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**Dynamics of Turkish Media in 21st
Century between the Lines: Ownership,
Concentration and Censorship**

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Dynamics of Turkish Media in 21st Century between the Lines: Ownership, Concentration and Censorship

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Abstract

In the 20th century, the developments occurring in social, political and economic aspects affected most spheres of business as well as the media sector. With the rise of liberalizing tendencies, the media sector, previously government-operated, was rapidly privatized. This, alongside the process of de-regulation in the media sector, has raised many problems.

Turkey immediately took its place in the competition of the media sector's privatization and de-regulation process. Turkish media has been the scene of many interventions in the 1990s. The connection between political power and the media apparatus extremely affected the operation of these regulations in practical terms.

This study intends to analyze the dynamics of current Turkish media structures in relation to their connection with media concentration, ownership and censorship practices. For this reason, the stance taken by major media outlets during the Gezi uprising will be taken as a case study.

Keywords: Media Ownership, Concentration, Censorship, Gezi Uprising

Introduction

The phenomenon of media, which has been conceptualized in 20th century, is becoming increasingly powerful by expanding its sphere of influence. Although the basic functions of media are both to receive and spread news and to maintain the proper flow of information, today its influence exceeds these mandates. Significantly, the economic and socio-political developments of the past decades gave way to a redefinition of media. Globalization, internationalization, radical improvement of technology, and liberalization policies differentiated media from other professions.

In the countries that adopted liberal economies and eliminated state monopolies, a commercialized media sector became an influential branch of industry. Observing its area of utilization and its capacity for influence, capital owners wishing to join the media sector took over media outlets, replacing bosses who came from journalistic backgrounds.

In this new atmosphere, horizontal-, vertical-, and cross-incorporations in the sector reached a degree very likely to create problems in media's basic functioning. Grand capital groups, which are effective in other sectors, aimed to gain power by investing in and utilizing media's influence. Thus, the relationship between media and some political groups changed unconditionally. Both the complexity of media's property relations and the trivialization of pluralism and transparency began to determine the basic dynamics of the media's relationship to political authorities.

Media not only maintains information-flow and keeps track of the social agenda, but also leads public opinion and determines economic variables and the course of interest relations. This emerges as a result of the transformation of media property, both in Turkey and abroad, leading countries to begin placing regulatory mechanisms in practice both to prevent media-concentration and to support pluralism. However, neither America nor European Union (EU) member states have any realistic policies for restraining recent attempts for monopolizing media. Because media's development and structure differ between countries, implementing measures with universal consensus is difficult.

In Turkey, media transformation accelerated in the 1980s. Privatization policies, commercialization of the sector, and the capital owners' acquisition media outlets through incorporation resulted in the formation of a complex media sector in Turkey, where liberal economies have yet to be practical. Although occasional attempts were made to prevent overconcentration in the media sector through specific interventions, by the 2000s media ownership was already concentrated in the hands of a few grand capital owners. This situation created problems in the relationship between the power-holders and media, as alliances and separations became obstacles to media functionality.

The Justice and Development Party (JDP), which came to power in 2002, had maintained balanced relations with the media. Because of continuing attempts to monopolize media and the sharpening of the discourse in both mainstream and antagonist media outlets, however, the interaction of the

government with media has become problematic. In May of 2013, a group of youth, dissatisfied for more than ten years with JDP's activities began a civil uprising. Originally aiming to stop the destruction of a park's trees, it grew larger as a response to provocations. An analysis of the media approach to these events will illuminate the formation of media in Turkey.

Dynamics of Turkish Media Over the Last Decade

In the past quarter century, the basic dynamic in the formation of Turkish media has been the movements towards deregulation, which began in the 1980s. As a result of the deregulation movements, whose influence extended beyond the media sector, newspapers have entered a competition over their daily circulation rates, starting a new type of press called coupon, or promotion journalism (Koloğlu 2006). This concern with circulation rates added to the reflection of tension in the economic policies of the government, complicating the relationship between the government and the press simultaneously.

