

“Role model” Turkey’s bankrupt news media: Lessons from the Gezi Parki protests

Ergin Bulut, *University of Illinois*

If you happen to be in Turkey and are interested in soccer, I recommend that you tune in to *DigiTurk*, the channel that broadcasts soccer games nationally every week. During the games of the “Big 3” (the major teams representing Istanbul: Besiktas, Galatasaray, and Fenerbache), pay particular attention to the 34th minute [1] of the game. There will not be any sound. You will think that a technical failure has occurred or that the fervent fans have decided to stop chanting all of a sudden. You are wrong, because fans critical of the government’s [2] attempts to transform Gezi Parki into something else (a military barracks and a shopping mall) are chanting anti-government slogans and *DigiTurk* has silenced the service for which you have paid.

This is the entry for my brief commentary on the Turkish news media in the light of the Gezi Parki protests that began at the end of May, 2013. During the protests that lasted for more than a month, followed by sporadic events [3], five protesters (Abdullah Comert, Ethem Sarisuluk, Ali Ismail Korkmaz, Mehmet Ayvalitas, Ahmet Atakan) and a policeman (Mustafa Sari) died. About 10,000 people were wounded. Prosecutions are still ongoing. The impact of the protests on the 2014 local and presidential elections is still unknown. However, the protests revealed one thing clearly: the media failed in covering the events and the protesters initiated a much-awaited protest against the news media. The result, so far, is an ongoing reconfiguration of the journalism scene vis-à-vis the state which is increasing its censorship of journalists. The profession in Turkey is already very much limited by the employers’ economic interests and by their personal relationships with the government.

During political upheavals, symbols and cultural practices matter significantly. As far as Gezi Parki is concerned, humor, subversive aesthetics, and the use of digital technologies were of paramount importance (Dagtas, 2013). Indeed, political parties across the spectrum were taken aback by the creative energies and digital skills of Generation Y in resisting the government and telling the mainstream media to get their act together. Here, one of the key symbols during the protests—the penguin—is helpful for discussing the relationship between the media and the state.



Figure 1. Penguin documentary on *CNN Turk* vs. Taksim protests in Antarctica on *CNN International*.

Source: <http://siyasicarikaturler.blogspot.com/2013/06/cnn-turkun-penguenleri.html>

When protests were at their most intense stage, *CNN Turk*, as a leading news station, chose to broadcast a documentary on penguins. Additionally, the univocal tone of pro-government newspapers revealed the ways in which alternative voices were highly marginalized. For instance, the headlines below constitute a summary of a major speech by the Prime Minister, addressing the protests.



Figure 2. Mainstream newspapers, summarizing the Prime Minister Erdogan's address to the protests. The newspapers quote Erdogan's remarks: "We are completely okay with democratic demands of the protesters".

Source: <http://t24.com.tr/haber/basbakan-dondu-medyanin-cani-feda/231486>

Mainstream news channels' indifference to the protests and the silencing of oppositional views contrasted with ongoing dissent within the digital realm. Subversive jokes became viral in social media. The fear barrier with respect to the government had already been overcome through the wide availability of digital technologies and the creative impulse associated with them. This is briefly exemplified below:



Figure 3. Prime Minister Erdogan caricatured as the Governor in *The Walking Dead*. ‘Chapuller’ is yet another creative modification of ‘Capulcu’, meaning ‘looter’ in English.



Figure 4. The Gasfather, with his links to mainstream cable news TV. Source:

<http://notesfromdystopia.wordpress.com/2013/12/18/bertrand-russell-the-megalomaniac/>

While political humor, laughter, and digital technologies were important to the protests, what I want to do here is map the current status of the news media and draw some preliminary conclusions.

My preference for mapping televisual news media is not meant to demean the role played by new media. However, the fact that populations in peripheral areas of the country were not aware of the extent of the Gezi Parki protests for three days reveals how so-called “dead television” still plays a major role in the everyday lives of people. Moreover, the commercial share television gets is important to underline. Fifty-six percent of the value derived from commercials goes directly to television stations and, as of 2011; this revenue had reached US\$ 2.5 billion. Despite the laws against monopoly, the sharing of economic value is far from egalitarian, and the bigger fish get the bigger share (Kurban and Sozeri, 2012).

