

The Transformation of Turkey's Media under the AKP's Authoritarian Turn

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President of the Republic and Leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the launch of Turkey's incursion into Syria under the name of "Operation Peace Spring" on the 9th of October 2019 over Twitter ("Erdoğan duyurdu," 2019). The next day every single mainstream newspaper including those of secular affiliation came out in support of the offensive ("Basında Bugün," n.d.). A short while later, as government officials warned that "the press had made a terminological error; this was not a war, but an operation," ("Emekli Kurmay Albay Tulga: Savaş Değil, Operasyon," 2019) certain journalists took immediate note of the correction and started saying this was "an eradication of terrorism" (Tezel, 2019). More than a hundred who continued saying "no to war" and calling Turkey an "occupying force" on social media despite this warning, as well as 11 from the Kurdish movement who dared speak this out on the street were, on the other hand, arrested in the first three days ("Barış Pınarı Harekâtı'na hakarete 121 gözaltı," 2019; "Barış Pınarı Harekâtı'nı protesto eden HDP'lilere müdahale," 2019).

Things were quite different 16 years ago, when the U.S. was bent on bringing Turkey into the Iraq War: there was no Facebook yet, three years to go before Twitter and seven before Instagram. Crowds that took to the streets to say "no to war" numbered a hundred thousand ("Türkiye'nin dört bir yanında 'savaşa hayır' gösterileri," 2003). Journalists turned their backs in protest of the then Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had come to Turkey to hold talks on the war effort, and none of them lost their jobs for it (Çelik, 2019). Furthermore, the Parliament was able to vote down the mandate for military action against the will of the AKP leadership, and the next day's newspapers could have "No despite Tayyip" in bold letters across their front pages ("Tayyip'e Rağmen No," 2003).

This paper shall analyse the gradual transformation of Turkey's media under the uninterrupted rule of the AKP between these two periods.¹ In this study based on the premise that this transformation under the AKP has been enabled by unchanging, long-standing tendencies² as much as new developments in the media, the first section shall focus on the AKP government's overall approach to conventional media.

¹ Many thanks to attorney Murat Deha Boduroğlu and journalist Doğan Akın along with the editors of Red-Thread for their important contributions to this article. I would like to reaffirm that any error or omission that may exist is not theirs, but mine entirely.

² Some examples to similarities between the two periods mentioned may be listed as the support given by most mainstream media organs to the military mandate in 2003, the statements issued by media groups condemning journalists who had turned their backs to Colin Powell, and arrests of anti-war activists taking to the streets when these were from the Kurdish movement.

Presenting a chronological overview of the coercive repertoire (though not exhaustively, at least in its basics) employed by the regime in this field, this article then seeks to look at new platforms where critical thought finds the opportunity to manifest itself in its second section. I shall attempt to analyse readers and journalists' shift away from conventional media and towards social media instead, the growing significance of social networks, news websites and foreign press in this area, as well as new government blockages in response to these. The paper shall conclude by opening up a discussion on the remaining space for journalism under current circumstances.

1. The AKP's Media War

1.1. 2002-2007: Contesting the Military, Alliances with Liberals

Mainstream media establishments were busy with intensive lobbying in 2001, as the Justice and Development Party was being founded. Their purpose was to have the article in the RTÜK Law (*Law No. 3984 on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and their Media Services*) preventing media owners from participating in public tenders removed. Those effectively able to take advantage of this concession were a limited number of capital-owning conglomerates that had pushed out media owners from a journalism background as a result of neoliberal economic policies implemented in the wake of the 1980 military coup: the **Doğan Media Group** owned by Aydın Doğan, Dinç Bilgin's **Merkez Group**, the **Çukurova Media Group** belonging to Mehmet Emin Karamehmet and family, **İhlas Group** owned by Enver Ören and his family, **Star Group** belonging to the Uzan family, and Ferit Şahenk's **Doğu Medis Group**. The Doğan and Merkez groups in particular held sway over much of the existing print media, which was most influential in setting the political agenda (C. Sözeri, 2019). All mainstream media outlets save for the religiously-motivated, conservative İhlas Group, espoused an approach aligned with the military, that was infused with Sunni Islam yet advocated for secularism in politics, writing Turkey's official history from the perspective of its coups. Since the army had carried out its last coup on the 28th of February 1997 against the coalition headed by the Islamist Refah Yol (Welfare-Path) – of which the AKP is an offshoot, the mainstream media turned a blind eye to the AKP. Instead, media bosses caring for their own profit chose to focus the attention of media outlets they owned on the Parliament's amendment to the RTÜK Law, which hence came into effect about five months prior to the general elections of 2002 (Önderoğlu, 2002). Mainstream media owners therefore created grounds for the party to come to power to literally pull the strings of outlets that were at odds with it. This profit-driven approach to journalism by the mainstream media ended up being one of the primary factors enabling the AKP's later violations in the area of press.

In the midst of the bloodless coup of 1997, the earthquake of 1999 that claimed over 18 thousand lives, and public reactions to the 2001 economic crisis, the AKP gained enough of a majority to form government on its own in the very first election it entered. Yet media owners still managed to believe that the AKP government was a temporary interval, and their leading representatives continued saluting the army all the way until 2008. As indicated by this fact, one of the defining characteristics of Turkey's mainstream media, even before the AKP, has been its staunchly statist stance, rather than a defence of democracy.³ This was precisely what allowed media owners and co. siding with the army while it held state power to legitimise in their own eyes their shifting loyalties once this control over the state was consolidated in the hands of the AKP some years down the line.

Due to ongoing relations of military tutelage during AKP's early period, its principal supporters in the media became mostly formerly leftist, liberal columnists looking for solutions to the Kurdish issue and the country's democratization problem. Prominent writers such as Hasan Cemal, Cengiz Çandar, Nuray Mert, Murat Belge and Ahmet Altan backed the AKP, citing, among others, the steps it was taking towards European Union membership. These journalists – all of whom would later lose their jobs, some ending up arrested – emphasized the second half of the party's "conservative-democrat" identity over the first and criticised those who voiced concerns over its religious conservatism (Arman, 2007). There were even those among them who accused non-AKP supporters of giving indirect support to putschists (Özvarış, 2015). Later many of them were forced to admit their mistakes. Their loss of political clout occurred in tandem with the global decline of liberal values and democracy. The course Turkey's famous liberal journalists followed became a matter of interest for both circles that had opposed the AKP from the very beginning on grounds of its religious character, as well as those pursuing the global downfall of the liberal order and those getting caught up in the rising wave of anti-elitism that ensued.

