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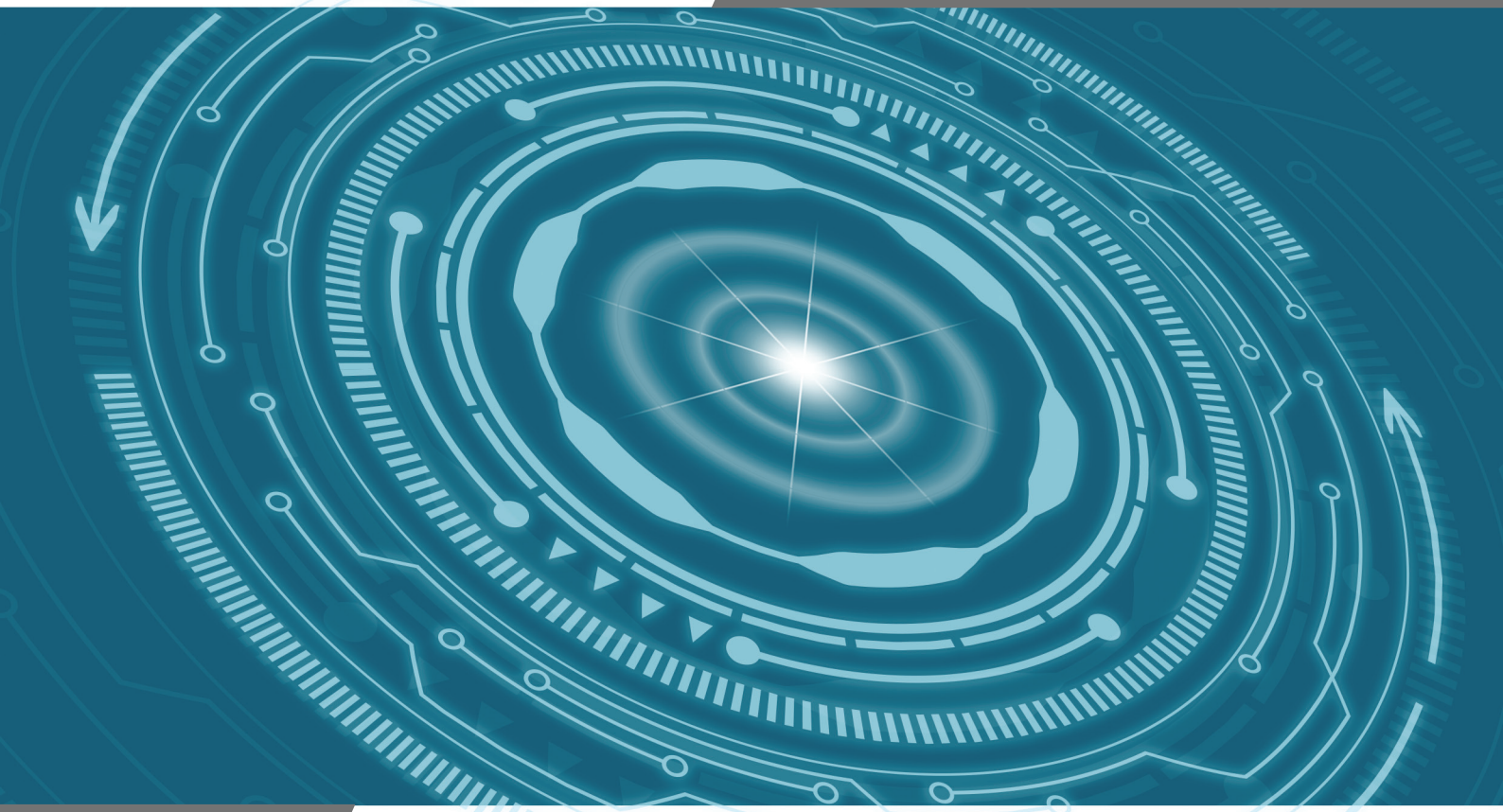

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THE IMPACT OF POLARIZATION ON TURKEY'S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Afşin Yurdakul | Journalist

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Polarization in Turkey has reached such heights in recent years that civility in public discourse has diminished, along with prospects for an inclusive democratic debate. The status quo creates vulnerabilities in the face of false information circulating in the digital space. It entrenches divisions along party lines to the extent that citizens find it increasingly difficult to engage in a fact-based national conversation around policy issues. This paper explores how polarization affects the country's information environment, and what role traditional and new media tools play in shaping the national discussion. It hopes to provide perspectives about possible social and political consequences of a vulnerable information environment, and how strengthening the practices of fact-based, empathetic journalism could help alleviate divisions and contribute to the restoration of civil debate in Turkey. The paper builds on research presented in previous EDAM papers tackling disinformation and polarization. It aims to offer perspectives for decision-makers, Turkey observers, and thought leaders in technology, media, and politics.

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Political Polarization and Media Consumption Habits in Turkey

In Turkey, one can easily observe the impact of polarization in everyday life: from rants on Twitter to bitter attacks between politicians and even fistfights in parliament. Several factors have played a role in aggravating the tense political mood in recent years. For instance, since the early 2000s, Turkish citizens cast their ballots in elections or national referenda more than a dozen times. As scholar Senem Aydin Düzgit observes, "this constant electioneering has fueled the intensity of political debates and stark divisions across partisan lines."[1] Turkey survived a coup attempt in mid-2016 and declared a state of emergency. Those suspected of having links to the putschists in the state bureaucracy, army, and the media were purged. Vice President Fuat Oktay recently announced that "53 newspapers, 20 magazines, 16 television stations, 24 radio channels, and six news agencies" were shut down, due to the platforms "belonging or having links to" entities "posing a threat to national security."[2] Critics saw the purges as an attempt to crush dissent, and the failure to transcend political divides in the aftermath of a traumatic ex-perience deepened tensions. The country transitioned to a presidential system in 2017, and the civil war in neighboring Syria caused at least 3.6 million refugees to flee to Turkey. Such developments put additional strain on Turkish politics.

The polarizing effects of identity politics have also become a defining feature of Turkish political life. KONDA, an Istanbul-based research company, articulates the phenomenon in a survey report published in the summer of 2017.[3-4] Author of the report Afife Yasemin Yılmaz explains how their findings support the widely held observations about the "mood" in Turkish politics that it is "stuck around identities" and is "more akin to supporting a team" than being about political preferences.[5] The imagery here is striking as it speaks to the fanaticism most often associated with soccer in Turkey. The survey finds that "if a given party is strongly represented within a certain group [of voters], other parties can show almost no presence [within the same group]."[6] Another survey, conducted the same year by researchers at the Bilgi University, provides further insights about how Turkish citizens tend to gather under the umbrella of a particular political party based on their worldview or identity, as opposed to concern for a common policy goal. According to its results, 79 percent said they "do not want their daughters to get married with" a supporter of the party they disapprove of, and 74 percent expressed unwillingness "to do business with one of the supporters of that political party."[7] Only 30 percent of the participants wanted to be neighbors with the supporters of the party they felt distant to, and 68 percent did not "want their children to play with children of that political party's supporters."[8]

Despite early hopes to foster national unity, the coronavirus pandemic, which hit Turkey in early March, highlighted the country's existing divisions. Management of a public health crisis promptly turned into a political competition. The mood that emerged after the opposition's victory against the governing party in major cities last year in municipal elections seemed to color relief efforts. For instance, the Interior Ministry banned fundraising drives by opposition-run municipalities as President Erdoğan characterized the local initiatives as an attempt to "be a state within a state."[9]

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1 Aydın Düzgit, Senem. "The Islamist-Secularist Divide and Turkey's Descent into Severe Polarization." In Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization, edited by Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, 17–37. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2019. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/83f6/bca00168c4acb3d391c8d38c8697374b228a.pdf.

2 "Fuat Oktay'ın Yanıtı: 119 Yayın Organını Kapattık." Gazete Duvar, June 28, 2020. https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2020/06/28/fuat-oktayin-yaniti-119-yayin-organini-kapattik/.