What follows is a status update of television news media in terms of ownership, political orientation, and economic interests (linked with the government). It demonstrates the complex relationships associated with media groups both at the national and the transnational level. This will be followed by a discussion of the Gezi Parki protests’ implications for media.

NTV

The *NTV* channel belongs to Dogus Media Group and was the first cable news TV network in Turkey. It established a precedent as far as journalism was concerned. However, its highly inadequate coverage of the Gezi events inflamed the audience.

Protestors specifically organized a meeting in front of the channel's headquarters. The Dogus group also has international partnerships with *MSNBC*, *CNBC*, *National Geographic*, *Virgin*, *Vogue*, and *GQ*. The group's economic activities include public tenders for the recently opened Marmaray underground tunnel connecting Asia and Europe underneath the Bosphorus and for Galataport, as well as various dams, highways, and power plants. It also has interests in the banking, tourism and automotive sectors. *NTV*'s political orientation can be considered liberal but along the lines of the hegemonic project of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). It has given more voice to writers and journalists from the conservative right.

CNN Turk

CNN Turk belongs to the Dogan Media Group, which is the most powerful media group in Turkey. Its coverage of a lawsuit (regarding misconduct of money and corruption at the charity named Deniz Feneri) did not make the government particularly happy due to the involvement of some bureaucrats. Because of a tax punishment, the owner of the group had to step down as CEO and was forced to sell *Star TV* due to regulations restricting monopolization. The Dogan Group in general is involved in construction, energy, and tourism and owns the Istanbul Hilton. Its political orientation is liberal.

SkyTurk 360

After being bought by the Saving Deposit Insurance Fund of Turkey (TMSF), *SkyTurk 360* had no private owner for a while and was managed by TMSF. During this transitional period under TMSF, programmes critical of the government were no longer given airtime. In 2013, the Kolin-Limak-Cengiz Partnership, which had also won the tender for the third airport, bought this channel and this created controversies. The partnership is engaged with construction and energy. It is also aiming to build the third largest dam in the world and it owns Turkey's largest network of energy distribution. However, as of September 2013, the group has decided not to buy the channel and *Aksam* newspaper. Upon the request of the Prime Minister, Nihat Ozdemir, the CEO of the Limak Partnership, decided to build a religious high school [4] in Siirt, a city in the eastern part of Turkey. Ozdemir is also said to be close to the religious network of Fethullah Gulen, which describes itself as a service movement with large investments in education, both nationally and internationally. The head of the movement currently resides in the United States.

AHaber

The *AHaber* channel is owned by the conservative/pro-government Calik Group, which is especially assertive within the realm of energy. It operates in the Middle East and Central Asia. The fact that Calik Group acquired some of the capital for buying the

ATV-Sabah Group from public banks created controversies. Moreover, the CEO of the holding company is the Prime Minister's son-in-law.

Bloomberg HT and HaberTurk TV

The liberally oriented Ciner Group owns these two channels. Their attitude with respect to the Gezi Events was also the target of complaints and protests. The interview with the Prime Minister conducted by the news coordinator of the group, Fatih Altayli, was particularly subject to satire in *Zaytung*, the Turkish equivalent of the *Opinion* satirical newspaper. It reported that: "In his programme, Fatih Altayli prepared questions for the answers of the Prime Minister." Ciner Group has interests in energy, mining, construction, and tourism.

KanalTurk and Bugun TV

The Koza Ipek Group, conservative and pro-government, owns these two channels. They have close links with the Gulen movement.

