News Media Consolidation and Censorship in Turkey:
From Liberal Ideals to Corporatist Realities

Murat Akser

The consolidation of the Turkish media is a recent phenomenon based on the economic liberalization of the 1980s under Turgut Ozal. Conglomerates in Turkish media were created as a result of the 1980s liberalization of the economy that allowed businessmen to purchase multiple newspapers. During the 1990s, the relationship between the media bosses and politicians came under public scrutiny due to competition between different media outlets. The most notable conglomerates of the 1990s in Turkish media were Aydin Dogan, the owner of Kanal D, Hurriyet, and Milliyet dailies; Dinc Bilgin, the owner of ATV and Sabah daily; and Cem Uzan the owner of Star TV.

As a former editor of Milliyet daily, Derya Sazak, commented, it was a photo in 1997 of media mogul Aydin Dogan and then prime minister Mesut Yılmaz chatting and walking on a weekend that gave the impression that media bosses can make or break governments.¹ The meeting was photographed and sent to news agencies. It caused a furor over Dogan and his influence with the government. The reaction came from Islamic and opposition press that supported the recently deposed government of Necmettin Erbakan in a coalition with the center-right True Path Party of Tansu Ciller.


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This incident and others published by the *Hurriyet* daily targeting Islamists, Kurdish politicians, and Armenians led to the belief that Dogan and other media conglomerates were dangerous in the eyes of the Justice and Development Party of Turkey (AKP) politicians in the 2000s.

Since 2009, especially after the loss of votes in March 2009 local elections, the AKP and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan have sought to strengthen their position by attacking the media critical of their policies, using an “othering” process of us versus them, in which others have become the target of all those who do not support the AKP or its agenda. The “enemies” of the AKP would include at times Kurds, secular citizens, leftists, and even nationalists or other Islamists. It was Cem Uzan who first contested the leadership of Erdogan through a newly established party headed by himself after the AKP government disbanded his business interests. Uzan ran an energy company, the first private television station in Turkey, and several newspapers. He personally attacked Erdogan during elections, and after AKP’s initial election victory, his companies were taken over by a government agency and redistributed to the new Islamic bourgeoisie supporting Erdogan and the AKP. There have been reports that Uzan and his companies were also involved in bad business practices and had to be investigated for fraud by large US corporations. His downfall proved that media bosses were not infallible, a serious lesson for the AKP and Erdogan’s future media policies.\(^2\)

Dinc Bilgin was similarly involved in the purchase of recently privatized state enterprises that went bankrupt during 2001 economic crisis. He lost ATV and the *Sabah Daily* when the government later took control of his companies.

The last remaining media mogul from the 1990s in Turkey was Dogan, who initially supported the AKP government. Because of various clashes with the government since 2008, Dogan lost his media empire through excessive tax requirements; he was forced to leave as the chief executive officer, and his companies were sold off. For all of these moguls, even when the conglomerates’ economic interests were at stake, they could no longer stand up to government policies through their media outlets.

In 2009, the AKP government faced poor local election results; major municipalities were lost to the opposition parties. The party began using legal, economic, and political means to control the flow of information, favoring its neoconservative-controlled and -censored view of news media. A historical and political economic analysis shows that successive governments in Turkey have found new methods to censor the news media as the country’s democracy moves toward consolidation. This essay identifies three types of news media control by the Turkish government: legal, economic, and political. The repression of information through court orders and censorship by the state telecommunication agency are examples of the government’s legal tools. The new state of emergency measure in the post–July 2016 coup environment resulted in, among other things, the detention of journalists and forceful takeover of television and newspapers. And from time to time, social media outlets were blocked wholesale, with bans on YouTube, Twitter, and Wikipedia. The transfer of ownership to businessmen close to the government has created “sided media outlets” (that is, media outlets biased in favor of the government), an example of economic media control. Finally, the political means used to control big Turkish media outlets on the part of the AKP government have been carried out through direct attacks by politicians trying to turn public opinion against any critical news media.

A Liberal Media?

