



Ethical Journalism Network

Censorship in The Park:

Turkish Media Trapped by Politics and Corruption



Picture: Milliyet

Introduction

This report by the Ethical Journalism Network arises from concerns over the growth of self-censorship and threats to independent journalism during and after the sweeping anti-government protests which took place across Turkey in the summer of 2013.

The protest began in May over the violent eviction of people taking part in a sit-in to save Gezi Park in central Istanbul from being bulldozed for redevelopment. Within days the protest had spread country-wide, raising new political concerns, including issues of press freedom and threats to secularism in the country.

The incidents led to fierce police battles with protesters in which five people were killed and reportedly more than 8000 were injured. It also posed the most serious challenge for a decade to the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its combative leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The role of media in these events gets to the heart of a troubling relationship between journalism, politics and business. It also reveals the growth of citizen's voice in Turkey. Social media sites became pivotal players when the media downplayed the protests or ignored them altogether, particularly in the early stages.

Following the protests the government moved rapidly to silence its opponents with more than a thousand students, teachers, doctors, lawyers and activists were questioned over their role in the protests, although few were charged. In media, scores of journalists were affected. Dozens lost their jobs and many were targeted for dismissal. Others resigned in protest over acts of internal censorship.

One of Turkey's wealthiest families – the Doğan group – found itself under close scrutiny by a swarm of government tax inspectors apparently for giving refuge in a hotel it owns to demonstrators escaping tear gas during the confrontations with police in June 2013.

To investigate these events the EJM organised a brief mission to Istanbul in November 2013 to talk to media academics, journalists, editors and media leaders. The mission was carried out by Aidan White, the EJM Director and Hosam El Nagar, Head of Operations at the Thomson Foundation.

This report, which has been updated in the light of developments since the visit – particularly arising from an unfolding political corruption scandal and legal threats to internet users – examines the media crisis and reflects on the current and future challenges to journalists and the media. It draws on a number of sources, including on the spot interviews, some detailed research from local organisations and the journalism of foreign and local reporters.

The report concludes with a number of recommendations to strengthen journalism and to provide broader support for editorial independence in Turkish media.

Aidan White

London, February 2014

Executive Summary

1. The dramatic events surrounding the protests at Gezi Park in central Istanbul in the summer of 2013 have opened up a new chapter in the evolution of democracy in Turkey. The protests, and the media controversies that followed, highlight a growing crisis for press freedom and journalism across the country.
2. This report reveals how the media system is subject to unacceptable levels of interference from government and business interests. Distorted media coverage of the Gezi protests and the subsequent political backlash against critical and independent voices inside journalism have exposed corrupt links between media, politics and business that pose a dangerous and continuing threat to editorial independence and press freedom.
3. There is a well-established culture of self-censorship in journalism, which has its roots in a long history of legal, political and violent pressure on media. This creates a distorted information landscape which undermines efforts to strengthen democracy and pluralism at all levels of Turkish society.
4. This self-censorship is a consequence of the structure of media ownership, developed over the past 20 years, which has created a pool of self-interest for politicians and business leaders, and which in turn compromises ethical journalism.
5. The EJM finds that the lack of transparency in the ownership and operations of media and the self-serving nature of relations between business and politics plays a far more significant role in explaining the failures of mainstream journalism in Turkey than the individual ethics of journalists.
6. The situation is made worse through the intemperate and often intolerant voice of government, most stridently represented by the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which encourages polarisation in society and which creates a fearful atmosphere for the exercise of journalism.
7. In this tense environment dissident voices inside journalism have been targeted and many journalists have been dismissed or forced to quit their jobs. At the same time there have been attempts to stifle criticism expressed through social media. In particular, the adoption of a controversial law on internet use, in February 2014, raises new fears for free speech protection in the country.
8. Nevertheless, the report also reveals a growing resistance within journalism and fresh determination to confront the Turkish media crisis.
9. Journalists and editors, dismayed by the lack of editorial freedoms, the absence of investigative journalism and the casual culture of self-censorship are aware of the need to work together in support of a new national dialogue and partnership to strengthen the craft of journalism.
10. In support of this process the EJM recommends more training in editorial leadership; the strengthening of professional associations; and the promotion of

transparency and good governance in media based on principles of self-regulation.

11. In particular, the EJM recommends the Turkish media community to adopt practical actions that will:

- Promote and strengthen systems of **self-regulation inside media**, including transparent systems of good governance;
- Strengthen **dialogues between traditional journalism and online media** on the need for responsibility in the use of information and for ethical content across the public information space;
- Support programmes to **strengthen independent professional associations** of editors, owners and journalists;
- Consider how best to create independent, credible and effective **national systems of self-regulation** of journalism covering all platforms of media.

12. Although media professionals have a specific responsibility to actively combat internal and external threats to editorial independence they will not succeed unless the government and the political community also do their part.

13. The Government should promote media policies that will strengthen press freedom and should hold an urgent review of all laws that are currently used to restrict or inhibit free journalism and should repeal all laws that are damaging to free speech and which have a chilling effect on the exercise of journalism.

Background

Turkey is a major media player. It boasts 300-odd private television stations as well as a national public network. There are around 1,000 private radio stations and as many as 50 daily newspapers serving a national market.

It's also a country where strong opinions are held and heard as the political pendulum swings between progressive and reform-minded movements and the more narrow, insular and conservative politics of nationalism and religious fundamentalism.

