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Repressed media and illiberal politics in Turkey: the persistence of fear

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical roots of the role of successive Turkish governments' fear of media and Turkish media's fear of government authority with respect to the development of press freedom over the long run and closely analyzes the historical pressures imposed on journalists through legal and informal means. We focus particularly on the economic and political pressure on the media in Turkey and offer three arguments regarding the fear in Turkish media: (1) Media fear is historical rather than a rupture that happened during the Justice and Development Party era; (2) out of fear of losing power, the governments use structural, legislative and extra-legal factors to the advantage of the ruling party to support a friendly media-ecology; and (3) the repressed media attempt to come out of this ecology of fear by utilizing new tactics of reporting, such as alternative media and citizen journalism.

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Introduction

Nowadays, Turkish media is under siege by an increasingly competitive authoritarian Turkish government as, whether government-friendly or oppositional, all proponents of the media system experience a sense of fear. Indeed, the fear has come to be the defining characteristic of media and political relationships in Turkey, especially following the failed coup attempt of 2016. In the new media system in Turkey, a conservative-led restructuring of the media has led to the emergence of a repressed media system with easy access to funding through government ads, incentives, and structural support. Historically, such regressive reconfiguration media apparatus has been an aim of previous conservative governments as well (Kaya and Çakmur 2010; Yeşil 2016; Över 2021). Through patient manipulation of media economics and legal arm-bending, this new repressive media ecology is the legacy of the Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) aggressive politicking after 20 years of uninterrupted majority rule as a political party (Esen and Gumuscu 2016, 2019). Başer and Öztürk address the issue of electoral democracy versus AKP's attempts to silence criticism and the resistance to this political repression (2017). Öktem and Akkoyunlu refer to this repressive political

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phenomenon as an attempt to exit from democracy through illiberal governance in Turkey (2016). All agree on the increasingly authoritarian nature of AKP's political stance and the democratic backsliding in Turkey. Competitive authoritarianism is a concept developed by Levitsky and Way (2002) to describe countries with governments that hold elections without having a properly functioning democracy. The characterization of the post-2010 Turkish democracy as a competitive authoritarian regime has increased significantly, with media being one of the four arenas concerning the contest between liberal democracy and authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way 2002).

Turkey now finds itself in the league of illiberal democracies by undermining the fourth estate status of restricting free and independent media, which is a requirement for proper functioning liberal democracy. As it stands now, mainstream Turkish media cannot ask hard questions about governance transparency, freely investigate the economic collapse, and report widespread human rights abuses initiated or protected by the AKP regime (Koçer and Bozdağ 2020). Such cases involve not-reporting of attacks on opposition party members and blocking news coverage of the conditions of political prisoners such as pro-Kurdish Party Democratic People's Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* – HDP) leader Selahattin Demirtaş and oppositional philanthropist Osman Kavala. Not only the government-friendly media do not report on these injustices, but they also endorse a hatred-fuelled reporting style. Such an approach ultimately may aim to control the public opinion by relying on intimidation tactics and reporting untruths through a polarizing media system (Özdüzen and Korkut 2020; Yıldırım et al. 2021).

The AKP regime uses media regulatory bodies, primarily the Radio and Television Supreme Council (*Radio ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu* – RTÜK), to control and manipulate the media under the guise of presenting 'honest/unbiased' reporting. These bodies are managed either by the representatives of the parliamentary majority or government-appointed bureaucrats. These can stop TV and internet outlets at will for long periods under vague or emotional terminology such as 'disturbing the peace and uniformity of the Turkish nation' or 'protecting the sanctity of our national cultural values.' This way, regulators create a media ecology of self-censorship whereby 'journalists come under pressure to conform to the ruling political agenda,' which is also experienced in other Balkan countries (Stojarová 2020, 162). This new repressive media regime also produces its own dis-informative trolls in the form of TV commentators, such as Cem Küçük or politically deployed pundits such as Abdülkadir Selvi. The once complacent media moguls like Aydın Doğan and his Doğan media are now erased from the Turkish media scene via the sale of their media holdings to government-friendly Demirören. Doğan media is now known as Demirören Media which include flagship Kanal D-CNN Türk and Hürriyet-Milliyet dailies (Finkel 2021; Sözeri Özdal 2021). The remaining cautious/semi-autonomous FoxTV and Habertürk are operating with fear and caution in reporting government activities.

The existing scholarly literature focuses on aspects of conglomeration and de-unionization of broadcasting (Christensen 2019, 141), biased content creation (Yanardağoğlu 2021) and an overwhelming reliance on social media content analysis (Saka 2018). Such detailed case studies omit the link between the relationship between the fear of media by the governments and the fear of the media practitioners in Turkey, which becomes a circuit of fear generation on both sides, which continuously undermines the operation of liberal democracy. In fact, this circuit of media fear has engulfed

Turkish media, and as a result, media bosses and workers took their share of economic fear. Post-1980 liberalization has witnessed the shift of Babiali journalistic tradition towards a media holding company owned and operated by business people who had other economic interests. Babiali, Sublime Porte, or high gate was the term used for the Ottoman government, whose newspapers during the 19th and 20th-centuries mostly covered government affairs and were sometimes censored by the government. This close-knit relationship with the state led to the usage of the term *Babiali journalism* to refer to newspapers operating since the 19th century (Farmanfarmaian et al. 2018).