Since their beginnings in the late nineteenth century, the Turkish mass media have aimed to gain a role as the fourth estate on the Turkish political scene. In the twentieth century, freedom of the press became a paramount principle in the political debate that deepened with the foundation of the Turkish republic in 1923. During the past century, the Turkish media have strived to establish a liberal model of the press to free themselves from government control. There have been occasional setbacks and backlashes due to the control and repression of press freedoms by various governments. Between 1980 and 2000, the Turkish media grew increasingly liberal and were able to express public discontent against government policies. Each time the Turkish media became more liberal, the government invented new methods of repression, ranging from libel laws to economic control. This essay argues that since
2009 the Turkish government has been moving toward a new form of political censorship. In this environment, big business and media conglomerates can no longer challenge the government and its repressive tactics toward the news media, because their economic interests are threatened. This outcome results from the economic transformation of the media sector through convergence and consolidation. Even though various large businesses have acquired newspapers and TV stations to create media empires, they do not have protection from the government, because the government plays such a large role in their economic well-being. Indeed, in this new political era of censorship, Turkish media must operate within the limits of freedom of expression; journalists are denied their critical stance toward the government by conglomerates focused on protecting their economic interests.

In 2001 when the AKP was first established, however, the party’s position was to push for more freedoms. When it began to govern, after 2002, the AKP government and Erdogan promised freedom of expression and the right of the media to deliver news, among other freedoms. Since 2009, however, Erdogan has deliberately created an atmosphere of animosity and rivalry between himself and his political opponents—everybody who does not support him became a target as the enemy of the people (millet). The debates between the government officials (particularly Erdogan) and the media corporations in Turkey started as verbal encounters, developed into legal battles, and ended in corporate takeovers and prison sentences. This wrath of the government on the media resulted in a significant shift in the media’s monitoring of public affairs and commenting critically. Government control over corporate media surpassed any conglomeration via economic pressures. The successive governments in Turkey, mostly conservative ones historically, have taken countermeasures to balance the media power to its logical extreme. The earlier economic conglomeration of the press, ironically, made it vulnerable to a new media regime, and it can no longer operate freely from government control. It is interesting to see how government restrictions on the media evolved to the point of inventing new methods of press suppression while there is still an assumption that the media are operating within a liberal economic and political environment.
A Historical Perspective on Press Freedom in Turkey

A recent study on the roles journalists assign themselves notes a remarkable shift. When journalists are forced to self-censor, are fired, or are put in prison, the result is that news coverage falters, editorial resources vanish, the amount of coverage dwindles, and contextualizing coverage by dedicated journalists disappears. Using a model developed by Frank Esser and Andrea Umbricht, we can conceptualize a Turkish model of journalism, which has moved from a polarized model to a corporatist model that aspires to be a liberal model.

The legal rights and guarantees of the press were liberalized and enhanced after major political changes over the last century that included the declaration of a constitutional monarchy, the declaration of the republic, the transition to a multiparty system, and finally the end of the Cold War and the emergence of globalization. Following the prime ministership of Ozal in 1984, media liberalization resulted from concurrent legal, political, and economic processes. The political establishment was always suspicious of the news media and therefore tried to find new methods of censorship. The restrictions brought to bear on the media by the government in different periods after 1950, while strict, were not as severe as the ones under the Ottomans, and for that reason, as one career journalist has stated, journalists in Turkey always had to be “cautious democrats.” Economically, the news media had always been free, with independent sources of income relying solely on advertisement revenue and sales, until the emergence of conglomerates in the 1980s and the 1990s.

Still, the consolidation of democracy in Turkey went hand in hand with the evolution of Turkish press freedoms. Kai Hafez lists three phases in the

democratization of the press in developing countries. They correspond to the changing methods of media censorship in Turkey by the government. The first is the authoritarian phase (1923–46 for Turkey), in prior restraint was used—that is, media were self-policing. This was followed by the transitory phase (1947–80), when seditious libel laws came into being. Finally, there is the consolidation phase (1981 to the present), when economic and structural means for suppressing the media were used—for instance, via rulings by the Radio and Television Supreme Council government agency, the Turkish equivalent of the US Federal Communications Commission. 