24 TV

The ownership of *24 TV* was transferred from Star Media to Azerbaijani state company Socar in April 2013. The channel adopts a pro-government broadcasting stance. The former name of this channel was *Star Haber 24*. Its news coordinator, Yigit Bulut, is now the Prime Minister's key advisor. In the past, Bulut used to criticize the government's economic policies. Both the national and the international press targeted and even mocked Prime Minister Erdogan's choice of Yigit Bulut. One of the partners of the channel is AKP's Tevhit Karakaya. The other partner is Fettah Tamince, who is Chairman of the Board of Sembol Construction, the company that ended up buying the HalicPort tender.

Samanyolu Haber

Samanyolu Haber is owned by Samanyolu Haber Yayincilik and has links with the Gulen Movement. This channel is particularly invested in the Olympics of Turkish Language, an organization with humanistic and colonial sentiments in relation to spreading the use of Turkish worldwide. The Turkish Olympics is an event where children across the world display their command of the Turkish language. Samanyolu Haber Yayincilik is attempting to internationalize and broadcasts in the USA through *Ebru TV*.

TGRT Haber

The conservative/pro-government Ihlas Group owns this channel. The group is also involved in construction, health, and education. Ihlas also owns *Turkiye* newspaper and Ihlas News Agency.

Ulke TV

The conservative/pro-government Beyaz Iletisim owns this channel. The Chairman of the Board of the channel is one of the alleged criminals associated with the Deniz Feneri Lawsuit, a matter that also involved some government bureaucrats.

Ulusal Kanal

This channel is owned by Yeditepe Iletisim Hizmetleri. It has a nationalist and anti-government stance. This TV station is criticized for being nationalist. Yet even those who were critical of its stance had to watch *Ulusal Kanal* during the Gezi Protests since it was one of the very few to cover it. The leader of the Workers' Party, who has been influential on the channel's broadcasting policy, is now in jail due to the Ergenekon lawsuit.

TV NET

This channel is owned by the conservative Albayrak Group, which has operations in construction (Istanbul subway), tourism, and industry. The group has familial links with the Prime Minister. The pro-government newspaper *Yeni Safak* belongs to the same group.

IMC TV

This channel is owned by Katilim Medya. The channel has a multiculturalist/leftist discourse. The group's CEO, Ramazan Baydan, is a shoe manufacturer. The channel has a decidedly oppositional stance and features commentators and intellectuals critical of the government. The channel has recently experienced layoffs. Ramazan Baydan denied the claims that the layoffs were related to union membership among staff.

TRT Haber

TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) *Haber* is the state's principal news channel.

Halk TV

The *Halk TV* channel was founded by the oppositional party, CHP (Republican People's Party). It has a nationalist and anti-government stance. This channel was the quintessential news outlet during the Gezi Parki protests. Citizens who had never heard of the channel before or just ignored it had to tune into *Halk TV* for its bold coverage of the events. The current ownership structure of the channel is vague. In an interview with *Hurriyet* (Oskay, 2013), the news coordinator of the channel, Hakan Aygun, said that the channel belonged to four to five businessmen, whose names he was unable to remember.

This brief summary might be familiar or unfamiliar to readers depending on their international background. On the one hand, names and actors constitute a historical background regarding Turkey. At the same time, the schematic map reveals how the relationships between the state and capital are tightly interlinked. Indeed, there is an oligopolistic structure in the market within which the state, through its economic and extra-economic power, plays a central role. However, a purely economic perspective would be insufficient if we are to understand the media's transformation under the AKP's rule. What I want to suggest here is that networks of capital outside of Istanbul—the financial and cultural center of Turkey—are embedded in the struggle over economic and cultural power. What, then, are researchers of media and communication from a political-economic perspective to make of all this?

Lessons from the Gezi protests

Choose your side

The organizing potential of social media frustrated the ruling party, despite its skills at using and regulating mainstream news media for government purposes. The Prime Minister described social media as a “social menace” and argued that “a prayer is more powerful than millions of tweets” (Radikal, 2013: para 1). However, the government's target was not only social media. The international press was accused of being part of a conspiracy that also included the “interest lobby”, namely financial actors. The pro-government newspaper *Yeni Safak* accused *Jadaliyya* of simply naming the events as the “Turkish Spring” (Jadaliyya, 2013: para 1).