³ Though relations between the media and the military weren't conducted out in the open, media owners never kept their statist affinities secret. For instance, Aydın Doğan, who was Turkey's top media tycoon until 2018, called his number one newspaper Hürriyet a 'state newspaper'. This prioritization of the state over democracy in the mainstream is a tendency that resurfaces again and again in Turkey's media history. The coup of 1997 had already extended the army's reach into editorial desks, and the AKP's rise to power simply sprung the pens they held into action. One example to this was the Star newspaper owned by the Uzan group belonging to Cem Uzan, leader of the Young ("Genç") party that had run against the AKP in the 2002 elections. According to Star columnist Mustafa Mutlu, it was common knowledge that the newspaper's editor-in-chief inserted pro-army content into the paper. Another overt example of the media-military relationship is the famous "Young officers are restless" ("Genç subaylar tedirgin") headline by Cumhuriyet, the country's longest-standing newspaper. The name under this news piece dated May 23rd, 2003, which the government took as a belligerent warning, was Mustafa Balbay, who also recorded in his journals certain discussions – that he did not report on – by army commanders on a coup against the AKP in meetings he attended as the newspaper's Ankara Representative (Balbay later partly acknowledged these journals during his trial).

While the alliance between the AKP and liberal journalists against military tutelage was yet intact, the assassination of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink took place on the 19th of January 2007. The events leading up to the murder, regarding which the most critical institutions and public officials remain un-investigated despite the 12 years that have gone by, were prompted by an article published by Dink in the weekly paper *Agos*, where he served as editor-in-chief. While Dink was charged with “denigrating Turkishness” based on a distortion of his article, Turkey’s media made him into a target with headlines such as “love it or leave it” (Özvarış, 2013). Due to its attitude instigating the nationalism that led to his assassination, the media was lumped among “Hrant Dink’s murderers”, alongside the army, police, Intelligence Service, judiciary and the ‘deep state’ involving elements of them all.⁴ Following the assassination of Dink, developments ensued that would radically alter the power balance between civilian and military authorities. About three months after the assassination, the army issued a memorandum over the internet – just because the likely next president had a wife wearing the headscarf. Before a month had gone by, Erdoğan held an undisclosed meeting with the Chief of General Staff who had put out this memorandum, and the next month the deep state in Turkey came under investigation for the very first time in history as the “Ergenekon terrorist organisation” (“Dokuz soruda Ergenekon davası,” 2013).

In its early period, the AKP leadership took strategic steps that would result in its own favour not only in its power struggle with the military, but also in terms of media ownership. An important part of these steps involved the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu – TMSF). Having taken over the Merkez Group before the AKP came to power, the TMSF then seized the assets of the Star Group in 2004, and shortly prior to the 2007 elections the group was sold to businessmen known for their proximity to the AKP (Hasan Doğan and Ethem Sancak).⁵ The same year the TMSF also took over all publications and broadcasts belonging to the Ciner Group, including the newspaper *Sabah* and the channel ATV (“TMSF Atv ve Sabah’a el koydu,” 2007). Thus, through the TMSF, the hegemony of the anti-AKP media was broken, an investigation was started extending all the way to the army that exercised covert control over the media, and prominent liberal journalists became allies over

⁴ The then Prime Minister Erdoğan said the Dink assassination was ‘an act of homicide directed at them’, claiming that this assassination taking place seven months before their second general election was an attempt at toppling the AKP government. This stance cemented the positions of liberal writers supporting the AKP at the time. Yet the AKP’s attitude changed over the years, and it hampered the judicial process by casting a protective net over many public officials involved in the murder. Its decision to backtrack on solving this murder became one of the clearest indications of the fact that the AKP had sided with the anti-democratic elements within the state it had pitted itself against up until then.

⁵ Ethem Sancak, who later became the sole owner of the group, explained the reason behind his entry into the sector as a move to “be of better service to Erdoğan by disrupting the uniformity of the media” and added that he was a “devotee” of Erdoğan’s.

common problems. Bolstered by these moves as well, the AKP breezed through its second general election with a 12% increase.

1.2. The AKP's post-2007 Interventions into Conventional Media

When did Turkey stop being a democracy and turn into an autocracy? A majority of the academic literature on the AKP's authoritarianism refers to the year 2011, meaning the AKP's third period, as the start of the autocracy (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Somer, 2016). Yet academics are unable to pinpoint an exact turning point before which there was democracy and after which came autocracy. One reason for this is because the army in Turkey never allowed a liberal democracy to flourish, and the AKP was therefore able to build its narrative on putting an end to this military tutelage even when its actions were anti-democratic. Another reason why this authoritarianism has hazy beginnings is because the AKP's own authoritarian turn was spread out over time and gained momentum gradually. Otherwise, the practices adopted by the AKP prior to 2011 had already narrowed the scope of democracy and started preventing its political rivals from competing on equal terms with itself. For instance, more than a hundred from the Kurdish political movement including mayors and academics were arrested as part of the KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union) court case. With a referendum in 2010 that was campaigned as an opportunity to curtail military tutelage, higher courts were restructured to better suit the purposes of the executive branch.⁶ The Ergenekon investigation that was launched prior to the elections developed into a court case, and hundreds including retired army officers were put on trial under the shadow of multiple due process violations on the main charge of attempting to "overthrow the government by force". Groups capable of challenging the AKP were thus purged from the bureaucracy and political establishment, and the resulting vacancies were filled in a manner to consolidate the AKP regime.

Its media purges, on the other hand, were carried out at times directly and at other times through more circuitous routes. In one example the AKP was directly involved in, the Sabah newspaper and TV channel ATV that had been taken over by the TMSF were sold to Çalık Holding, the only bidder in the state-run auction. The government support involved in the process became even more evident with the provision of 750 million by state banks for the 1.1 billion-dollar acquisition ("Sabah ve ATV Çalık Grubu'na geçti," 2017). A short while later Erdoğan's son-in-law (and later minister) Berat Albayrak became CEO of this energy giant. With this sale, the AKP had taken its biggest stride thus far in the direction of creating its own media. At the same time, the Albayrak Group said to have won 33 tenders from the Istanbul Metropolitan

⁶ For instance, the President was vested with the authority to –directly and indirectly- appoint 14 of the Constitutional Court's 17 members.

Municipality during Erdoğan's term in office here, revamped its channel Tvnet (C. Sözeri, 2019). Taraf newspaper that would come to set the national agenda with documents it published claiming to expose the underbelly of the military tutelage system was founded in 2007. Though not considered a partisan (government-controlled) paper due to the liberal professional backgrounds of its management, Taraf ended up furthering the political agenda of the AKP and Gülen movement with its lack of adequate editorial filtering when publishing documents it was being leaked and its featuring of certain columnists from a law enforcement background. The most important consequence of which being the initiation of the Balyoz (Sledgehammer) case, in which certain members of the armed forces were prosecuted – again with many due process violations involved – on charges of an attempted coup (“Balyoz Davası’ Nedir?,” 2012).



“Balyoz davası” (Sledgehammer Case) process started with this copy of Taraf newspaper published on January 20, 2010.

In its second period, the AKP resorted to two new means in order to reshape the media: Hurling public threats at media proprietors during political rallies and imposing tax penalties. Doğan Media, the largest media conglomerate in Turkey and a sustained government critic, was hit with an astronomical tax fine in 2009 while giving important exposure to corruption scandals implicating the AKP.⁷ After this fine, Doğan

⁷ The lead-up to the 6 billion 448 million 8 thousand lira fine imposed on the Doğan Group eventually paid off in 1.2 billion liras started with the Hürriyet newspaper headline that read “411 hands raised for chaos” in the wake of the Parliamentary vote to lift the headscarf ban in universities. Erdoğan's subsequent call to boycott the group was followed by the group's coverage in its media outlets of the Deniz Feneri (Lighthouse) corruption case with links to the AKP.