Given this context, this article is motivated by this fear of media. We delve into the historical aspect of legal and structural factors and how the AKP politicians and their supporters reveal their fear of media to justify their restrictions on critical media. We further examine the historical roots of the role of fear in Turkish media with respect to the development of press freedom over the long run. The article closely analyzes the historical pressures imposed on journalists through legal and informal means and focuses on the economic and political pressure on the media in Turkey.

The underlying theme of the study is that the media and the journalists have had an increasingly visible way of viewing their role in Turkish society as liberal and inquisitive guardians of truth against government tyranny. Governments, whether democratically elected or not, have increasingly feared the power of the media, which they perceived to threaten their power base. The media in Turkey, however, refuse to give up on viewing itself as the watchdog of democracy even when there is strong government support to create a friendly media ecology and to use it as a means to reinforce the illiberal regime. While building our arguments, the news related to the restructuring of Turkish media ecology into a more repressive media system was our primary source, while the analyses of statements by different AKP spokespeople were used as the secondary source. Semi-structured interviews with journalists, academics, and NGOs from all sides of the political spectrum were conducted to explore these issues further.

The paper is structured as follows, The first section reviews the current media ecology and components of fear of media in Turkey. The second part looks at the historical roots of media fear and how AKP governments have utilized legal and other methods to repress media. The following section looks at the increasing banning of news as a widely used tool, followed by a section dealing with political pressure, censorship and direct arrests of journalists. The last part focuses on the new tools available to AKP, such as using the internet trolls army to intimidate journalists. The conclusion outlines alternatives for independent media in Turkey.

Current Turkish media ecology: components of fear of media in turkey

There are theoretical frameworks developed over the years within media studies for a historical analysis of fear in Turkish media. These include media ecology theory, which allows for the analysis of historical agents and their interactions and the mediatization theory, which takes into account the use of media and fear as a discursive political tool. Here, we take media ecology as a metaphor to study the historical roots of an emergent authoritarian communication environment. As Scolari states, such metaphors ‘provide a model for understanding the new territory, offer a vocabulary, and indicate in which directions to continue exploring. At the same time,

the metaphor often facilitates the transmission of a new concept to researchers and the general public (206)'. Hence, media ecology as a metaphor allows us to address multi-faceted political, social, cultural, economic, and legal aspects of media authoritarianism in Turkey. This biological metaphor allows for the use of such terms as evolution, extinction, survival, co-evolution and bursts of media in Turkey historically (Scolari 2012). Similarly, the authors take the mediatization of politics in the background in analysing the historical processes that lead to authoritarianism towards media use. Such metaphors like the spiral of silence or echo chamber are commonly used to analyse the democratic backsliding of media in different contexts; as Mattoni and Treré state, the concept of mediatization (of fear in politics/society/journalism by a repressive government) would focus on processes where social and cultural institutions are through to be modified by media influence over time (2014, 261).

In our disentangling of the system of fear in Turkish media, we take the media practitioners and negative reactions to their almost activist reporting by the elected Turkish governments. Hence, the historical frameworks of media fear and capture in Turkey hang on Turkish journalists' self-assigned/presumed idealization of their roles as opinionated/partial and, in a way, biased authoritarians on democracy in Turkey and the politicians' attempts at restricting such behaviour to the level of almost destroying it. At this juncture, the concept of mediation enters our historical framework. In our application of the historical exploration of fears in Turkish media, mediation acts as 'the exploration of everyday practices of media appropriation through which social actors' enact resistance and resilience to domination and hegemony' (Mattoni and Treré 2014, 260). Here, journalists in Turkey are acting as historically activist agents in competition with political actors that support the flow of discourses, meanings, and interpretations in societies.

As of 2022, around 90% of the mass media is under the control of AKP friendly management. The AKP friendly media managements are installed using a mechanism of asking government-friendly companies to borrow credits with a low-interest rate from government banks to purchase the media outlets captured by the government regulatory agency Savings Deposit Insurance Fund. AKP's media capture has been brought up recently by multiple researchers, such as Yeşil (2016; 2018), Yilmaz and Bashirov (2018) and Coskun (2020) in reference to the creation of an authoritarian neoliberal state in governing and directing media. These *captured* media outlets try to keep Turkish public opinion in check, favouring the AKP government and president Erdoğan's policies by peddling conspiracy theories (Gürpınar 2019; Sağlam 2020). The AKP government was able to sustain a partial and government-friendly media support for themselves through the years, and in return, these news outlets with were rewarded with government advertising income and easy access to information sources and promotion at government agencies, such as Turkish Airlines (Yanatma 2021). In media ecology terms, AKP attempted to lead the critical media into extinction but instead unexpectedly led to the co-evolution of alternative media, which we will discuss later.

Daily Turkish newspapers, online reporting and broadcast media take a new story and spin it in a way that could discursively raise the fear of either the government or the oppositional parties. In a constant state of high alert after the coup attempt, the public prosecutors and judges prefer to use the trial under arrest method. As a result, the

number of journalists in prison awaiting trial increases (Çelik 2020, 111). Since 2016 Turkey has been on the human rights watchlists and condemned as the country with the most number of journalists in jail (Pukallus et al. 2020).