During the authoritarian phase, the political process was “monopolized by an elite that rules not on the basis of democratic procedures and legitimacy but by coercion and force.” This was the case in the Ottoman Empire and in the early days of the Turkish republic, when media were controlled by governments through prior restraint. 

The subsequent transitory phase was characterized by either reformist or revolutionary processes moving away from authoritarianism. The free elections of 1946 and 1950 brought the Democrat Party to power, and rapid economic growth was achieved with more citizen participation in government. This period, however, also carried with it the old habits of repression of the press and was prone to authoritarian interruptions by elites, such as in the 1960, 1971, and 1980 military coups in Turkey. During this time, the government in Turkey preferred bringing charges of seditious libel when it wanted to control the media. Although there is no equivalent wording to “seditious libel” in Turkish, its application can be found throughout Turkey’s history. For example, freedom of the press is governed by many laws enacted by the parliament, in addition to the constitution, and one of these laws, the Press Law (including a number of amendments added in 1983) provides that a public prosecutor may, without securing a court order, stop distribution of a newspaper or magazine containing material that constitutes an “offense

9. Ibid., 146.
against the state” — a vaguely defined offense that includes political expression and is the functional equivalent of seditious libel. After distribution has been stopped, a public prosecutor may apply to a state security court for an order approving his action. The public prosecutor can also seize publications already distributed. Additionally, where a state of emergency exists, the government has a right to ban published material.\textsuperscript{11} Today, the AKP government utilizes such legal precedence to silence private news media ranging from television and newspapers to the Internet.

Prior restraint is still at work in broadcasting in the form of licensing in many countries. Licensing of broadcasting was not in existence in Turkey before the emergence of private television and radio stations. Until the 1990s, radio and television were owned and run by the state. Turkish Public Radio and Television was the single station at that time and was televised as the voice of the government. In 1990, STAR 1, the first private television station, was established. In subsequent years, many new private televisions and radio stations started broadcasting. When the Turkish government realized the power of this new sector, it began to apply restrictions on broadcasting.\textsuperscript{12} The government regulatory agency responsible, Radyo Televizyon Ust Kurulu (Radio and Television Supreme Council, RTUK) was established in 1994. RTUK’s restrictions and fines in broadcasting have been justified through Law No. 3984, which put Turkish licensing into effect. The power to issue and revoke broadcasting licenses lies exclusively with RTUK, and it can apply a range of sanctions for those broadcast stations and networks that do not comply with its rules. The lightest sanction is a warning, given when RTUK deems that a broadcaster is fulfilling its obligations and is violating broadcasting principles. If a broadcaster ignores the warning, RTUK has the authority to stop the broadcasting temporarily or cancel the license, depending on how serious the violation is. RTUK’s decisions can be appealed to the provincial administrative court and then to the Council of State. Unfortunately, under the state of emergency imposed by the Erdogan government,


appeals cannot be made and the AKP government’s takeover of oppositional media outlets cannot be prevented.

In the third phase of the democratization of the press in developing countries, consolidation occurs. Consolidation, according to Hafez, includes “the establishment of institutions like a constitution, parliament, [and] democratic media as well as a stable political culture and vibrant civil society. Consolidation is prone to relapse because the authoritarian bureaucracy and societal values cannot be replaced from one day to another.” Until 2003, when the Erdogan’s AKP government took power, press freedom in Turkey was gradually developing. Turkey had undergone the two previous phases, inching away from the past Ottoman authoritarian model toward a more liberal and consolidated model, until there appeared a fundamental debate between the press and the government in Turkey. This last phase is proving to be difficult for both media conglomerates in Turkey and the ruling government.

