech is also constructed in the line of us vs them and it targets all classes of society such as journalists, opposition party members, any kind of protesters, students and workers. Also, this intimidation can be done through institutions of the President's Communication Office, the NGO of Pelican Group or individual trolls (Çarkoğlu, Yıldırım, 2023).

Nowadays, many oppositional journalists continue their activities in online outlets such as YouTube, T24, Diken, Duvar and others for independent and quality journalism. This is described as "web-based journalism". The best-known example is the Özgürüz website, directed by former Cumhuriyet editor-in-chief, Can Dündar (Mat, Vivona, 2019).

Existing Literature Review in the Six Mentioned Areas

Supply of Political Information

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report for Turkey in 2018, social media and online news are at the top of the list of sources of news used weekly with a reach of %87, followed by TV (%77), printed media (%46) and radio (%39). While online media (%45) is the primary source for left-wing respondents, TV (%59) is for those on the right. In terms of top media brands in traditional sources, TV channels such as Fox TV, CNN Türk, NTV, TRT channels and Hürriyet and Sözcü newspapers are the most preferred traditional brands

(Yanatma, 2018). The overall trust was %38 and distrust was %40 in the Turkish news is similar which illustrates highly polarized society in this regard. Moreover, political leaning plays significant role in trust since overall trust in news in the right wing is %50, while it is %29 in the left wing (Ibid, 2018).

Some independent TV channels such as Fox TV and Halk TV provide politically unbiased news/elections to Turkish citizens. Moreover, the digital revolution in 2002 with the rise of AKP power has transformed the country's information space – such as online news outlets/newspapers (T24 in 2009), YouTube have become popular among the young generations for independent journalism (Tahiroğlu, 2022).

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report in 2024 for Turkey, it is argued that government friendly TV channels CNN Türk, A Haber, and TRT have given greater airtime disproportionately to the incumbents despite impartiality being required by the Turkish institution. It argues that citizens need to be careful when discussing politics with others online in Turkey because of the legal amendment of the Disinformation Bill. Furthermore, Television remains the most influential news medium with online news services in Turkey. Trust in the news has remained stable at %35 and TRT's clear support to the incumbent party for election coverage resulted decrease in trust in the eyes of the citizens (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Arguedas, Nielsen, 2024).

One of the journalists, Afşin Yurdakul, argues that polarization has risen to level that the civil public discourse and inclusive democratic debate is now impossible among people in society. The status quo in the country provides fragile environment in the false information spreading in the digital arena which increases divisions along party lines, and this influences citizens to discuss politics objectively around fact-based conversations. Therefore, the report recommends improving practices of fact-based, empathetic journalism may alleviate divisions and increase civil debate in the country. AKP government also passed a law borrowed from Germany's Network Enforcement Act, NETzDG in 2017 which targeted online hate speech and gave fines to technology companies in case for not abiding by the law. The report suggests focusing on how political advertising influences the democratic process in Turkey for further research (Yurdakul, 2020).

News quality, impartiality, independence

Another article concentrates on the political ideology and its influence in the production of news in contentious Turkish culture. It investigates how Turkish Islamic conservative journalists produced representations of two dramatic uprisings in 2013: the Gezi Park protests in Turkey and the military coup in Egypt. These two cases illustrate how Islamism as a political ideology instrumentalizes news-making. The article is based on newsroom ethnography conducted at an Islamic national mainstream TV channel in Turkey between 2011 and 2014 (Aşık, 2024).

The article argues that as the polarization between Islamic and secular groups is based on cultural distinctions, political ideology determining journalist practices is defined not only by party affiliations or socioeconomic class but also by the common cultural ways of living and

considering journalists who affiliate themselves as members of sociocultural groups. Therefore, the collective beliefs and concerns of Turkish journalists are shaped by their life experiences, affect their ways of forming opinions of news events and their journalistic practices not according to external reality or news information but rather by the reflection of the ways which relieve the journalists' anxieties and address their political concerns (Aşık, 2024).