Media and journalists have been among the most prominent victims in the country's long history of military coups, police brutality, torture and disappearances. The continued use of laws which limit free speech, including the controversial laws against insulting "Turkishness," remain an obstacle to press freedom, even today.¹

Although much progress has been made to modernize the state and its economy and there have been significant improvements in the country's human rights record, the

¹ In 2008, Article 301 was amended. The term "Turkishness" was changed to "the Turkish nation," in the hope that

problem of entrenched intolerance of critical opinion and of journalists reporting on minorities and political dissidents remains in place.

This intolerance has been especially exemplified by the killing of Hrant Dink, former editor in chief of *Agos*, in 2007. The assassination of Dink is not an isolated incident as it followed from many others in which journalists who investigated, who voiced their opinions in opposition and especially criticised the approach to issues about minorities were silenced by force.

The culture of violence that has developed in Turkey over many years, which has been directed at journalists can also be a cause for self-censorship for fear of retaliation from the public.

Although progress on human rights protection has been made journalism is exercised in the shadows of the past. The intolerant political speech of government and Prime Minister, provokes consternation both at home and abroad over increasing restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of the press and internet use.²

International concern has largely focused on the continued imprisonment of journalists for reporting on the conflict in the country's troubled south east where Kurdish rebels have been mounting a campaign of violence for decades.

More journalists are imprisoned in Turkey than anywhere else in the world and the Turkish Journalists' Union says 63 journalists are still in jail, while more than 120 journalists have been released pending trial. In November 2013, 22 journalists were given sentences ranging from six years to life imprisonment in a case, alongside senior military officers, politicians and academics convicted of plotting a coup against the AKP government.

The government says the imprisoned journalists are guilty of criminal acts, but many EJM members, vigorously campaigning with international rights groups over the abuse of human rights and free speech, strongly disagree.

Many observers saw in the brutal tactics of the police at Gezi Park and the problems of media self-censorship and the purge of critical and independent journalists that give an echo of the country's troubled past.

However, the government believes it has used reasonable force to keep the peace, and has mounted a balancing act – cracking down hard enough to keep its critics quiet while not alienating international business and political links, especially in Europe where it still hopes for membership of the European Union.

Whether this strategic approach is successful remains to be seen, but unquestionably the behaviour of media over the Gezi story has prompted some serious internal reflection within journalism and a growing appetite for change and an end to the stifling structural and political controls that limit press freedom and pluralism.

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/world/europe/turkeys-glow-dims-as-government-limits-free-speech.html?pagewanted=all>

Gezi: A Picture of Self-censorship

The iconic image used during the Gezi protest to ridicule media self-censorship by mainstream media coverage is that of a penguin, as shown in the photograph of young activists on the cover of this report.

This was adopted by the protesters at the sit-in taking place in Gezi Park in central Istanbul following an incident on June 2nd 2013 at the height of the violence. As the international broadcaster CNN was showing live pictures of the confrontation between police and protesters, its Turkish partner, *CNN Turk*, chose to wilfully ignore the unfolding drama and, instead, broadcast a wildlife documentary on penguins.

This deliberate and conscious censorship of the Gezi protest continued in all of the mainstream media, broadcast journalism and including most major newspapers, for three days.

Despite widespread public scorn over much of the media coverage, there has been virtually no evidence of humility from the executive belt of journalism. Only one media leader stepped up to take public responsibility for the abject reporting of the protest.

The Chief Executive Officer of *Doğuş Media Group* Cem Aydın apologised to his staff and conceded that the criticisms of protesters who had gathered outside the group's television network NTV to complain were justified. "Our audience feels like they were betrayed," he said. Shortly after his comments, Aydın left the company.³

Nevertheless, despite the weakness of mainstream media the story was still being told. As thousands of demonstrators paralysed the centre of Istanbul, the events were being vigorously reported on Twitter and across social media which played a major role in keeping people informed.

A typical example was the newspaper *Sabah*, a pro-government daily, which ignored the violence unfolding on its doorstep and instead devoted its front page to Prime Minister Erdoğan being awarded a prize for combating smoking and to pictures of President Abdullah Gul being presented with a horse during an official visit to Turkmenistan.⁴

The caution of the media in covering the story may have reflected uncertainty about how to handle such drama in the hothouse of Turkish politics, where media have long been subject to governmental pressure, but many of the people interviewed by the EJM claim now government officials have telephone contact with media bosses or editors to complain about certain headlines or to direct news coverage.

Esra Arsan, Professor of Journalism at Bilgi University says, "There was indirect and direct censorship from Ankara. Some of the NTV journalists who resigned from the news department did so because they were being censored."⁵

³ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/dogus-media-ceo-takes-leave-amid-media-criticism-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=48753&NewsCatID=341>

⁴ <http://blogs.wsj.com/middleeast/2013/06/03/amid-turkey-unrest-social-media-becomes-a-battleground/>

⁵ Interview with EJM, November 19th 2013.

Mustafa Karam, Director of *TV Hyat*, says, “There was direct and clear censorship – some of it self-imposed and some of it part of the fabled “telephone culture” of calls from the government to editorial departments,” he says.⁶

This is not new. According to the BBC in 1997 pressure from the military forced the resignation of an Islamist prime minister. During that period several columnists were sacked, headlines were manipulated, and certain Islamist papers were banned from military press conferences.

However, there is little direct evidence of acts of interference and a columnist for the conservative daily *Zaman*, Mumtazer Turkone, says such things never happen. “Someone from the government never says, ‘If you do not do this, we will not do that’ directly. These measures are applied by the media bosses or maybe the papers are too sensitive to government reactions, so they apply these measures themselves.”⁷

Deniz Ergurel, General Secretary of the employers group the Media Association, is less certain. “Some people say government officials called the media stations asking them not to broadcast material,” he says. “This is not proven but I think this might have been possible.”⁸ He admits that there might have been an element of self-censorship.