**Conglomeration as the New Censorship**

During the 1990s, the Turkish media gradually came to be concentrated in the hands of one man, Dogan, who was a mid-level businessman until the late 1970s. There were other major media groups, but none has had the influence of the Dogan Media Group, which is both horizontally and vertically integrated with various types of media outlets. The Dogan Media Group has grown steadily, but it started with humble beginnings adding *Milliyet* in 1979 and later *Hurriyet* in 1983 to its daily newspapers in Turkey. These purchases were a move of prestige by a wise businessman rather than a profitable investment. During late 1970s and early 1980s, journalism was seen as a profession carrying a social responsibility—reporting the truth to the people—rather than as simply a business. Throughout the 1980s, the political authority and Turkish print and visual media slowly evolved to the everyday realities of a market economy. A liberal conservative prime minister, Ozal, used two control tools in the 1980s: the state’s advertising allocation and financial regulation, including censorship. Ozal was a conservative...
prime minister in the mold of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and his economic reforms were supported by newspaper owners who were also businessmen profiting from this neoliberal economic change. Overall, the media in Turkey generally supported this new liberal model of economics.\(^\text{14}\)

While this model was supported by business owners, the journalists of the era called for more freedom of the press, and while the country’s economy became more liberal, government tolerance toward the press did not similarly follow. In 1989, Ozal used government tools to bring down the daily newspaper \textit{Tercuman} because its owner, Kemal Ilicak, criticized Ozal’s policies in the paper. There were people in the press who resisted Ozal’s changes and accused their colleagues of being “libos,” or liberal sellouts. These were the Jacobin republican bastions, such as the daily \textit{Cumhuriyet}, who were against liberal economic policies and defended state interventionism and secularism. Around this time journalists who worked for big media companies like Emin Colasan could criticize the government and its policies freely without the fear of censorship or of being fired.\(^\text{15}\) For instance, Colasan’s book on Ozal and his family sold millions in 1990. At that time, if a journalist’s work sold papers, he or she could write anything in a newspaper.

Big business—owned media have created new means of filtering the news, censoring itself, in a way. The concentration of news outlets in the hands of a few businessmen created uniformity in the news and few alternative news outlets. As the parent company’s interests may clashed with the public interest, journalists questioning government practices feared the loss of their jobs under the constant threat of “optimization of human resources.”\(^\text{16}\) The news editors controlled the news flow centrally, and this led to gatekeeping, a form of censorship in this case. On the other hand, Dogan’s recent struggle points toward new methods of repression of the press by the government.

The recent concentration of media has also created other means of censoring the press with auto-control mechanisms and internal censorship. At its height in 2008, Dogan Media Group controlled more than 50 percent of all


\(^{15}\) See Emin Çolasan, \textit{Kovulduk Ey Halkım Unutma Bizi} (Ankara: Bilgi, 2007).

the print, audio, visual, and news media in Turkey. Dogan owned the daily newspapers *Hurriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Radikal*, and the TV channels Kanal D and CNN Turk. This concentration of media in the hands of a single individual is the result of the neoliberal policies of the AKP government that came into power in late 2002. David Skinner and Mike Gasher categorize this position as an issue of media concentration that could lead to serious editorial control and censorship anywhere.17 Cross-media ownership, mergers, commercialism, concentration and consolidation, and convergence were common in the 1990s worldwide. As soon as Dogan owned various news outlets, key features for controlling news surfaced: concentration and convergence resulting in censorship. These neoliberal corporate tools are now integrated into AKP government’s media management style. The government-friendly pool media is concentrated, and it converged with government friendly journalists writing in newspapers, appearing on television, and tweeting online, praising AKP government successes and attacking anybody criticizing them. Censorship is now achieved through legal and forceful methods of state power and state-influenced economic power.