Bankrupt news media

Frustrated by the condition of the news media, protestors burnt *NTV* broadcast vehicles and performed non-violent interventions during live broadcasts, such as throwing cleaning water onto cameras. Citizens called news channels and asked them if they were selling groceries or whether they would replay the penguin documentary. Commentators invited to discuss the protests on television raised their concerns regarding the condition of the media and were sometimes ‘reprimanded’ by the hosts.

Journalists under siege but not silent

Just like protestors, journalists too were subject to police brutality. Up to 100 journalists were wounded during the events and foreign journalists were detained (Medyatava, 2013). The Union of Turkish Journalists declared that 22 journalists were fired, while 37 were forced to resign (Akgul, 2013). The Mayor of Ankara Metropolitan Municipality intimidated a BBC correspondent (Halliday, 2013). Reaction to journalists went beyond intimidations. Media employees were fired from *SkyTurk 360*, *Sabah* newspaper and *TRT*. The latter also terminated the popular TV Show, *Leyla ile Mecnun*, since the actors had participated in the protests. While their institutions were under siege, journalists were not silent. Various journalists resigned from Dogus Media. Dogus' CEO apologized to employees for the organization's failure to cover the protests and resigned nine days after this declaration. The Istanbul branch of the Association of Turkish Journalists announced that 59 journalists were forced to resign (Akgul, 2013).

Social protest is about media literacy

Citizens who took to the streets for the first time in their lives (mostly educated urban Turks) and became subject to police violence, later apologized to Kurds for not sympathizing with their struggle over the years. That is, Turks living in the urban centres experienced what it means to be silenced by the media, a routine experience for the Kurds. The resistance produced its own media as well. Protestors used different kinds of technologies and had their own television outlets to cover and discuss the events.

Final remarks: Conundrums of political liberalism

In line with global trends, the Turkish news media has been experiencing a major transformation over the past three decades. The 1990s marked the end of the state's monopoly over news broadcasts. In 2001, a banking crisis impacted on the ownership structures in news media. Finally, the AKP, as the ruling party, has used its economic and extra-economic means to create a media structure that is conservative *and* neo-liberal in its approach to politics and the economy. The AKP's role in this transformation has been so immense that the Dogan Group, as the News Corporation of Turkey, had to make concessions as far as their economic interests and associated political alliances were concerned.

The state has always been influential in shaping the media scene globally. However, what needs to be noted in the case of Turkey is that the media itself became proactive in creating new alliances with cultural elites that now occupy a major space within news media (Chakravarty and Roy, 2013). The composition of the news/debate shows on television has changed radically over the last decade. Indeed, one gets to see faces and political views that were not apparent 10 years ago. In other words, a new intelligentsia has emerged.

A final note in regard to the broader study of media and communications is that the discourse of liberal-democracy is not helpful to our understanding of the relationship between state and capital in the case of Turkey. Liberal-democratic journalists from Turkey, who aligned with the government in its early years especially in relation to its flourishing relationship with the European Union, ended up being the frustrated and discarded allies of an AKP regime that is now in its eleventh year. These journalists, who were rightly frustrated with the state's censorship of the media, had to face the contradictions of a liberal-democratic discourse that does not politicize the capitalist mode of production, in regard to the labor process in news industry workplaces. In other words, the assumption that the tradition of a strong Turkish state is *the* reason for the curtailment of freedom of speech is problematic because it ignores relations of production in society at large. This mistaken view is a dominant one among journalists. It is imbued with Orientalist perspectives that take the West as the model to follow as far as democracy and freedom of speech is concerned. It is this liberal discourse of freedom of speech that provides the space for TV hosts to appear on state TV (*TRT*) during *Ramadan* and declare that it is inappropriate for pregnant women to walk in the streets. Indeed, when a complaint was filed, the regulatory board—*RTUK* (Radio and TV Supreme Council) — decided that these remarks were within the scope of 'freedom of speech'.