Moreover, the lack of unionization/solidarity among journalists leads to labour exploitation and low-quality content due to also lack of pro-democratic social movements, the conservatism of the judiciary, and the institutional weakness of the parliament vis-a vis the society and media. Positively, NGOs and activist groups have started to watch the media to reduce discrimination and increase diversity in the media due to the lack of self-regulatory framework (Kurban, 2011).

The report argues that the absence of media freedom and independence in Turkey through a historical lens for a relationship between the state and media. Therefore, the ideological and political factors between the military (Kemalist Republicanism) and the government (Islamic Conservatism Governments) explain the anti-democratic laws and decreased media freedom. Ergenekon cases against Turkish Kemalist military high-ranking personnel and the election of a President from Islamic background altered the media outlets positions and became pro-government in this regard (Kurban, 2011).

Media concentration

The essence problem of the Turkish media is that almost all of Turkey's media outlets are owned by pro-government businesses which allow the government to have indirect control over them. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan exerts influence over media by controlling more than 90% of the country's print, broadcast, and online media outlets. The five media conglomerates/biggest companies of Ciner, Doğuş, Demirören, Kalyon, and Hayat Görsel own the most popular TV news/networks and have strong personal/political/economic ties with President Erdoğan (Tahiroğlu, 2022).

While these channels enjoyed relatively media freedom between 2002-2013, after 2013 (Gezi Park Protests) until our time, they have become a propaganda and censorship tool of the Erdoğan government (Tahiroğlu, 2022). These companies also join public tenders and have government contracts to sustain their businesses in other sectors which undermines the independent/critical journalism against government. So, they protect their private business interests in return by providing propaganda, manipulate facts to promote government interests (Tunç, 2015).

The link between negativity bias and political parallelism in the Turkish press and links this with media ownership patterns during the election's coverage in 2015 and 2018. It conducts quantitative media content analysis based on the front pages of six newspapers. It illustrates significant relationship between partisanship and negativity: newspaper negativity is not distributed equally in all directions, so the newspapers support their endorsed party by attacking others through criticism of the respective opposition. Media ownership also plays a

role in this linkage. For newspapers that are part of conglomerate or cross-media ownership structures, negative messages towards the main oppositional party (CHP) in the 2015 and 2018 elections are increased than positive messages. Independent owned newspapers illustrate more negative towards the ruling AKP party than positive messages. Therefore, these results are most likely because of media outlets' organizational ties with the parties, profit considerations and political or ideological preferences (Hoff, Pagels, Rott, 2020).

In terms of media concentration in Turkey, the period between 2019 and 2021 saw an increase in wireless, digital media/games and internet advertising than traditional media. Turkey's media has always been somehow dominated by the handful of conglomerates between 1990s and our present time. These handful conglomerates with having close political or economic interests with the ruling parties have joined government contracts, auctions and increased their power in other industrial sectors. They became successful because of regulatory gaps and limited enforcement of competition laws which decreased pluralism and diversity in the Turkish media and internet sector (Yeşil, Aydın, 2024). The Turkish media sector is interesting case because business owners serve to governments not the other way around because to government plays critical role in the economy.

Therefore, pro-Erdoğan media controls almost %90 of the traditional and online media and the other independent media outlets face significant financial (funding from foreign NGOs – facing allegations for colluding against Turkey) (Yeşil, 2024, p. 43), and judicial challenges such as RTÜK fines, closure of their channels and others (Yeşil, Aydın, 2024). The prominent scholars of media ownership and regulation in Turkey are Gülseren Adaklı and Beybin Kejanlıoğlu. They explained how the neoliberal transformation of the country's media system from the 1980s has resulted in negative implications on concentration and cross-ownership in democratic communication (Yeşil, Aydın, 2024).

Another article focuses on the media capture in Turkey which suggests that Turkey's media shift is influenced by media capture. It associates four media aspects of Hallin and Mancini's to the effects of media capture in the Turkish media system shift: the rise of political parallelism, erosion of journalistic professionalism, controlling role of the state and government friendly ownership concentration. The study concludes that the primary reason for this media shift from a captured liberal to a captured media in Turkey is the climate of fear that has triggered successive governments in Turkey to attempt media capture (Akser, Baybars, 2024).

