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Country: Turkey

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While one of the biggest protests was taking place in Istanbul in decades, the mainstream media turned a blind eye to reporting what was happening in the streets. The major TV channels such as CNN Turk and NTV chose to broadcast a cooking program or a documentary about penguins, instead of showing images of the clashes during which the police used brutal force, and teargas on peaceful protesters that were trying to stop the demolition of Gezi Park.

The mainstream media failed to report on the initial events and fuelled the anger of many Turks who questioned the media blackout.

Emre Caliskan, a Turkish freelance journalist, points out one of the main reasons, “the majority of media companies have investments in other sectors and they are afraid to lose their contracts and be in the blacklist of the government”.

The media outlets in Turkey are owned by large conglomerates with interests in other sectors such as construction, energy, finance and tourism, as the study [‘Caught in the Wheels of Power’](#) published by TESEV states.

“Media owners were extremely dependent on the clientelist relations with the state which enabled them to acquire tenders to undertake massive projects financed by the public. This has prevented these companies from performing the watchdog function expected from the media in established democracies”, concluded the study.

Dr. Ceren Sözeri, co-author of TESEV report and professor at Galatasary University, gives an example of the close relationship between media owners and government. “A few weeks ago, Ferit Şahenk who owns Dogus Media, one of the biggest media groups in the country, took a big public procurement from the government, a new port for Istanbul called Galataport. As Prime Minister mentions, Şahenk always says that "Thank you my Prime Minister we have expanded thanks to you", states Ceren.

One of his channels is NTV, whose chief editor resigned and apologised for the failure to inform the public about the protests. The protesters burnt out one of NTV's news van which stands now as a symbol at Taksim square.

Self-censorship is a common phenomenon in the Turkish media that affects in particular journalists and reporters who fear to be fired. The European Commission has reported that several journalists have lost their jobs for writing articles openly critical of the government.

“The government interpretation of freedom of speech is becoming sharper and sharper by time. If you do not share the agenda, discourse and views of the government, then you do not have space in the media to express them”, affirms Emre.

Turkey was placed near the bottom (154 of 179 countries) of the World Press Freedom index and labelled the world's biggest prison for journalists last year by Reporters without Borders.

Some TV channels did broadcast the Gezi protest images, such as Halk TV which belongs to the opposition political party (CHP). However, the Turkish public watchdog has fined these channels for "harming the physical, moral and mental development of children and young people" by broadcasting coverage of the Gezi Park protests.



In this case, as in the Arab protests, social media has shown to be the key channel used to report and find out what was happening in Turkey.

"The social media was very useful since the beginning. After the first attack we shared information about "where the police is", "which way is safe" and "where to reunite". In the first 5-6 days the news about Gezi park were only in the social media", explains Ufuk Tanişan, who has been protesting in Gezi Park every day.

On the first night, more than 3,000 tweets per minute were sent about the protests, according to a study by New York University's Social Media and Political Participation Laboratory.

The great influence of social media was also shown when a campaign was launched on Twitter to raise money for a full-page ad to call for support in *The New York Times*. More than \$50,000 was collected in 21 hours and the ad was published in the newspaper on 7

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June.

The discourse of the government has been very critical towards social media. Erdogan defined it as “the biggest menace to society” and protesters were detained for posting “misinformation” via Twitter.

People in Turkey have turned to social media, and alternative and independent sources to inform themselves, such as [Bianet](#) , an activist media organisation with a version in English, and [What is happening in Istanbul?](#) , a website that was created by a group of activists in Gezi. This website aims “to provide up to date and verified information on the events in Istanbul as the majority of Turkish mainstream media continues to either ignore the mass movement that we’re witnessing on the streets of Istanbul, or distort the facts”.

Ceren highlights that “one of the positive gains of the Gezi resistance is that people are more conscious about the media in the country and that small and independent media outlets will gain more importance in the near future”.