In 1990s, the strained press-government relationship continued. At the beginning of the 90s (known as the Özal period), the press underwent a kind of suppression. Prime Minister Özal's dissenting attitude toward the press and his desire to bring the press under control marked a breaking point in the press-government relationship in Turkey. As a result of the tense press-Özal relationship "the press took the first step in transforming into media; an economic, political and ideological complex" (Adaklı, 2006). In 1990s, another factor motivating the aforementioned transformation was the emergence of private TV channels broadcasting alongside the state monopoly station TRT. Thus, in addition to the printed press, visual media outlets played roles as commercially motivated entities in the sector. This gave way to the incorporation of printed press and visual media organs; inevitable given the expansion of media's sphere of influence. In general, 1990s presided over the origin of concentration and conglomeration in the Turkish media.

The factors encouraging media conglomeration in the 90s are important in understanding the current state of the sector. These motives on the part of capital owners are summarized below:

- To share the fourth power.
- To be appreciated in political circles.
- To be more influential in other sectors.
- To get privileged in governmental incentives and other rents.
- To utilize media for the bank or company advertisements.
- To increase marketing activity by using media.
- To utilize media in finance sector which was popular in 1980 and necessitated reputation and reliability' (Acar, 1998).

On the eve of the 21st century, the media sector was at a financial dead-end both because of its relationship with power-holders and because of two

major economic crises. Because of these crises, affecting mostly media organizations, big capital owners crowded out small-scale media outlets, becoming stronger through incorporations and takeovers. The fact that media owners now owned businesses in various sectors like technology, tourism, construction, distribution, and advertising also marked a departure from the past. Some media bosses, who also had investments in the severely affected finance sector, however, needed to transfer their companies to the Saving Deposits Insurance Fund (SDIF). According to the Turkish Journalists Union (TJU) almost 3,900 journalists were left unemployed as a result (Özsever, 2004).

When the JDP came to power in 2002, this initiated a major transformation in several aspects of Turkish life. Turkey turned into a “new” Turkey through developments attendant on the process of gaining EU membership such as: religious, linguistic, and ethnic freedoms; representation of cultural identities; and economic improvement. JDP policies and activities created prominent changes in social, cultural and socio-economic dynamics, congruent with EU regulations. This was supported by developments in communications technologies, digital publishing, online shopping, and the Internet; at this point media began to be redefined.

The economic parameters in the 2000s should be considered alongside these developments when hoping to understand the structure of media sector in this period. One of the media sector’s most important sources of income is ad revenue. In times of crisis, ad revenues fall considerably. During the JDP’s implementation of balanced economic policies, continued until 2007, however, the sector underwent a stable expansion.

In the past decade media ownership has changed considerably, but this did not affect dominant capital owners because handovers, incorporations, and acquisitions were rife. New media bosses did not emerge because existing ones simply underwent an exchange of power relations. In this process, the following capital groups dominated the sector: Doğan Group, Ciner Group, Doğu Group, Çukurova Group, Çalık Group and Ihlas Holding.

In the 21st century, media sectors worldwide faced calls for increased democratization, including greater pluralism and transparency. This would require reforming the sector to free it from the influence of political and economic powers. In Turkey and many other countries, however, the sector in fact expanded its influence, becoming recognized as the ‘fourth power’ in modern democracies. Instead of becoming independent, media sectors established an organic bond with political powers, potentially endangering the principles of transparency and editorial autonomy. Occasionally, this bond benefitted the ruling party.

Today, three resources of the ruling stratum determine the media-government relationship: political power, economic power, and the power of media. The interaction of these three factors created a shift in the usage of media away from its traditionally determined purpose (Kongar, 2003). Thus, “media is one of the political actors and it has an agency in the regulation of the public sphere” (Taşçı, 1996).