However, it also concludes that alternative independent media can emerge and disrupt the captured media system. The captured media (ATV, Sabah, CNN Türk, Kanal D, Hürriyet) used different tactics in spreading fake news against the oppositional candidate. These are discursive tools of false reporting, photo-defaming, and constant hate rhetoric against political opponents as being separatist, terrorist sympathy, serving Turkey's foreign enemies, Zionist and atheist for electoral gains in Turkey (Akser, Baybars, 2024). So, Turkish media is described as hybrid, it became more illiberal and used extensive media captured methods – state subsidy of private media (Akser & Baybars, 2023) – to create favourable media over post-2011 (see Panayircı et al., 2016; Uce & De Swert, 2010).

So, this is useful for AKP since Turkish people spend their daily time at least 5 hours on TV. Erdoğan's government gave arbitrary tax penalties to force newspapers into bankruptcy which then later owned by the President's friends. Therefore, major media outlets were silenced by financial threats, self-censorship and job insecurity of journalists. Also, the state broadcaster TRT must be radically reformed to turn into the independent public service. Appointment processes in RTÜK must be regulated to minimize political influence (Tunç, 2015).

Polarization of media

After Turkey's changing system from Parliamentary to Presidential, the media was highly politicized and monopolized by the government. Independent media networks faced fines and bans from Turkey's state-controlled broadcast regulator – RTÜK for offenses "insulting the government and others". However, no single fine was given to pro-government media outlets. Moreover, Turkey was the world's sixth biggest jailer of journalists in 2021 according to the Committee to protect journalists with the Journalists Union of Turkey recording 23 journalists in prison as of May 2022 (Tahiroğlu, 2022).

Also, independent journalists are not allowed to enter the war zones of Turkey in Syria, Iraq so that Turkish citizens can only learn from the state narrative TV channels. Other civil society leaders – Osman Kavala and political leaders such as HDP's former leader Selahattin Demirtaş were still in jail. Also, the lack of financial situation of the independent media outlets and the funding from the EU member states to them resulted in new problems/accusations for serving foreign interests by the politicized judiciary (Tahiroğlu, 2022).

Another article examines press-party parallelism during the 2011 national elections in Turkey. It focuses on two indicators of press-party parallelism: respective voice given to the leading and opposition parties, and news articles' tones toward AKP (incumbent party) and CHP (opposition party). The newspapers were content analyzed and separated into three different groups based on survey data: conservative newspapers, mainstream broadsheets and opposition newspapers. The findings illustrate that over the course of the election campaign, internal pluralism in both conservative and opposition papers declined in terms of voice given to respective parties and tone of news coverage (Çarkoğlu, Baruh, Yıldırım, 2014).

However, for mainstream newspapers, the ratio of voice given to AKP and CHP is in line with balanced coverage in terms of parties' visibility in media coverage. As a result, the Turkish media system is defined as clientelist, corporatist (media companies need to cater to specific reader segments) and hybrid nature of media systems on press-party parallelism especially in the last stages of election campaigns. Therefore, the further polarization of news coverage in Turkish media may be explained by the competitive media market in which newspapers have target readers based on ideological orientation (Çarkoğlu, Baruh, Yıldırım, 2014).

Another article focuses on the populism in foreign policy and polarized news media of Turkey by framing the Syrian operations. Turkey's military operations in Syria allow us to assess how an increasingly polarized media industry has used populist framing to report on the conflict. It conducts framing analysis method by analysing 2.166 examples of news coverage of the

conflict by 3 mainstream national online news outlets which are related to certain political parties. These are the pro-government Sabah, the moderate/pro-government Hürriyet and the opposition/Kemalist Sözcü and alternative outlet Bianet (İşeri, Ersoy, 2020).