He suggests that the protest was not picked up quickly by mainstream media because they saw it as a “marginal issue prompted by a small group of people causing trouble.” However, they were caught out when the sit-in turned into a major disturbance as a result of police strong-arm tactics. What started as a small local protest suddenly mushroomed into a global news event.

When media finally regained their composure, the coverage quickly polarised say media observers and was heavily partisan either in favour of the government or the opposition. In the febrile atmosphere there were hints from government leaders of an organized conspiracy to overthrow the government.⁹

However, according to Ergurel, this was overblown. “Gezi was a shock to the political system and also to the media,” he says. “Journalists and editors like politicians were unable to comprehend what was going on. Was it a form of Arab Spring?

“Clearly it was not a movement against the structure of the state; it was directed against the government and the PM. In this sense it was not a movement for political revolution.”

Nevertheless, many media ran with a story of conspiracy and threats to the state. Mehmet Ozer, an executive with the 24-hour news channel *TV Hyat*, says the media narrative developed by government suggested the hand of “foreign powers” behind the Gezi chaos. “There were many stories of deliberate attempts to cause chaos and bring the government down,” he says.

⁶ EJN interview, November 19th 2013

⁷ BBC, Report November 14th 2013

⁸ EJN interview, November 19th 2013

⁹ See *Hate Speech and Discriminatory Discourse in the Media: May-August 2013*, Hrant Dink Foundation.

http://nefretsoylemi.org/rapor/may-august2013_reportfinal.pdf

Mustafa Karam adds, “It was difficult for journalists. The mainstream media were dominated by government voices and the alternative media are not pluralists; as a result the story was being distorted on all sides.”

The idea that behind the Gezi protests was an attempt at a forcible takeover of the government came from the Prime Minister and was enthusiastically taken up by the daily *Yeni Şafak*, a newspaper renowned for its support of the government and which put itself at the forefront of the huge assault on the Gezi protestors and their supporters.

Particularly malicious in the paper’s blanket bombardment of dubious journalism were reports concerning a young Turkish actor, Memet Ali Alabora, one of the many celebrity protestors, and the founding President of the independent actors’ union who is now living in London.

The paper targeted him and the group of writers, actors and designers behind an interactive political drama (called *Mi Minör*) which ran weeks before the protests and was about people apparently getting organized against a dictator, with the actors playfully involving the audience. This, the paper claimed, was a rehearsal of the Gezi “insurrection.”

The actor was also accused over his use of Twitter and he became a target for criticism both in the newspaper and directly by government ministers. With the same atmosphere building that was in play before the killing of the independent editor Hrant Dink, Alabora was forced to have armed guards for his own protection. He later left the country.

Despite all of this in some corners of the media landscape there were attempts to provide fair and balanced journalism. News outlets such as *Ulusal* and *Halk TV*, smaller networks not compromised by the ownership structure of the mainstream broadcasters, streamed live coverage of the protests.

But some of those that tried to break the media silence came under fire from other quarters. The state broadcasting regulator, the High Council of Radio and Television (RTÜK), which is dominated by the AKP, took aim at networks which got too close to the action. Penalties in the form of heavy fines were imposed on the grounds of “incitement to violence” and “violating broadcasting principles”.¹⁰

The AKP were unforgiving over media that did not toe the line. As noted earlier, the Doğan Media Group, owned by one of Turkey’s wealthiest families, found itself under close scrutiny by a swarm of government tax inspectors apparently for giving refuge in a hotel it owns to demonstrators escaping tear gas during the Gezi confrontations. Consequently, the company had to pay 1.2 billion TL tax penalties (5Bn \$) over an international deal with the German Axel Springer Group.

¹⁰ “RTÜK Fines TV Networks on Gezi Resistance Coverage”, *BİAnet*, 12 June 2013, <http://www.bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/147517-rtuk-fines-tv-networks-on-gezi-resistance-coverage>

Nuri Colakoglu, one of Turkey's most distinguished and veteran journalists, now President of the Doğan Media Group and a senior adviser to the Board, does not mince his words over the intention of the government action. "Erdoğan made a scapegoat of Doğan Media Group," he says.

At the same time the action against Doğan sent an uncompromising message to other media players about the pressure the government can put on them if they step out of line. He was not surprised that some media took the most cautious approach when covering Gezi. "The 'penguin' channels didn't cover the Gezi conflict for fear of retaliation," he says.

Nevertheless, there are signs that more editors are ready to break ranks and to openly express their frustration over undue political interference and are yearning for an end to Erdoğan's autocratic style.

According to a Reuters report in February 2014 Fatih Altaylı, editor-in-chief of the mainstream *Haberturk* newspaper, opened up a new front in the battle for editorial independence when he made a stinging attack on the government, saying that political pressure had left media editors intimidated and created a climate in which they were unable to publish freely.¹¹

Altaylı had previously been widely criticised for conducting an unsatisfactory interview with Prime Minister Erdoğan after the initial protests. He was accused of being a sycophant and a supporter of the prime minister for not asking tougher questions.

"The honour of journalism is being trampled on. Instructions rain down every day from various places. Can you write what you want? Everybody is afraid," Altaylı told *CNN Turk*. His comments came after recordings were leaked on the internet apparently of executives from *Haberturk* altering coverage, manipulating an opinion poll and sacking reporters under government pressure.

Typically, Erdoğan is not apologetic. Speaking during a meeting of his AKP members in parliament the next day he accused the media of being a "lobby" group conspiring against him. He said that before AKP came to power "media in this country was functioning even above the government ... We have foiled this game."

