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**How do Turkish People use the Media  
Content of the Health Issues?**

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
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## **How do Turkish People use the Media Content of the Health Issues?**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years it has been obviously observed that there has been a huge increase in health news in Turkey. In addition to this increase it's also observed that there has been an obvious raise in critics about this kind of news. It is also possible to say that academic researches on health publications have limited extent or they are independent from each other in the scope of subject. In this respect, today's health publications in Turkey are required to have some specific features. According to this, publication content should be examined, and publics' opinions and perceptions should be determined. In other words, there is a need for increasing social consciousness by determining main principles of health publication. In this regard, the project named "Designation of the Principles on Health Content of the Media in Turkey: An Analysis on Source, Message, and Audience" has been conducted to reveal main principles of health publications and to increase public's consciousness by describing

health publication in today's Turkey, examining media content and determining public's perceptions and considerations on these publications.

As a part of the project, this paper covers the results of the national survey on the health content of Turkish media. The paper aims to show how people use and how they evaluate the media content on health issues in Turkey. Results show that Turkish people mostly prefer to get information from medical doctors rather than the media. But on the other hand, even though if it's not the majority, Turkish people implement treatments, visit doctors, hospitals and buy health products that they see on the media.

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**Key Words:** Health news, health content of media, Turkish people, Turkish press

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## Introduction

Media contents on health issues usually gain criticism about “how informative they are” and “how beneficial to public health”. Because of deficient, deceptive and incorrect health news human life can be easily affected. In this concern, these news are crucial. Besides there has been an obvious increase of interest in health subject. Turkish Statistics Institute reported that the number of health publications increased from 26 to 282 in the years between 2005 and 2010 (Turkish Statistics Institute, 2010). Along with the increase of health media contents, concerns have appeared on reliability, validity and accuracy of health content which people get from the media.

In literature, one of the four factors affecting health behavior is cultural components and messages sent by mass medium which change people’s behaviors by affecting their consumption styles (Bulduklu, 2010a:73). In this respect, taking into account all of these factors there is a need for examining people’s behaviors towards health publications.

## Literature Review

Ferhunde Kırış is the one who wrote the first master’s thesis on health publications in Turkey in 1988. In her study Kırış (1988) examined, in scope of demographics, the effects of short term health education programs which are broadcasted on TRT channel, on women living in shantytowns in Ankara. Results reveal that the effects of short term health education programs depend on education level and length of living in the city (Kırış, 1988).

Erdoğan (2002) states “Health and medical news on media leave traces on people’s mind”. The results of his research indicate that 80 percent of the people remember what they see on television about medical sciences. Only 10 percent don’t remember anything. Results also show that news about diet, healthy nutrition and weight loss and bodies of women models’ are the most remembered news.

Apart from researches analyzing media content, in her dissertation Tülay Bektaş Şeker (2004) focused on effects of the health content of webpages on patients’ knowledge level. In scope of knowledge gap hypothesis, she examined knowledge differences between patients having cardiovascular diseases. The results of the questionnaire show that there is knowledge gap among cardiovascular disease patients in terms of using health web pages.

Sexual and Fertility Health Research was conducted by Cinsel Eğitim Tedavi ve Araştırma Derneği (CETAD) in the year 2006. 1537 people have participated in the research. 41% of the attendants said they usually see sexual/fertility health news on television and 22% said they see this kind of news on magazine articles. Besides 39% of attendants said they don’t trust the media about sexual/fertility health. On the other hand %32 think television shows are trustworthy. 30,5% of attendants prefer to consult with a medical doctor or a healthcare organization to get more information. 6% visited a



doctor or a healthcare organization that they saw on the media. (İncesu vd, 2006).

In her dissertation, named “The effect of the health and medical news on the press”, Utma (2010) examined the presentation styles and informational potential of health news. For that purpose, eight of well-known Turkish newspapers were analyzed and 1108 health news were observed. Results revealed that the informing level of health news on newspapers is insufficient and these health news have the power of setting agenda as well. It was also determined that there are many misleading messages in health news that can result in misinformation among the public (Utma, 2010).

In the scope of uses and gratifications theory, Bulduklu (2010a) determined people who watch health programs on television and examined which motivations drive them to watch these programs. In this research health programs on television were analyzed; also a survey was conducted and 763 people who live in Konya have participated. Findings show that the content of health programs on television mainly include information that helps to improve social awareness and the highest motivations of audiences to watch health programs are to get information and seek support.

Koçak and Bulduklu (2010) aimed to reveal motivations of older people to watch health programs on television. For this purpose they conveyed a face to face questionnaire with 306 people older than 50. In the end of the research, it was determined that five motivation factors including information, support/sharing, awareness, routine and personal benefits are important for older people to watch health programs.