Fear of media in Turkey is not recent, however. The politics of fear has shaped Turkish media and politics since the early 1890s, 1930s and the 1980s (Öncü 2004). Each time fear led the political authority to control and guide the evolution of a friendly media ecology. When this attempt failed, the political power was ready to deploy extinction-level policy tools on disobedient media. This type of political power was heavily used by a former president of Turkey, Turgut Özal, who tried to suppress the voices in the media (such as the extinction of Kemal Ilıcak's *Tercüman* daily) and politically banned former politicians throughout the 1980s in the news (Yazar 2008). Yet, with the AKP coming to power in 2002, the fear of media evolving out of control reached new peaks. Especially after the failed coup attempt, there has been increasing authoritarian control over the Turkish media powered by extraordinary legal means by the AKP government. Such repressive tactics include media capture, barring all foreign journalists from reporting news from Turkey, arresting hundreds of local journalists, denying access to the Anatolian Agency (Turkish state-sponsored and governed news agency) and denying access to press conferences. There is a substantial number of journalists in Turkey, who are under arrest and now awaiting trial, who are forbidden to have contact with the outside world, and there are also allegations of widespread torture in prisons (Kanver 2018). The reason AKP pundits often cite is that these journalists have reported fake news or untruths.

This discursive side of fear partially feeds on recent trends of political disinformation trend sometimes referred to as *post-truth*. Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou describe post-truth as a ubiquitous term in global politics, which caused widespread debate in democratic societies concerning the distinction between true and false (2018, 298). The *post* side denotes the persistence of populist right-wing political leaders using hit issues such as immigration in their countries to fuel divisions to gain an advantage at the polls. Such divisive politicians like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Victor Orban tend to define critical reporting as fake news, which has gained prominence around 2016. A more technical term for this is disinformation. Scholars like Michailidou and Trenz offer a pragmatic understanding of the role of news media and journalism not as truth keepers but as truth mediators in the public sphere (2021, 1340). We agree with this approach as the authors and make a point of approaching Turkish journalists as truth mediators with a public mission and a repressive government viewing them as truth keepers, which led them to perceive this type of news as 'untruth.' Thus, to survive, the populist politicians use discursive fear tactics on the two other actors of media fear: the media bosses and the public.

Actors of Media Fear

There are three interacting parties to this fear in Turkey: media conglomerates, the AKP government and the public. First, from an economic perspective, media conglomerates in Turkey fear the government's potential attack on their economic interests if their media outlets portray the government negatively. What they do to protect their investments is various, including editorial changes, co-optation, the firing of employees, de-

unionization and sale of the media outlet to a government-friendly business people, which was the case of Aydın Doğan's sale of all of his media holdings to government-friendly Demirören family in 2018.

Secondly, the discourse of the members of the AKP government often displays a permanent fear of media among the political elite. Due to historically rooted bias towards the media, the AKP elite believes that media makes and breaks governments, a fear deepened with the Gezi Park protests, during which the AKP government began to fear that abuse of media could cause a Turkish spring that could overthrow the government. This fear can be detected in the inflammatory statements made by party, cabinet or government spokesmen such as Mahir Ünal and Ömer Çelik in their defence of media regulations that intended to silence news media (Duvar English 2021, July 17; Daily 2021, February 9). Since the 2018 presidential elections that granted absolute power to President Erdoğan, the downright oppression and authoritarianism against the media critical of the government are combined with a more policy-oriented, anti-modernist autarkic discourse of the government. Most of the time, the AKP government tried to counter criticism of their bad governance with a discourse of domestic and foreign enemies as the unseen powers behind corporate media. Such negative discourse unwittingly contributed to spreading more fear of the other, primarily of the Western countries and their citizens, who are argued to be orchestrating operations to undermine Turkey. Recent examples of such fear led to the imprisonment (and later release) of an American pastor Andrew Brunson, a German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel and an Israeli couple who accidentally took a photo of Erdoğan's Istanbul residence. Government-friendly media covered each case as attempts by foreign spies to destabilize the AKP government, which were found to be false. Ironically, the people involved are released due to bowing to pressure from foreign governments (DW 2018, February 16; McKernan 2018; BBC News 2021).

The third component of fear is the public, the citizens, and from the government's perspective, the voters that need to be herded from election to election through media manipulation. In the age of post-truth politics, the AKP's ideological discourse of conspiracy demands complacency from its supporters. The discourse around citizens can be summarized often boils down to arguments on protecting the ideals of the government and protecting them at all costs and the claims of how if the AKP loses the elections, the country will devolve into the profound political and economic instability of the 1990s while the AKP supporters will lose everything they materially and spiritually fought for over the years. The discourse of fear of devolving back to the 'old day' is so profound that the AKP politicians anachronistically keep reminding the days of hyperinflation or economic crises of coalition governments from the 1940s onwards to 2002. A typical example would be Erdoğan's elections speeches during the 2011 and 2014 elections, when he falsely accused the opposition party CHP of being unable to provide food or gas during their reign in the 1940s and the 1970s (OdaTV March 19, 2014). Such claims can now be dismissed as disinformation, thanks to the bursts of new fact-checking sites like *Teyit* and *Doğruluk Payı* (Weise December 21, 2018). However, Erdoğan presents a discourse according to which the AKP has turned Turkey into an island of peace and prosperity where only a minority of naysayers exists, who can be 'rightfully' crushed with citizens' support through elections or outright mob attacks.

