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**Rethinking Activist Journalism when  
Freedom of Press is Under Threat**

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## **Rethinking Activist Journalism when Freedom of Press is Under Threat**

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### **Abstract**

Today, self-censorship and government pressure dominate the media, preventing fair and balanced coverage, and special interests are driving investment in Turkey's not-very-profitable media sector. During and after Gezi protests, social media became very crucial for both the journalists and the audience in Turkey. While mainstream media outlets ignored the stories of police attacks against the peaceful protests due to their corporate purposes, the breaking news was disseminated by journalists (some of them anonymously) through social media accounts. It is observed that they adopted some journalistic standards to their Twitter posts and played an important role to the news sharing during the events. As a result, the research showed that the question of how journalism can be compatible with activism is not clear even if they took a side like activists. Activist journalism is seen as the outcome of increased pressure on media and unadopted ethical codes.

**Keywords:** activist journalism, freedom of press, Gezi protests, social media, Turkey

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## **Introduction**

Concentration of media markets, the close relationship between media owners and the governments, dissatisfaction of the mainstream media's coverages raised the concerns on the future of journalism in many countries (Coyer, Dowmunt, & Fountain, 2007). Especially, when journalists deal with censorship and self-censorship in their media organisations, the traditional journalistic hallmarks like objectivity and impartiality became more problematic (Ruigrok, 2010). However, the new technologies and raising social media provide new opportunities for journalists to share their stories and thoughts. They can be active participants in a social debate, moreover, they can become advocates of social movements particularly in a conflict situation or under oppression (Ashuri, 2012). Therefore, as seen in many instances during the last social movements in many countries, the line between journalism and activism became blurred. This new journalism tends to be more personal, but also more transparent. Nevertheless the new form of journalistic practices need to be discussed.

Journalism in Turkey is caught between structural problems and political pressure by the government nowadays. Many journalists lost their jobs in the last few years due to their critical comments on government policies. Self-censorship became so widespread since the media owners were eager to please the government on every occasion (Sözeri, 2013.). In this research this new form of journalism was analysed within the case of the journalistic practices during Gezi Protests in 2013. This research explores the motivations of journalists who seek to struggle against corporate interests and oppression by combining activism and professionalism. This research aims to discuss the line between journalism and activism particularly where the freedom of press is under pressure. Since the activist journalism has been considered a consequence of censorship and self-censorship in the media and is seen as an alternative way to disseminate information during the protests in Turkey, its borders and discrepancies with the professional norms have not been discussed yet.

Within this context first, the debates on journalism and activism, the new hallmarks and traditional ideal views were discussed. In the following chapter, the situation of the journalistic profession and the political and economic constraints were analysed to understand the reasons of activist journalism in Turkey. Finally, the opinions and experiences of eight journalists', on their news sharings and use of social media during Gezi protests was examined through semi-directive interviews.

## **Activism or Journalism?**

Journalism is undergoing profound changes in news production and sharing due to technologies and the pressure on the freedom of press in many countries. While journalists struggle with censorship and corporate interests in

their media organisations, the new technologies offer some new forms of journalism which became at the same time some alternative sources for audience. New journalism is considered more personal. Transparency is preferred rather than the traditional notion of journalistic objectivity as Wards remarked (Ward, 2011).

The concept of objectivity has become the key professional ethic or "strategic ritual" (in Tuchman) since at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of "liberal pluralism". Especially after the emergence of telegraph agencies, information had to be perceived as ideologically neutral for being acceptable to all. The objectivity ideal eroded in the 1920s and 1930s by the emergence of fascist dictatorships, and the propaganda which came with them. Today, the principle of objectivity is regarded by most journalists not as absolute but in practical terms impossible to attain (McNair, 2009, p. 34). The criticism of objectivity based on the acknowledgement that journalism is not, and never can be, a neutral, value-free representation of reality (McNair, 2009, p. 40). Besides, as the former BBC war correspondent, Martin Bell, famously said at a News of the World conference in 1996, that *"I do not believe that we should stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, aggressor and victim"* (Charles, 2013, p. 388).