The dissertation named “Social inequalities and health: a sociological research in Eskişehir” belongs to Temmuz Gönenç Şavran (2010). The main purpose of her dissertation is to determine whether social and economic status can cause significant difference on health-related perceptions, attitudes and behaviors and self health status. In this direction 229 structured interviews, 126 questionnaires, 6 depth and 2 focus group interviews were conducted. Results show that there are differences between the advantaged and disadvantaged groups in terms of defining health and illness and preference of source on health related knowledge. Social inequalities display a cumulative pattern; the disadvantaged groups due to economic, regional and gender related factors, continue to remain disadvantaged in regard to health risks and access to health care services (Şavran 2010).

In 2011, Aktaş and Cebiray conducted a research named “A study on the means of mass media used by consumers for nutrition information”. The main purpose of their research is to determine the preference of consumers regarding the means of mass media for nutrition information, their follow-up frequency of nutrition information and reasons. The preference of consumers for means of mass media was determined respectively as TV (29.1%), Newspaper-Magazine (25.7%), Radio (23.0%) and Internet (22.1%). Consumers were determined to follow nutrition information through mass media on daily and weekly basis (52.5%) to protect their health (64.0%). It was found that consumers apprehensively (64.9%) and scientifically apply their nutrition information in

mass media and use their knowledge on recipe (52.4%) and nutrition safety (58.8%) (Aktaş and Cebirbay, 2011).

In 2010, a nationwide research named “Women’s Television Watching Tendencies -2” was conducted by The Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK). Within the scope of the research, 2.523 women responded to a survey. Findings show that the most watched TV program among women is “My Doctor” (Doktorum) on Kanal D (18%). The reason why “My Doctor” is the most watched program is that it is thought to be “informative/educative, included health issues and is beneficial”. 68% of the participants stated that they want to see “health themes” on television. 45% preferred to see “educational themes” and 17,3% want to see “religious themes” on television. Almost half of the participants (48,7%) said that they watch health programs (Radio and Television Supreme Council, 2010).

## **Purpose**

The paper aims to show how Turkish people use and how they evaluate the media content on health issues. In this context the paper aims to answer these questions:

- What do people do in case of having an unimportant health problem?
- What are the information sources in case of having a serious health problem?
- Do they trust the information learned from medical doctors who examine them?
- What kinds of health publications do arouse their attention?
- How often do they implement what they learn from health publications?
- Do people, who implement things being learned from health publications, ever get benefit? Or have they ever been harmed?
- Do they visit medical doctors/specialists that they see on media?
- Do they buy products which they see on media?
- Do they visit hospitals/health centers that they see on media?

## **Methodology**

A national face to face survey was conducted on 23-24 November 2011 by one of the public opinion survey agencies named A&G Research Company in Turkey. Using the national population statistics in Turkey, the sampling covers 33 cities, 142 districts and villages, 2.503 different homes and people. As a part of the survey, this paper focuses on 9 questions on people’s usage and thoughts on health content of Turkish media.

The proportion of geographical regions, metropolises, cities and the country was taken into consideration in sampling. In this respect, 8 metropolises having the most of the population in Turkey were included in sampling. These metropolises are as follows: İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Adana, Bursa, Gaziantep, Konya, and Kayseri. In order to determine the amount of the inquiries conducted in geographical regions, the places aside from these metropolises were categorized as city and the country.

As it can be obviously understood from the literature, most studies that focus on people's behaviors in Turkey are limited and there is no research which was conducted nationwide on effects of health media content. In this regard the importance of this study is that it's a comprehensive nationwide research which is the representative of population size. The main limitation is that this study just covers general questions of the nationwide inquiry. Findings involving the rest of the questions must be taken into consideration.

## **Findings and Interpretation**

Findings about the general questions in the questionnaire are below. In consequence of this research, general health behaviors of participants and the effects of health publications/broadcasts on participants' behaviors are identified. The findings obtained under the purpose questions of the study may be defined under separate sub-titles.

### *What do People do in case of having an Unimportant Health Problem?*

The first question of the inquiry is as follows: "What do you do when you have an unimportant health problem such as cold, common cold, headache etc.?" 99,8% of participants answered this question (n=2499). Findings show that in case of having an unimportant health problem attendants mainly prefer to go to a medical doctor (%30,1; n=751). According to the frequency of responses the most prominent three answers were as follows: "I visit a doctor and I just do what the doctor says" (%30,1, n=751), "I take medicines that I already know or have used before" (%23,4 n=586); "I wait for it to heal itself" (%18,3, n=458). Besides, the ratio of people who say "I apply traditional or natural methods such as herbs and treatments that I know" is also significant: %15 (n=374). On the other hand, the rate of people who say "I search for treatment in sources such as Newspapers, TV, internet, books and apply what I have learned from them" and "I consult my spouse, friends, relatives and neighbors" is less than 1%.