3 Yılmaz, Afife Yasemin. "Türkiye'de Donan Siyasetin Şifreleri: Karar Ağacı Yöntemi Ile Seçmen Tercihlerini Anlamak." KONDA, July 15, 2020. https://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/KONDA_Turkiyede_Donan_Siyasetin_Sifreleri_Temmuz2017-1.pdf.

4 Findings drawn from results of the "Konda Barometer" series, surveys that have been held between March 2010 and April 2017 with 213,717 individuals.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 "Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey." Istanbul Bilgi University Center for Migration Research, June 2, 2018. https://goc.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2018/02/06/dimensions-of-polarizationshortfindings_DNzdZml.pdf.

8 Ibid.

9 Sayın, Ayşe. "Koronavirüs: Belediyelerin Yardım Kampanyaları Neden Tartışma Yarattı, Iktidar ve Muhalefet Ne Diyor?" BBC Türkçe, April 1, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-52127212.

Pro-government voices criticized social distancing practices in mass transit systems operated by Ankara's opposition municipality.[10] And, some opposition lawmakers accused the government of mismanaging the pandemic.[11] The heated back-and-forth was a product of the tense atmosphere in the country, yet the confrontational style was not new. In Turkey, party loyalties often interfere in the way of objectively assessing what is in the public's best interest. In the words of Düzgit, "this polarized political context inhibits rational, fact-based public debate on key issues of Turkish domestic and foreign policy."[12]

Turkey's fight against Covid-19 and other instances explored in the following sections show that polarization, coupled with a weak information environment, hurts prospects for a healthy national debate and undermines the public's defenses against the copious amounts of falsities circulating on the web. Worldwide, the role of social media platforms in spreading such content has been under the spotlight. While Turkey is no exception to that trend, understanding the state of traditional media outlets also offers perspectives about how structural issues precluded the Turkish press from guarding against false or misleading information during the pandemic. Turkey has long suffered from what Wardle and Derakhshan call "information disorder;" namely, "misinformation," "disinformation," and "malinformation."[13-14] The outbreak only exposed the problems further.

In a comprehensive journalism handbook prepared by UNESCO, Posetti draws attention to how significant shifts that have been underway in the media landscape contributed to "information disorder" around the world.[15-16] She explains that digitalization transformed the way we consume news, challenged the old business models in the media industry, and inevitably changed how newsrooms operate.[17] According to Posetti, such pressures led to "depletion of newsroom resources" which caused an overall decline in quality reporting; left "less time and resources" for processes such as "reporter fact-checking and sub-editing;" and popularized "'clickbait' headlines;" among other outcomes.[18] Posetti's analysis is helpful to understand how newsrooms struggled to function while trying to adapt to new circumstances.

Some of these dynamics also play out in the Turkish media landscape. In recent years, falling advertising revenues[19] led some print outlets to fold. Digital transformation pushed news platforms to turn to more in-house production while reporting from the ground, especially from abroad,[20] shrank. The stifling media environment and scarce resources posed challenges for the practice of investigative journalism.[21] Competition for ratings, traffic, and ad revenue popularized clickbait,[22] leading to poorer journalistic practices. As a result, structural problems in Turkish journalism played a role in weakening the country's information ecosystem, presented

10 Göksu, Fatma. "Sosyal Mesafe Kuralı Büyükşehir'e Uğramamış." Sabah, April 4, 2020. https://www.sabah.com.tr/ankara-baskent/2020/04/04/sosyal-mesafe-kurali-buyuksehire-ugramamis.

11 "CHP'li Ünsal: 'Sağlık Çalışanlarının En Üst Düzeyde Korunması Tercih Değil Zorunluluktur." Habertürk, May 6, 2020. https://www.haberturk.com/chp-li-unsal-saglik-calisanlarinin-en-ust-duzeyde-korunmasi-tercih-degil-zorunluluktur-2669879.

12 Aydın Düzgit, "The Islamist-Secularist Divide and Turkey's Descent into Severe Polarization."

13 Wardle, Claire and Hossein Derakhshan. "Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking." Council of Europe, September 27, 2017. https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c.

14 A detailed description of what the authors define as "information disorder" can be found on p. 20.

15 Posetti, Julie. "News industry transformation: digital technology, social platforms and the spread of misinformation and disinformation." In Journalism,"Fake News"& Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, edited by Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti, 55-69. UNESCO, 2018. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0_0.pdf.

16 The handbook is an educational resource consisting of seven modules written by different authors. Each section focuses on a specific journalism-related challenge such as "fact-checking," "combatting online abuse," and "combatting disinformation and misinformation through Media and Information Literacy."

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 "Türkiye'de Tahmini Medya ve Reklam Yatırımları: 2019 Yıl Sonu Raporu." Reklamcılar Derneği, March 2020. http://rd.org.tr/assets/uploads/medya_yatirimlari_2019_.pdf.

20 Bayraktar, Bora. "Türkiye'de Dış Habercilik." Marmara Journal of Communication, no. 26 (2016). https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/267624.

21 Us, Merve. "Zorluklara Rağmen Altın Dönem: Yeniden Araştırmacı Gazetecilik Zamanı." Journo, October 4, 2019. https://journo.com.tr/arastirmaci-gazetecilik-altin-donem.

22 Deniz, Şadiye, and Elif Korap Özel. "Google Gazeteciliği: Dijital Çağda Bir 'Gerekli Kötü' Olarak SEO Haberleri ve Haberin 'Tık' Uğruna Deformasyonu." Istanbul University Journal of Communication Sciences 55 (2018): 77–112. https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/611565.

obstacles for the press to help mitigate polarization and foster a fact-based national debate by way of supporting an informed public.

Over time, views on social media have evolved too. Once praised for enabling access to information and facilitating democratization in Turkey and elsewhere, social media is now criticized for playing a role in deepening tensions. During the protests in Arab countries earlier in the decade, the role of technology platforms attracted global attention.[23] Facebook and Twitter were also instrumental in the Gezi protests in Istanbul and other cities in Turkey in 2013.[24] However, users' tendency to follow, like, or converse with like-minded individuals in the digital space is increasingly associated with the formation of echochambers, further deepening polarization. The U.S. based Council on Foreign Relations points to how online vitriol can spark violence and warns that "the same technology that allows social media to galvanize democracy activists can be used by hate groups seeking to organize and recruit."[25] Some scholars also focused on how "internet subcultures," mostly consisting of opponents of "multiculturalism and globalism," use the online space to disseminate their ideas, and raised concerns about the possible detrimental effects of such messages on "democracy and civic participation."[26]

As views on the potential impact of social media in our lives grow nuanced, Cass Sunstein argues that "social media platforms are terrific for democracy in many ways, but pretty bad in others."[27] To illustrate his point, Sunstein explains how automobiles can be convenient yet risky: "For social media and democracy, the equivalents of car crashes include false reports ("fake news") and the proliferation of information cocoons — and as a result, an increase in fragmentation, polarization and extremism."[28] For others, such as journalist and author Ezra Klein, platforms cannot be solely held responsible for the rise in polarization and the deterioration of democratic debate. He argues that a variety of cultural and political factors explain why divisions exist in the United States, and social media acts as a "polarization accelerant."[29] These ideas mostly apply to Turkish society as well. Over the years, social media provided opportunities for a diversity of ideas to be expressed and disseminated. However, it also led to increasingly isolated online communities that rarely speak to each other, posing a challenge to an inclusive and pluralistic national debate.

In Turkey, trust in the media is low. Structural media problems go hand in hand with political polarization, which often pushes citizens to believe in a kind of truth that is in line with their worldview. Turkey scores high among countries where individuals express their trust in information sources has dropped in the last five years.[30] According to the 2020 edition of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 55 percent of Turkish citizens trust news overall.[31] (The year before it stood at 46 percentage points, though the authors state that "there does not seem to be any obvious explanation for such a change."[32]) In 2019 and 2020, participants expressed higher trust in their preferred news platforms compared to "overall news"— 61 percent in 2020 and 52 percent in 2019 — suggesting that they tend to think their favorite brands offer a more well-rounded perspective than others.[33]

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23 Brown, Heather, Emily Guskin, and Amy Mitchell. "The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings." Pew Research Center (blog), November 28, 2012. https://www.journalism.org/2012/11/28/role-social-media-arab-uprisings/.