Concentration

The negative effects of the media concentration of news outlets have come under scrutiny by scholars worldwide.18 The economic power of businessmen who want to own more media outlets can lead to undemocratic consequences. Dogan demonstrated to the AKP government that one can have the capacity and ability to frame news through editorials in newspapers and on television. Between 2003 and 2007, these editorials represented the AKP and Prime Minister Erdogan as conservative modernists who believed in freedoms, a market economy, and Turkey’s European Union bid. The same themes resonated in different newspapers and television channels. This allowed Dogan

the opportunity to develop a good business relationship with the government. For the AKP, a media group that represented modernity and secularism meant support and prestige from a larger segment of society. The uniformity of news coverage and presentation reached such levels that newspapers and television reports frequently used the same text. Media concentration also highlighted that the AKP governments could pressure business owners more easily, as their economic interests might be hurt by a change in government policies. Concentration thereby created a more vulnerable media that willing to censor itself. According to recent research, four media groups—Dogan, Merkez, Cukurova, and Star—one controlled 80 percent of the market. This, however, changed ten years later under heavy AKP media control policies.

Convergence

The second control mechanism Dogan showed AKP was convergence: that it was possible to integrate newspaper and television headlines in a way that daily news outlets could support and complement each other. Media staff could be “optimized,” which meant that journalists easily transferred from one Dogan media company to another. Many were replaced or even fired, because so many were doing the same thing. After several media takeovers, the AKP government exercised convergence powers through appointed caretakers. For Dogan, this was business optimization and reorganization and therefore natural in a competitive market economy. Unionization was also low and led to job losses in media sector. Eventually, with just a few exceptions, there was no alternative newspaper or television channel left for anyone fired by the Dogan Media Group.

19. See Hüseyin Aykol, Haber Basımdan İslamiye Medyası (İstanbul: Agora Kitaplığı, 2008).
Early Attempts at AKP Government Censorship:
The Colasan Case

The Dogan Media Group either supported the AKP government’s policies through by positively framing the news about them or just did not allow its journalists to criticize them. Through this type of gatekeeping, it implicitly supported the government. This quasi-support by Dogan allowed him to win government bids and receive favorable business treatment, such as being allowed to own more than one national newspaper or nationwide television channel. On top of this, Dogan expanded its interests in petrochemical enterprises, land ownership, and construction. In 2007, Dogan’s approach was criticized by one of Turkey’s veteran writers, Colasan, who was fired by Dogan for not complying with editorial rules at the daily *Hurriyet*. In the two books he wrote after his dismissal, Colasan described the pressures he felt from the management team of the newspaper and the ways the management was pressured by the government because of his articles. At times, Colasan states, Ertugrul Ozkok, the managing editor of *Hurriyet* told him how their boss, Dogan, who was under pressure because of his deals with the government, was hurt by Colasan’s editorials criticizing the government. In this process Dogan had to suppress alternative writers and closed down *Gozcu*, a left-leaning daily he owned that heavily criticized the government. Their writers later regrouped and now publish the independent *Sozcu* newspaper, which incorporated the same critical approach. *Sozcu* was able to build a reader base and became one of the top three best-selling newspapers in 2017. In the postcoup state of emergency, however, *Sozcu*’s manager and journalists were arrested and are awaiting trial.  

Colasan had warned his former boss that one day the AKP government would attack *him* as well. A little less than a year after Colasan was fired, then prime minister Erdogan openly attacked Dogan, accusing him of publishing news that slandered Erdogan himself, his family, and his AKP party. Erdogan claimed Dogan had illegal business dealings, and his government refused to bow to his wishes. Dogan responded in kind, as he rejected the accusations and claimed that his companies were being targeted and denied

business because his newspapers had revealed illegal business dealings by Erdogan's son.  

**Dogan versus Erdogan**

The debate pitting Dogan against Erdogan has been a turning point in how big businesses view the government in Turkey. Since late 2008, Dogan has been publicly stating that the government was trying to repress his platforms' news reporting through economic and political pressure. The government, including Prime Minister Erdogan, responded negatively to these accusations, and in turn accused the Dogan Media Group of fraud and false news reporting. Since then, this line of attack has become a political tool used by AKP government against any newspapers critical of its policies.