"Transparency is the new objectivity" for proponents to new journalism (Riordan, 2014). Despite the fact that, the digital era provides many tools for the transparency of journalism, transparency alone is not enough to do good journalism. According to Tom Kent of Associated Press, *"transparency must be coupled with the hallmarks of solid journalism: checking facts, attributing accurately, uncovering new information, and exposing falsehoods"* (Riordan, 2014).

Ideology objectivity can become very problematic especially during conflict situations. Many times it is impossible to get a two-sided story. Sometimes journalists even get personally involved. They can tend to be activist rather than journalist. According to Ruigrok, during the Bosnian war numerous journalists adhered to this form of advocacy journalism rejecting the aspect of neutrality (Ruigrok, 2010. p. 86). Another research on the online media shows of the Ethiopian diaspora, that in societies caught between political and social constraints, there is discrepancy between journalistic performance and the editors' ideal view of journalism. The practices characterized more by activism and favouritism (Skjerdal, 2011, p. 740).

Journalism crisis also prompted reporters to act individually for reassessing their profession and regaining the trust that they lost it in today's media landscape. Therefore they use social media to broadcast what they want to report (Charles, 2013, p. 390). Sometimes they are not only taking sides but also want their audience to act.

### **Why the Journalists Intend to Be Activist in Turkey?**

The journalism in Turkey has always struggled with political and economic constraints. It is even described as a "no-man's land" located somewhere between south-eastern Europe and the Middle East (Christensen, 2007.) the political ties of media owners and journalists reinforce the political polarisation in society and consequently self-censorship in media as seen in the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model of Hallin and Mancini (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

From the outset, the journalists have been potential targets of government repression. In the early years of the Turkish Republic, they were charged with modernizing the society by supporting the government. The opponent journalists were punished with exile to small cities or foreign countries as civil servants (Gürkan, 1998). Although the first *coup d'état* of 1960 introduced some regulations in favour of journalists to protect them from the press owners, military regimes instituted after the coups of 1960, 1971 and 1980 rolled back these limited rights (Kurban & Sözeri, 2012).

The journalistic culture in Turkey was remarkably shifted after the third *coup d'état* in 1980, with the entry of new investors from other industries. After the termination of the state monopoly over broadcasting, a few conglomerates that had increased their economic power through vertical and horizontal mergers came to dominate whole sectors of the media and 'clientelist' relationships between media patrons and the state increasingly became established. Another big change came with the 2001 financial crisis, some media groups that had investments in the financial and banking sectors were completely wiped out while some others were seized by the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu, TMSF) established by the government. These transfers were used as a tool for the reconfiguration of the mainstream media in accordance with the ideology of Justice and the Development Party (JDP) from 2002.

Despite the fact that, JDP was supported by the media owners in their first ruling period, After its second electoral victory in the municipal elections of 2004, the peace was disturbed. The JDP government adopted a dual strategy to eliminate media opposition. It implemented heavy tax fines then it reconfigured the mainstream media by selling the media outlets seized by the TMSF. The JDP also has supported opponent media owners through public tenders because of the huge portion of the state investment in economy. Therefore, the big media groups who cannot get money from the media please the government at every possible occasion, consequently self-censorship became very widespread in the media.

The political and economic pressure on media significantly increased in the recent years. Many journalists and columnists lost their jobs due to their critical comments on government policies. In the Freedom House special report on "Democracy in Crisis: Corruption, Media, and Power in Turkey" it is said that editors and journalists in the mainstream media receive regular phone calls from the prime minister's office to change stories, to downplay coverage, or to

fire reporters or columnists. Besides that the government also uses the courts to go after offending journalists. As Reporters without Borders correspondent in Turkey, Önderoğlu notes that the consolidation of power at the hands of Erdoğan became a violation parameter i.e. one of his most significant concerns was freedom of expression and freedom of press in Turkey, so much so that he targeted caricaturists, reporters, columnists and media owners at the same time thing that has not been witnessed, not even during the military tutelage (Akgül, 2014). According to the Independent Communication Network's (BİA) Media Monitoring Reports 339 journalists, columnists and caricaturists lost their job due to President Erdoğan's pressure just in 2014. Moreover, 22 journalist and 10 distributors, were imprisoned during the year of 2015. 21 out of 22 jailed journalists and all jailed publishers were jailed for reasons related to "illegal organizations" according to the Turkish Penal Code (TCK) and the Anti-Terror Act (TMK). Another journalist was jailed for "resisting the police". 14 out of 22 jailed journalists and all jailed publishers were affiliated with the Kurdish media. 13 journalists, 1 columnist and 1 caricaturists are still standing trial on the grounds of insulting President Erdoğan (Önderoğlu, 2015).