24 Hutchinson, Sophie. "Social Media Plays Major Role in Turkey Protests." BBC, June 4, 2013. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22772352.

25 Laub, Zachary. "Hate Speech on Social Media: Global Comparisons." Council on Foreign Relations (blog), n.d https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/hate-speech-social-media-global-comparisons.

26 Marwick, Alice, and Rebecca Lewis. Media, Manipulation, and Disinformation Online. Data & Society Research Institute, 2017. https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf.

27 Sunstein, Cass R. "Is Social Media Good or Bad for Democracy?" Facebook (blog), January 22, 2018.https://about.fb.com/news/2018/01/sunstein-democracy/.

28 Ibid.

29 Thompson, Nicholas. "Why Are We Polarized? Don't Blame Social Media, Says Ezra Klein." Wired, February 13, 2020. https://www.wired.com/story/why-are-we-polarized-dont-blame-social-media-ezra-klein/.

30 "Trust in the Media." Ipsos, 2019. https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-06/global-advisor-trust-in-media-2019.pdf.

31 "Digital News Report 2020." Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

Figure 1: Trust in media outlets among supporters of different political parties

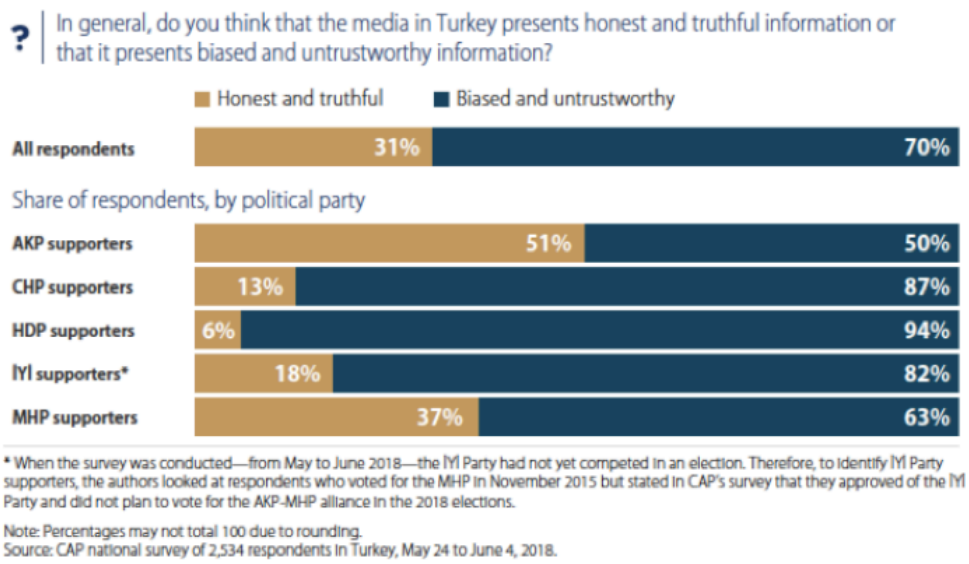


Chart retrieved from "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape" by Center for American Progress, p.3[34]

Similarly, a study by the Center for American Progress shows that only about 30 percent of Turkish citizens find media "honest and truthful."[35] According to the chart above, distrust is highest among HDP, CHP, and İYİ — all opposition parties — compared to the supporters of the governing AK Party and MHP, who make up the Cumhur (People's) Alliance.[36-37] The varying degrees of trust in the media amongst supporters of the five major parties suggests that political orientation plays a role in determining media attitudes and news consumption habits.

Figure 2: How supporters of political parties view Turkish news sources

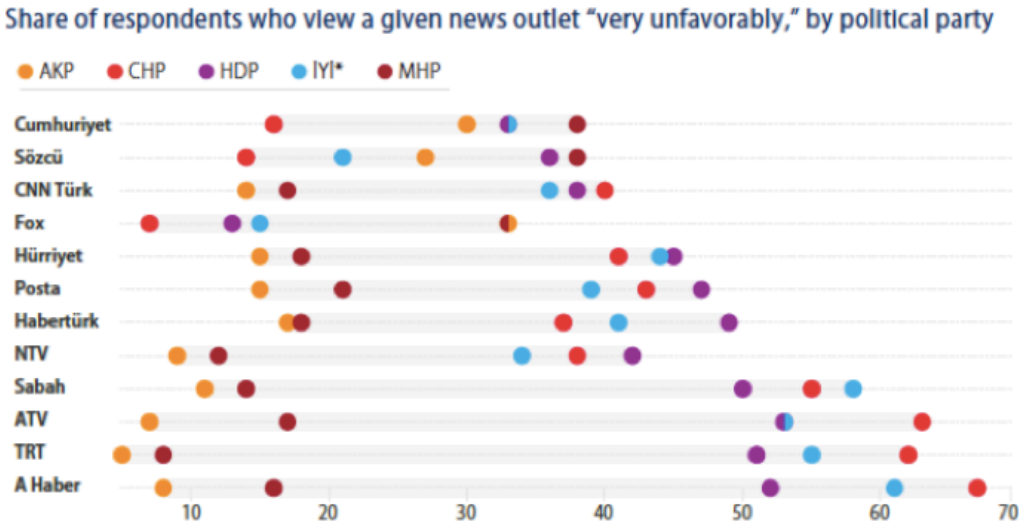


Chart retrieved from "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape" by Center for American Progress, p.8[38]

34 O'Donohue, Andrew, Max Hoffman, and Alan Makovsky. "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape." Center for American Progress, June 10, 2020. https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2020/06/10/485976/turkeys-changing-media-landscape/.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 İYİ was founded in late 2017 and participated in the elections the following year as part of the opposition Millet (Nation) Alliance.

38 O'Donohue, Hoffman, and Makovsky, "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape."

The CAP study also finds that supporters of different political parties turn to different outlets to get informed.[39] Among a selection of 12 national news sources composed of both print and broadcast platforms, participants rated which ones they viewed "very unfavorably." As seen above, less than 10 percent of those who affiliate with the main opposition party CHP viewed Fox News, a broadcast network known for its critical attitude towards the government "very unfavorably;" whereas more than 30 percent of AK Party and MHP supporters thought so.

Similarly, the opposition CHP found A Haber and TRT, broadcast outlets perceived to have affinity to the government, least favorable — more than 60 percent of the voters viewed them "very unfavorably"— whereas, less than 10 percent of the AK Party supporters felt the same. A sign of divisions plaguing the Turkish society, the researchers point to the lack of a news platform to which voters, regardless of political orientation, fully trust.[40] Concerning the chart provided above, it is essential to note that all other listed outlets are private except for TRT. While TRT is Turkey's public broadcaster and the institution pledges neutrality in its charter,[41] the gap between its stated position and the public perception of the network's editorial slant is a prominent indicator of polarization in the country.