This situation reveals that in case of having an unimportant health problem almost one third of the participants visit a doctor, near one fourth of them use drugs which they used previously, less than one fourth of them wait for it to heal itself. In the event of having an unimportant health problem, using media contents and apply something learned from them has a lower rate than the other alternative way of getting information. It is possible to say that the reason of

this situation is because the health problem is “unimportant-ordinary” (Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Unimportant Health Problem*

<b>Question 1. What do you do when you have an unimportant health problem such as cold, common cold, headache etc.?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
I visit a doctor and I just do what the doctor says	751	30,1
I take medicines that I already know or used before	586	23,4
I wait for it to heal itself	458	18,3
I apply traditional or natural methods such as herbs, treatments that I know	374	15
I visit a doctor, besides I apply traditional or natural methods	186	7,4
I don't usually get sick, I don't know, I don't remember	70	2,8
I consult a pharmacist and buy medicines	57	2,3
I consult my spouse, friends, relatives, neighbors	10	0,4
Other	4	0,2
I search for treatment in sources such as Newspapers, TV, internet, books, I apply what I have learned from them	3	0,1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2499</b>	<b>100</b>

*What are the Information Sources in case of having a Serious Health Problem?*

The second question is “In case of having a serious or an important health problem, from who or where do you mostly prefer to get information about this illness?”. In this question participants were asked to choose “the most privileged three answers” among 13 options. Almost half of the participants who stated more than one option prefer medical doctors as a source of information in the first rank (n=2353, %41,7). Other responses given to this question are as follows: “spouse, friends, relatives, neighbors etc.” (n=638, %11,3), “pharmacists” (n=625, %11,1), “someone having the same illness” (n=591, %10,5). These are the mostly preferred information sources. On the other hand ratio of getting information from mass media is considerably low. Internet is the most preferred media among these mediums (n=131, %2,3). Television is in the second rank; for newspaper, books and magazines ratio is quite low.

When responses given by participants are evaluated with regards to the options, the ratio of getting information from medical doctor in case of having an important health problem is % 94,1. In other words, it is only %5,9 of the participants who don't prefer to get information from a medical doctor. The rate of people who prefer to get information from “spouse, friends, relatives, neighbors etc.” (25,5%) and “pharmacists” (25%) are equal. In general, getting information from newspapers, books and magazines are low. On the other hand, getting information from internet (%12,7) and television (%5,2) is much higher (Table 2).

**Table 2. Important Health Problem**

<b>Question 2. In case of having a serious or an important health problem, from who or where do you mostly prefer to get information about this illness?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Doctors	2353	41,7
Spouse, friends, relatives, neighbors etc.	638	11,3
Pharmacists	625	11,1
Someone having the same illness	591	10,5
Other health staff (Nurses, nutritionists, midwives)	550	9,7
Internet	317	5,6
Herbalists, spice-sellers	152	2,7
Television	131	2,3
Neither have I nor my friends had a serious health problem so far.	114	2
Scientific, medical academic publications	82	1,5
Newspapers	62	1,1
Books	22	0,4
Magazines	6	0,1
<b>TOTAL (The most privileged 3 options coded)</b>	<b>5643</b>	<b>100</b>

*Do they Trust the Information learned from Medical Doctors who examine them?*

The third question of the questionnaire is as follows: “How much do you trust the information that you learned from a doctor who examined you?”. 99% of the participants responded this question (n=2478). Almost half of the participants say “I always trust” (n=1158, %46,7), one fourth of them say “I mostly trust” (n=703, %28,4) and 16,4% say “I partly (sometimes) trust”. Generally, participants stated that they trust information learned from a medical doctor who examine them. The proportion of who say “I never trust” is 3,3% (n=82) (Table 3).