One cardinal reason for the emergence of the culture of fear in Turkish media is the current neo-liberal AKP government's regulations that allow for a negative, regressive and authoritarian regulation/censorship model of the media. This model is based on self-justifying reasons and sometimes based on conspiracy theories, such as Zionist media bosses misleading the Turkish public (Nefes 2013). The backsliding competitive authoritarian AKP government's new Turkey now resorts to previously unseen methods of media repression. These methods include banning the news, arresting journalists, media capture, and erasure of media content to protect citizens from exposure to supposed 'bad' influences. However, these methods have historical precedent dating back to Ottoman times (Yalman 1914).

Historical roots of fear in Turkish mediascape: old vs new

From a media-focused and political perspective, changes to Turkish media ecology always came from above through three distinctive processes: (1) control of state infrastructure, (2) implementation of restrictive government policy to determine the content, and (3) controlled liberalization. Hence, the compliance by the rules from above rather than evolution from below has been the norm of journalism. There is a tradition of 'press pitted against the state' dating back to 1839, when the Ottoman state recognized the rights of its citizens for the first time through the Edict of Reform. Yet, despite this recognition, old habits of censoring the press lived on. For every new development in news infrastructure that allowed more access to a larger segment of the Turkish population, more centralized control through government policy and legal framework was simultaneously developed (Finkel 2000).

The Turkish governments' fear of journalists and journalism dates back to the single-party era of the 1920s and 1930s, when the Kemalist leadership had adopted a strict version of media law from fascist Italy in the 1930s. Legal tools such as prior restraint gave the government the right to censor the news even before its publication as newspaper editors used to show the news the day before to government officials for editing and then printed them later. Even in these circumstances, however, newspapers were not immune to being closed down (Hawks 2011). *Cumhuriyet* daily, established in 1924, regularly supported the Kemalist regime for decades, yet despite this, it was closed several times in the 1930s and 1940s. When such controls failed and journalists dared to criticize the government policies, they were often targeted. In 1946, the left-leaning liberal pro-western *Tan* newspaper was attacked by right university students. The socialist newspaper *Sertels* was attacked for writing against the Nazi regime and favouring Americans during WWII. Some of the attackers were university students who later became prime ministers and presidents of Turkey, like Turgut Özal, Necmettin Erbakan and Süleyman Demirel (Philliou 2021).

Though relatively freer from the strict government control compared to the 1930s, governments' fear of journalism remained in the multi-party period of the 1950s and onwards. A prime example was the case of a prominent journalist, Ahmet Emin Yalman (1888–1972), who was targeted by the Democratic Party government and survived an assassination attempt. Yalman was the editor-in-chief of *Vatan* daily, and he was shot by a 17-year-old Islamist radical (Hüseyin Üzmez) in 1952 for criticizing the government. Being shot for your reporting was not the end of the story for Yalman. He was later

arrested in 1959, along with other prominent journalists, for criticizing the government. His assassination came to be a prominent example of fear of free evolution of journalism in Turkey and how governments could create a negative spin around journalists, which could jeopardize their lives. Interestingly, Yalman was also the first Turkish academic to get a PhD in Journalism from Columbia University. The title of his thesis that was later published also shed light on how the more things remained the same with the government–media relationship in Turkey. *The Development of Modern Turkey as Measured by Its Press*, published by Yalman in 1914, is still relevant today (Yalman 1914). The book was a first of its kind in English, analysing the birth of Ottoman journalism and was a reprint of the author's Columbia University journalism PhD completed just before the start of WWI. Yalman's assassin, Hüseyin Üzmez, was long hailed as a great Muslim hero by the Islamist press in Turkey, who, 47 years after the assassination attempt, was convicted as a paedophile in 2009.

In this restricted media ecology, survival/extinction dichotomy has proved to be lethal for journalists at times. Starting with the 1979 murder of *Milliyet* daily's editor Abdi İpekçi, a new series of attacks were launched by Islamist terrorists on high profile journalists who reported on the mishaps of right-wing governments in Turkey. Çetin Emeç (*Hürriyet* daily, d. 1990), Bahriye Üçok (d. 1990) Turan Dursun (d. 1990), Uğur Mumcu (*Cumhuriyet* daily, d. 1993), Ahmet Taner Kışlalı (*Cumhuriyet* daily, d. 1999) and Hrant Dink (*Agos* daily, d. 2007) were all killed and their assassins were in most cases found (Christensen 2010). AKP and the new Erdoğanist presidential regime later utilized less lethal but equally repressive legal tools to silence critical journalists. New habits of regulating online and offline content have emerged during the AKP government. The controlled liberalization of the media (evolution) during the 1980s and the 1990s came to a halt with the AKP regime, especially in the post-2011 centralization of power in the hands of President Erdoğan. As the technology infrastructure expanded, newer devices were invented to control citizens' access to information via news media. The restrictive measures included on and off controls/bans on YouTube, Twitter, Wikipedia, and denial of access to thousands of news sites in Turkey and abroad (Yalkın et al. 2014; Akser 2018).