Figure 3: Popular news sources in Turkey

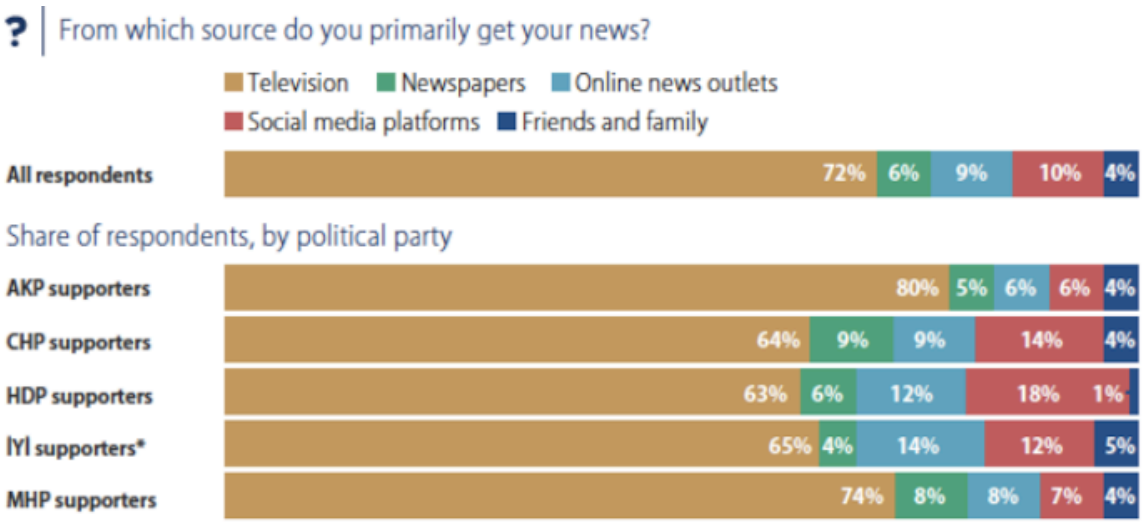


Chart retrieved from "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape" by Center for American Progress, p.7[42]

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report finds that 85 percent of the Turkish population uses online news and social media to get information.[43] Considering that their sample consists of citizens living in urban areas, the authors highlight that "television remains the most important source of news" in the country overall, as 68 percent of citizens turn to it to get informed.[44] The CAP survey points to the political orientation of citizens who favor online news over television: AK Party supporters are the most avid TV watchers (80 percent), and HDP supporters prefer this medium the least (63 percent). Audience preferences suggest that the opposition finds a home for itself less and less in traditional broadcast news, most likely due to the perception that mainstream networks shy away from covering their perspectives.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 "TRT Yayın İlkelerimiz," n.d. https://www.trt.net.tr/Kurumsal/YayinIlkelerimiz.aspx.

42 O'Donohue, Hoffman, and Makovsky, "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape."

43 "Digital News Report 2020." Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf.

44 Ibid.

The impact of televised news content on polarization in Turkey deserves a closer look. Data from a study in the United States offers perspectives for Turkey and other divided societies: When Gentzkov, Shapiro, and Boxell investigated affective polarization in nine nations between 1975 and 2017, they found that "the US experienced the largest increase in polarization over this period."[45] They point to, among other factors, "the rise of 24-hour partisan cable news" in the United States as a possible contributor to affective polarization.[46] The two networks mentioned in the paper are Fox News and MSNBC the right-and left-leaning national broadcast platforms that have considerable weight in the United States. As the research suggests, the relationship between affective polarization and exposure to politically-biased news content is worthy of attention. The authors reference a study by Benson and Powers to point out that the countries with declining affective polarization — namely, Australia, Britain, Norway, Sweden, and Germany — "all devote more public funds per capita to public service broadcast media" as compared to the other group.[47] According to Benson and Powers, that amount is $133.57 in Norway and only $3.75 in the United States.[48]

Turkish viewers are no stranger to debate programs where influential ideologues clash along party lines, and program formats are deliberately designed to encourage confrontation. The rising popularity of pro-government and opposition networks seems to color the news with partisan sensitivities. Further research is needed to gauge the impact of the perceived partiality of the Turkish public broadcaster. The research findings mentioned above offer insights into how fixing that trust gap might heal societal divisions in Turkey.

The popularity of online platforms also deserves attention as false and misleading information spreads easily there. According to the report Digital 2020, published by We Are Social and Hootsuite, Turkey's Internet and social media penetration rates are at 74 percent and 64 percent, respectively.[49] Facebook and Whatsapp have become popular platforms where citizens share content related to news and politics.[50] Turkey ranks as the number one country where citizens said they "were exposed to completely made-up news" the previous week,[51] and the country also suffers from the highest number of bot infections across the globe.[52]

45 Boxell, Levi, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro. "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization." NBER Program(s): Political Economy, June 2020. https://www.nber.org/papers/w26669.pdf.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Benson, Rodney, and Matthew Powers. Public Media and Political Independence: Lessons for the Future of Journalism from Around the World. Freepress, 2011. http://www.internetvoices.org/sites/default/files/resources/public-media-and-political-independence.pdf.

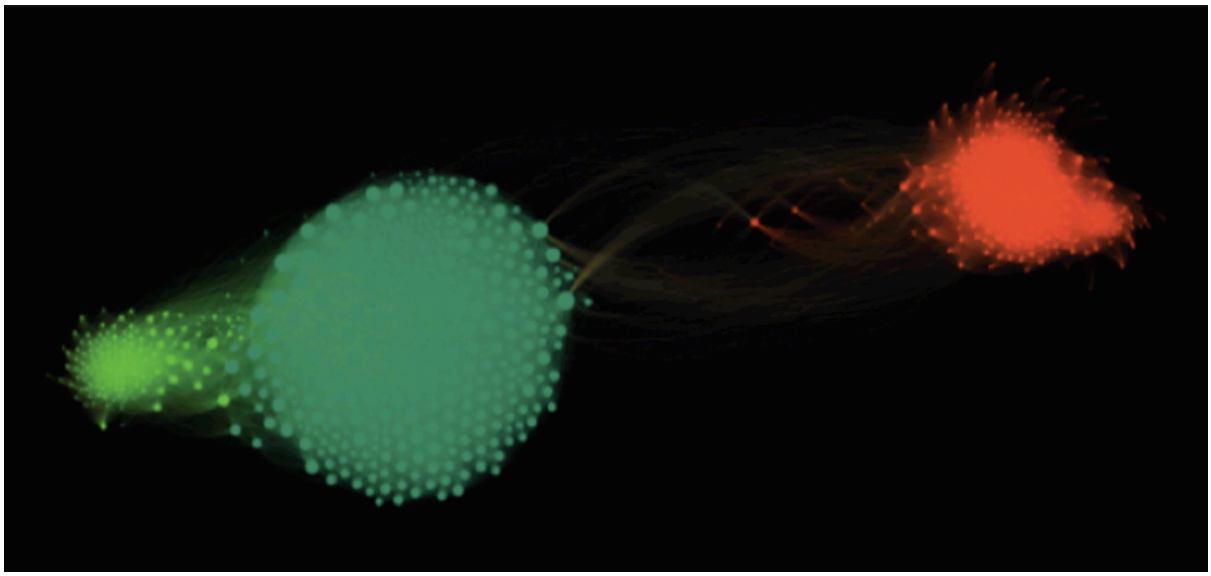
49 "Digital 2020 Turkey." We Are Social, February 18, 2020. https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2020-turkey-january-2020-v01.

50 "Digital News Report 2019." Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR_2019_FINAL_0.pdf.

51 Fletcher, Richard. "Misinformation and Disinformation Unpacked," 2018. http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/suvey/2018/misinformation-and-disinformation-unpacked/.

52 Abel, Robert. "And the Country with the Most Bot Infections Is… Turkey." SC Media, October 5, 2016. https://www.scmagazine.com/home/security-news/and-the-country-with-the-most-bot-infections-is-turkey/.