Some media leaders are convinced the Gezi affair was a defining moment that finally blew apart the myth of journalistic independence in the midst of undue political influence.

"Gezi exposed the poisonous relations between media and the government," says Muge Sokmen, publisher and owner of Metis Publishing House, one of Turkey's most respected book companies.

¹¹ See:

http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/11/us-turkey-idUSBREA1A1120140211?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter&dlvrit=992637

“People were shocked that media were not reporting what was happening. Many of them were worried about the whereabouts of their friends, their children but they saw nothing on the television. They couldn’t believe it.”¹²

The sudden realization that media were not reliable had a particular impact on the young, she says. “The Gezi generation of people in their teens and 20s were really shocked.”

She says, “They thought they were being properly informed, but suddenly they found that the media were ignoring a brutal reality being played out on the streets. And they realized, perhaps for the first time, that if this happened over Gezi, how could they trust anything that comes from the media?”

Victimisation of Dissident Voices

Once the violence ended, plans to redevelop the Park were put on hold, the scene of the violence in Istanbul’s busy Taksim Square was paved over and the government set about isolating and dealing with people it identified as key players in stirring up unrest. In particular, the weeks after the protests saw the cull of a number of leading journalists and writers across the newsrooms of Turkish media.

Turkey’s political opposition, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), highlighted these attacks in a document titled, “Turkish government’s retaliation to Gezi,” in which it listed 77 journalists who were either fired or forced to resign, including the leading journalist Yavuz Baydar, who had been the ombudsman for *Sabah*.

Writing about his case in *The Guardian*, Baydar voiced criticism of political and internal pressures on the work of journalists. He said, “The country’s journalists are enslaved in newsrooms run by greedy and ruthless media proprietors, whose economic interests make them submissive to Erdoğan.”¹³

It was his criticism – earlier reported in the *New York Times* – that led to his dismissal from *Sabah* which at the time was owned by Calik Holding, a company run by Erdoğan’s son-in-law.

According to Ercan Ipekci, then President of the Turkish Journalists Union, the number of victims is even higher. He told the EJN that the union had recorded some 85 “well known” cases of journalists who lost their jobs, either through direct dismissals or protest resignations. But he believes the real numbers are higher “probably more than 200 across the country and many of them not well known journalists.”¹⁴

He said that representatives of political parties contacted editors directly to complain about reporters and writers. Media at national and local levels came under pressure to take action against journalists suspected of supporting the protests.

¹² Interview with EJN delegation, November 19th 2013

¹³ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/29/my-sacking-attack-turkish-democracy>

¹⁴ Interview with EJN delegation November 20th 2013

Another prominent media casualty was columnist Can Dunder who was dismissed from the daily *Milliyet*, after his columns were not published for three weeks. He was sanguine about his treatment. “I am not the first, and I will not be the last,” he wrote in his blog after his dismissal, which sparked a huge debate in Turkish media. It is the second time Dunder has paid a price for supporting dissidents. Two years ago he was sacked from a TV channel ago for attending a protest over arrested journalists.¹⁵

Turkey’s public broadcaster TRT dismissed two of its employees and fined another, over social media messages according to the daily *Radikal* which also said 15 staff members were being investigated, mostly for tweets sent from their personal accounts in support of the Gezi demonstrations.

“The TRT administration has acted as the police, the prosecutor and the judge by illegally inspecting social media accounts of their people. It is clear that both the protection of privacy and freedom of expression were violated here,” the Haber-Sen union said in a statement.¹⁶



Associated Press

The *New York Times* on November 14th quoted a leading academic who denied that there was a systematic witch-hunt, but admitted “definitely the government has tightened the screws.” Saban Kardas, a professor at the University of Economics and Technology in Ankara said the actions against journalists and others were “a preventive move, so that these protests don’t happen again.”

According to Akif Beki, a former adviser to Erdoğan and now columnist for the daily *Radikal*, the pressure in the media is self-imposed. It is the media bosses and not the

¹⁵ Report in the BBC, November 14th 2013

¹⁶ Reported In *Hurriyet*, November 14th 2013

government who are responsible for the increasing number of sacked journalists. He told the BBC that "it is not like the government asked for these 70-80 journalists to be fired and then media bosses showed them the door".

But he also said the AKP government had failed to rid itself of "old reflexes" towards the media. "They can still perceive criticism as a rejection of their existence. That is why they sometimes overreact."¹⁷

However, even in the midst of political interference and internal pressure there were examples of media solidarity and defiance. The Metis book publishing company, for instance, intervened over one of the most egregious examples of self-censorship involving the popular history magazine (*NTV Tarih*), with a steady circulation of 50,000, which was closed down abruptly by Doğuş Group.

The closure came after the company banned an issue in which journalists reported on the Gezi protests, placing them in their historical context. At least ten people resigned in protest and defiantly published the uncensored edition online.

Metis released a book version of the magazine, *Gezi Resistance*, in October 2013 and announced that income from the book would be donated to a fund to help the families of the five people killed in the Gezi protests.

"We are publishing the *Gezi Resistance* issue as a document of the linkage between power authorities and media - with the hope that we can leave it to our sons and grandchildren," Metis wrote at the time.

In a defiant comment Gürsel Göncü, the magazine's former editor-in-chief, explained what happened: "As NTV Tarih Magazine, we were thinking that we were doing our usual job of depicting events through an original historical lens."¹⁸

"However, we were wrong," he said. With the book's release "We have a publication that will document both Gezi Resistance and media-politics relations in Turkey. History doesn't freeze, it can't be frozen. This is just the beginning, we will meet again."