At first, the Turkish government started using more economic and political tools. Legal tools were utilized by semi-autonomous government institutions such as RTUK and Tasarruf Mevduat Sigorta Fonu (the Savings Guaranteed Insurance Fund, TMSF). The government used TMSF to penalize critical media and help foster alternative media owned by businessmen close to the AKP and the prime minister. These new alternative outlets, owned by right-wing conservative Islamist businessmen who prospered under the AKP regime, were acquired through legal means from liberal businessmen who own media outlets such as Erdogan's political opponent, Uzan. TMSF controls who can buy such media outlets, at one point preventing the Cukurova group from purchasing Sabah newspaper and the ATV television station. Economic controls included the exclusion of certain media groups from government bids, tax audits and fines, RTUK fines, and the prime minister and other members of the AKP suing every negative portrayal of their political activities. Political tools included government agenda setting and calls for boycotts of the press. Today, the Turkish government proactively sets the country's discourse agenda by commenting on the liberal media. The prime


minister himself has called for every supporter of his party to boycott reading the Dogan Media Group newspapers. (Erdogan claims Dogan newspapers have few readers but ignores millions of Internet readers.) The Dogan Media Group and similar groups are portrayed as rich, snobbish, elitist, and bourgeois. Dogan Media’s response to these accusations has been to change its stance from gatekeeping to priming: that is, presenting a flood of negative portrayals of the AKP government through all media channels. As of 20 March 2018, Dogan had sold all his media assets to a government-friendly business, the Demiroren Group. Various commentators agreed that Dogan was “afraid of spending the remaining days in prison.”

The current merger of media means that over 90 percent of media outlets in Turkey are now in control of government-friendly businesses.

Legal Tools: TMSF, RTUK, and The Turkish State of Emergency

The constitutional changes following the 2010 referendum gave the AKP government the means to totally control big industry-owned media through various new legal tools. It became easier to shut down newspapers, take over television channels, and imprison journalists within the new constitutional/legal regulatory framework.

Since 2008, Dogan has openly argued that the AKP government is trying to silence him through bureaucratic controls such as being excluded from bidding for, or receiving, government contracts, and economic controls such as excessive auditing and tax fines for his companies. Not long ago the same government had allowed Dogan to purchase a former media baron’s companies at extremely low prices. To do this, the government used TMSF, a special funding agency that was given legal authority to appropriate and resell the property and liquidity of businesses due to bankruptcy, criminal sentencing of the owner, or related reasons. By transferring the ownership of these

companies and selling them to the highest bidder, the AKP government had
silenced media outlets in the past.

During the 2002 election campaign, Uzan, a business and media owner,
had openly challenged Erdogan and the AKP. After Erdogan’s election,
Uzan’s companies were heavily audited, then disbanded and sold to Dogan.
Today, Dogan feels similar pressures to Uzan and is resisting. The govern-
ment is looking has found new legal methods of pressuring Dogan.

After the December 2013 police investigations into AKP government min-
isters, Erdogan and the AKP government declared war on persons and insti-
tutions they saw as a threat. The AKP was able to shut down both Gulenist
and Kurdish media, inventing new legal and illegal ways of media repression
along the way.

**Economic Tools: Exclusion, Boycotts, and Takeovers**

The exclusion of certain media groups from government bids, calls for boy-
cott, audits, overtaxing, and fines are the Turkish government’s ways of eco-
nomically controlling the news media. Businessmen who criticize the prime
minister have been excluded from government bids. For example, Dogan
Oil Co was excluded from supplying oil to government projects by a govern-
ment decree. Prime Minister Erdogan was happy to implicitly reference this
approach when he declared to his supporters at political rallies: “We cut their
money hoses; that is why they are unhappy!”25 This demonstrates the natu-
ralization of the idea that a government—a political party and its leader, the
prime minister—are openly declaring that they have created (and continue
to create) procedures and policies to exclude certain businesses because they
are critical of that government in their media outlets. This approach reflects
a move toward an authoritarian model of control of the press. Ironically, such
a move is against the liberal reformist ideals expressed by the AKP and its
leaders during their earlier election campaigns of 2002 and 2007.