Media ceased its coverage of corruption and shifted its course by incorporating figures such as Erdoğan's former press consultant ("TAZ," 2009). Erdoğan, however, kept demanding more extreme moves with statements like "The showcase is only for those who deserve it" during his rallies ("Elde körük ülkeyi yangın yeri gibi gösteriyorlar," 2010). In one year's time, the Doğan Group was forced to sell two of its leading newspapers, Milliyet and Vatan, to businessman Erdoğan Demirören.⁸ Seven years later, in 2018, Demirören acquired all other media outlets in Aydın Doğan's possession including, most importantly, Hürriyet, becoming Turkey's biggest media giant ("Doğan Medya Grubu satıldı!," 2018). The current bulk of space taken up by the government in Turkey's mainstream media is as follows:

"9 out of the top 10 newspapers with the highest circulation, all of the top 10 radio channels, 9 of the top 10 most-watched TV channels, and 7 of the most-visited 10 digital news portals mostly feature content in line with the policies of the president, government and the AKP. ("Şahıslar," n.d.)"

Arrests, Layoffs, and Censoring Massacre

The changeover in media ownership affected journalists first and foremost. Both media owners and editorial directors with journalism backgrounds, as well as journalists themselves were cast out of the profession through judicial interventions. By the end of this gradual process, the sector was, to a great extent, turned into an empty shell.

The first notable journalist arrests came with the Ergenekon trials. First Mustafa Balbay and then İlhan Selçuk from the daily Cumhuriyet, following a lefty-nationalist line at the time, were taken under police custody in 2008. While their colleagues were busy debating whether the actions of these figures, known for their pro-army tendencies against the AKP, constituted a crime or not, public trust in the media – which was already quite low – plummeted further.⁹ Partly due to this attitude, the validity of the evidence and due process violations were not called into question as loudly as necessary, and arrests went on. Come 2011, journalists Ahmet Şık and Nedim Şener, who were investigating the military tutelage system, were arrested and

⁸ The most significant milestone in Demirören's rapid rise in the media was Milliyet's publication of Namık Durukan's "İmralı Transcripts" in 2013. Following this exposure of the secret notes of a meeting between the imprisoned leader of the armed wing of the Kurdish movement, the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan and parliamentarians from the Kurdish movement while the peace process was ongoing, Erdoğan publicly targeted Milliyet saying "Damn your journalism!" When one of its liberal journalists Hasan Cemal vocally objected to these remarks, this cost him his contract with Milliyet. Thanks to later leaks of tapes, the public found out that the newspaper's boss Demirören had pleaded for Erdoğan's forgiveness in tears over the phone for this very same article at the time.

⁹ According to the European Commission's Eurobarometer, those who distrusted the media in Turkey rose from 61 percent in 2007 to 73 percent in just one year.

detained based on non-existent evidence.¹⁰ The same year, more than thirty journalists were arrested in operations against media outlets aligned with the Kurdish movement and jailed in pre-trial detention under charges related to the KCK case initiated based on anonymous witness testimonies (“7 yıldır devam eden 'KCK Basın davası' ertelendi,” 2019). Thus Turkey, having entered 2011 with 39 journalists in prison, ended the year with 93 imprisoned journalists (Abay, 2011, p. 93). Since Kurdish journalists accounted for the bulk of the increase in arrested journalists, Turkey’s media managed for the most part to overlook this with its trenchant nationalism. And the AKP entered its third term with a near 50 percent of the vote.

That same year famous names also started losing their jobs. For instance, NTV – one of Turkey’s top two news channels – was purged of its news anchors capable of criticizing the government such as Ruşen Çakır, Banu Güven and Can Dündar. While the mainstream media came to learn the government’s reflexes, layoffs and increasing restraint marked the burgeoning pro-AKP media.¹¹ As a result of these practices, Turkey experienced one of its darkest instances of censorship. After the army bombed 34 Kurdish citizens in an airstrike in Roboski, a village on the Iraqi border on December 28, 2011, TV channels did not report on what had happened for 12 hours (“Roboski Katliamı Kronolojisi: Bir Yıl Geçti, Sorumlusu Yok,” 2012). The government’s hold over the media had reached the point of getting journalists to turn a blind eye to massacre.

The New Media Elite

As a result of this all, the old media elite was replaced by a new one. The former core composed of mostly college graduates, wary of religion, and mostly men who were leftists back in university, turned liberal in their old age disintegrated. The members of this group whose pay grade reached 15 thousand dollars (“Fatih Altaylı,” 2015) – with

¹⁰ At this point, Ahmet Şık’s book that led to his arrest merits special mention for its ordeal became the first sign of the kind of space the internet would open up against the crackdown on media in Turkey. The court decided to have Şık’s yet unpublished book *The Imam’s Army (İmanın Ordusu)* banned and confiscated, and Erdoğan retaliated to reactions saying books could be “more dangerous than bombs”. In return, the book’s draft was published online by an anonymous source with a message that said “Long live civil disobedience!” Before long, it was downloaded by thousands. Caught technically unprepared, the government was unable to hunt down via the judiciary or internet service providers those who had downloaded the book and/or applauded this action.

¹¹ For instance, Hasan Karakaya, chief editor at Yeni Akit, a paper known for its Islamist stance and ample use of hate speech, mentioned in our interview with him that they received their own fair share of reprimands from the AKP. Ali Akel was fired from Yeni Şafak, where he had worked for 16 years, after saying that Erdoğan should apologize for Uludere. While being dismissed from his post at the newspaper Star, Mehmet Altan said: “The press doesn’t make its money from journalism or the people. Newspapers cost a lot more than the price they are sold for. Where the real money comes from is influence peddling and ads.” The political pressure leveraged in order to cover the loss started being exerted in broad daylight about a year after this revelation by Altan. The then President of the Star Media Group complained from his column that “the scales had started tipping in favour of the democratic and plurivocal strand in the media, but Turkey’s leading corporations such as Koç and Sabancı continued advertising in the old media.” In such manner, pro-AKP journalists compelled Turkey’s original bourgeoisie into choosing sides and financing their own expenses.

the rate at the time – that weren't turned around by the AKP government lost both their fat salaries and their role as agenda-setters. Those replacing them were middle-aged, conservative men with mediocre degrees who had up until then gained unremarkable experiences in the handful of existing religious outlets. The overwhelming male-domination of the sector became apparent in both newspapers and television programs. The already low number of women journalists dwindled even further, as those wearing the headscarf among them increased. And tabs on which of these journalists were most in favour with the government were kept through photographs issuing from Erdoğan's plane.



A photograph of Erdoğan posing on the presidential plane with journalists accompanying him on his visits abroad.