Figure 4: Twitter conversations about the Idlib attack



Retrieved from EDAM report titled "Turkey's Digital Landscape" by Barış Kırdemir, p.19[53]

A previous EDAM paper[54] demonstrated how media polarization is prevalent in the digital world and warned about the possible consequences of such divisions for societal cohesion. On February 27, Turkey lost 33 soldiers in a regime attack in Syria.[55] Kırdemir observed the conversation on Twitter in the aftermath of the incident. He focused on the period between February 27 and March 11 when the coronavirus outbreak became the lead story with the official announcement of the first case in Turkey. As seen from the graph above, the national debate was fragmented. The red cluster represents the opposition, and the green one is the pro-government group. Kırdemir explains that these clusters were "followed and endorsed by mostly distinct audiences," and individuals in these groups spoke almost only with those in the same crowd.[56]

Kırdemir also surveyed ten news platforms some sympathetic and some critical of the government that had "the highest engagement rates on social media" within the given time bracket.[57] A similar picture emerged there as well. Outlets sympathetic to the government "had either zero or very low levels of reach to the users from the opposing cluster," and this was largely the case for platforms that appealed to the government's critics.[58] Kırdemir draws attention to how, at a moment when Russia confronted Turkey in Syria, Sputnik Türkiye, the Turkish-language edition of the Russian state outlet, was one of the platforms "with the highest engagement rates" and "achieved most of the intercommunity reach in the network."[59] Trust in the network might be the primary reason for the interest. However, audiences might be drawn to the outlet because it presented the Russian perspective as Turkey was in the midst of a tense confrontation with that country. The paper calls for Turkish authorities to address the fragility born out of extreme polarization as divided groups could cause "further vulnerabilities to manipulative and hostile information operations" by adversaries.[60]

53 Kırdemir, Barış. "Turkey's Digital News Landscape: Polarization, Social Media, And Emerging Trends," June 18, 2020. https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Turkeys-Digital-News-Landscape-Barış-Kirdemir-with-discussion-paper.pdf.

54 Ibid.

55 "Syria War: Alarm after 33 Turkish Soldiers Killed in Attack in Idlib." BBC, February 28, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51667717.

56 Kırdemir, "Turkey's Digital News Landscape: Polarization, Social Media, And Emerging Trends."

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

Consequences of Consuming False Information in the Digital Space

Turkey is often subject to false information. Consuming such stories might have far-reaching consequences in a polarized society.

Like the rest of the world, Turkey's battle with the coronavirus pandemic took a psychological and physical toll on the society. As of this writing, the country has registered more than 6100 deaths. From adapting to new personal hygiene rules to remote work and watching a global public health crisis unfold in real-time, societies were hard-pressed to process large amounts of new information to adapt to new circumstances. Fighting against rumors, conspiracies, and false information became a global challenge, which prompted the Director General of the World Health Organization Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to say that "we are fighting an infodemic" which circulates "faster and more easily than this virus."[61] Secretary General Antonio Guterres also tweeted in March that "our enemy is also an infodemic or misinformation" and that to beat Covid, "we need to urgently promote facts and science."[62]

Turkey dealt with a flurry of misinformation during the pandemic. Teyit.org, a Turkish fact-checking platform, identified seven broad categories to classify pandemic-related false information. Among the most popular were falsely associated visuals (43.5 percent), fake cures (8.41 percent), and features of the virus as well as decisions taken by Turkish and foreign governments (both 11.7 percent).[63] Misinformation circulated liberally across various platforms. A previous EDAM report[64] found that traditional news networks, popular digital platforms such as YouTube and Twitter, and applications such as Whatsapp were instrumental in disseminating disinformation. "Media outlets" as well as "political parties" or "politicians" spread fake news, and conspiracies regarding the "origins" of the novel coronavirus were popular.[65] Some of the motivations for spreading false and misleading content were "undermining state institutions" and "inflicting confusion and fear," according to the EDAM report.[66] Fake stories such as using hairdryers or eating garlic to repel Covid-19 also circulated online.[67] Turkey's struggle with falsities during the pandemic reminds how verified information is critical in forming and implementing public health policy at the national level. Failure to do so could have consequences, such as losing lives.

The situation of Syrian refugees has also become a critical test for Turkey in recent years. At least 3.6 million Syrians live in the country due to the civil war raging on for nearly a decade now. Public opinion was empathetic early on in the conflict, yet it is shifting in the opposite direction. Refugees have become an increasingly divisive topic domestically, and they are often targeted by or become subjects of rumors and false stories. Given that they are likely to stay in Turkey for the foreseeable future, this trend may continue, and the risk of consuming false information about refugees could rise too.

Last year, rumors circulated on social media about a Syrian man sexually abusing a Turkish girl in the working class Ikitelli district of Istanbul.[68] The story prompted locals to take to the streets and attack the homes and shops of Syrian refugees. Security forces were deployed to quell the unrest. The police investigation revealed that the Ikitelli Youth Group, a Whatsapp group of about 58 people who organized online and aimed to target Syrian refugees in the

61 The Department of Global Communications. "UN Tackles 'Infodemic' of Misinformation and Cybercrime in COVID-19 Crisis," March 31, 2020. https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-'infodemic'-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19.

62 Ibid.

63 Çavuş, Gülin. "Salgının En Gözde Yanlış Bilgileri." teyitekipten, June 6, 2020. https://beta.teyit.org/salginin-en-gozde-yanlis-bilgileri.

64 Kırdemir, Barış. "Exploring Turkey's Disinformation Ecosystem: An Overview." EDAM, July 2020. https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Exploring-Turkeys-Disinformation-Ecosystem-by-Baris-Kirdemir.pdf.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 "Koronavirüs (Covid-19): Virüs ve Hastalık Hakkında Dikkate Almamanız Gereken Hurafeler." BBC, March 11, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-51815676.

68 Zengin, Ferit. "Taciz ve Tecavüz Provokasyonunun Arkasından 'İkitelli Gençlik Grubu' Çıktı." Milliyet, July 2, 2020. https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/taciz-ve-tecavuz-provokasyonunun-arkasindan-ikitelli-genclik-grubu-cikti-2898489.

area, planned the mob attack. Following the disturbance, the police detained individuals who tweeted hashtags such as #UlkemdeSuriyeliIstemiyorum ("I do not want Syrians in my country") and #SuriyelilerDefolsun" ("Syrians Out"). In the past, social media played a role in mobilizing sentiments against Syrians in other cities as well: In Gaziantep, a major city at the Turkish-Syrian border, rumors such as Syrians "poisoning the city's water plants" or "killing a policeman" spread, leading to growing unrest and frustration there.[69]

Turkish decision-makers shall keep in mind that rumors and disinformation campaigns can exacerbate xenophobia and hate speech. The role of social media in disseminating such messages elsewhere in the world can offer lessons. In 2018, the United Nations criticized Facebook for playing an instrumental part in disseminating xenophobic and hateful content against the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.[70] The role of false information circulating via Whatsapp in India has been widely discussed as a contributor to societal violence in that country.[71] Research by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University drew attention to the challenges in tackling misinformation circulating on popular mobile instant messengers, or MIMs.[72] Examining relevant data from India, Pakistan, and Nigeria, researchers observed that "MIMs can play an important role in disseminating misinformation, and that such information can sometimes prove quite dangerous."[73] Countering false information on these platforms is tough as correspondence is private.[74] The authors note that "researchers and fact-checkers face significant challenges in identifying and implementing effective countermeasures."[75]

In Turkey, 86 percent of the population uses instant messengers such as Whatsapp, WeChat, and Facebook Messenger regularly.[76] According to Statista, Whatsapp is the most widely used messaging platform in the country.[77] The incidents in Istanbul and other cities show that understanding the role of popular platforms in spreading malicious content and galvanizing misinformation campaigns to target specific groups is crucial to eliminate potentially risky social and political outcomes.

The examples about the coronavirus pandemic and Syrian refugees demonstrate the extent and reach of false information and polarization in Turkey. The emergence of Turkish fact-checking platforms has been an essential step in countering falsities and improving the Turkish information ecosystem. Akın Ünver explained in a previous EDAM paper[78] that the birth and rise of such platforms were due to the shifts taking place in Turkey's information landscape in the last decade. Initially, rising "connectivity" brought about "an explosion of online forums and social media groups."[79] However, in time, the Internet became instrumental in spreading falsities, and the necessity for fact-checking stemmed from this newly encountered challenge.[80] The verification platforms which Ünver investigates widely share a mission and a vision, despite separate focus areas. For instance, YalanSavar.org and EvrimAgaci.org specialize in

69 Orhan, Oytun and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar. "Suriyeli Sığınmacıların Türkiye'ye Etkileri." ORSAM and TESEV, January 8, 2015. https://orsam.org.tr/tr/suriyeli-siginmacilarin-turkiye-ye-etkileri/.