The Rise and Fall of Citizen's Voice

One undeniable effect of the mass media failure of principle in reporting the Gezi events was to reinforce the rise of social networks and online communications as alternative sources of news and information.

Online communications and social networking has been rising (a December 2012 [Pew Research Center](#) study showed that 35 percent of Turks use social networking sites) and surged in the summer of 2013 as social networks rapidly moved to fill the vacuum left by mainstream media in temporary shutdown over the Gezi protests.

The online reporting of the developing crisis enraged the authorities and there were a number of people who were detained for posting provocative messages.

¹⁷ BBC Report, November 14th 2013

¹⁸ Report BIA News Desk , October 25th 2013

The power of citizens' voice through the web has been learned by the government, says journalist Andrew Finkel. He says they now better understand the extent to which social media is being used, and it's not by their allies.¹⁹

This realization has led the government to resolve to extend its use of social media, as an instrument among its own ranks, particularly among its young supporters. Finkel's argument is backed up by reports that the AKP has recruited thousands as part of a drive to increase its presence on social media and counter critical sentiments expressed against the government.²⁰

However, the mix of journalism and social networking also has its dangers as highlighted by the case of Azerbaijani journalist, Mahir Zeynalov, who works for the English-language daily *Today's Zaman*.

He was accused by the Prime Minister's office of making false statements in two of his tweets, and of inciting hatred and animosity and was deported from the country in February 2014 and banned from entering Turkey even though he has a residence and work permit and is married to a Turkish citizen.

The incident enraged leading journalists' groups. "It is shocking that the authorities in Turkey have gone to such great lengths to identify Zeynalov through his Twitter account and track him down for deportation." said Mogens Blicher Bjerregård, President of the European Federation of Journalists "It is clearly a systematic targeting of journalists with the aim to silence their critical voices."²¹

The government's determination to tame the internet was further on parade with the passage of a tough new internet law early in 2014, which strengthens control over internet access and use of social networks. The law allows the state regulator to force internet service providers to block web pages within four hours if they are deemed to infringe privacy without going through the courts.

Not surprisingly, the move infuriated free speech campaigners across the information landscape, but particularly [within the online community](#). The new law is likened to China's infamous 'great firewall' and as one online commentator says, "it takes internet-phobia to new levels, and represents an unprecedented attack on the free speech rights of Turkish citizens."²²

It has also [angered the European Union](#). In a robust statement Brussels officials complained that the law improperly restricts freedom of expression, pointing in particular to a requirement that internet service providers monitor online comments and that browser histories be retained for two years.

¹⁹ Interview with EJM delegation November 19th 2013

²⁰ See <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/akp-social-media-twitter-facebook.html>

²¹ See <http://us6.campaign-archive2.com/?u=312d2086b1b5654e5e6957dd9&id=d47a628d36&e=0132b7ed60>

²² See <http://gigaom.com/2014/02/06/turkey-passes-draconian-internet-law-turks-say-goodbye-to-their-freedom-of-speech/>

“The Turkish public deserves more information and more transparency, not more restrictions,” said Peter Stano, European Commission spokesman.²³

But the expansion of online information is not all good news. Some of the anonymous (and thus hard to trace and hold accountable) internet sites that mushroomed in the country during this period are notorious for misinformation, hate speech and merciless character assassination.

Some of those particularly targeted on such web sites are the journalists and academics who once supported the government but who are increasingly disenchanted at the slow pace of democratic reform. Often a fearful atmosphere is created which can lead to violence and threats of violence against journalists.

Rumours abound that the new state intelligence agency (MIT) is behind internet sites full of libellous, abominable slanders, echoing the behaviour of the old office of the Chief of Staff which was behind some of the websites that targeted the ruling AKP during the old order. The former Chief of Staff İlker Başbuğ who apparently turned a blind eye to those seditious, anti-government websites was sentenced to life imprisonment in August 2013.

At the same time media organisations have had a sharp reminder the mixing journalism and social networking can be a recipe for confusion and misunderstanding.

Everyone should be free to express their personal opinions online, no matter how opinionated or offensive they may be, but does this right apply to working journalists? Journalism, after all, has its ethical limits, not to say employment responsibilities.

It is a question which the Doğan Group, one of Turkey’s leading media conglomerates addressed in the aftermath of the Gezi events. Aydın Doğan, the company’s founder spelled out the challenge to journalists in January 2014, when he urged all the company’s workers and journalists to use social media with care and to be transparent in their comments.

“Newspaper and magazine staff must not ignore their professional and institutional identities in social media,” he said. “They must stand aside from behaviour that could undermine the institutions’ reputation.”

The company has updated its publishing principles which sets out the ethical obligations of staff and journalists with a new 24th principle that warns journalists not to make statements on behalf of media on social networks unless they are authorized and not to leak information about what goes on inside the newsroom or any other part of the company’s operations.

Media ownership: An Open Door to Government Influence

²³ See <http://www.ft.com/home/middleeast>

The Gezi protests exposed the scourge of self-censorship, but also cast a fresh light on the toxic mix of political and wider commercial pressures on journalism.

For the first time, many people saw clear evidence of widespread political influence within Turkish journalism which is encouraged by a system of media ownership that is conducive to self-censorship and external interference. Some observers who have analysed the events of May-June 2013 suggest that this is the root cause of unethical behaviour by media.²⁴

The journalism business in Turkey is heavily concentrated, with cross ownership across all sectors of media. The newsstands and televisions provide a kaleidoscope of titles and shows, but according to market research many media outlets cannot generate optimal advertising revenues and therefore operate in the red.²⁵

Nevertheless, the media landscape has long been a battleground for political and commercial self-interest.