Post-coup authoritarianism and Erdoğan's new media regime

The AKP's newly brandished post-coup attempt in competitively authoritarian Turkey harbours desires to oppress its media even more. After he was elected president in 2014 by popular vote, President Erdoğan began an unprecedented claim of direct legitimacy to exercise the power of a single man over all institutions. From Erdoğan's perspective, media is a major influence on public opinion and needs to be strictly controlled. Erdoğan's claims that media messages directly manipulate and redesign politics, and shape public opinion, is what is termed in classical mass communication theories as the hypodermic needle or the magic bullet theory, which is a now-debunked 1940s social science myth treating messages as directly and powerfully infused into passive receivers (Sproule 1989).

Previous studies described the media control measures between 2003 and 2010 as historically conservative, redistributive, panoptic, discriminatory, and autocratic (Akser and Baybars-Hawks 2012, 302), whereas later studies described the development of

a more autarky, an almost dictatorial media regime (Topak 2017; Bozdağ and Koçer 2022). The pre-coup media control by the Turkish state was already harsh on private broadcasters and newspaper publishers. The Turkish public regularly consumes television (around 80%), which is saturated with regular news, TV series, daytime wedding and cooking shows, and talent contests, yet whenever a TV station veers towards serious journalism, reports on or invites critical guests to roundtable TV debates, it is either fined heavily by the RTÜK or closed down permanently under clauses of the state of emergency law, which are replaced by presidential decrees in post-2017. The irony was that the state media, radio and television were among the first seized institutions the army seized during all the coup attempts in Turkey, but in 2016, the private media was so widespread and uncontrollable that over 60% of the public stated that they heard the coup attempt from private TV channels (Esen and Gumuscu 2017; Yanardağoğlu 2017).

AKP's reaction was to initiate a controlled co-evolution of a parallel friendly media in this media ecology. Such press-party parallelism is not novel, as it has also been observed in the past when certain newspapers openly acted as semi-official media organs of political parties on the right (Çarkoğlu et al. 2014). The transformative and redistributive properties of the new media regime in Turkey allowed the AKP government and Erdoğan to capture TV stations and newspapers belonging to opposition views and then, through the creation of special funds (hence were nicknamed 'the pool media'), given to friends and families, such as Çalık and Sancaklı (Coşkun 2020). According to the media ownership monitor report, out of the ten most-read dailies, seven belong to owners affiliated with the government. Pro-government, biased media are listed as Ciner (HaberTürk), İhlas (Türkiye), Kalyon (Sabah), Demirören (Milliyet, Hurriyet), Albayrak (Yeni Şafak), Es media (Güneş). The only semi-independent and oppositional one is Estetik (Sözcü). Similarly, out of the most-watched tv channels, seven belong to owners affiliated with the government, who are more or less the same as the previous list: Demirören (Kanal D, CNN Turk), Ciner (ShowTV), Doğuş (StarTV), Acun (TV8), TRT (state-owned), Kalyon (ATV), Hayat Gorsel (Kanal 7). On the other hand, the only semi-independent and oppositional one is Huzur (FoxTV).

These television/news channels have a variety of ways of framing news, making them palatable for the public to depict the government's performance positively, often by having celebratory headlines and explicitly attacking the opposition political parties, coupled with slandering and paying fines at arising from their misreports. Another significant method often employed is ignoring and not reporting the significant events related to opposing parties, protests, civil unrest, and even acts of terror that may show the government as weak and incapable. The Gezi Park protests of the summer of 2013 or terror explosions against left-wing protestors in Ankara (10 October 2015) are, for example, cases that the pro-government media has actively ignored or grossly under-reported (Hostettler 2018). In post-Gezi Park media ecology, fear of the negative political implication of (bad) news drove the AKP to ban the undesirable kind of reporting.

Fear of the news

Under the new oppressive media regime in Turkey, different reporting approaches have different consequences depending on the institution reporting them and whether they are government-friendly or not. The bloody images of people beaten to a pulp or dead bodies lying on the street were freely aired during and after the 2016 coup attempt, as the

government-friendly media extensively exploited the failed coup attempt to boost support for the AKP regime. Yet when the terror attack on the Istanbul Beşiktaş stadium happened (10 December 2016), the first reaction of the police was to block all media access. It is tragically ironic that, after a major terrorist attack with many casualties, Turkish citizens could get information about the attack only through British tabloid newspapers whose reporters could gain location access. In fact, following the suicide bomber attack targeting the soccer fans and police officers outside a stadium in Istanbul on that day, one of the first reflexes of the AKP political commissars was to ban all news coming from the scene. This type of ban was a super-injunction by a government-friendly prosecutor and was applied immediately as a blanket ban on media after such terror attacks. The rest of the world and Turkish citizens found about the news through *The Sun* newspaper's website, where graphic images of dead bodies burnt and scattered around could be seen (Lockett and Awford 2016, December 11). Turkish journalists were barred from the scene, which is a clear example of how the AKP elite fear that such news stories or images can damage the perception of AKP's supposed 'good governance.'