The Press under Emergency Rule: FETÖ Charges

All of these repressive measures the AKP imposed on conventional media intensified further at every single political threat against the government, including elections. The most obvious example of this being the painful parting of ways lasting from 2011 to 2016 between the government and its one-time partner the religious community known as the 'Fethullah Gülen movement'. The separation was cemented and sealed with the December 17/25 corruption investigations of 2013 involving certain ministers from the AKP, carried out by members of the judiciary affiliated with the Gülen movement relying on legally questionable wiretaps. This was followed by police raids on the movement's media outlets starting with the daily Zaman, and trustees were appointed to their management. While the movement came under prosecution as

the “Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization” (FETÖ), many executives working in its media groups fled abroad. Journalists who remained and had supported the movement in some way or another, on the other hand, faced heavy penalties in the wake of the July 15th coup attempt in 2016 – where FETÖ was considered the main actor. The emergency rule declared that same year generalized state repression and took it to a previously unprecedented level in Turkey.



Images from the police raid of 5 March 2016 in Zaman newspaper, prior to the appointment of the trustee.

Following the coup attempt, the country was ruled under a state of emergency for two years, during which 70 newspapers, 20 journals and 33 television channels were shut down. The number of people removed from public sector jobs reached 121 thousand 311 – including 5 thousand 705 academics. 715 journalists lost their press credentials (yellow press cards), and the count of imprisoned journalists swelled to 143.¹² Among them was *Die Welt* correspondent Deniz Yücel, whose detention for over a year on charges of “spreading terrorist propaganda” resulted in a diplomatic crisis between Germany and Turkey. Taraf’s founding editor-in-chief Ahmet Altan, his brother and former columnist for the daily Star Prof. Mehmet Altan, as well as Nazlı Ilıcak, a veteran writer of the Turkish right recently working in publications belonging to the Gülen movement, were other journalists who ended up in prison at this time. These three figures who had been criticizing the AKP for a while were first accused of “sending subliminal messages to coup plotters” on a television program and then of seeking to “overthrow the constitutional order by force”. Their case became proof of the whole new level the judiciary had reached, for the defendants were not released despite European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and Constitutional Court (AYM) rulings on violations. In the hands of the ruling party, heavy penal courts were rendered devoid of law and exempted from the binding hierarchy of courts. In light of these developments, it took more than three years in prison before Ahmet Altan and Nazlı Ilıcak were finally released in November 2019. Ahmet Altan was re-arrested about a week after his release. In addition to suffering injustice, these figures also received very limited support from their colleagues. The number of journalists going

¹² Turkey topped the Committee to Protect Journalists’ (CPI) list of the “worst jailers of journalists” for three consecutive years in 2016, 2017, and 2018.

to meet them outside the prison complex as they were being released were less than a handful. The main reason for this was their past of ardent journalistic defence of court cases carried out in partnership by the AKP and Gülen community, in utter disregard of the violations these entailed.

Another example that merits mention in terms of the weak bonds of solidarity characterizing Turkey's press is the Cumhuriyet case. Known for its stance against the Gülen movement even before the movement was classified as a terrorist organization, the newspaper Cumhuriyet was accused in the wake of the coup attempt of aiding and abetting FETÖ with its editorial choices. One of the bases of these charges was the testimony of a top-level Cumhuriyet executive writing a letter of complaint to ask for President (as of 2014) Erdoğan's support in the power grab for the paper's control (Akin, 2017). Though the witness was refuted and the prosecutor revealed as a FETÖ suspect himself, 14 members of the press were put on trial and most of them spent time in prison. In other words, the accusation of "having ties with FETÖ" somehow skipped over its overt collaborators the AKP and its media, and instead became a means of silencing journalists critical of the AKP – especially as of late.



Following the arrest of journalists from Cumhuriyet newspaper, protests were held in front of its building in Istanbul.

The Situation Post-Emergency Rule

Nothing improved in terms of press freedom after the state of emergency was lifted. The court cases mentioned above and more went on just the same, physical violence

against journalists was encouraged with impunity, and regulations were issued that conflicted with the Constitution. For instance, with a single statutory decree the Office of the President put its very own Directorate of Communications in charge of handing out press credentials (“İletişim Başkanlığı Hakkında Cumhurbaşkanlığı Kararnamesi,” 2018). Based on this decree, a body of regulations was prepared giving the administration powers in complete disregard of existing legislation on the matter (“Basın Kartı Yönetmeliği,” 2018). Harassed in multiple ways including through unemployment, social lynching and arrests, journalists have lately started being actively attacked as well. An oppositional-nationalist journalist Yavuz Selim Demirağ and Sabahattin Önkibar, known for working in nationalist and Kemalist neo-nationalist papers were beaten up in front of their homes, and their assailants remained unpunished (Demokrasi için Medya/Medya için Demokrasi, n.d.). Despite all of this, the AKP lost hold of the local governments of 15 provinces – with two defeats in Istanbul – in the local elections of 2019 (“Seçimde il değiştiren iller hangileri?,” 2019). Here is how the opposition’s triumphant candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu explained to the Washington Post how he overcame this asymmetry in the media throughout the campaign period:

“The ruling Justice and Development Party dominates the media landscape in our country, making it extremely difficult for anyone opposed to the party to break through. Such an environment dictates a people-first focus. (...) As I conducted one-on-one dialogue with citizens, my campaign turned these real conversations into video clips that we spread through social media. (...) These videos, which were often circulated live, attracted great public interest and gave me a chance to communicate with voters despite the biased media environment of Turkey. (İmamoğlu, 2019)”

In the next section I shall attempt to outline when and how the internet – which enabled İmamoğlu’s election – started gaining importance in terms of the press in Turkey, the main actors operating in this field, and the measures taken by the AKP government against them.

2. Forced Online: The Press Under Siege

The wave of insurgency starting in the West in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, emerging in Tunisia and Egypt towards the end of 2010, and circling back to the West with the US in particular in 2011, manifested itself as the Gezi Park protests in Turkey in 2013 (Tuğal, 2013). Originating as a local environmental movement seeking to defend a park in Istanbul’s city centre and quickly engulfing the entire country, these

protests became a turning point for Turkey's media as well because for the very first time it was seen that the conventional press could cease being the main source of news. According to a survey conducted by KONDA, a public opinion polling and research company, with protesters as the Gezi Park protests were ongoing, 69 percent of protesters were following the news from social media, 15.4 from their friends, 8.6 from news websites, and only 7 percent were resorting to television (KONDA, 2013). One reason for this was that having an affinity for technology was a quality the mostly youthful protesters at Gezi shared. Another was that Gezi protesters could only ever find news of themselves on social media. A sign of the disparity between Gezi protesters and the rest of the country was that a Turkey-wide survey carried out at the same time revealed that only 15.9 percent received news from social media and 6.4 from online papers (KONDA, 2014). Still, even this overall national picture demonstrates that about one third of internet users, who numbered 35 million at the time, had the internet as their main news source, and the fact that the Gezi Resistance boosted the number of Twitter users from 7.2 to 11.3 million suggests that the number of those getting their news from the internet has grown (Demirel, 2013; "İşte Türkiye'nin Twitter istatistikleri," 2012).



A photograph from the Gezi Park protests in 2013, where traditional press's status as being the main news source was shaken.