**Table 3. Trust to Doctors**

<b>Question 3. How much do you trust the information that you learned from a doctor who examined you?</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
I always trust	1158	46,7
I mostly trust	703	28,4
I partly (sometimes) trust	407	16,4
I barely trust	128	5,2
I never trust	82	3,3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2478</b>	<b>100</b>

*What Kinds of Health Publications do arouse their attention?*

Participants were also asked about what kind of health news or programs mostly get their attention in newspapers, television or internet. In this question participants were asked to choose “the most privileged three answers” among

12 options. Responses predominantly scattered among two responses. Health publications arousing participants' attention are mostly covering every kind of information or suggestions for them or their intimate ones' good (n=1666, %26,5). Secondly, participants' attention get aroused by the publications including their own and their intimate ones' health problem (n=1385, %22). Other prominent responses given to this question are as follows: "Health publications/broadcasts that involve someone's experiences about his/her health problem which ended up with benefit or harm" (n=653, %10,4), and "News about terminal illnesses or epidemics" (n=606, %9,6). Least followed up publications/broadcasts are about "Pilates, aerobic, yoga and sports" (n=74, %1,2).

When responses given by participants are being evaluated with regards to the options; 72% of participants stated that programs or health news on television, newspapers or internet which include any kind of information or suggestions for their or their intimate ones' good mostly get their attention. More than half of the participants (59,8%) say they find publications about their own or their friends' illnesses interesting (Table 4).

**Table 4.** *Attention Getting*

<b>Question 4. What kinds of health news or programs mostly get your attention in newspaper, television or internet?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Every kind of information or suggestions for me or my intimate ones' good	1666	26,5
News about my own and my intimate ones' health problems	1385	22
Health publications/broadcasts that involve someone's experiences about his/her health problem which ended up with benefit or harm	653	10,4
News about terminal illnesses or epidemics	606	9,6
Medical and technologic innovations, new implementations	517	8,2
Misapplications which patients have been exposed to	345	5,5
Herbs, natural products, alternative medicine	306	4,9
Diet, weight loss, and healthy nutrition	301	4,8
Mental health, stress, psychiatry	262	4,2
Beauty, cosmetics and esthetics	142	2,3
Pilates, aerobic, yoga and sports	74	1,2
Other	30	0,5
<b>TOTAL (The most privileged 3 options coded)</b>	<b>6287</b>	<b>100</b>

*How often do they implement what they learn from Health Publications?*

98,2% of the participants responded this question (n=2459). In this question they were asked how often they implement what they learn from health publications. %63,2 (n=1554) say "I never implement"; %17,2 (n=423) say "I sometimes implement" and only 39 of them say (%1,6) "I always implement everything" (Table 5).

**Table 5. Implementing Treatments**

<b>Question 5. How often do you implement information or treatments about health that you learn from newspapers, magazines, television or internet?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
I never implement	1554	63,2
I sometimes implement	423	17,2
I barely implement	341	13,9
I usually implement	102	4,1
I always implement everything	39	1,6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2459</b>	<b>100</b>

*Do people, who implement things being learned from Health Publications, ever get Benefit? Or have they ever been harmed?*

The sixth question is for the participants who answered the previous question positively. In other words this question is for those who apply information or treatments being learned about health from newspaper, magazines, television or internet. Participants were asked if they have ever been harmed or if they got any benefit from what they implement. 34,2% of participants answered the question (n=868). %38,2 (n=332) of those who implement what they learn from health publications say they got benefit from what they did a few times; 31,9% responded “neither benefits nor harm” (n=277); 15,2% say that they got benefit mostly (n=132); 12,7% of them say they sometimes have been harmed and sometimes got benefit (n=110). Just %1,5 of the participants say that they have been harmed a few times (n=13) and the ratio of who say “I have mostly been harmed” is 0,5% (n=4) (Table 6).

**Table 6. Results of Implementations**

<b>Question 6. Have you ever got harm or benefit from what you implement?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Got benefit few times	332	38,2
Got neither benefits nor harm	277	31,9
Got benefit mostly	132	15,2
Got benefit sometimes, have been harmed sometimes	110	12,7
Have been harmed few times	13	1,5
Have been harmed mostly	4	0,5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>868</b>	<b>100</b>

*Do they visit Medical Doctors/specialists that they see on Media?*

97,8% of the participants answered this question (n=2448). They were asked if they have ever visited or wanted to visit any medical doctor or specialist about their health that they saw on newspapers, magazines, television or internet. Most of the participants haven’t visited any medical doctor and specialist that they saw on the media (n=2023, 82,6%). The rate of who say “Yes, I have” is 6,7% (n=165). 10,6% say “I wanted to visit but I couldn’t”

(n=260). The respond which shows the effect of media on human behavior is colored gray on Table 7.