Using media as a means of control is a phenomenon seen mostly during periods of economic instability or crisis, general elections, and societal developments. The government's power and control over the media outlets give the media bosses a right for equal sanctions on the government.

Media organs have the duty not only of directing social consent, but also of fostering social consensus and support. According to Hall, during the transmission of information, the tools of communication take on the task of building up meaning. The social recognition of this meaning, furthermore, depends on inclusive–exclusive information, as defined by the media (Hall, 1994). In this regard, the government, leveraging the organic bond that it has established with the media, forces the media to censor itself rather than implementing oppressive policies. The informative and manipulative functions of media, especially, gain control over this auto-censorship.

These three developments—the concentration of media ownership, mechanisms of censorship and auto-censorship, and media's internal polarization—are all illustrated by the example of the Gezi Park protest.

Gezi Uprising

Gezi Park was built in Istanbul's Taksim area on the site of the Ottoman-period Halil Pasha Artillery Barracks. This was destroyed during the republican period on the order of Lutfi Kırdar, governor of Istanbul, according to Henri Proust's new construction plan (Direnişi, Nedir, Başladı & Dedi, n.d).

In 2013, the Municipality of Istanbul decided to pedestrianize Taksim's Gezi Park, also deciding to build a museum of Halil Pasha Artillery Barracks that would both reflect the building's historical image and be open to the public (Özkan, 2013). Claiming that they were relocating them to another location, the municipality began cutting down trees, prompting calls for protests in the park that aimed to protect its natural beauty.

The Gezi Uprisings began on May 27th, 2013, as construction equipment entered the park. The situation worsened as the number of protestors increased and the police staged disproportionate interventions. Although young environmentalists began the protests, they soon escalated into an unpredictable mess as people denounced government policies. In particular, protestors claimed that the ruling JDP, elected by a voter majority for a third time in 2011, was restricting the rights of those who had not voted for them. The government took harsh measures to stop the protests, resulting in several injuries and eight casualties.

From the outset of the Gezi Uprising, both printed press and visual media outlets were accused not only of withholding information about the situation and not broadcasting the protests or the state's response, but also of exaggerating the severity of events. Media outlets were classified as either proponents or detractors of the protests. Social media expanded its sphere of usage by easing the flow of information; however several problems regarding its usage made it highly contentious.

This process caused people from many social groups, including the ruling and opposition parties, non-governmental organizations, and ordinary citizens, to revisit their conception of the media. The attitudes of both printed press and visual media at the beginning of the incident became especially important catalysts. Thus, the Gezi protests resulted in a broader criticism of democracy and the media in Turkey

Attitude of Media During ‘Gezi Uprising’

Due to the effectiveness of the tools at its disposal, contemporary media serves the function of reproducing (Gürkan, n.d) many kinds of knowledge that individuals and societies require when giving meaning to the world. The attitudes adopted by national and international media outlets regarding the Gezi Uprising well illustrate this effectiveness.

The Gezi Park protests that began in May 2013 were initially of little significance. Initiated by environmentalists, the protests began in the form of a sit-in in Taksim and received little attention in either the press or audiovisual media. The protesters’ call for a nationwide protest on the night of May 31st by means of social media, however, did trigger a response from the government and police forces.

As the demonstrations were announced country-wide, more demonstrators joined the movement in the cities of Ankara and Izmir, and police forces began interventions, Turkey’s most-watched channels continued regular broadcasting. The channel CNN Türk, for example, showed a documentary on penguins, and another channel, NTV, was criticized for days for not revealing *any* information with regard to the protests. The director of the news division of NTV, unable to bear these criticisms, resigned from his post. Other reporters from various channels followed suit, marking the Turkish media’s entry into a new phase of transformation. Because of the stance taken by the media in initial stages of the demonstrations, public distrust towards the media solidified and the use of social media reached its apex.