The findings illustrate that the creation of a sense of crisis over Syria has provided a “rally round the flag effect”. This allowed AKP’s populist discourses to dominate the public sphere through mainstream media, including opposition outlets which caused detrimental effects for the state of democracy. The article also stressed that there is an urgent need for further studies on how populist discourses have shaped the political scene in different contexts. It adopts cross-sectional analysis of Syrian operations and understands how different media outlets frame them as “crises” (İşeri, Ersoy, 2020). Therefore, AKP used legitimization discourses of the strong state and citizens in unity against common enemies by using the role of media outlets during Syrian operations over democracy. Therefore, the media’s role in the populism should be studied alongside structural factors (regime type and media system) and situational factors (cross-border crisis) that increase authoritarianism through polarized and populist media landscapes (İşeri, Ersoy, 2020).

Another article aims to analyze how political polarization influences the users’ trust in the news and their perceptions about misinformation on social media. According to the longitudinal studies, the citizens’ trust in news institutions has declined and both Turkish society and media have been politically polarized as well. It is based on a multi method research, focus groups, media diaries and interviews with people of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds (Bozdağ, Koçer, 2022). The results illustrate that citizens first use different strategies to validate the information in the news by looking at the comments below and looking at other news media, especially TV. The article proposes the concept of “skeptical inertia” which means that although citizens are self-aware of their critical and partisan news media consumption and evaluation, they still reveal or support media sources that they believe are politically closer. Therefore, the society and institutions are divided into “us” and “them” in the society and media among citizens (Bozdağ, Koçer, 2022).

Another article analyses the media’s role in vote choice in Turkey while the media and party systems are highly polarized. It argues that media highly influences vote choice, party support and vote switches during the campaign periods of four general elections between 2002 and 2015 even under this polarized system. It employs original panel data from four general elections in this period (Çarkoğlu, Yıldırım, 2023). Therefore, it shows that favorability in their choice of newspapers increases their likelihood of supporting political party. Also, favorability positively works with visibility to increase the likelihood of vote switching. However, as media is dominated by one ruling party system, undecided voters do not have alternative information, less visibility of opponents and which decreases the likelihood of vote switching in general (Çarkoğlu, Yıldırım, 2023).

Other articles concentrate on digital populism: trolls and political polarization of Twitter in Turkey. It argues that AKP’s failure to develop effective strategy to mobilize the online masses, caused the polarizing performances of the large pro-government troll army. This troll army serves three features of JDP’s populism: serving the people, fetish of the will of the

people and demonization. It argues that the literature overlooks how trolls in social media strategic tools for the state are to energize citizens through populist discourses. Trolling in Turkey is a government-led populist polarization, misinformation and political lynching (Bulut, Yörük, 2017). Another study investigates whether the news media can still make the political agenda in a highly polarized political environment. So, it applies network agenda setting model to Twitter. Findings show that political parallelism is the major factor in defining relationship between issues and accounts. Also, the political agenda was prioritized over the media agenda (Doğu, Mat, 2019).

Another article focuses on how the coup attempt in 2016 has shaped the editorial policies of news media outlets in a highly polarized media system. It argues that even in a catastrophic event, the framing news of media outlets converges to the limited degree of consensus. It conducts a content analysis methodology, that evaluates four different strategies of newspapers that have sociopolitical camps: the pro-government Sabah, the moderate Hürriyet, and the oppositional Sözcü and Cumhuriyet. It concludes that these media outlets used different framing strategies and the gap between them enlarged over the period of analysis (İşeri, Sekercioglu, Panayırıcı, 2019).

The article concludes by proposing three requirements for consensus in a polarized media system. These are the severity of the event must be big enough to bridge the peaks in the bi or multipolar landscape, the out-group identity/perpetrator must be easily established and the narrower the target population is the less likely a sphere of consensus is to be formed (İşeri, Sekercioglu, Panayırıcı, 2019). Another article also stresses the historical conflicts and background as the main reasons for political interventions and media control in Turkey. It also clearly argues that non-media investments of media bosses in other industries (infrastructure, energy, and others) are one of the most crucial reasons for media polarization, together with reasons of increasing technology and growing economy (Karlıdağ, Bulut, 2021).