2.1. Critical Online Platforms Before and After Gezi

But where does all this news circulating on the web come from? As conventional media undergoes censorship and social media users are only able to report from scratch their own or their acquaintances' experiences, it is online media outlets that

take on the bulk of actual news production.¹³ The rise of such news organizations publishing online only in Turkey has been more a consequence of the media establishment created by the steps detailed in the previous section than of market pressures towards digitalization. For journalists' oft-repeated motto regarding Turkey's press, that "the Sublime Porte is a 40-chambered mansion, if you walk out of one room, you enter the next" became obsolete, as no media owners stepped up to hire blacklisted journalists. Many unemployed journalists unable to find a place for themselves in media outlets affiliated with political parties and/or limited in resources shifted to online platforms. Yet, at that time, with an internet dominated by the websites of newspapers and TV channels such as *Milliyet.com.tr* or *NTV.com.tr* ("Top Sites in Turkey," n.d.), there were very few outlets existing prior to the Gezi Park incidents that could produce content critical of the official line and operated online only. The Gezi protests resulted in the growth of an internet media engaging in critical journalism. But what prompted these sites that sprouted up after the protests was the same as those that existed beforehand: the tight filter imposed by mainstream media.

A couple of examples to long-standing online-only news websites existing prior to the protests: *Bianet*, which has been online since its test runs in 2000, *sendika.org* that set out as a publication of the labour movement in 2001, and *T24* established in 2009. *Bianet* started out due to the need for an alternative media felt by civil society organizations disturbed by the uniformity of the media (Metz, 2008). Seeking to "become the voice of the grassroots", *Bianet* met its costs with funds from international bodies such as the EU, paying content writers to publish in many areas including women's and LGBT issues. *T24*, which, on the other hand, doesn't receive any funding, set out with the purpose of practicing "another kind of journalism to counter for-profit journalism." *T24*'s founding editor-in-chief Doğan Akin cites the cost-efficiency of the Internet as their reason for preferring a digital format. Making most of its income from online ads dominated by Google, today *T24* features many

¹³ Turcotte and colleagues (2015), studying news credibility on social media, revealed that when the news a person encountered on these platforms had been shared by a friend of theirs, their trust in both the information and its original source increased. Therefore, the communication aspect (keeping in contact) inherent to these platforms played an indispensable role in turning social media into a source of news during the Gezi Park protests. While the media establishment did not cover developments taking place in the Gezi protests, this continued contact allowed users to follow both what their friends, family and acquaintances were doing and what new information alternative media was providing. While on the one hand enabling the spread of false news, this media also provided opportunities allowing users to quickly verify and circulate information. Still trust in news remained limited, since accountability is not a precondition for sharing on these platforms. Perhaps based on these reasons, studies by Olkun and Balci and Olkun (2016, 2017) comparing the credibility of news on social media with news in established newspapers found that trust in social media is lower in Turkey. Breaking through this lack of trust are, first and foremost, actors publicly known for their credibility: i.e., journalists, academics, and researchers. With this in mind, it may easily be said that although news websites are used much less than social media as a news source, they actually encompass social media in terms of their impact. (Cf. Mehmet Fatih Çömlekçi and Oğuz Başol, "A Study on Social Media News Credibility and News Verification Awareness" ["Sosyal Medya Haberlerine Güven ve Kullanıcı Teyit Alışkanlıkları Üzerine Bir İnceleme"], Galatasaray University Journal of Communication, June 2019).

famous journalists ranging from former *CNN Türk* hosts to mainstream columnists (“T24’ün Kurucusu Doğan Akın DAÜ’de Söyleşi Gerçekleştirdi,” 2017). Founded 18 years ago to be the “voice of labour and resistance”, *sendika.org* is one of the first organizations that put the Internet to use as a site of social opposition (“Hakkımızda,” 2013). Operating on a volunteer basis, where its employees receive nothing but meals and transportation expenses, *sendika.org* was shut down by the state and reopened under alternative names a total of 62 times until 2019 (“Sendika.org’a 62. kez erişim engeli,” 2018).

What caused new ones to be added to these news websites that were already up and running was often the mainstream media’s lack of journalistic response to an unfolding political crisis. For instance, a university student named Engin Önder started the platform *140 journos* as a reaction when television channels failed to report on the Roboski massacre for 12 hours (Karadeniz, 2015). In 2012, when government statements were all you could hear on the mainstream media about Kurdish prisoners’ hunger strikes, a Facebook page called *Ötekilerin Postası* (The Others’ Post) was started. A while later, with the addition of *otekilerinpostasi.org*, the team became one of social media’s highlights (Yumuşak, n.d.).

The media outlets mentioned above, as well as many others, embraced those expelled from the media establishment from 2013 onwards. For instance, Hasan Cemal, who worked for 44 years in the mainstream where he breached taboos such as the Kurdish or Armenian issues, took his column to *T24*, and his Twitter account reached above 700 thousand followers. The shift from central media to the Internet gained speed with the Gezi Park protests. One reason for this was that at least 22 journalists were fired and 37 were forced to resign while the protests were ongoing. These break-offs further weakened the news content of mainstream media, as well as causing new news websites to pop up over the Internet. For instance, 2013 saw the establishment of *Diken* (meaning ‘thorn’). Different outlets such as *Demokrat Haber* (Democrat News), *Haber Vesaire* (News Etcetera) and *Gezi Postası* (Gezi Post) joined forces to start a joint network by the name of *dokuz8haber* (literally, ‘nine8news’) (“Yeni bir medya deneyimi,” 2014).

News websites turning into meeting grounds for disemployed journalists started attracting former stars along with figures from the mainstream media. In their studies of the new alternative media, Ataman and Çoban find that famous journalists pushed out of the mainstream have been made activists by circumstance, turning to alternative media in order to put their voices out there (Ataman & Çoban, 2018). One example of this is Ruşen Çakır, who parted ways with NTV to then set up *Medyascope* – which he financed through funding – in 2015 (Bakır, 2018). In 2016, *Gazete Duvar* (Wall Newspaper) was founded incorporating reporters breaking off from the mainstream such as Fehim Taştekin – one of the top media experts on the Middle

East. A Germany-based website, Artı Gerçek (literally, 'Plus-Truth'), was launched in 2017. Journalists taking similar routes were able to provide both themselves and other journalists, and academics put out of work under emergency rule an opportunity to keep doing their job (even if partially) and make their voices heard, as well as means to access news for those in search of it.

2.2. The AKP's Discovery of Online Censorship

The fact that the social opposition went online with the Gezi Park protests and that news spread via online channels turned the AKP government's attention to the Internet, as it expanded its oppressive repertoire to include this particular domain as well. The methods it applied here consisted of both an adaptation of conventional techniques and internet-specific tactics.

Twitter and Trolls

Early in the Gezi Park protests, Erdoğan said "There is now a scourge called Twitter. The biggest lies can be found there. What is called social media is, in fact, the worst menace to society right now." A social media agency director convened with columnists from pro-government newspapers at the time in order to inform them about social media and what it was capable of, thinking that the AKP hadn't realized the true power of Twitter (Saka, 2018). The same director mentioned that the columnists in this meeting were later able to take advantage of this information during crises polarizing society. He also supplied a pro-AKP newspaper with a list of agencies and activists supporting the Gezi protests, following which the state severed its business ties with some of the names on this list.¹⁴ Terming himself an "AK troll", this director showed the AKP two ways in which it could make use of social media: setting the online political agenda and surveilling.