Another government tool to repress big media has been Erdogan’s call to
loyal party members to criticize and even boycott media critical of his gov-

ernment. As Erdogan has been fond of saying, “[Do not] let these newspapers and television channels in your homes.” Throughout 2008, Erdogan called more than once for people not to buy newspapers or watch television channels that belong to the Dogan Media Group. This move toward an authoritarian model of press censorship is not unprecedented in Turkish political history. The approach is reminiscent of another right-wing, economically liberal prime minister, Adnan Menderes, who called for a united front against leftist media in 1960. This call led to attacks on journalists by Menderes and his Democratic Party supporters. Erdogan frequently likens his party and himself to Menderes and the Democratic Party of that time in terms of economic and infrastructure advances. It is often mentioned in the Turkish press that Erdogan also aspires to Menderes’s repressive tactics against the media.

**Political Tools: Government Agenda Setting**

The government’s political tool for news media control is its own agenda setting, which creates a media bias in favor of the government. This debate never took place face to face but was conducted openly through the media owned by Dogan. These media outlets report whatever the prime minister says along with Dogan’s responses, thereby opening channels of expression in the public sphere. Erdogan’s rhetoric and some recent moves against the Dogan Media Group such as record-breaking tax fines have recently taken a significant portion of airtime and filled newspaper columns in the Turkish media. Erdogan has constantly repeated his “sided media” comments and “cutting the hose” rhetoric, voicing other accusations toward the Dogan Media Group. He has also received regular responses from Dogan himself. Erdogan is applying yet another textbook definition of media attacks. Recently Erdogan has used the same rhetoric to attract the popular vote in the municipal elections of March 2009. His portrayal of the critical media—and by default their viewers—as rich, snobbish, elitist, and bourgeois is in fact creating a great divide in the public and therefore extremely dangerous in terms of social movements.

The Dogan-Erdogan debates features an ongoing rhetorical battle over whether the media are biased, never publishing any positive achievement of the AKP government but ready to slander him and his party at any given opportunity. Recently, Erdogan called for support from conservative groups to create “our own biased media.” Here the acceptance and naturalization of the concept of a biased media and its support by the government is a key indication of a move toward a more authoritarian manipulation and control of the media. As mentioned, government agencies such as the TMSF are used to sell important newspapers like Sabah and television channels like ATV to businessmen close to Erdogan. In fact, Erdogan’s son-in-law has come to operate these media outlets, which constantly support government policies.

Media Response: Movement from Gatekeeping to Priming

During this debate, Dogan has been accused of changing his position from gatekeeping to priming. Erdogan has argued that the Dogan Media Group is covering only the negative aspects of his government, itself a textbook definition of priming. As mentioned, Colasan narrated how the Dogan Media Group controlled the publication and airing of negative news about the government through editorial control, again a textbook definition of gatekeeping. By opening these gates, the Dogan media group has now flooded the print and visual media with news against Erdogan and his government. To avoid this negative portrayal by the press, the prime minister’s press office has revoked the accreditation of all journalists who have criticized the government and asked for new, more “suitable” people. This move demonstrates the prime minister’s desire for less critical and more compliant journalists. All but one newspaper, Vatan, have complied with this demand.


The concentration, conglomeration, and censorship of the media was put to test during Gezi Park protest, when CNN Turk and NTV news television stations chose not to report the event in fear of the government response. Journalists who supported the protestors were fired. The entire team of NTV History
Journal was fired and the magazine permanently shut down, as it made a special issue for Gezi Park criticizing government. Dogan by now had surrendered to the AKP government and had let go of Ertugrul Ozkok, who resigned as chief executive officer of Dogan media. A Dogan media entity that owned the left-leaning Radikal daily newspaper first terminated its print version and became an online entity and later completely ceased operations in 2016.27

During the 17–25 December 2013 police investigations into government bribery, the AKP government discovered that it could do almost anything from a legal standpoint, from issuing gag orders on the news to closing media outlets like Zaman daily and Bugun TV. Later, after the AKP’s electoral loss in the June 2015 general elections, reporting of any news that would make the AKP government appear weak was deemed to be illegal and silenced by injunctions through the Turkish court systems. One such attempt was to silence Can Dundar and his coverage of illegal arms trafficking to the Islamic States in Syria by the Turkish government. Dundar and his associates were taken to court, with then President Erdogan’s heavy involvement in the affair and constant televised comments against Dundar. The journalist was later released based on a constitutional court order and took refuge in Germany. His team of journalists at Cumhuriyet daily were arrested and their trials continued.