In the time leading up to, during, and after the Gezi Uprising, both the mainstream and opposition media within Turkey exhibited strongly differing interpretations of events. However, the mainstream media in particular made an effort to atone for their initial lack of coverage, by attempting to broadcast prolonged live feeds of demonstrations occurring across the country. By contrast, the opposition media, while claiming neutrality, put their stamp on broadcasts by creating a discourse of provocation justifying further protests.

International media outlets also became the subjects of criticism for their coverage of events. For example, CNN International cut from their standard coverage to broadcast live from Istanbul, showing the events in Gezi Park for an approximately seven-hour period. During the live broadcast of a discussion between host Christiane Amanpour and government representatives, Ms. Amanpour's interruption of the senior advisor to the Prime Minister, İbrahim

Kalın, demonstrated the agenda of the international media against the Turkish government, independent of the Gezi Uprising.

The opposition media outlets portrayed events as a popular movement arising from straightforward environmental concerns and expanded by the police's use of disproportionate force, which turned against the government because of its recent statements violating personal freedoms. The mainstream media, by contrast, used similar language for the beginning of the protests, but pointed out that, as the protests grew, they began to serve the interests of other marginal groups. In a piece published on June 10th, 2013, by newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, a young person who had stayed in the tents set up in the park by protesters described the course of events thus:

"At the end of the 10th day, what was happening in the park changed from a demonstration into an occupation? Did we come to occupy that park? Or to make the people regain control of it again? Tents were set up everywhere, there was nowhere left in the park to sit or walk... Any political party, association, or organization that you can imagine had set up at a tent in the park... My friend, I thought we said we weren't political? Thanks to the tents where you disseminate leaflets, there's nowhere left for us to sit... Anyone who fails the breathalyzer test has a reason to fight. In the line for the toilet, the line for food, or on the subject of space... Patients were constantly being carried to the infirmary... People are constantly arguing with one another..." (Yenisafak, 2014).

The importance of this news item lies in the fact that the groups present did not merely comprise ordinary citizens motivated by their sensitivities, the youth, and the people who were there for non-political reasons, but also groups intending to politicize the Gezi Park protests.

The protest's initial motivation was environmental advocacy, but it became a test of Turkish democracy. Throughout this period, media outlets were often criticized for the complexity of their property relations, as well as their organic ties with the government. While considering the stances of media outlets, traces of the oppressive policies of the government, direct censorship, and self-censorship were sought. The fact that there exists within the Turkish media a certain level of intensity is a scientific truth, and the close ties between certain media magnates and the government, illustrated by the frequent presence of those magnates in privatization deals, are also well known. It would be inaccurate, however, to say that the Turkish government places limitations on information or that an oppressive policy towards the media is in place. When we consider the circulation of daily newspapers in May 2013, this situation can be better understood. 52.1% of the total 4 million 467 thousand papers sold were from media outlets that support the ruling JDP. The newspapers with links to larger sources of capital claimed 36% of the circulation. Newspapers such as *Aydınlık* or *Yeniçağ*, described as "mission-

oriented" newspapers, had 4.5%. Newspapers such as *Sözcü* or *Cumhuriyet*, linked to small-scale capital or owned by a trust, had 7.4% (Yılmaz, 2013).

No matter how true the criticisms of the bias of the media towards Gezi Park, one cannot say that the media outlets completely neglected their duties. The report on media bias throughout the Gezi Park protests by the Institution of Public Inspection acts as a summary of the situation during Gezi Park:

"It was observed that certain television channels were insensitive towards the incidents during the first days, while other television channels were using their broadcasts to reflect their own contrarian stance towards the ruling party in such a way as to create conflict, violence, rage, and exacerbate hatred, even to the point of encouraging criminal behavior. The concern that traditional media outlets were unable to provide accurate information was eliminated by social media and internet-based broadcasts" (Sondakita, 2014).