Ak trolls – as in, social media aggressors supporting the AKP through anonymous accounts using pseudonyms – became the visible actors meeting these functions on Twitter. An official connection is yet to be exposed linking the AKP to the Turkey wing of these government trolls, which have parallels in many countries such as Mexico, China and Russia.¹⁵ It is, however, evident that these accounts are interrelated due to brazen similarities in the content and timing of their posts. According to Erkan Saka,

¹⁴ This social media director cites the Kabataş assault as an example, referring to the crisis that broke out upon allegations that Gezi protesters had harassed a woman wearing the headscarf taking things so far as to urinate on her. Though the claim was later proven to be bogus, the crisis was put to use by the government in order to paint the protesters as hostile elements in the eyes of the conservative population.

¹⁵ One of the most important pieces of evidence in hand is Erdoğan's daughter Sümeyye Erdoğan caught on record saying "Tell our trolls to support our hashtag campaign" to the then Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister Mustafa Varank in one of the tapes leaked in 2014. A study conducted by the Memory Collective (Hafıza Kolektifi) on exposed Ak troll accounts also reveals Varank as a central hub of Ak troll interaction in 2015.

who examines social media as a space for political battles, Ak troll practices include: social lynching to intimidate individuals voicing critical opinions, hacking such cause-oriented accounts to fill them with pro-AKP content instead, mounting bot attacks in order to suppress any propaganda against the government, and using foreign languages to take action against active AKP opposers abroad (Saka, 2018). In 2015, government trolls added fascist reporting on war to this toolkit. After losing its majority in Parliament for the very first time, the AKP called for snap elections on November 1st, 2015 and created an atmosphere of conflict in South Eastern Anatolia, the region home to Kurdish voters who had shifted away from the AKP. Security forces in these places opened anonymous accounts to post violent visuals they had recorded during operations along with ultra-nationalist messages.¹⁶

Despite all of these efforts by Ak trolls, the AKP was unable to hold sway over social media, and records of phone-tapped and bugged conversations compiled as part of corruption investigations launched a couple of months after Gezi were leaked on social media. While many news websites approached these corruption tapes serviced on Youtube by an account called “Başçalan” (literally, ‘head-stealer’) with caution, an account named “Haramzadeler” (meaning, ‘illegitimate children’) spread them on Twitter. A ban was imposed on the media in order to prevent any reporting on these corruption tapes (“17 Aralık yolsuzluk soruşturmasına ‘eleştiri’ dahil yayın yasağı!,” 2014). While none of these developments were featured in the mainstream, conversations regarding the structuring and workings of mainstream media were unearthed among the recordings. In one record, Erdoğan was personally calling the chief executive of Ciner Media from Morocco to have a news ticker (scrolling text on the bottom of the screen) in their channel redacted. Another record demonstrated how Erdoğan and Binali Yıldırım, minister at the time, were trying to set up a pool of funds to secure the buy-out of the Sabah newspaper and channel Atv, collecting 630

¹⁶ During the war involving curfews up to 253 days, the posts that were most jarring to the public were naked pictures of the dead body of PKK-fighter Kevser Eltürk and footage of Hacı Lokman Birlik's body riddled with 28 bullets dragged behind an armoured vehicle.

million dollars from businessmen in return for public tenders.¹⁷ After this leak, Sabah-Atv as the largest of media corporations aligned with the government came to be publicly known as “the pool media”.

Increasingly Speedy and Unchecked Website Blocking and Access Restrictions

In the wake of the release of the corruption tapes, the AKP resorted to legal means in addition to AK trolls in order to bring the internet under its hegemony. A brief review of measures taken prior to the authoritarian turn is needed here so as to demonstrate what effects the AKP's deepening authoritarianism then had in this area.

Internet publications and broadcasts made their initial entry into legislation in Turkey through the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) Law – with an amendment made in 2001 that “all provisions concerning damages arising from publishing false news, defamatory statements and similar acts would apply to the Internet as well”. This addition brought all court cases regarding internet publications previously operating according to the Criminal Code under the ambit of press legislation. The second step was the Internet Act numbered 5651 and dated 2007, which established the state's online presence in the form of the Presidency of Telecommunication and Communication (or Telecommunications Directorate) (TIB) (“İnternet Ortamında Yapılan Yayınların Düzenlenmesi ve Bu Yayınlar Yoluyla İşlenen Suçlarla Mücadele Edilmesi Hakkında Kanun,” 2007). The authority to issue blocking orders if there was strong suspicion of the presence of ‘catalogue’ crimes such as betting/gambling or encouraging suicide rested with courts, judges and prosecutors, while the TIB had the power to do so in the case of “child sexual abuse” and the ever-so-ambiguous “obscene content”. The TIB or prosecutor was, on the other hand, required to seek

¹⁷ Nihat Özdemir, one of the businessmen associated with Zirve Holding, the conglomerate that bought the publications, had a matter of months before the Sabah-Atv purchase bought out the daily Akşam (seized by the TMSF) and the channel Sky-Türk with two partnering companies. Here was his answer to why he put 60 million dollars into a media outlet that was losing money: “Us three partners, we have an important share in the power distribution sector. We serve 9.6 million customers. With this we would make it into Europe's top ten. We're in energy production as well. We produce electricity from natural gas, coal, and hydropower. We're all involved in tourism, with a capacity of about 10 thousand beds among us. We do cement, we do mining. So we wanted the power of the media behind us. We felt we needed it. All of us need advertising for the work we do. We need our energy, cement and tourism to be marketed. Now we will be able to advertise on our own outlets.” It is debatable who this advertisement is meant for on newspapers without any readership, but there is no doubt that the Sabah-Atv purchase brought these businessmen enormous profit. Just one example is this partial list of investments made by Kalyon Construction operating under Zirve Holding in 2015 (after the purchase): *The New Istanbul Airport Project, the Başakşehir Stadium, Nurdağı-İslahiye Highway, the Çanakkale-Ezine-Ayvacık Highway, the Beyoğlu-Kasımpaşa Hasköy Avenue Rehabilitation and Tunnel Construction Project, the Erzurum-Bingöl-Diyarbakır Highway Junction, the Çat-Karlıova-Bingöl Freeway Second Section Construction, the Iraq Erbil Dohuk Water Supply Project, the Melen Water Conduction Line, the Northern Cyprus Suspension System Sea Crossing, Waste Water Tunnel Construction in Selimpaşa-Kumburgaz and Çanta-Gürpınar, (...) three hydroelectric power plants in Giresun, Ordu and Erzurum, the transportation of natural gas from Turkmenistan to Hopa over Georgia and its use for electricity production, the İnegöl Gas Distribution Corporation.*

approval from a judge or court immediately after exercising their authority to block access – thus preventing any bypassing of the judicial mechanism and making it possible for blocking orders to be lifted. In short, though not without its problems, this law prescribed a certain ‘separation of powers’, limiting the crimes for which blocking orders could be issued and leaving the final say to the judiciary.