70 Miles, Tom. "U.N. Investigators Cite Facebook Role in Myanmar Crisis." Reuters, March 13, 2018. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-facebook/u-n-investigators-cite-facebook-role-in-myanmar-crisis-idUSKCN1GO2PN

71 Varma, Tara. "The WhatsApp Election: The Fake News Challenge to Democracy." ECFR, April 30, 2019. https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_whatsapp_election_the_fake_news_challenge_to_democracy.

72 Pasquetto, Irene V., Eaman Jahani, Alla Baranovski, and Matthew A. Baum. "Understanding Misinformation on Mobile Instant Messengers (MIMs) in Developing Countries." The Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, May 2020.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Kunst, Alexander. "Social Media Usage by Platform Type in Turkey 2020," June 23, 2020. https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1002992/social-media-usage-by-platform-type-in-turkey#statisticContainer.

77 "Mobile App Ranking," August 11, 2020. https://www.similarweb.com/apps/top/google/store-rank/tr/communication/top-free/.

78 Ünver, Akın. "Fact-Checkers and Fack-Checking in Turkey." EDAM, June 29, 2020. https://edam.org.tr/en/fact-checkers-and-fact-checking-in-turkey/.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

"scientific fact-checking and pseudoscience debunking," DogrulukPayi.com in "political statement verification," teyit.org, in "news debunking" and malumatfurus.org in verifying statements and claims by columnists, who carry considerable weight in shaping national political discussions in Turkey.[81] The various areas these platforms focus on also provide a sense of the frequently encountered types of misinformation and disinformation in the Turkish environment. Perhaps a sign of the country's polarized political landscape, other fact-checking platforms associate with and are financially supported by the government, such as gununyalanlari.org and the English-language website factcheckingturkey.com.[82] Their work entails challenging claims against the Turkish government, Ünver explains.

Fact-checking is relatively new in Turkey. Türkiye Raporu, a survey published by Istanbul Ekonomi Araştırma finds that currently, less than one-tenth of the population uses these platforms to verify information and that men use these platforms more often than women.[83] Besides, fact-checking alone may not be sufficient to fix Turkey's information problems. Other challenges will need to be addressed. For instance, a comprehensive study conducted in 2018 by scientists at MIT concluded that "falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information."[84] Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral drew their results from a rich pool of data. They studied nearly 126,000 stories spread by approximately 3 million individuals on Twitter over a period of 11 years (2006-2017).[85] The researchers also observed that "false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information."[86] These findings show that there is still a lot to understand about what motivates people to share falsities.

In addition to boosting corrective mechanisms such as fact-checking platforms, it is necessary to strengthen journalistic institutions, encourage civil debate, and push for a fact-based national conversation to complement the effort to counter the spread of false information. Decision-makers shall take responsibility as dissemination of such content bears consequences for democracies worldwide.

Countdown to 2023: Influence Campaigns and Online Political Advertising

Turkish citizens will vote in a high-stake election in 2023, on the centennial of the Turkish Republic. Addressing the county's information-related issues will help fight against possible foreign influence campaigns and purposeful attempts to spread misinformation and disinformation.

In recent years, foreign information operations have increasingly come under the spotlight as Western nations accused Russia of manipulating the electoral processes during the 2016 American election and the Brexit vote. Following the US elections, the role of tech platforms in disseminating targeted political advertising has been debated. Lack of measures to regulate the financing and spread of political ads cast doubts on the transparency of the democratic process and showed how, through such ads, misinformation could circulate. The intensifying debates on both sides of the Atlantic pressured technology platforms to revise their policies: Twitter banned all political advertising last fall[87]; Google announced new restrictions on targeted ads;[88] Facebook and Instagram allowed users to avoid

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Vosoughi, Soroush, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral. "The Spread of True and False News Online." Science 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018): 1146–51. https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Conger, Kate. "Twitter Will Ban All Political Ads, C.E.O. Jack Dorsey Says." The New York Times, October 30, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/technology/twitter-political-ads-ban.html.

88 Google Ads. "An Update on Our Political Ads Policy," November 20, 2019. https://www.blog.google/technology/ads/update-our-political-ads-policy/.

viewing political ads.[89] Ahead of the November elections in the US, various regulatory efforts have been discussed, such as the "Honest Ads Act,"[90] and Senator Elizabeth Warren criticized Facebook about misleading political ads.[91] In Europe, where concerns over Russian interference are widespread, the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity, a platform composed of experts from various fields such as media, politics, and technology, works to identify effective strategies to protect the democratic process.[92]

In Turkey, the debate about political advertising has a mostly different framework, and awareness is yet to grow. Concerning election campaigns, the existing regulatory practice encompasses traditional news platforms such as broadcast and radio. However, Turkey's online space is unregulated for misleading political content that could influence the democratic process in questionable ways.

This year, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report features a section on how public opinion is shaping up around the role of technology companies regarding political advertising. When asked about what action technology platforms should take about political ads that contain "information that could be false," the majority of the participants in 40 countries expressed a desire for them to "block the advertisement."[93] They said technology companies should be obliged to ensure that "information on their platform is true."[94]

Figure 5: Attitudes towards political advertising

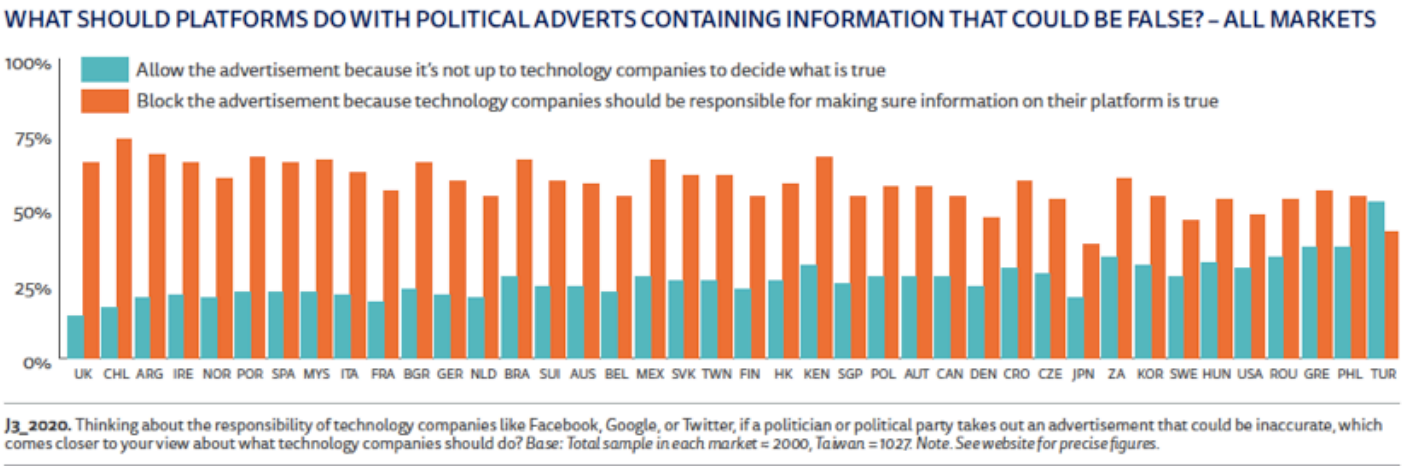


Chart retrieved from the Reuters Institute Digital Journalism Report 2020, p.45[95]

89 "Facebook to Let Users Turn off Political Adverts." BBC, June 17, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/business-53074995.

90 Eggerton, John. "Klobuchar Pushes Honest Ads Act on Senate Floor." Multichannel News, October 22, 2019. https://www.multichannel.com/news/klobuchar-pushes-honest-ads-act-on-senate-floor.

91 "Warren Dares Facebook With Intentionally False Political Ad," October 12, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/12/technology/elizabeth-warren-facebook-ad.html.