Fake news, misinformation

Another article focuses on the 2023 Turkish general elections which was characterized by widespread misinformation. It targets the unique challenges and media consumption (traditional and online news sources) patterns in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes (CAR). It utilizes the nationally representative survey after the 2023 general elections and assesses the association between media consumption (traditional and online sources) and susceptibility to misinformation among government and opposition voters. The results illustrate that partisan news consumption significantly influences belief in misinformation, with individual who believes claims aligning with their political affiliations and rejecting opposition claims. While Television remains the dominant source of information in Turkey unlike social media which shows the limited impact on misinformation beliefs (Andı, Çarkoğlu, Baruh, Bocskay, 2025).

So, it is argued that the dynamics of misinformation within CARs is not well studied, and it confirms the enduring influence of traditional media in CARs and the restricted information environment shapes public perceptions. It is also argued that the dynamics of misinformation within the CARs remain significantly underexplored. Also, CARs strategically use these traditional media outlets to distribute pro-government propaganda and disseminate

misinformation (Andı, Çarkoğlu, Baruh, Bocskay, 2025). The study reveals a connection between partisan news consumption and belief in misleading election related claims in Turkey. So, supporters of electoral alliances prefer to believe the claims made by their preferred party while expressing disbelief from the opposing party. Moreover, traditional media especially influences citizens on their perceptions and their susceptibility to misinformation in Turkey rather than social media. CARs also capture these traditional media sources to limit citizens' access to diverse information sources and spread misinformation through these sources against political opposition (Andı, Çarkoğlu, Baruh, Bocskay, 2025).

During the Covid pandemic in Turkey, the infodemic (misinformation defined by the World Health Organization, WHO) was also one of the problems that provided misinformation regarding the origins of the pandemic to the disease's treatment in social media. The results of an article illustrate that nearly half of the participants in a quantitative study tended to believe in at least one of four misinformation and conspiracy theories about the virus. However, after fact-checking, participants' trust in social media showed a decrease in general (Tuncer, Tam, 2022). Half of all social media users in Turkey believe they face misinformation online every week (Yanatma, 2018) placing Turkey the first out of 37 countries listed with the highest reported misinformation rate. Moreover, fact-checking platforms were the least used in Turkey, less than %10 (Ünver, 2020). This is also called as "backfire effect" after fact-checking participants' trust in social media decreases when they find out the misinformation (Tuncer, Tam, 2022).

Another article also focuses on detecting fake news on social media in Turkey. It argues that in contrast to traditional media; social media's lack of control mechanism allows the spreading of misinformation in social media easily which illustrates the significance of fact-checking platforms. So, the purpose of this academic article is to determine the features of fake news and teyit.org (the biggest fact-checking platform in Turkey) was chosen in their analysis. The results show that fake news can be detectable based on four features: Propagation, User Type, Social Media Type and Formatting (Bozkanat, 2021).

Therefore, there are some articles that propose an advanced deep language transformer model to identify the truth of Turkish Covid-19 news from social media. It used five conventional machine learning algorithms and novel deep learning algorithms for the study (Bozuyula, Özçift, 2022). Another article focuses on the problem of fake news detection on social media for two languages Turkish and English and creates the first real world public dataset of Turkish fake and real news tweets, named SOSYalan. So, it targets a research gap or need to find automatic systems distinguishing fake news from real ones (Güler, Gündüz, 2023).

The overall trust is the lowest in the youngest population (18 to 24) with %28 but higher for people over 55, with %43. Almost %50 of the respondents believe that they came across stories that are made up for political or commercial reasons and Turkey is the leading country in 37 countries in the report. Both political left- and right-wing ideologies of respondents were exposed to made-up news, higher in left wing (%60) and center and right wing (%50). Finally, social media messaging on WhatsApp among respondents increased due to fears about

government surveillance on social networks. Turkey is at the top of all 37 countries with %65 that believe that open expression of their political views would get them into trouble with the government (Yanatma, 2018).