Fear of the journalists

This fear of critical journalism demonstrated so far has led the AKP government to block journalists' access to government press briefings, deny them accreditation to interview any government official and refuse them the use of Anatolian agency. In severe cases, some of the most critical journalists were later arrested. Following the coup attempt leading journalists, among which were Nazlı Ilıcak, Şahin Alpay, Ahmet Altan, Mehmet Altan and many others, were arrested and imprisoned. Their reporting for the Gülenist media was seen by the AKP government as smoking-gun evidence that these journalists were involved in the coup attempt. Already by 2013, the accusations of theft and wrongdoing by these newspapers had led the AKP government to close down newspapers and television stations owned by Gülenists. The closings of *Bugün TV* and *Zaman* daily were widely publicized. The images of head scarfed women teargassed, dragged in the streets and beaten by the police were published and broadcast widely between 2014 and 16. These scenes were ironically reminiscent of the AKP's supporters with headscarves, who were mistreated for protesting against the headscarf ban by then secularist governments in the 1990s. After the failed coup attempt, the government-initiated a state of emergency law, giving them sweeping powers to repress the media. The detention time for questioning by the police increased, and journalists were arrested in large numbers and made to wait for trials for years in prison. The media outlets critical of the AKP regime face extinction level crisis. They were either closed down or captured via transfer of ownership. During this flurry of activity, the AKP government exercised the use of executive decrees that supersede parliament-made laws, which could not be contested in a court of law, were legally binding, and could not be reversed even in non-emergency times (Sertdemir Özdemir and Özyürek 2019).

When it comes to dealing with the fear, and paranoia of the arrested journalists, the AKP government has four ways of framing them. First, the AKP elite's discourse is that the detained journalists are not in prison because of their journalism activities but their involvement with terrorism, who are often accused of being Kurdish separatists by the AKP. The arrested journalists were usually arrested during their reporting of human rights violations from Southeastern Turkey, where the majority of the Kurdish

population lives. The HDP and the journalists affiliated with or reporting in favour of HDP were similarly framed as traitors (Arsan 2013). Secondly, some of the arrested journalists were framed as foreign spies, enemies of the Turkish state, or serving the foreign interests, portraying them as traitors who betrayed their homeland for personal gain. The AKP elite also bundled the local journalists with all foreign media representatives in Turkey that approached Erdoğan and AKP policies critically, such as BBC Turkey and Deutsche Welle Turkey reporters (Davis 2020). The third category of journalists who were arrested by the AKP regime were the so-called crypto-Gülenists, namely the journalists who did not directly criticize Erdoğan and his policies but applauded the excesses of post-coup authoritarianism, which apparently seemed weird to the AKP elite as they were aware of grossly violating human rights and could not comprehend why a journalist would support them. This illustrates the level of paranoia, where AKP core politicians are afraid of the excesses in human rights violations and suspect when a journalist supports them (Cagaptay 2020). Finally, liberal journalists who supported Erdoğan and AKP between 2003 and 2011 and then started criticizing him through Gülenist press and television channels were, similarly, framed as potential coup planners. This fourth type of arrested journalists also included all journalists whose writing was not welcomed by the government.

A case in point is the famous journalist Can Dündar, who had to flee to Germany for the claim of revealing state secrets. Dündar was arrested and taken to prison awaiting trial, where he made an appeal to the Constitutional Court and was released. His memoirs of the affair are now published in different languages (Dündar 2016). Upon his release, he was immediately demonized by the government and President Erdoğan. Can Dündar was cut off live on the day of his release from prison when he joined IMC TV live with journalist Banu Güven (Medyatava 2016).

Journalists like Can Dündar experience a four-part process that starts with warnings and ends with their arrest. In this mechanism, the owners of newspapers are first summoned by President Erdoğan or one of the AKP cronies and are advised to check on their news editors and reporters. After this initial warning, if these journalists do not comply, they are fired by their media boss, whereby Erdoğan's interference is remotely involved once again. The third part of the process is professional exclusion when no news outlet hires the fired journalists for fear of retaliation from the government. These journalists are then left with few options, retire or leave the country. Eventually, if they continue to report on alternative platforms on social media, they are arrested. One such case is Hüsni Mahalli, a Syrian-born reporter covering the Syrian conflict arrested after his tweet (Sözeri 2016).

Other notorious cases are Hande Fırat and Nevşin Mengü. Fırat is the CNN Turkey news reporter who broadcast Erdoğan via live connection during the coup attempt on the night of 15 July 2016. Yet when she reported the concerns on the excesses of the anti-Gülenist witchhunt within the military, she was declared a potential coup supporter and planner by the members of the government, and Erdoğan himself warned CNN Turk by saying, 'They will pay for this,' though Fırat was not fired due to her previous record of supporting AKP and her high degree of credibility as an impartial journalist. Similarly, Nevşin Mengü, who is the daughter of a well-known MP, Şahin Mengü, was chastised many times by the AKP government for criticizing the government. She has been removed from her news anchor on CNN Turk position for

commenting on the duration of the Erdoğan-Trump meeting. Because of her comment 'a mere 23 minutes,' she was removed from the television and assigned to newspaper commentator status (TurkishMinute 2019, July 10). Other high-profile cases involved the Fox TV anchor Fatih Portakal who had to resign after threats from AKP elites became unbearable.