92 Alliance of Democracies. "The Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity," n.d. https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/transatlantic-commission-on-election-integrity/.

93 "Digital News Report 2020." Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

Only in Turkey, this is the other way around. The percentage of Turkish citizens who think platforms should "allow the advertisement because it's not up to technology companies to decide what is true" is higher than those who think the ads should be blocked.[96] The report mentions that people were more in favor of blocking misleading ads in countries where "political advertising is already tightly controlled" and less so in "countries that have traditionally worried about regulating free speech."[97] However, it does not offer specifics on why the Turkish response was different from the rest. Although further research is needed to understand why the majority of Turkish participants prefer technology platforms not to intervene, some of the possibilities explored in the following paragraphs might offer perspectives.

Firstly, it is important to have a clear sense of how the participants' understanding of the concept of political advertising itself influenced their response to the survey. Gülin Çavuş, editor-in-chief of the factchecking platform teyit.org, points to how political advertising, as discussed in the current American and European context, is rather new in Turkey.[98] She also explains that the Reuters study uses an urban sample in Turkey, and those participants might feel more confident about their media literacy skills. Alternatively, the fact that there's less appetite for technology companies to intervene if an ad contains possibly misleading content could be related to the political mood in the country. Historically, skepticism for foreign meddling has been high in Turkey, and the failed coup attempt in 2016 heightened public anxiety over the idea of such interventions. Survey participants may have interpreted possible interventions by technology companies similarly.

Another possibility is related to news consumption habits of different political groups in Turkey. As explored in previous sections of this paper, Turkish opposition has largely moved away from traditional news outlets, where they feel their views are less represented. In the past, opposition parties expressed frustration with modest budgets for campaign spending and argued that the governing party enjoyed stronger representation on mainstream broadcast platforms. The governing party denied allegations saying that the opposition often raises such complaints during election times and that the party in power traditionally receives the larger chunk of election funding.[99] In last year's local elections, rapporteurs from the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe observed that "there was a lively social media campaign" in the country and "the opposition parties used it to get their message across."[100]

When Google announced limitations on targeted political advertising, opposition newspaper Sözcü ran an interview with Necati Özkan, campaign advisor to Istanbul's mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. Asked about possible repercussions of the newlyadopted policy, Özkan said "this restriction can be a problem for democracy" and that while time will tell how the new measures will play out, "it places a roadblock in front of alternative, opposition parties whose budgets are not [as much as] that of the governing party."[101] The newspaper also stated that Google's decision will "seriously impact" political parties who "have a hard time finding a place for themselves in mainstream television [networks] and newspapers", and that opposition parties "will have to review their campaign strategies."[102]

It is evident from the interview that Özkan refers to ads financed and disseminated by legitimate political parties in Turkey. However, during the campaign period, other kinds of dubious video ads, which can be considered "political" due to their messaging and content, also circulated. For instance, one such YouTube video is about Mansur Yavaş,

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Author's interview with Gülin Çavuş.

99 "Muhalefetin Bütçe İsyanı: 'Seçimde Haksız Rekabet Var.'" December 23, 2018. https://www.dw.com/tr/muhalefetin-bütçe-isyanı-seçimde-haksız-rekabet-var/a-46848964.

100 "Local Elections in Turkey and Mayoral Re-Run in Istanbul." Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. Council of Europe, October 31, 2019. https://rm.coe.int/local-elections-in-turkey-and-mayoral-re-run-in-istanbul-committee-on-/1680981fcf.

101 "Özkan: Google'ın Kararı Türkiye'de Demokrasi Açısından Problem." Sözcü, November 22, 2019. https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/ekonomi/ozkan-googlein-karari-turkiyede-demokrasi-acisindan-problem-5466844/.

102 Ibid.

then the opposition candidate for mayor in Ankara.[103] The 28-second clip is a collection of soundbites stitched together from a televised interview. While it is hard to tell the context, it leaves the viewer think that Yavaş threatened someone for money. The video was uploaded on March 20, shortly before the municipal elections, with hashtags such as #MansurYavas and #31MartSecim (#31MarchElections). It has been viewed more than 400,000 times.

Unlike those ads which were approved, financed, and disseminated by political parties themselves, this video falls in a blurry category. There is no transparency about who the advertisers were, where the financing came from, and what the ad was intent on achieving. Google's Transparency Report provides "information about verified advertisers' spending on ads related to elections"[104] in the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, India, and New Zealand but not Turkey. Without available data, it is impossible to understand the impact of such political messaging on voter behavior.

A well-functioning democracy needs to maintain standards for fair competition amongst political parties. However, dissemination of political ads that might deliberately skew facts or contain misinformation may also influence the political process in questionable ways. Turkey's divided digital information environment creates opportunities for false and misleading information to spread, and it might render public opinion susceptible to manipulation. A hotly debated proposal for regulating social media passed in the parliament in late July. It is unclear if the legislation will touch upon measures to ensure transparency regarding the financing and circulation of such political content online. To reiterate, the possibilities mentioned above aim to offer perspectives for future research about how Turkey can maintain an open and transparent online space as it gears up for a highly competitive election a few years down the road. More data is required to assess the context and consequences of political advertising in Turkey and how political content circulating online influences the Turkish democratic process. Turkey's troubles in accessing vital data shall remind global technology platforms that their role in maintaining the robustness of the democratic process extends beyond the developed nations where they have a considerable market presence.

Turkey sits in a geopolitically sensitive region where various interests compete. In an EDAM report referenced earlier, Kırdemir observes that divisions render the country vulnerable against foreign influence operations.[105] Online echochambers — such as those that emerged in the aftermath of the Idlib attack — provide opportunities for possible manipulation attempts.[106] It is essential to watch for such threats in the coming months and years as Turkish politics will likely heat up before the elections.

In recent years, Russian interventions in electoral processes in the West attracted considerable attention. Ünver explains that Moscow's information operations in Turkey have so far maintained a less ambitious scope.[107] In his research about Russia's digital activities in Turkey, he finds that perspectives sympathetic to Moscow are "well-embedded within the existing Turkish information sphere," and this might eliminate the need for Russia to take any additional steps to cultivate a pro-Russian public opinion.[108] Turkey's polarized landscape also plays a role in shaping the perception of Russia, he argues.[109] Russia receives coverage by opposition outlets if it challenges the government, whereas if it is favorable to Ankara's stance on a given issue, pro-government networks run the story.[110]

Despite troublesome episodes in bilateral relations, Ankara and Moscow managed to keep close ties. Frustration with the United States following the coup attempt and Washington's

[103] "28 Saniyede Mansur Yavaş Gerçeği." YouTube. Büyük Türkiye, n.d. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5VvyXr4jlE.

[104] Google. "Transparency Report Political Ads," August 11, 2020. https://transparencyreport.google.com/political-ads/home?hl=en.

[105] Kırdemir, "Turkey's Digital News Landscape: Polarization, Social Media, And Emerging Trends."

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ünver, Akın. "Russian Digital Media and Information Ecosystem in Turkey." EDAM, March 1, 2019. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21042?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid.

support for the YPG forces in Syria pushed Turkey to seek closer ties with Russia; and Russia did not miss the chance to win Turkish public opinion. For instance, political scientist and ideologue Alexandr Dugin, famed in Turkey for his close ties to Putin, gave various interviews to Turkish outlets. In one such interview, he talked about how Russia tipped off Turkish officials before the coup attempt.[111] Pictures of Dugin's visit to the tomb of Islamic sheik Abdulhakim Arvasi circulated on Turkish social media.[112] Arvasi is known to have influenced Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, an intellectual revered by Turkey's conservative elites. His visit seemed to be an effort to cultivate a favorable Russian image at a time when American skepticism was high in Turkey.