Nuri Çolakoglu explains that historically, the relations between government and the media have not been conducive to freedom. During the periods of military rule and coup d'état the media were partially restricted with some formal controls, but journalism existed mostly within a culture of chronic self-censorship.

During the period of multi-party coalitions in 1990s until the accession to power of AKP in 2002, media were relatively free. "However, it was a shady playground," he says. "Media played a key role as kingmakers."²⁶

The election of the AKP was a game-changer, he says. The new government opened up the media market leading to an explosion of new outlets and extensive cross-ownership. They also actively created a firm pro-AKP media community within this reformed information landscape.

"There is no blue water between government and publishers and editors," he says. "As a result there is an enormous polarisation of opinion in Turkey. There are no grey areas in media and there are deep problems of intolerance and living with other peoples' ideas."

According to Çolakoğlu the government's cat-and-mouse strategy for dealing with the media has created a degree of unprecedented influence for the Prime Minister and his government. He estimates that the AKP controls around 50 percent of media directly, around 30 percent indirectly and the remaining 20 percent are relatively small players.

The capacity of government to pull the strings of media arises because of a system of media ownership that has the country's major media outlets in the hands of industries that rely on public contracts. According to Reuters at least a dozen newspapers and 10 TV stations are owned by conglomerates with energy, construction or mining interests, all sectors heavily dependent on government business.²⁷

²⁴ See Beatrice White <http://roarmag.org/2014/01/crackdown-press-freedom-turkey/>

²⁵ <http://www.tesev.org.tr/the-political-economy-of-the-media--a-sectoral-analysis/Content/407.html>

²⁶ Interview with EJM November 20th 2013

²⁷ <http://news.yahoo.com/corruption-scandal-tests-turkey-39-cowed-media-104718545--sector.html>

A simplified breakdown of the economic interests of the major media conglomerates reveals:

- **Doğan Group:** Energy, retail, tourism, finance, industrial
- **Demiroren Group:** Gas, construction, education, industrial
- **Ciner Group:** Energy, mining, industrial, service sector
- **Doğuş Group:** Banking, finance, automotive, construction, tourism, energy, restaurant chains
- **Calik Group:** Textiles, energy, construction, finance, telecoms, mining

Some industrialists are not naturally inclined to get into media ownership, but some businesses feel obliged to enter the media sector under pressure from politicians says media researcher and commentator Ceren Sözeri from Galatasaray University.

In a recent report detailing the links between media and big businesses she says industrialists have openly admitted political pressure to buy into the media market.²⁸

Despite of the fact that media, and particularly newspapers, are a business risk, they can be used to provide editorial favours that will help secure lucrative public contracts.

Sözeri, who has been observing these industry links with media for some time, notes that more public tenders in urban and municipal services are being won by companies with links to pro-government media. She has no doubt this is a result of biased editorial coverage.

“This ownership profile explains why media owners please the government at every possible occasion,” says Sözeri. “It is also why self-censorship was so widespread in the media during the Gezi protests.”

The structure of media ownership in Turkey means that issues such as defence, nuclear power, construction, and the economy are covered in a superficial, amateurish way, or sometimes not at all.

Fatih Gokhan Diler who covered the Gezi protests for *Agos*, the bi-lingual newspaper which serves also the Armenian community in Turkey and whose editor Hrant Dink was assassinated by political extremists in 2007, regards these issues as far more difficult to write about than certain politically sensitive topics such as the Kurdish minority issue.²⁹

This is because outsiders, he says, particularly countries in the West, are not paying as close attention to domestic aspects such as corruption, so much as long-standing conflicts with an international dimension, such as the Kurdish peace process or tensions with Armenia surrounding the recognition of the genocide in 1915.

²⁸ Report *Media Ownership in Turkey and its Advantages*, Dr. Ceren Sözeri

²⁹ EJM interview, November 20th 2013

Yet as Diler points out, the partisan nature of these outlets and their affiliation with political parties meant that they also engaged in a degree of political manipulation to suit their own agendas.

International observers have also expressed fears for journalism when the business agenda and ownership interests are at play in the newsroom.

“This has created a situation in which media outlets are used to promote the ownership group's financial interests,” concluded the United States media watchdog Freedom House in a report in February 2014. “Members of the media and the government alike describe newspapers' Ankara bureau chiefs as 'lobbyists' for their companies,” it said.³⁰

The report found that links with businesses as well as the government improperly using its leverage over media to limit public debate over its actions, is deepening the country's political and social polarization.

“The government must recognize that its efforts to control a free debate are further alienating Turkey's citizens and could potentially threaten the country's stability,” the report said. “It could also put at risk Turkey's integration with Europe and its strong alliance with the United States.”

Media and the Corruption Scandal

The murky dealings between media and politics in Turkey surfaced again in December 2013 in the midst of a corruption scandal which opened up a web of intrigue involving Prime Minister Erdoğan, members of his government and his family and a long-standing rivalry with a former political ally now in exile.

The scandal broke when Prime Minister accused senior police officers and judges engaged in a widespread investigation into corruption, which led to the arrests of prominent businessmen and sons of cabinet members, of taking part in what amounted to an attempted “judicial coup.” He promptly closed the investigation down and reassigned prosecutors and judges and thousands of police officers.

His action provoked a flood of leaked court documents to journalists not in the pocket of the government and led to a new confrontation with media that, for the first time since the Gezi protests, again tested the capacity of journalists to report freely.