The final layer of increased media control by the AKP government came with the so-called Gulenist coup attempt of 15 July 2016. Using newly imposed state of emergency laws, Erdogan was able to issue decrees without the approval of the Turkish parliament. Thousands were arrested and are now awaiting trial, many media outlets have been closed, and several journalists have been arrested.

Conclusion: Rupture and Repercussions

Conglomeration and concentration of Turkish media in the 1990s led to censorship in the 2000s. The Turkish media historically were censored and

controlled by the government, but it always had the ideals for independent
coverage of news and acted as a check on the government and its potential
overreach. Its model waned from a liberal media to one that has become
polarized and corporatist. Since 2009, the AKP government has been trying
to control the media in Turkey using all available political, economic, and
legal tools at its disposal. Unable to stand up for their rights, media bosses
like Dogan lost their credibility and standing in opposition to Erdogan and
the AKP. There has been a rupture between the media and the AKP govern-
ment, and this rupture has had two repercussions:

1. The government in Turkey now depends more than ever on legal means
to censor critical news media in the state of emergency since July 2016,
such as arrest of journalists, direct takeover of media outlets, and clos-
ing of media companies. This comes in addition to already exercised
economic and political tools such as huge tax fines and denial of adver-
tising revenues to media conglomerates.

2. Media conglomerations in Turkey have created an internal means of
censorship due to the concentration and convergence of the media by
big business. When their economic interests are no longer threatened,
outlets owned by business interests attempted to voice opinions against
government policies, but they failed. Such failures moved them toward
a more controlled media model than the past liberal configuration in
Turkey.

To counter such authoritarian tactics by the AKP government, the land-
scape of the media in Turkey is opening free, independent, and online alter-
natives such as citizen journalism or journalist portals like T24 and 140jour-
nos. Thus, there may be a new model coming into being in this complex
country. Until this takes hold, however, media-politics relations in Turkey are
far from the liberal sector idealist journalists try to see. In its current form,
it is a slope toward an authoritarian abyss. Media conglomerates like Dogan’s
became targets of the AKP government, losing billions of dollars in tax fines.
Other media control issues have been raised concerning the banning of You-
Tube, Twitter, and Wikipedia in Turkey by the courts for these websites’
revelation of videos of AKP leaders either denouncing secularism or getting
bribes. The recent arrests of journalists who were critical of the government
in the infamous Ergenekon trials have also raised concerns for press freedom violations in Turkey by international human rights groups. Ergenekon is the name of the umbrella investigations by Turkish police of various criminal activities ranging from unauthorized assassinations of Kurdish businessmen by covert police and military forces to coup attempts against current and previous Turkish governments. It is named after an ancient Turkish national legend to indicate the operations of people who abused their official positions in the name of nationalist sentiments. Several high-level military staff and public figures were arrested, and the case is still pending in court. The seemingly random arrests and releases of these public figures are often interpreted as government scare tactics toward dissenting opinion leaders.\(^{28}\) Just before the July 2016 coup attempt, these allegations were proven to be false, and all those indicted and sentences were released from prison.\(^{29}\)

If the media can be described as operating as an intermediary agency between the political and public spheres, its bias or neutrality can be constantly called into question and should be checked internally by the ethics of journalism and their vocational regulators, such as **Turkiye Gazeteciler Cemiyeti** (the Turkish Association of Journalists), free from government fear and interference. The role of the media, however, is to provide checks and balances in Turkish political life, to operate as the fourth estate, and to never avoid criticizing the governing power when it is warranted. The denial of this basic right could very well lead to the destruction of democracy that today’s AKP political leaders have long professed to cherish.

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