The Gezi protests in 2013 provided an understanding of how media covered the sensitive issues in Turkey. It was a milestone for both journalists and the audience. The protests started on May 27th 2013 with a small group of environmental activists determined to protect a park in Istanbul's Taksim Square from the government's shopping mall plans. Thousands of people who learned the news from social media gathered at Taksim Square to join the resistance. When the police attacked the people with tear gas on May 31st 2013, the mainstream news channels ignored it. Moreover, while CNN International were covering the protests in the streets, CNN Türk was broadcasting a documentary on penguins which became the symbol used by protesters to remind people of the self-censorship climate in Turkey.

Gezi protests also became a big exam for journalists. One of their famous slogans is "*journalist sell bagel, live honorable*" then some journalists quit their job and some of them participated in the protests as activist journalists.

## Findings

During and after the Gezi protests Facebook users approached 90% when the Twitter users increased by 31.10% (Alternatif Bilişim Derneği, 2013). The internet users in fact got the news about the events from social media rather than mainstream media. Although as a veteran journalist Ruşen Çakır said that journalism in Turkey is no more a reliable profession (Çakır, 2014), according to the Freedom House Report, Gezi also showed there is a strong demand for professional news and journalists willing to stand up to government pressure. Especially alternative news sites founded by journalists and also social media became a breakthrough for both audience and journalists (Corke, Finkel, Kramer, Robbins, & Schenkan, 2014). Some journalists reported the news

anonymously from the streets on social media after their shifts in the mainstream media.

In this research the eight journalists' experiences and thoughts regarding their news sharing during the Gezi protests was analyzed through semi-directive interviews. The questions were structured to understand their journalistic motivations during news sharings and how they describe activist journalism and the journalistic norms. Three journalists were working for the mainstream media, one of them is from the public service media, two of them are freelance journalists and two of them were working for online news sites. The analysis of their news sharings through their Twitter accounts could not be a part of this research due to avoiding disclosure of their identities and protecting them from oppression and firing, thus, their names remained anonymous.

The research aims to analyse how the journalists separate activism and journalism, which ethical codes and methods they used in their social media posts, whether they came across any pressure from their organizations and their opinions about the future of journalism in terms of freedom of expression issues in Turkey.

#### *Activism and Journalism are Comptable?*

The question of "can a journalist be also an activist?" is an ongoing debate in terms of the ideal of journalistic objectivity. Since the ideal of journalistic objectivity excludes partiality, it is widely accepted that a journalist cannot be an activist (Brewer, n.d.). However, in many countries, journalists struggle with freedom of expression and freedom of media issues, thus they also turn into activists. Activism and advocacy of specific causes can deliberately create moments of rupture and transformation. The emergence of new communication technologies can also open up fresh spaces for dialogue (Waltz, 2005).

In this research a journalist rejected to identify himself as an activist and did not respond to the relevant questions. Another did not identify herself as an activist but she accepted that her social media sharing can be perceived as activism. Six of eight journalist thought that activist and journalist identities should be separated during the following events.