As the government resorted to heavy-handed tactics to staunch the flow of devastating allegations in the media about corruption in the government, the Prime Minister called investigative reporter Mehmet Baransu a traitor for publishing documents related to the scandal and ordered his lawyers to file a legal case against a newspaper columnist for his critical Twitter messages.³¹

³⁰ http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/democracy-crisis-corruption-media-and-power-turkey#.UvU_jPI_vko

³¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/12/world/europe/in-scandal-turkeys-leaders-may-be-losing-their-tight-grip-on-news-media.html?_r=0

But the strong-arm response of the government did not succeed. In some newspapers and on Twitter, a document emerged that was said to be a summons for Erdoğan's son to appear for questioning, and reports on the discovery of \$4.5 million in cash stuffed in shoe boxes at the home of a director of a state bank.

Behind the row is a festering dispute between Erdoğan and his United States based rival and Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen. Erdoğan accuses this former political ally of using his influence in the police, judiciary, and some sections of media to mount a malevolent public campaign and judicial investigation to destabilise the government.

Like many issues in Turkish political life the rivalry between Erdoğan and Gülen is a complex mix of shadowy politics in which none of the players has much to commend them.³²

In fact, it's a choice between pest and cholera, according to journalist Ahmet Sik who was jailed in 2011 for writing a book on how Gülen's movement has indeed infiltrated the police and the law enforcement community as Erdoğan claims.

Sik doesn't argue that the purge by Erdoğan of Gülenists in powerful positions means he is right. "There is also a real witch-hunt going on. We have massive corruption on the one hand, but the investigation against it also violates democratic and judicial principles. It's a choice between a rock and a hard place, pest and cholera. One is not better, or cleaner, than the other."³³

So-called "Gülenist" newspapers such as *Zaman* and *Bugün*, which in the past have been sympathetic to Erdoğan's AKP reported lurid allegations, including pictures of cash stuffed in shoe boxes as well as damaging telephone recordings between businessmen and Erdoğan's associates.

At the same time, the pro-government media including newspapers like *Sabah*, *Star* and particularly *Yeni Safak* portrayed the corruption investigations as a plot against Erdoğan.

The row has also shed further light on the profoundly unhealthy relations between government, business and media. On February 3rd 2014 leaked recordings of phone calls between Erdoğan, some of his ministers and leading businessmen were raised in parliament by the opposition party CHP who accused the government of bribery over the sale of the pro-government daily newspaper *Sabah* and ATV television.³⁴

The government was accused of bribing a group of businessmen in August 2013 and offering tenders for major public contracts to make up their losses if the media sale

³² The Gülen movement has been a significant actor in the arena of politics in Turkey since the 70s and has managed to increase its influence over the years. The movement grew in size and is thought to have a certain level of control over education, the judiciary and the police. With the rise of the AKP and Erdoğan's increasing power, Gülen had also found an ally. However, increasing dissatisfaction on both sides, has seen the erosion of the mutual support between the AKP and the Gülen movement. This division became increasingly public after the Gezi protest.

³³ See: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/09/turkish-police-fethullah-gulen-network>

³⁴ Reported in *Daily News*, February 1st 2014

went ahead. The consortium concerned – involving the Cengiz, Kolin and Limak companies – had already bagged a 22.1 billion Euro public contract to build Istanbul’s third airport earlier in the year.

The sale of *Sabah*, which was eventually bought in December 2013 by Kalyon, a construction group with major government contracts, typifies the way ownership structures in the Turkish media landscape are designed to support political and business interests.

Indeed, this proposed sale was already on the radar of corruption investigators and was one of the issues being looked at by judges when the prosecutor concerned was removed from office as part of the purge of police and judicial officers launched by Erdoğan in December.

The Fallout from Gezi: Where to Now?

Although the crisis for journalism in Turkey in recent years has focused on the arrest, detention and prosecution of scores of journalists, as this report reveals, the country’s media face an equally devastating threat to ethical journalism from the corrupt and sinister environment in which they work.

Gökhan Diler told the EJM that before Gezi people were divided, even those working within media circles, over whether there was any clear political bias in media. “Gezi caused a mind shift within media,” he says. “There is a clearer awareness now of where the red lines are drawn and who is exercising the authority.”³⁵

Significantly, the Gezi incident and the subsequent events have opened up a new debate inside Turkey about the role of government and its relations with the media.

There are now calls for more transparency in media ownership and rules of governance that will eliminate the possibility of all forms of direct and indirect political influence on journalism.

Two different struggles are in place, says Mustafa Karam, one to build solidarity in the media profession and a second is to change the political approach and open the door to pluralism in media and more independent voices. Society is polarised and there are few opportunities to get access to inclusive journalism that provides more pluralism.

When discussing the legacy of the government and mainstream media’s treatment of the Gezi protests, the word “polarization” is repeated time and time again. What exists now, says Yavuz Baydar, is “a more tamed media”; a media that has been and can be “bought by money or intimidation.”

While the bulk of columnists are now largely pro-government, others feel more intimidated. For him, there has been an “entrenchment in media,” which is increasingly demarcated in partisan terms, impossible to reconcile.³⁶

³⁵ Interview with EJM delegation November 20th 2013.

³⁶ Interview with EJM delegation November 20th 2013.

The Hrant Dink Foundation, established by the family of the assassinated former editor of *Agos*, monitors hate speech in the media and periodically publishes reports with analysis on the topic. Zeynep Arslan, who is involved in this work, said they observed that hate speech was strengthened after Gezi, as a result of the polarization that aggravated social fault lines and heightened pre-existing suspicions.

For Ercan İpekçi, veteran journalist and President of the Turkish Journalists' Union (TGS), the driving forces behind this polarization are government policies and the mainstream media. The tension and hostility conveyed by the divisive narrative favoured in the media are not reflective of society, where by and large, people are more understanding of one another, he argues. He also notes a broader shift in society: "The level of consciousness is higher now... Society has learned to demand its rights."