The disjuncture: AKP's new methods of media oppression

Although there is continuity in fear, historically, the AKP government has produced some differences. There are continuities, such as legal fines against media outlets, media capture or imprisoning journalists. There are also disjunctions in the new Turkey of President Erdoğan invented new ways of controlling Turkey's media ecology. These repressive control methods range from legal injunctions to trolls, direct takeovers of media outlets, denial of access to the state news agency, legal action over retweets, revisionist deleting of web links, and finally, outright attempts to mob lynching. Super-injunctions are used to block the public awareness caused by major events, such as bombings or large-scale meetings by oppositional political groups. These are barred from the media as soon as they happen. In the to-do list of police blocking, the media often appear to be listed higher than gathering emergency services to the crime scene. They are sometimes used to shield the perpetrators of child abuse who are linked to AKP friendly religious orders.

Exclusion from satellite frequencies is another method of blocking ethnic or left-wing television stations from reporting human rights abuses of the AKP government. For example, IMC TV, a Kurdish left-wing TV station, is excluded from the TURKSAT satellite system without no apparent reason. As a solution, the channel switched to Hotbird, another satellite system, but it was shut down after a police raid in September 2016, along with 12 TV stations and 11 radio stations (Koçer 2018).

Trolls and hackers who attack critics of AKP elites are also a new method of media repression in Turkey. Aktrolls and AKHackers, as they are nicknamed, work on government payroll employed to write negative and often threatening comments on Facebook and Twitter accounts of government critics (Bulut and Yörük 2017). They attack the possible opponents of Erdoğan within the party, such as former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. The events that led to Davutoğlu's resignation show the capacity of these trolls to undermine and suppress political criticism. In this case, an anonymous website called *Pelican Brief* wrote inflammatory accusations that Davutoğlu was secretly meeting prominent AKP members to sideline Erdoğan. Davutoğlu was removed from the position of PM 48 hours later. Aktrolls also attack celebrities and ordinary people who write negative comments on online news sites, and they relentlessly attempt to discredit the individuals who speak out against Erdoğan (Saka 2019).

The direct takeovers/capture of media outlets are a new method used by the AKP government after the coup attempt. This method includes taking over media corporations by the state via a mechanism in the guise of caretaking called 'overseeing,' which was used to overtake the Gülenist media, such as *Zaman* and the Kurdish media. Forceful closing down of media outlets makes use of the emergency measures act. The government also cancels broadcast licences of these companies so that they do not resurrect elsewhere under a new guise (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020). Another AKP

government method is to prevent journalists from accessing the news sources. Denying access to the state's Anatolian Agency to reporters critical of Erdoğan is a common tactic as well (Irak 2016).

Erasing and rewriting history through severing links to newspapers critical of the AKP government is another new method of media oppression, also an extinction level event within the collective memory of this media ecology. For instance, all of *Zaman Daily's* archive is deleted from the internet to prevent retroactive access, as well as *Sözcü daily's* former links, all of which are blocked now. The government telecommunications agency blocks the links to blog pages from within Turkey so that Turkish people cannot access news and commentaries critical of AKP and Erdoğan. Other blocked content includes WikiLeaks Turkey documents released two days after the coup, which entailed 300,000 emails between the AKP officials. The contents of these emails were immediately blocked in Turkey. These emails included details on AKP's illiberal strategy of consolidation of power through neighbourhood surveillance. The emails came from ordinary citizens who hoped to get favours from AKP elites by informing on people they know who happen to criticize AKP's policies. There have also been multiple leaks of emails of AKP officials later on, notably including the emails of President Erdoğan's Finance minister Berat Albayrak. The contents of the leaks were immediately repressed by AKP friendly court orders (Lynch 2019).

Other repressive media tactics by AKP include the indictment of retweets, such as in the case of famous pianist Fazıl Say, who was given a prison sentence for retweeting a comment criticizing Erdoğan by using an antiquated law from the 1940s to protect the presidential reputation. President Erdoğan often uses this law to silence his critics. Approximately 30 thousand tweeters are taken to court for criticizing Erdoğan via social media (Över and Tuncer-Ebetürk 2022).

The final tactic is mob intimidation. Turkish government's use of mob tactics entered journalism research literature as an exemplary case of media intimidation (Waisbord 2020), which entails crowds of AKP supporters attacking television stations and beating up journalists. This was commonplace before the coup attempt and spread to beating individual journalists at the airport, such as in the case of Barbaros Şansal. Şansal criticized in a tweet, while he was away in Cyprus, after which the Turkish government forced the Northern Cyprus government to hand over Şansal. As Şansal landed at the airport, some men attacked and beat him in front of police officers who stood by during the lynching (Girit 2017, January 4). Attacks on journalists and even media outlets such as Halk TV are often not investigated by the police, who usually stand by and do not interfere with the mob during the lynching attempts.