**Table 7. Doctor Visit**

<b>Question 7. Have you ever visited or wanted to visit any medical doctor or specialist about your health that you see on newspaper, magazines, television or internet?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
No, I haven't	2023	82,6
I wanted to visit but I couldn't	260	10,6
Yes, I have	165	6,7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2448</b>	<b>100</b>

*Do they buy Products which they see on Media?*

98,1% of the participants responded this question (n=2456). The question is as follows: "Have you ever bought any product about health, nutrition, diet, esthetics or beauty that you see on newspapers, magazines, television or internet?". Most of the participants say "No, I haven't" (n=2138, %87,1). 8,7% (n=213) of them say "Yes, I have" and 4,3% (n=105) say "I wanted to buy but I couldn't". On the purpose of showing the effect of the media on human behavior, the answer "Yes" is colored gray on Table 8.

**Table 8. Product Purchase**

<b>Question 8. Have you ever bought any product about health, nutrition, diet, esthetics or beauty that you see on newspapers, magazines, television or internet?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
No, I haven't	2138	87,1
Yes, I have	213	8,7
I wanted to buy but I couldn't	105	4,3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2456</b>	<b>100</b>

*Do they visit Hospitals/health Centers that they see on Media?*

98% of the participants answered this question (n=2453). They were asked if they have ever visited or wanted to visit any hospital/health center that they see on newspapers, magazines, television or internet. Most of the participants haven't visited any hospital/health center that they saw on the media (n=2130, 86,8%). 6% say "I wanted to visit but I couldn't" (n=148). The rate of those who say "Yes, I have" is 7,1% (n=175). In order to show the effect of the media on human behavior, this respond is colored gray on Table 9.



**Table 9. Hospital Visiting**

<b>Question 9. Have you ever visited or wanted to visit any hospital/health center that you see on newspapers, magazines, television or internet?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
No, I haven't	2130	86,8
Yes, I have	175	7,1
I wanted to visit but I couldn't	148	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2453</b>	<b>100</b>

## Conclusion

Health communication as a kind of mass communication includes national and international health programs, health improvement campaigns and public health plans. In this respect health communication involves publication and interpretation of mass health messages. In this sense health communication is defined as implementing communication concepts and theories to the interaction and actions which occur among individuals on the purpose of improve health (Tabak, 1999:29). On the other hand, even though the main purpose of media should be to improve public's health, this is not mostly the situation happening in real life.

Findings show when Turkish people have an unimportant health problem, they don't prefer to search information on media. They mostly visit medical doctors, and do what doctors say.

When they have an important health problem, they again mostly prefer to consult a medical doctor. On the other hand it is important to indicate that "internet" is the sixth most stated respond and this finding shows that Turkish people use internet in case of having an important health problem. In this regard, it can be stated that although the ratio of using any media to get information is low, it also depends on the significance level of the health problem.

It can be clearly understood that Turkish people generally prefer to visit medical doctors whether they have an important or an unimportant health problem. But, in other respects just almost half of the participants say that they "always" trust information they learned from medical doctors.

It's no surprise that the publications which mostly get Turkish people's attention are the kinds that include every kind of information or suggestions for their own or their intimate ones' good and are about their own and their intimate ones' health problems.

Turkish people usually don't implement information or treatments about health that they learn from newspapers, magazines, television or internet. Meanwhile those who implement these treatments mostly get benefit from them. The ratio of those who only have been harmed from these implementations is quite low.

In literature, one of the four factors affecting health behavior is cultural components and messages sent by mass medium which change people's behaviors by affecting their consumption styles (Bulduklu, 2010a:73). In this sense, even though it is not the majority of the participants, findings show that media has an effect on Turkish people's behaviors. People want to visit medical doctors or hospitals or buy products about health that they see on the media.

In short, Turkish people mostly use health media to get information about their and their intimates' health problems. Even so just half of them "always" trust information being learned from a doctor, they still prefer to consult a medical doctor. They use internet and television for searching information when they have an important health problem. Some of them use treatments and implementations that they learn from media, and also want to visit a hospital and a medical doctor and buy a health product that they see on the media.

Findings show that people generally prefer to visit medical doctors whether they have an important or an unimportant health problem. But, in other respects just almost half of the participants say that they "always" trust information that they learn from medical doctors. Among media genres, Internet is the most preferred media to get information.

Turkish people usually don't implement information or treatments about health that they learn from newspapers, magazines, television or internet about health. Meanwhile those who implement these treatments mostly get benefit from them. The ratio of those who have been harmed from these implementations is quite low. Even though it is not the majority of the participants, findings show that media has an effect on Turkish people's behaviors. People want to visit medical doctors or hospitals or buy products about health that they see on the media.

Even though they don't trust in newspapers, some people use treatments and implementations that they learn from media, and they also want to visit a hospital and a medical doctor and buy a health product that they see on the media. In this sense, it can be stated that media has a power on people's health behavior.

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