Another consequence, points out İpekçi, was that people rejected mainstream media in favour of social media.³⁷ This does not constitute journalism, stressed İpekçi, and in fact social media was often conducive to the propagation of unfounded rumours and disinformation during the protests.

The lesson of Gezi for the media was a failure to consider the context of the protest, according to veteran journalist and author Andrew Finkel, who said that both media and the government were unsure how to react. They suffered from a fundamental lack of understanding as to what the protests were about, which has still not been overcome.

This led to a general sense of paranoia, he said, with a government constantly looking over its shoulder, and led to far-reaching consequences in all areas of society, in order to prevent a reoccurrence of such events.³⁸

Importantly, says Finkel, it also led to the realization how other events, such as the Kurdish conflict, had been treated by the media in the same way for years – receiving distorted coverage or in some cases no coverage at all.³⁹

Baydar explains that the government exerts considerable influence over content, though indirectly for the most part. Op-ed pieces for example, have been known to be directly commissioned from pro-government think tanks, who would on occasion send "ready-made propaganda" to newspaper editors, he says.⁴⁰

Not surprisingly, in this atmosphere mainstream news organisations struggle to find a credible, independent voice, and many doubt that the ownership structures can allow for meaningful change, but Baydar, is optimistic. "The graft probe is a new opportunity for Turkish journalism to push itself out of suffocation," he told Reuters.

Baydar is among a group of prominent journalists who launched Platform 24, a media monitoring website, which aims to counter the undue influence of government over media and to encourage accurate, balanced, fair, non-partisan news coverage.

³⁸ EJM interview, November 19th 2013

³⁹ EJM interview, November 18th 2013

⁴⁰ EJM interview, November 18th 2013

Nuri Çolakoğlu, says the Gezi events have highlighted problems which have always been present in the long and troubled history of relations and between government and media.

The turbulence of the last months – there were serious clashes between Doğan, Sabah and some other media about the fallout from the Gezi protests – has also provided some glimpses of a new mood sweeping the country. “It may be that Gezi marked a turning point and there is clear evidence of a generational shift,” he says. “Certainly, it has opened the door to fresh thinking about media and the future of journalism. It is a discussion not held in the context of maintaining conventional media practice.”

Although Çolakoğlu does not hold out much hope for a change of mindset within the current government, some people are saying enough is enough.

“Everyone knows what is right and what is wrong,” he says. “But how do we create conditions in the media for doing it right? We can start by supporting new media initiatives and by starting a debate inside the media and within wider society about the need for change. There should be no going back.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

The social and political drama that unfolded around the Gezi Park sit-in and the political scandals that have arisen since provide conclusive and troubling evidence of unacceptable levels of political influence and interference in Turkish journalism.

The distorted media coverage of the Gezi Park protests and the backlash against critical and independent voices inside journalism that followed have exposed a culture of self-censorship in journalism that has developed over many years in which there has been legal, political and violent pressure on media.

This self-censorship arises also due to the structure of media ownership, which has created a pool of self-interest for politicians and business leaders, and which in turn compromises ethical journalism. This distorted information landscape undermines efforts to strengthen democracy and pluralism.

The EJM believes that the lack of transparency in the ownership and operations of media and the often corrupt nature of relations between business and politics plays a far more significant role in explaining the failures of mainstream journalism in Turkey than the individual ethics of journalists.

The EJM, with other press freedom groups, believes that the situation is made worse through the intemperate and often intolerant voice of government in Turkey which encourages polarisation in society and which creates a fearful atmosphere for the exercise of journalism. In particular, the adoption of a controversial law on internet use, in February 2014, raises new fears for free speech protection in the country.

Despite all of these difficulties there are positive signs. Journalists and editors are increasingly vocal in their demands for urgent change and for actions to strengthen media freedom, ethical journalism and responsible use of information.

With this in mind, the EJNI urges media professional groups in Turkey to build a new partnership and to promote a national dialogue within journalism to promote editorial independence and press freedom at all levels. This dialogue should address the crisis of political interference and the impact of excessive commercialization of media.

As part of this process we recommend more training in editorial leadership; the strengthening of professional associations; and the promotion of transparency and good governance in media based in principles of self-regulation.

The EJNI recommends that this new initiative should support actions that will:

1. Promote and strengthen systems of **self-regulation inside media**, including transparent systems of good governance;
2. Strengthen **dialogues between traditional journalism and online media** on the need for responsibility in the use of information and for ethical content across the public information space;
3. Support programmes to **strengthen independent professional associations** of editors, owners and journalists;
4. Consider how best to create independent, credible and effective **national systems of self-regulation** of journalism covering all platforms of media.

The EJNI will support media professional groups in their efforts to build public confidence in journalism by actively combatting internal and external threats to editorial independence and the rights of journalists to report freely.

At the same time, the political community also do their part. The Government should commission an urgent review of all laws that are currently used to restrict or inhibit journalism. Laws that are damaging to free speech and which have a chilling effect on the exercise of journalism should be repealed. The aim should be to create an atmosphere for free, democratic exchange and information pluralism.

At stake in all of this is not just the future of independent journalism in Turkey, but the vision of the country as a modern democratic state and its continued development as a prosperous and thriving democracy.

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Nuri Çolakođlu	President, Dođan Media Group
Ercan Ipekci	General Secretary, Turkish Journalists Union
Yavuz Baydar	Journalist, P24
Andrew Finkel	Journalist, P24
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Fatih Gökhan Diler	Journalist, Agos
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African Centre for Media Excellence
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