Another article focuses on examining how Syrian refugees interpret the fake news spread about them and how these interpretations influence their daily lives and their relationships with Turkish society. The study illustrates findings that Syrian refugees encounter fake news, and these negatively influence on their integration into social life. Certainly, false news flows driven by political and economic expectations exist and target refugees in the media in this regard. Syrian participants argued that the media tends to frame Syrians as criminals in social media and causes an increase in misinformation and violence in society (Hafez, Ünal, 2025).

According to Hallin Mancini, Turkey's media system represents the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralistic model which the media is dependent on the state, political parties, religious institutions and wealthy private patrons because of it has weak commercial media markets. Furthermore, Syrian refugees had four different positions in the article: criminal, humanitarian aid receiver, victim and role model. So, Turkish media is used as a tool to influence public perception on the Syrian refugees (Sunata, Yıldız, 2018).

Another event for fake news and misinformation spreading occurred during the Russia and Ukraine war. So, it focuses on this event and identifies common or fake contents or themes of fake social media posts and reveals emerging polarized discourses through the identified themes. The research offers five themes that feed polarization: war reporting, ideological misrepresentation, humor, hate speech and conspiracy theories (Uluşan, Özejder, 2024). The findings illustrate that fake content is focused on ideological polarization and antagonisms. Fake content was combined with hate speech and conspiracy theories distorted the context of the war. These fake news and distorted information illustrate significant polarization in supporting political views or ideology in the representation of Ukraine-Russia war (Uluşan, Özejder, 2024).

Another article examines fake news as a tool of populism in Turkey through a case study of Pastor Andrew Brunson. It stresses that fake news increases populism in Turkey by spreading fake news from pro-government media. It considers the Turkish government – Erdoğan - as the behind of this fake news by conducting critical discourse analysis method on the fake news about the Pastor Brunson case. Troll groups of Erdoğan target America, the Kurds, Israel and the Arabs to provoke citizens' emotions who are linked to them ideologically. It also suggests that the influence of fake news on the left-wing ideological groups is not well studied (Akgül, 2019).

Political knowledge

Another article focuses on the relationship between social media use and the political knowledge gap in Turkey. It researches the political knowledge gap among individuals categorized at different socioeconomic status, education level, motivation and social media use variables. So, it evaluates whether social media usage shows a meaningful differentiation in the level of political knowledge among people and if so, what points information gaps

emerge. It finds that education level and gender variables are no longer determinants in the knowledge gap between people (Topçu, Serarslan, 2024). This result is against the findings of the most studies investigating the knowledge gap hypothesis in new media environments to date. It is argued that the education factor lost its effect because everyone can access technology regardless of their education level. Finally, respondents who use social media are more knowledgeable about political issues than those who do not.

However, another article argues that mass media play crucial role in the political knowledge of Turkish citizens. The study aims to understand the level of trust in mass media in terms of political information. The results of the study illustrate that participants mostly utilize the internet and social media for political information, and they have higher trust towards the internet, newspapers and television from mass media. The least trusted media type is said to be social media (Ince, Kocak, 2019). Also, President Erdoğan continues to sustain his populist policies by controlling Turkey's information space through media ownership, censorship, repression, and the strategic circulation of propaganda and misinformation.

For example, during Covid-19, there were manipulated and wrong number of death cases – a fact reported by foreign agencies. The government also started criminal complaints against citizens for sharing posts about the pandemic (Tahiroğlu, 2020). Another article focuses on the media concentration problem in Turkey and finds that the amended Turkish Media Law had not prevented media concentration by 2010 and even allowed media groups to increase their industrial investments and cooperate with governments (Gül, 2011).

Conclusion

Overall, Turkey's media deteriorated in the mentioned six areas mainly because of ideological (Kemalist vs Conservatism) conflicts, economic transformations (neoliberalism), external conflicts/crises (wars, Covid-19) and collapse of judiciary and regulation in the media sector. These reasons all lead to the highly politically polarized country because of increased misinformation in the news, low quality editorial content and politically less informed citizens in this regard.

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