The Role of Social Media During the "Gezi Uprising"

Social media can be described as any internet-based platform (Gürkan, n.d) from news sites, blogs, and social networks to live streaming, wikis, social bookmarking sites, video and image sharing sites, where the users publish content that they generate. World-renowned academics who conduct research on media and cultural studies, such as Chomsky, Rodriguez, and Dragon, describe new media technologies as "citizen media" that are independent of any political ideology, the state, or large-scale capital (Türk, 2013). Social media, distinct from traditional media organs, provides an interactive space for communication and the quick conveyance of messages. In this regard, the flow of information between media organs and society extends such that it flows from every layer of society to the media organs and then back again to society.

With the increase in the use of social media, the number of areas in which it is used has also increased. People have begun to announce their cries for help, their suffering, their joys, and various feelings through social networks. In recent years especially, in Turkey and around the world, it became possible to keep one's finger on the pulse of society, and even to form social movements, through social media. The interactive communication environment offered by social media gave social networks an additional function as a tool for protest, one of the most basic individual rights.

In recent years there have been many social movements whose organization began on social networks. Among the most important of these movements are the following three events (Türk, 2013). First, parliament of Moldova was occupied following the elections of 2009. This occurred in an environment of strict control over the mainstream media, and was initiated by young people, interested in exposing possible manipulation of the electoral results, who called for a protest over Twitter.

Second, prior to the Arab Spring- one of the foremost examples of effective social media use- many people from different regions and of different social stature in Tunisia, Albania, and later Egypt, organized themselves over social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. They chose this platform because the media faced pressure from the ruling elite in their countries. The call "Come to the streets", announced over social networks, caused approximately 90,000 people to gather. As a result of these demonstrations, the rules of Zine El Abidine, Ben Ali, and Hosni Mubarak were brought to an end.

Third, in 2011, political activists started the "We are the 99%/Occupy Wall Street" movement on Wall Street in New York City. The activists, who announced their demands through an official website "occupywallst.org", quickly gained the support of more than 100 cities within the United States and more than 1,500 internationally. The main purpose of this movement was

"to fight back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process. At the same time, to reveal the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest recession in recent history. The political movement was inspired by popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, and aims to fight back against the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy" (Çildan, Ertemiz, Küçük, Tumuçin & Albayrak, 2012).

For this reason, calls for protest were organized through social networks, establishing an historical precedent of the efficient use of social media on a global scale.

Many recent examples from around the world could be added to this list, including the Turkish example of effective social media use: the Gezi Park protests. Throughout the course of the Gezi Park protests there was a marked increase in the use of social media. The reason behind this was the lack of responsiveness to events at the beginning of the demonstrations from traditional audio-visual media outlets. While the number of Twitter users in Turkey on May 29th, 2013 was under two million, in only a ten-day it reached ten million (Banko & Babaoğlu, 2013).

On Twitter, the hashtags "#direngeziparkı", "#occupygezi", and "#geziparkı" became trending topics globally in the last days of May 2013. In a study conducted by the Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) laboratory at New York University to measure Twitter traffic, it was observed that on May 31st, more than two million tweets were published within 24 hours (Bozkurt, 2013). This intense use of social media triggered a social movement and initiated many other problems. Because the veracity of the very first tweets could not be ascertained, a serious danger of disinformation arose. During the period when these tweets were being re-tweeted, there was a danger that they would not remain up to date, and therefore that misunderstandings would persist. More importantly, social media tools were convenient breeding

grounds for provocation, providing opportunities for events to be twisted in such a way as to increase the atmosphere of tension.