As the AKP turned more authoritarian, however, it removed the judiciary from the process of blocking web access and concentrated this power in the executive branch instead. Come 2011, the number of regulations allowing for web access blocking had reached 10.¹⁸ One particular regulation passed in 2014 right after the corruption tapes had spread over social media centralised the power to enforce blocking orders in the hands of a single authority, enabling their imposition within a maximum of four hours. The list of crimes calling for this measure was expanded to include violations of privacy and personal rights along with catalogue crimes as adequate reason for blocking access (Akdeniz & Güven, n.d.). The TIB's authority to issue blocking orders under exceptional circumstances was broadened. It became such that the TIB's President could issue a blocking order the moment he thought a “privacy violation” had occurred, and unlike before the new law did not require the TIB to report such contents to the prosecutor's office, meaning that its blocking orders were no longer subject to judicial review.¹⁹ As a result, by means of complicating the law, concentrating the power to issue and implement decisions in a single hand, and weakening judicial review, the AKP managed to turn blocking orders into an ordinary

¹⁸ Other than Law no 5651, the 8 laws and 1 statutory decree issued on the matter are as follows: *article 4 of the Appendix to the Law on Intellectual and Artistic Works; sub-paragraph (k) of paragraph 5 in article 8 of the Law on the Organizational Structure and Duties of the Tobacco and Alcohol Market Regulatory Authority; provisions regarding unfair competition in the Turkish Commercial Code (arts 56 and 58 in the former version, now arts 54, 55 and 56); paragraph 4 in article 6 of the Anti-Terrorism Law; arts 24 and 25 of the Turkish Civil Code; article 101 of the Code of Civil Procedure; article 5 of the Law Regulating Betting Activities in Soccer and Other Sports; article 6 of the Law on the Establishment and Duties of the Presidency of Religious Affairs; arts 9, 76 and 77 of the Statutory Decree on the Protection of Trademarks.*

¹⁹ Another problematic aspect of the amendment was that it obligated content, domain and service providers to “surrender any information requested by the TIB in the manner requested.” The AKP managed to get the bill through Parliament even though the article created controversy on grounds that it could allow for user surveillance, but the Constitutional Court then repealed these provisions. A few months after the amendment, the AKP shut down the TIB on suspicion that it had been infiltrated by the Gülen movement, transferring its powers to the Information and Communication Technologies (Bilgi Teknolojileri ve İletişim Kurumu – BTK). The total number of websites blocked by the TIB before it was shut down reached 177 thousand 515.

procedure – impossible to tell which state agency it had been requested by and quite difficult to lift once imposed.²⁰

In the same period, the government resorted to other measures to keep Twitter posts in check. The AKP emerged from its confrontation with the company – that took place in the form of a two-week Twitter ban – winning a “country-specific content withholding” deal. With this policy that was put into effect in Turkey for the very first time as of March 2014, tweets or accounts regarding which there were removal requests or court orders were blocked from users in that specific country. Twitter announced that using this method it had only last year withheld 497 accounts and 1819 tweets in Turkey (Akdeniz & Güven, n.d.).

Surveillance, News Deprivation, and Punishing Critical Content

A new form of censorship introduced to Turkey by the AKP in 2015 is bandwidth throttling. This method used on porn sites by service providers causes users to experience slowness on certain selected sites, making it harder to access these sites without needing any blocking order. The first encounter users in Turkey had with throttling was on July 20th, 2015, when 33 mostly young people seeking to support refugees were killed in a bomb attack in Suruç, a town on the Syrian border.

Bandwidth throttling was later implemented on networks such as Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp without informing its users in the aftermath of other bombings (“CHP’den sansür raporu,” 2018). Thus, while media bans following every such attack silenced conventional media, users going online for news were deterred by the sloth-like speed of the system.

The technology that enables this slowing down of the Internet is called Deep Packet Inspection (DPI), allowing for all data flowing in and out of a network to be classified. It is claimed that all internet service providers in Turkey have been compelled to use this system since 2014 in order monitor internet traffic (E. K. Sözeri, 2016). If this is

²⁰ The first time a social network was banned in Turkey was in 2007. Youtube remained blocked for over a year with 34 different court orders. A day after Erdoğan cried “Twitter, schmitter – we will eradicate it all” during a rally in 2014 right after the corruption scandal had spread over the news, Twitter was shut down, followed by Youtube once again. When the block on Twitter was lifted by order of the Constitutional Court, Erdoğan declared that he “did not respect the ruling”. News website *otekilerinpostasi.org* was shut down in 2014 never to reopen. The Facebook page of the same Others’ Post (Ötekilerin Postası) was shut down by Facebook 9 times in its first two years. At the end of 2015, the websites of many agencies reporting on Kurds denied from the mainstream such as *Dicle News Agency (DİHA)*, *ANF*, *Hawar News Agency (ANHA)*, *Özgür Gündem newspaper*, *Yüksekova News*, *Jiyan.org*, and *RojNews* were blocked. According to the Republican People’s Party report, Turkey came in first in content removal on Twitter with over 7 thousand requests. The same year 712 access restrictions were imposed on Facebook. *Sendika.org* was blocked 61 times from 2015 to 2017, and access to certain news sites including *Medyascope*, *Gazeteport*, *Rotahaber*, *ABC Gazetesi*, and *Karşı Gazete* were blocked temporarily in the wake of the July 15th coup attempt in 2016. Finally, Wikipedia was blocked in 2017 on grounds that “it had become part of an information source which is running a smear campaign against Turkey in the international arena, instead of coordinating against terrorism”, and the ban has not been removed until January 2020.

true, websites visited by internet users in Turkey are tracked, and it is unknown how and for what all of this personal data is being used. In this regard, it is particularly alarming that news websites feature heavily amongst user data revealed to have been tracked by a certain service provider (E. K. Sözeri, 2016). Researcher Efe Kerem Sözeri draws attention to yet another disquieting use of DPI: When elected mayors in the Southeast were removed and replaced with appointed administrators in 2016, internet access was cut off in the region for quite a long time and people had difficulty contacting each other (E. K. Sözeri, 2016). It would not be wrong to say that the government used such region-specific slowdowns to obstruct potential internet-based organizing.

Though unclear how and through which softwares these are being detected, many social media users today face judicial action in Turkey.²¹ Investigation subjects vary according to the political agenda. For instance, when the foreign currency crisis broke out in 2018, 346 accounts were brought under investigation for painting a “negative picture” (“Dolar kuru paylaşımı yapan yüzlerce sosyal medya hesabına soruşturma,” 2018). “Insulting the President” became another one of the primary reasons for social media investigations. With this deterrent effect of its more micro-level interventions, the AKP managed to significantly cut down the amount of critical content posted on social media.

2.3. The Last Move Against Internet Media: RTÜK Oversight

RTÜK took the first step against online-only media outlets, bringing them under its supervision in March 2018. It is still dubious whom exactly this supervision shall encompass, yet taking the pessimistic view dictated by the overall climate in Turkey, it is possible to say that those affected by this new measure will be the news websites mentioned above and foreign news agencies operating mostly online. First coming to mind among such agencies active in Turkey are those that do not stray from their country's official line such as Russia's *Sputnik Turkey* and China's *Chinese Radio International (CRI) Turkey*, as well as others that are – though not always – able to be critical of their state's policies such as *BBC*, *Deutsche Welle (DW)* and *Voice of America (VOA)*.