*"You should separate your identities in your social media accounts. First, you are responsible for your organizations in terms of editorial policy. Second, if you get involved in the protests as an activist you lost your objectivity. Third, it is inevitable to come across the pressure in both public or private media organizations because of our situation in Turkey".*

(Journalist 3)

Journalists who are working for independent media think that activism and journalism can be compatible:

*"A journalist can be an activist. There is no problem if he/she is transparent for the audience. I have an ideology, I feel free to disclose it.*



*However, I don't throw stones to the police. I saw a cameraman who hit a policeman with his camera. He lost control."*

(Journalist 8)

*Blurred the Line Between Journalism and Activism*

Despite the fact that the journalists think that the two identities should not be connected to each other it was not easy in practice:

*"I think that the line was blurred in Gezi; because the overwhelming police attacks against the peaceful protests is human rights violation. However, entirely journalism and activism have a risk that the profession can turn into a mission or at best a slogan/militant journalism."*

(Journalist 4)

*"When I looked at my past sharing, I saw some posts like "my country is resisting" or "#ressistAnkara". We felt our emotions strongly those days. The messages don't contain calsl for violence, but I prefer not sending them today. I think that it is better for a journalist to report or to use social media restrainedly."*

(Journalist 2)

On the other hand, a research of the American Press Institute (API) shows that Twitter has made an attempt of reaching out to media companies in a number of ways, including verifying journalists at a much higher rate than other groups (Ingram, 2015). This motivated the journalists to be more active and to challenge the censorship on the news. There are some advantages for journalists to participate in protests as activists. Mainstream media journalists feels themselves responsible for the audience who knows them and the newspaper they work for.

*"I am not a civil servant. I am a journalist. My profession necessitates to be in the streets. In my opinion, if my messages doesn't contains manipulation or insult, there is no problem. On the other hand, when I participate in protests as an activist, I can get close to the events, I can catch the news and photos, the other journalists cannot. This feeds my profession."*

(Journalist 7)

Some journalists preferred to separate their professional and personal accounts on social media to protect journalistic ethics and themselves. However, it did not work all the time.

*"My personal attitude is to separate the information and comments on Twitter. Journalists should do that. However, my story is different. Since my main account is more popular than my business account, I used mostly my main account. I don't approve my behavior indeed. On the other hand,*

*I am a freelance journalist. I am responsible on my own. If I am working at a media outlet, I understand the warnings on my social media posts which can damage the image of the organization. I think the solution is to have two different accounts like me, but not to use them like me."*

(Journalist 6)

*"I didn't hide my identity when I was in the streets during protests, contrarily, I could easily move and protect myself thanks to my organization. However, it was ineluctable that I anonymously shared the information on Twitter."*

(Journalist 3)

### *Adopting Ethical Standards*

Today's reader's need guidance and credibility, thus, journalist can be debunkers and fact-checkers even in social media. NowThis's president, Sean Mills points out the importance of building trust "If you don't know, just say you couldn't verify it. The new news consumer likes being let in on that process." (Fisher, 2014). Similarly, in this research all the interviewees said that they implemented some ethical rules while reporting their social media accounts.

*"In general, I was attentive to avoid being sensual. But sometimes it was easy to explode with anger against the police attacks that I witnessed and experienced. The choice that you preferred to participate in already contains subjectivity indeed. I strive to avoid the sharing that I couldn't explain when I look at my account's history."*

(Journalist 7)

*"To be accurate about the numbers, making a double-check is an essential reflex for journalists. I also used them on social media. I trust the sharing of my colleagues, I am sure of their reflexes."*

(Journalist 2)

*"I don't share any information from untrusted sources. If I share, I note that I am not sure about the information in my post. Even if I am very angry with the police, I strive to not to act like a cheerleader."*

(Journalist 6)

### *The Effect of Journalistic Situation*

Dan Gillmor believes that journalists cannot be neutral while governments and corporations are leading the attack against freedom of expression and no one would object to journalistic activism on this front (Gillmor, 2015). The interviewees who are working for mainstream media think that there is no opportunity to fairly cover these protests and human rights violations in their organizations. One of them contends that she did not suffer oppression yet, but

she is afraid of experiencing it. Another one is not sure, but thinks that she was fired because of supporting the protests.

*"I didn't experience censorship directly. However, they always make feel that we have to oversee some balances. Everything became more intense after the Gezi. There are two main problems for the countries like Turkey: the journalists don't embrace the ethical codes. On the other hand there is no place to do good journalism. A journalist cannot ask a question and report. Hence, social media become very crucial not only to the audience but also to the journalists."*

(Journalist 2)

The political polarisation in the society affected the reaction against journalists in their organization and social media. Therefore, sometimes they send their stories to alternative news sites.