Endnotes

- [1] They choose the 34th minute because 34 represents Istanbul's plate number.
- [2] The ruling party governing Turkey is AKP (Justice and Development Party). While Western media for a long time hailed AKP for being reformist, it can also be characterized as a coalition of forces that managed to build an authoritarian, neoliberal, and conservative hegemony over a decade. For succinct discussions of AKP's politics and its role in the Arab Spring, see Tugal (2007, 2008, 2012). For a focused discussion on the media, see Akser and Barbara-Hawks (2012).
- [3] While the initial tension faded within a month, the government's ongoing policies and the Prime Minister's remarks sparked events every once in a while across the country. Medeni Yildirim and Hasan Ferit Gedik were two young people who lost their lives in the sporadic, ongoing events across the country.
- [4] Religious high schools constitute a priority given the government's political stance. The fact that the Prime Minister asked a businessman to construct one of these reveals the symbolic power through which the government exercises power.

Author Bio

Ergin Bulut is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois. Ergin's research interests broadly cover political economy of communication, critical social theory, globalization and development, and video game studies. He is the co-editor of *Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor*.

References

- Akgul E (2013) Gezi direnişinde 59 gazeteci işten çıkarıldı, istifaya zorlandı [59 journalists were fired or forced to resign during Gezi resistance]. *Bianet*, 22 June. Available at: <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/medya/148636-gezi-direnisinde-59-gazeteci-isten-cikarildi-istifaya-zorlandi>
- Akser M and Barbara-Hawks B (2012) Media and democracy in Turkey: Toward a model of neoliberal media autocracy. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5(3): 302–321.
- Chakravartty P and Roy S (2013) Media pluralism redux: Towards new frameworks of comparative media studies “beyond the West”. *Political Communication* 30(3): 349–370.
- Dagtas S (2013) The politics of humor and humor as politics during Turkey’s Gezi Park protests. *Cultural Anthropology*, 31 October. Available at: <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/397-the-politics-of-humor-and-humor-as-politics-during-turkey-s-gezi-park-protests>
- Haliday, J (2013) BBC journalist received ‘threatening’ tweets from Turkish mayor. *The Guardian*, 24 June. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/jun/24/bbc-journalist-tweets-turkish-mp>
- Jadaliyya (2013) A pro-government newspaper in Turkey blasts Jadaliyya for its role in the protests! *Jadaliyya*, 13 June. Available at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12227/a-pro-government-newspaper-in-turkey-blasts-jadali>
- Kurban D and Sozeri C (2012) *İktidarın çarkında medya: Türkiye’de medya bağımsızlığı ve özgürlüğü önündeki siyasi, yasal ve ekonomik engeller* [Media within the government machinery: Political, legal and economic obstacles regarding media freedom in Turkey]. Istanbul, Turkey: TESEV Yayınları.
- Medyatava (2013) Gezi parkı olaylarında yaralanan gazetecilere çağrı: şikayet edin [Call to journalists injured during Gezi protests: take action]. *Medyatava*, 6 September. Available at: http://www.medyatava.com/haber/gezi-parki-olaylarinda-yaralanan-gazetecilere-cagri-sikayet-edin_95725
- Oskay C (2013) Halk TV yayın yönetmeni Hakan Aygün sert konuştu: ‘Yanlış yapsın CHP’ye de çakarım [Halk TV Editor in chief Hakan Aygun: If CHP did something wrong, I would smash them as well]. *Hurriyet*, 16 June. Available at: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/pazar/23512996.asp>
- Radikal (2013) Başbakan Erdoğan: Bir besmele milyonlarca Tweet’e bedeldir [Our prayer is worth a million tweets]. *Radikal*, 22 June. Available at: http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/basbakan_erdogan_bir_besmele_milyonlarca_tweete_bedeldir-1138705

Tugal C (2007) NATO's Islamists: Hegemony and Americanization in Turkey. *New Left Review* 44: 5–34.

Tugal C (2008) The greening of Istanbul. *New Left Review* 51: 64–80.

Tugal C (2012) Democratic janissaries? Turkey's role in the Arab Spring. *New Left Review* 76: 5–24.