Ünver argues that Russia's preference to not engage in the sort of influence operations in Turkey — as it does in Europe and elsewhere — is linked to "the convergence in security/strategic relations" with Turkey.[113] Moreover, he explains that the amount of disinformation already existing in the Turkish information environment might trouble Russia to find a room for itself.[114] Ünver's analysis suggests that Russia might stick with the course only as long as the status quo is maintained. As of late, Turkey and Russia do not see eye to eye regarding issues to which they ascribe political or strategic significance. They have different priorities in Syria and Libya. The changing of the Hagia Sophia museum's status to a mosque drew mixed reactions from Russia as the edifice holds significance for world Orthodoxy. Russians voted in a critical referendum earlier this year and mentioning "God" in the country's constitution was among the proposed amendments.[115] Turkey is deliberating about the use of the Russian S400 air defense systems. At the same time, it seeks to engage in dialogue with the United States to cooperate in defense and other areas. Such developments might bring new challenges to Turkish-Russian relations in the coming years. As Turkey's 2023 elections will likely yield significant domestic and foreign policy outcomes, whether Russia might change its course of action vis-à-vis the Turkish digital information environment shall remain on the radar.

New Rules in the Digital Space: Turkey's Social Media Law

Turkey passed a law to regulate social media in late July. It introduces requirements for technology companies with more than one million users to appoint Turkey-based representatives, keep electronic data in servers in Turkey, and respond to requests to take down content if perceived to be defamatory.[116] In case they fail to act in accordance, technology platforms will have to pay hefty fines or face bandwidth limitations.[117] It did not come as a surprise in a divided society that the legislation was widely supported or rejected along party lines. The government has defended that the law aims to stop online abuse and hold big tech companies accountable.[118] Critics, however, voiced concern because they saw the measures as a veiled attempt at curtailing freedoms.[119]

The Turkish government has said the legislative framework

111 "Aleksandr Dugin: 15 Temmuz'u CIA'ci güçler gerçekleştirdi," July 16, 2018. https://www.aksam.com.tr/dunya/aleksandr-dugin-15-temmuzu-ciaci-gucler-gerceklestirdi/haber-755228.

112 Çiçek, Nevzat. Twitter post. February 6, 2017, 12:48 a.m. https://twitter.com/nevzatcicek/status/828359610067255298?lang=en.

113 Ünver, Akın. "Russian Digital Media and Information Ecosystem in Turkey." EDAM, March 1, 2019. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21042?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

114 Ibid.

115 "Putin Orders Amendments Extending His Rule into Constitution." AP, July 3, 2020. https://apnews.com/4191c3938d1e3f7a7c8b88a68c6c10d5.

116 Santora, Marc. "Turkey Passes Law Extending Sweeping Powers Over Social Media," July 29, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/world/europe/turkey-social-media-control.html.

117 Ibid.

118 "Turkish Parliament Approves Bill to Regulate Social Media." Daily Sabah, July 29, 2020. https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/legislation/turkish-parliament-approves-bill-to-regulate-social-media.

119 Santora, "Turkey Passes Law Extending Sweeping Powers Over Social Media."

borrows from Germany's Network Enforcement Act, commonly referred to as the NetzDG. That law was passed in 2017 and aimed to target online hate speech. However, it has also drawn criticism. For instance, some argued that the law "conscripts social media companies into governmental service as content regulators."[120] Justitia, a think tank in Denmark, even called it "the digital Berlin Wall" and pointed to how some nations used the German legal framework as a model to control the online space.[121]

In Turkey, more than 62 million citizens use the Internet, and 54 million are active social media users, according to the Digital 2020 Report.[122] Google, YouTube, and Facebook are the top three most visited websites; citizens spend about 2 hours 51 minutes on social media every day.[123] Twitter, which has evolved into a vibrant political arena in the country, has 12.7 million Turkish users.[124] These numbers illustrate how social media platforms have become an integral part of the national debate in Turkey. According to Hürriyet, the government "aims to negotiate with social media companies until October 1," when the law goes into effect.[125] It will only strengthen Turkish democracy if authorities consider the criticism towards the German model, and refrain from regulating the digital space at the expense of liberties.

120 Lee, Diana. "Germany's NetzDG and the Threat to Online Free Speech." The Media Freedom and Information Access Clinic (blog), October 10, 2017. https://law.yale.edu/mfia/case-disclosed/germanys-netzdg-and-threat-online-free-speech.

121 Mchangama, Jacob. "The Digital Berlin Wall: How Germany (Accidentally) Created a Prototype for Global Online Censorship." Justita (blog), November 5, 2019. http://justitia-int.org/en/the-digital-berlin-wall-how-germany-created-a-prototype-for-global-online-censorship/

122 "Digital 2020 Turkey." We Are Social, February 18, 2020. https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2020-turkey-january-2020-v01.

123 Ibid.

124 Clement, J. "Leading Countries Based on Number of Twitter Users as of July 2020." Statista (blog), June 24, 2020. https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries/.

125 "Turkey Aims to Negotiate with Social Media Companies until Oct 1." Hürriyet Daily News, June 30, 2020. https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-aims-to-negotiate-with-social-media-companies-until-oct-1-157007.

Conclusion

This paper sought to understand how political polarization shapes Turkey's information environment, what role traditional and new media platforms play in molding public discourse, and what consequences information problems might bear for the society. In recent years, the frequency of elections and referenda, the rise of identity politics, and geopolitical tensions aggravated divisions. Citizens increasingly cling to news sources that validate their worldview. Uniting around objective facts becomes exceedingly difficult, and social media preferences reinforce echo chambers. These trends contribute to polarization, yet they are also a manifestation of it.

Previous sections highlighted how a weak information environment renders the country susceptible to misinformation and disinformation, which might bear social and political consequences. For instance, the circulation of false information and conspiracies during the Covid-19 pandemic posed challenges for the management of a public health crisis. Online rumors about refugees threatened to provoke cultural sensitivities and instigate instability in Turkish cities. Polarization and online echo chambers risk weakening the public in the face of influence campaigns. Boosting the country's information environment is even more urgent as Turkey goes to the polls in 2023. Access to facts and verified information will allow citizens to make informed decisions at the ballot box. Lessening tensions and restoring civility in public discourse will help protect public opinion against possible external manipulation attempts. While this may not be politically palatable as incendiary rhetoric seems to win votes, it will strengthen democratic debate.

This paper reminds the importance of raising standards of ethical, fact-based, and empathetic journalism in Turkey to help alleviate divisions, counter the flurry of false information, and help create an informed public vital for the healthy functioning of democracy. In recent years, hunt for clickbait, and appetite for higher ratings or site traffic incentivized the production and dissemination of content that caters to audience preferences, which are defined by increasingly divergent world views. Aside from constraints on press freedoms, structural issues plaguing Turkish journalism also played a role in exacerbating the country's information problems. No news source has managed to gain citizens' trust across the political spectrum. Data referenced in previous sections show how some segments of the society feel a distance towards the country's public broadcaster. Diversifying coverage and strengthening the organization's independence is likely to help alleviate divisions and provide a go-to news source for citizens of all political persuasions.

Further research will help explain how political advertising affects the democratic process in Turkey. With presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2023, the question merits increased attention. The decision by prominent technology platforms to ban or limit targeted political advertising is likely to restrict Turkish opposition parties' campaign strategies, which in recent years increasingly focused on the digital space. Ensuring standards for fairness and transparency during campaigns is imperative for the well-being of the democratic process, yet questions surrounding political advertising have broader implications in the Turkish context. At least during the municipal vote in 2019, dubious videos with relevant hashtags about the election circulated online. Except for those officially endorsed by political parties, Turkey does not have the means to identify who is financing ads of that sort, whether the content circulating in the digital space is accurate or misleading, and how, if at all, they shape public opinion. Turkey already demonstrates vulnerabilities in the face of possible attempts to manipulate public opinion. Deliberately misleading ads pushed by domestic and international actors could potentially interfere with a transparent democratic process. It is wise for Turkish decision-makers to encourage civility in online and offline conversations, and design tools and policies to fend off such possible interventions.

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THE IMPACT OF POLARIZATION ON TURKEY'S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

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