Having budgets that are not as limited as local online-only outlets, these foreign news organizations have brought in well-known and experienced names deprived of their

²¹ Internet users in Turkey are monitored not only by service providers or the TIB, but also by the police. It has been revealed that the police spent 600 thousand dollars to use the Italian Hacking Team's Remote Control System between 2011 and 2014. According to the company, this system allows its clients to overcome data encryption, anti-virus software and security walls. Though he did not disclose how these were detected, Minister of the Interior Süleyman Soylu announced that legal action had been taken against over 20 thousand users due to social media posts between 2013 and 2018.

jobs in the mainstream media to work in their Turkey services. Weekly programs such as the one on DW run by former CNN Turk host Nevşin Mengü and news articles have proliferated. As the news content of these agencies grew stronger they began to stand out in the eyes of the government and ended up subject to its monitoring. With the amendment requested by AKP MPs in order to both extract tax money from and control the content of online streaming services with foreign finances such as Netflix, media streamers have been required to obtain a broadcast license and platform operators a broadcast transmission authorization from RTÜK (“Vergi Kanunları İle Bazı Kanun ve Kanun Hükmünde Kararnamelerde Değişiklik Yapılması Hakkında Kanun,” 2018). This regulation has given RTÜK the authority to request broadcast bans against streaming content it deems inappropriate in addition to handing out licenses.

Though inter-organizational coordination is generally weak in Turkey an exception occurred in this case, and the next step against foreign press was taken by the think tank closest to the AKP, namely the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı – SETA). In a report it published in July 2019 titled “The Extensions of International Media Outlets”, SETA designated these outlets as “the most important component of oppositional media” (Çağlar, Tokar, & Akdemir, 2019). It also drew attention to the *Independent’s* new *Independent Turkish*, as well as *France24*, *VOA*, *BBC* and *DW’s* +90 Youtube channel to say that the foreign press has been lately increasing its scope of activity in Turkey. This 202-page report also detailed how these outlets covered anti-democratic measures taken by the AKP. Critical news sources and commentary condemned the SETA report as profiling, but the organization did not step back (“SETA Vakfı ‘andıç’ tepkilerine yanıt verdi,” 2019).

In this atmosphere of profiling, a new RTÜK directive was announced on August 1st, 2019 detailing the implementation of the legislative changes enacted in March 2018. This directive listed 25 thousand TL as the mandatory license fee for radio broadcasting and 100 thousand TL (approximately 17,500 dollars at current rates) for all other broadcasts. These license fees shall especially put a strain on news websites barely managing their budgets as is, but the real problem is that it is unclear to whom RTÜK will grant or refuse licenses and on what grounds. Criticized for its vague language, it is still difficult to tell to what extent this set of regulations shall apply to online journalism.²² RTÜK board member from the main opposition party the CHP, Faruk Bildirici, said that although obtaining a license was mandatory RTÜK would announce media service providers that hadn't, therefore advising online newspapers

²² The law defines “on-demand broadcasting” as “audio or visual media services provided according to a programme catalogue”. It is therefore possible to assume that written news sites and/or those without a programme catalogue are not subject to licensing. They could still, however, fall within this scope due to their daily or weekly video presentations or podcasts.

and social media broadcasts to wait for the regulation to be implemented before making any applications.²³ Lawyer Murat Deha Boduroğlu, on the other hand, believes these regulations encompass all media outlets operating online. Boduroğlu underlines that this directive requires all media service providers to obtain a license, establish a joint stock company in order to apply for the license, and if the media service provider in question is based abroad it is obligated to compose at least 50% of its shareholding and executive board membership of natural Turkish citizens or legal entities established according to Turkish law, along with other partnership and membership requirements. In cases where these obligations are not met and licenses are denied, Boduroğlu claims, penalties such as broadcast bans may be imposed (*Personal Interview with Self-Employed Attorney Murat Deha Boduroğlu*, 2019). It therefore appears that new mechanisms of oversight await members of the foreign press, who are already worried about accreditation due to new press card regulations.

In Conclusion: What Is Left for Journalism?

Turkey suspended its Operation Peace Spring launched in northern Syria after nine days as a result of US pressure, after which it largely petered out (“Türkiye ile ABD anlaştı,” 2019). This war supported by no country save for Qatar, Pakistan and Hungary brought yet another violation of Syrian borders, cost the lives of civilians and soldiers in numbers that will forever remain a matter of debate, and displaced tens of thousands. While Turkey’s mainstream media, capable of saying no to war before it even started hailed the operation with front pages reading “High time for national unity”, “On to victory”, “Traitors vanquished”, it didn’t even question why when the operation abruptly ended. On the contrary, on October 18th 2019 they sported headlines such as “Great victory”, “We won on the field and at the table” as if everything had gone just as planned (“Gazete Manşet, 18 October 2019,” 2019).

Throughout this article I have tried to convey why it would be unrealistic to expect anything else from Turkey’s mainstream media. For the mainstream in Turkey has always been pro-state rather than pro-democracy, perpetually nationalistic, patriarchal, and profit-driven. The AKP government now indirectly owns approximately 90% of the media it has been trying to conquer since 2007 in the many ways described in detail above. It continues to broadcast and publish mixing in a heavy dose of Sunni Islam with the other age-old characteristics it has inherited. The remaining 10% of the mainstream media is also unable to practice effective independent journalism due to limited resources and/or ideological affiliations other than the AKP. With things as is, therefore, journalists able to say nay when the AKP says “war” no longer work in the mainstream.

²³ Faruk Bildirici’s RTÜK membership was revoked unlawfully not long after, on October 31st 2019.

Journalists unable to find a place for themselves in this present state of the media – along with disemployed academics, artists, experts and activists – have for a while been active on the Internet. The Gezi Park experience strengthened the impression that the Internet opened up space for critical thought, increasing the media presence here. Yet the AKP, taking note of this space and seeing an example in practices espoused by other authoritarian states, combined its traditional forms of oppression with new information systems to turn the Internet into its new spying and hunting grounds.

Media organizations and individuals are forced to publish, broadcast and post on social media constantly gauging what backlash they may face. The content of news produced under these circumstances is also quite poor quality in comparison to the past. Investigative journalism is close to nill. News sources have long been afraid to talk or share documents. Guests sought out for interviews turn down journalists, asking for their understanding under present circumstances. In the space that is left, declarative journalism grows, columns feature specific, targeted articles drawing attention to the contradictions within government, conveying analyses by academics kept from conducting research as well as the reports of civil society organizations; so, the past is recalled, protests reported, and state violence recorded as much as possible. This news cycle in the critical arena attracts fewer and fewer readers by the minute. It is better than nothing, but one must see where the press is going. We are moving towards a journalism characterized by weak material, low news diversity, serious financial difficulty, a constant expectation for documents to leak through cracks in the state/AKP apparatus, a lack of societal support, and worst of all no sanctions whatsoever directed at politicians.

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