In the post-coup environment of Turkey, the AKP elites and President Erdoğan's authoritarian attempts at controlling the media and journalists increased substantially. The grip on the media criticizing the AKP government on a range of subjects tightened as the likelihood of losing the upcoming 2023 general elections increased. The new social media law makes it almost impossible to discuss issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic response mismanagement, the AKP's unorthodox economic policy that led to the devaluation of the Turkish lira in 2021 and ever-increasing the human rights violations. The police block any news website remotely critical of the government via the Turkish Telecommunications Authority. Many journalists critical of the government are arrested and awaiting trial. Even media, communications and journalism academics are arrested

or fired mostly for being openly oppositional and critical. The AKP Book (AKP Kitabı) is a prime example of this, which was a collection of articles on the neoliberal economic transformation of Turkey under the AKP regime published in 2013. The book was written by esteemed scholars in political science, economics, law, foreign policy, education, health science, urban studies and sociology. Nearly all the academics who contributed to the volume have lost their jobs since (Uzgel and Duru 2013).

Not a conclusion but a proposition

Studies focusing on press-party parallelism in Turkey point at increasing government visibility through media capture, especially in times of general elections. As Yıldırım, Baruh, and Çarkoğlu indicate, competitive authoritarianism may lead to higher press-party parallelism over time (2021). Yet this does not guarantee the total extinction of the persistence and resistance of oppositional media even in conditions of the extremely low visibility of opposition political parties in the dominant media ecology. What kind of solutions are to be found to fight such oppression of the journalists and the media? The answer lies in new resistance from below. The repressed media has the potential to come out of this ecology of fear by utilizing new tactics for news reporting (independent, social media, activist media). The social media organization of alternative resistance groups during the Gezi Park protests showed the citizen media reporting via social media. There are also other types of citizen journalism, such as video activists, documentary makers, visual artists, and cartoonists, that create highly visible image-based news-making work to bypass media capture and fear in contemporary Turkey (Aslan Ozgul and Veneti 2021). There are now multiple platforms online operating outside AKP's control (Ataman and Çoban 2018). These include T24, which is an instant online news portal, and BIANET, which is a human rights-based news portal. P24 is a citizen journalism platform, and 140Journos relies on university students in different cities. Finally, Medyascope was created after fired journalists gathered to become online journalists. These new news platforms all face financial difficulties, but they have relatively more freedom to report the news than more established news outlets (Akser and McCollum 2019). Even a former mob boss turned into an investigative journalist through social media in contemporary Turkey, as in the case of Sedat Peker's YouTube revelations throughout 2021 (Bianet 2021).

Turkish media and the political elite have had a longstanding relationship that incorporates elements of mutual fear. Media owners of the past, today's media conglomerates and independent journalists, experienced the authoritarian excesses of the Turkish political power both in regular times and extraordinary times like wartime or times of military coups. One of the reasons for such a problematic relationship is how Turkish journalists position themselves and give themselves the role of the guardians of the democracy, as deliverers of truth to the people, and even as the fourth force to counter elected politicians and their excesses and abuse of power. The pro-government journalists are part of the fear spectrum as they also represent themselves as guardians of truth from the perspective of the political/economically repressed Islamists of the 1990s. Especially conservative women journalists act as guardians of AKP's truth and accept that they have to defend the current government, albeit they resort to authoritarians not to lose the current power status of

their fellow Islamists (Özcan 2019). From this perspective, as evidently, these journalists openly declare that they will not be critical but supportive of the AKP, which makes it very difficult to regard them as serious and unbiased journalists instead of propagandists.

These excesses and abuses are now epitomized in the AKP elite and President Erdoğan's actions after the July 15 coup attempt. With the change in the Turkish constitution as President Erdoğan gained legal and executive powers, the AKP government is virtually a one-man show, having acquired its legitimacy for its political abuses from Erdoğan's 2018 electoral victory. During the post-coup environment arose a more authoritarian media environment exacerbated by the sweeping powers granted to the president in 2018, which enabled the state of emergency declared in the post-coup to practically never end. The bureaucracy, politicians, and the legal system under Erdoğan found new ways to control media and journalists, motivated by their constant fear of losing power or elections and being held accountable for their human rights abuses. The victims of this repressive regime are journalists who are arrested and awaiting trial and their media outlets. One can see this in the longstanding news media like *Hürriyet* Daily and *Cumhuriyet* Daily are operating today as passive and ineffective institutions with no critical coverage of the AKP government. The journalists of the past, some of whom died to uphold certain principles, believed in the freedom of expression and the right to report without limits. Their work ethic informed their perspective that the truth belongs to the public and cannot be hidden; it has to be exposed, even if that means the journalists would be fired or put in prison for doing just that. Not reporting the news or actively trying to rationalize the AKP government's crimes shows how deeply rooted the fear of losing control is historically present in Turkish media. This betrayal to serious journalism cannot be hidden even if the links to former news items are blocked or erased, oppositional journalists are arrested, or critical media outlets are closed down. The idea that fear and intimidation tactics can re-frame the truth to counter the criticism has proven ineffective in the past, as the long history and the bitter end of Eastern European and Soviet regimes' control of media shows. No matter how new technologies and policies of media suppression are imposed from above, the new media growth from below can counter such propaganda at the grassroots level. The rise of new, alternative and independent reporting as a natural evolution in Turkish media ecology is slowly setting a new precedent for journalism where free and independent reporting will eventually deplete the democratic deficit.

Disclosure statement

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