Thus, a great deal of disinformation was presented to public during through social media the Gezi Park protests. Some of the most important pieces of disinformation were: "A journalist claimed that the government will be overthrown by a European Union decision if the protests lasted for more than 24 hours", "A police vehicle ran over a protestor" (actually a picture of an individual who fell from a motorboat in a foreign country), "Gezi Park protestors marching across the Bosphorus Bridge" (actually a picture of the Eurasian Marathon), "the lady in red, who was subjected to police violence, was a commercial actress" (no picture of a commercial was found), "they entered the mosque with their shoes on, and drank beer" (the demonstrators used the mosque for first aid purposes, and treated demonstrators with medicinal solutions) (Insanhaber, 2014). Such fabricated news items caused an uproar on social media and both the protestors and government representatives developed their discourse in accordance with these items of "news".

Despite this, the Gezi Park protests constitute one of the most important examples in recent history of the power and efficiency of social media. Its susceptibility to subjective use, however, produced disruptive effects that should be carefully observed. Many individuals took a step forward in terms of their awareness of media as a result of their experience in this period.

Conclusion

Media has entered into a transformative period thanks to the increased frequency of technological developments, worldwide political instability, and the shifting balance of economic systems and financial fluctuations. Since the end of the Cold War and the United States' emergence as global superpower, country after country has adopted its free-market policies, significantly influencing media. The media organs, previously monopolized by the state, began to privatize. Furthermore, the influence of globalization caused national boundaries to weaken, subjecting national media markets to international economic competition.

With the policies of privatization in Turkey beginning in the 1980s, many sectors experienced movements of liberalization. Of these, one of the most important, from both the perspective of its use and of its sphere of influence, was the media. Deregulation in the media sector also caused the structural transformation of that sector. The media magnates who previously oversaw traditional journalism are now the owners of large-scale capital. These magnates became interested in media because of the media's influence upon not politics and economics, but also upon social and cultural life. Since the 1990s, those media outlets most competent in informing and manipulating public opinion began using their power according to the interests of these magnates. This caused the media to adopt an entangled ownership, changing not only the dynamics of the sector but also the function and definition of the

media. Because of the power held by media, by necessity an organic relationship emerged between these channels of communication and political authorities. Both in periods like elections, where political power was in flux, and in periods of social unrest, the ruling elite has used media as their tool. Additionally, media magnates used their political influence to invest in other sectors in which they were active. Small or oppositional media outlets were condemned either to fade away or to merge with larger-scale media outlets.

Over the past twenty years, the Turkish media sector's tendency towards monopolization has been clearly demonstrated, and although the sector's level of intensity is not yet serious, precautionary measures to ensure transparency and pluralism are being taken. Concerns about losing these values in the media continue to rise. Claims that political authorities are conducting their relationship with media in terms of ownership, censorship, and self-censorship are also being made. In this regard, the Gezi demonstrations in 2013 provide a strong case study for the stances taken by media outlets.

Demonstrations begun by a group of environmentalists motivated by ecological sensitivities and in order to prevent the removal of trees from an Istanbul park spread country-wide due both to the media's initial insensitivity towards the incident and to the carelessness of political authorities. Thus, the protests turned against the ruling elite. Social media allowed the announcement of the protests to spread rapidly, but the spread of disinformation also accompanied this useful function.

The protestors blamed media outlets for not fulfilling their main purposes, resulting in demonstrations against "sell-out media". The media outlets, by contrast, struggled to remain impartial in this oppressive and chaotic atmosphere, discussing the Gezi Park demonstrations only from the perspective of either the government or the protestors. Moreover, those working for various media outlets, including journalists, editors, and even chief editors, resigned from their posts. The possibility of government-imposed media censorship during these events became a topic of extensive discussion. It should be noted that anti-government media outlets were nonetheless able to broadcast 24 hours a day and did not meet with intervention.

Because audio-visual media outlets lost credibility, social media gained popularity during the Gezi Uprising due to its ease of use. It made calls for help, the rapid announcement of events, and the mass dissemination of information possible. Nonetheless, many problems were encountered while using social media, including agitation through the use of out-of-date news, direct provocation, and the effective dissemination of disinformation. These demonstrated the necessity of a cautious approach towards social media.

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