*"I wasn't exposed to censorship in my organization. I also didn't receive any warning. They at most mocked me by saying "go to work for Birgün"<sup>1</sup>. However, my blog posts were unpopular when my opinion was more left than my newspaper's editorial policy due to audience preferences. However some people insulted me on Twitter since they identified me with the newspaper. I sometimes write on Bianet<sup>2</sup> to reach relevant audience."*

(Journalist 7)

Despite this widespread self-censorship climate and their experiences, a few journalists think that activism and journalism are compatible.

*"Partial journalism is an oxymoron of course, but you already take sides while choosing what you report. Under this censorship and the self-censorship climate, we need a little positive discrimination. It is not good for journalism maybe, but good for the country."*

(Journalist 7)

On the other side, some journalists think that activist journalism can tend to propaganda in this polarized era. We also have big problems regarding unadopted ethical codes.

*"Activist journalism, which based on human rights can be very effective. There is only a few alternative news sites where journalists oversee human rights journalism. However, in general, the journalistic practices are very problematic in Turkey. A protester's right to live can be a tool for political*

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<sup>1</sup> Birgün is small, independent and very opponent newspaper on the left side in Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> Bianet (Independent Communication Network) is an alternative and independent news site which funded by local and international resources. <http://goo.gl/osC6fE>.

*polarization. A part of the society has been labelled as 'terrorist' for a long time. The state's pressure on the media is outrageous. The change in the mindset of mainstream media is very slow. In this case, human rights journalism always remains 'alternative'. I am hopeless."*

(Journalist 4)

*"The ideal is reporting the events within ethical rules, not activist journalism. Most of the time facts like state violence are so vicious that it's enough to show them without interpretation."*

(Journalist 2)

*"I think that activist journalism is not useful, contrarily it is harmful. We saw many examples of manipulated information during the Gezi protests. Our duty is reporting the facts. Activism and comments damage our reliability."*

(Journalist 3)

## **Conclusions**

Today, the media in Turkey dominated is by self-censorship, the government's pressure and special interests. The journalists suffered from censorship and self-censorship. Many journalists, columnists and caricaturist lost their jobs because of covering sensitive issues or their critical comments on government policies in the recent years. On the other hand, new technologies provide new opportunities for journalists to challenge the government's pressure and voice their opinions.

The Gezi protests in 2013 became a milestone in understanding the situation of the media by the audience. When thousands of people were on the streets to protest the government, the mainstream media failed to cover them. On the other hand, many journalists were reporting the events on the streets through their social media accounts especially on Twitter. They used their journalistic experience to report the events and warn the people against police attacks. They were considered reliable sources by the users. However, this process revive the debate on the line between activism and journalism, which is very crucial in today's polarized era.

In this research, the practices and thoughts of selected journalists who got involved in the Gezi protests showed that the first and foremost reason of activist journalism is self-censorship rather than ideological engagements. All the interviewees contended that there was no possibility to fairly cover the protests in the mainstream media organisations. One of them lost their job, the other ones are afraid of pressure from their owners. Although most of them think that activism and journalism are incompatible and they strive not to behave as an activist. However, they accepted that the practices are different. As seen in the research on Ethiopian diaspora websites (Skjerdal, 2011) which is mentioned above, there is a discrepancy between journalistic performance

and the journalists' ideal view of journalism. Even though they are hopeless, they think that activist journalism is not a solution especially in a politically polarized country. Obviously, it is necessary to think about activist journalism in some choke points because doing real journalism is activism in some cases, especially when freedom of speech and freedom of press are under threat as Gillmor (Gillmor, 2015) remarked. However, besides the widespread beliefs on the ideal journalistic norms incompatible with activism, increased pressure on media and pervasive climate of self-censorship are preventing a healthy discussion on traditional hallmarks and ethical standards for specific forms of new journalism. Activist journalism is seen as a consequence of today's miserable situation of journalism in Turkey.

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