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The evolution of political culture in Turkey: The transformative role of mass media

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Abstract

This article explores complexities in the evolution of political culture in Turkey that emphasize the transformative and reciprocal role of mass media throughout distinct historical periods. Tracing developments from the late Ottoman era through the early Republican modernization, the multiparty democratic transitions, periods of military intervention and the current digital landscape, the study places media as both a mirror and an engine of political change. The application of foundational theories of political culture (Almond and Verba; Inglehart) and media studies (agenda-setting, framing, media dependency), it demonstrates how Turkish political culture has oscillated between authoritarianism and pluralism, secular nationalism and religious conservatism with mass media mediated and amplified these tensions. During the early Republic, state-controlled media outlets propagated secular and nationalist values but subsequent media encouraged liberalization and privatization. Which exacerbates ideological contestation and oligarchic control. The proliferation of digital media in the 21st century enabled new forms of civic engagement and opposition but this advancement heightened polarization and facilitated digital authoritarianism through surveillance and content manipulation. The paper contends that Turkish media has actively influenced civic identities, behaviours and the boundaries of public discourse rather than just functioning as a passive channel that oscillates between promoting democratization and reinforcing hegemonic control. In the end, the Turkish experience underscores that media's impact on political culture is contingent on shifting power dynamics, legal institutions and technical systems. The study provides extensive insights for comparative research that emphasises the crucial role of media in conflicts regarding democracy, identity and authority in transitional countries.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, political culture, mass media, populism, post-structuralism

Introduction

The evolution of political culture in Turkey presents a complex and dynamic tableau influenced by historical disruption, ideological contestations and sociopolitical transformations. Turkey's political culture has undergone continuous transformation spanning from the late Ottoman period through the secular reforms of the early Republic, from single party republic to the multiparty democratic experiments, military interventions and the contemporary landscape characterise by divided populism and digital activism. The development is fundamentally shaped by media which serves as reflection of societal sentiments and a significant influencer of political norms, values and identities.

Political culture in a wide sense has the constellation of attitudes, beliefs, emotional affiliations and behavioural patterns that individuals and groups possess toward political institutions, authority, participation and legitimacy. It functions as the psychological foundation upon which political systems evolve and progress. Turkey's political culture has oscillated between authoritarian statism and democratic pluralism as well as secular nationalism and religious conservatism that reflects the contradictions embedded in its distinct sociohistorical trajectory. Mass media including early print publications and state-controlled radio to satellite television and contemporary social media platforms have not only reported on these transformations but have also actively influenced them. The media have supported and challenged prevailing political order through agenda-setting, framing, censorship, propaganda and digital mobilisation.

This study seeks to examine the reciprocal and transformational link between political culture and mass media within the Turkish setting. This paper enquires how the media has impacted the development and evolution of political culture in Turkey over various historical epochs. The research employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates political theory, media studies and historical analysis. It positions the media not only a communication apparatus but also a political entity intertwined with power dynamics, ideological constructions and civic struggles.

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Although early media supported the nation-building objectives of the Republic, the liberalisation of the press in the 1980s and the emergence of digital platforms in the 21st century introduced new dynamics of contestation, fragmentation and participation.

This research work posits that mass media in Turkey have been both a producer and a product of political culture that oscillates between governmental control and public expression while changing with Turkey's intricate political history. Comprehending this relationship is crucial for understanding the challenges of democratisation, civic participation and ideological polarisation in the modern Turkish political landscape.

Theoretical Framework: Political Culture and Media Influence

An extensive theoretical framework is essential to examine the evolution of political culture in Turkey through the lens of mass media. This section delineates the key conceptual instrument from political science and media studies that underpin the analysis.

Political Culture Theory

The notion of political culture started to get significant due to the foundational research of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in *The Civic Culture* (1963). They introduced classification of political cultures as parochial, subject and participant. In parochial culture, individuals are largely disengaged in politics in subject culture, they possess awareness but remain passive while in a participant culture, citizens are actively engaged. These categories provide a framework for comprehending the diverse levels of civic orientation and state-society interactions in Turkey across historical periods.

Almond and Verba's was augmented by Ronald Inglehart who delineated the difference between materialist and post-materialist values by emphasising generational changes in political perspectives. The Turkish situation exhibits the oscillation between authoritarian and participatory tendencies often influenced by regime changes, ideological polarisation and generational transitions which may be examined within this matrix.

Furthermore, post-structuralist theorists like Michel Foucault and Ernesto Laclau contend that political culture is a collection of values and a discursive production influenced by power/knowledge regimes. From this perspective, political identities and norms are dynamic, shaped by hegemonic contest over meaning often mediated by language, symbols and media representations.

Mass Media Theories

In the formation and propagation of political culture, the mass media contributes essential role. Classical media theories like agenda-setting contend that while media may not determine individual opinions but it profoundly affects the subject of public discourse ^[1]. This phenomenon is especially evident in Turkey where specific issues like Kurdish rights, military operations and corruption are either emphasised or suppressed depend on media ownership and political affiliation.

Framing theory is intricately linked to the notion that media frames influence audience perceptions by the selection and accentuation of certain aspects of a narrative ^[2]. During the Gezi Park demonstrations, pro-government media characterised the protestors as terrorists or foreign agents but independent digital outlets portrayed them as defenders of democracy and civil rights. The frame therefore serves as a tool for the contestation and reproduction of political culture.

Media dependency theory emphasises another aspect that public reliance on media for information intensifies during moments of political uncertainty or crisis which are often evident in Turkish political life ^[3]. This theory is especially valuable for comprehending the significant effect of state-controlled media during military coups and elections. Finally, post-structuralist media studies propose that the media functions not as a neutral conduit but as a performative apparatus that constructs reality through repetition, spectacle and discourse. In this regard, the mass media in Turkey have significantly influenced the formation of political imaginaries from the Kemalist ideal citizen to the devout conservative to the digital activist thereby actively creating political culture in terms of subjectivity and symbolism.

Integrating frameworks in the Turkish context

This study examines how mass media in Turkey has mirrored and influenced transformations in political culture from the state-sponsored secular nationalism of the early republic to the populist conservatism of the AKP era to the disjointed algorithm-driven public sphere of the digital age. It does not consider the media just as a communication institution but also as a political actor positioned at the convergence of government, civil society and global technological transformations.

Historical development of political culture in Turkey

To understand the evolution of Turkey's political culture, it requires a diachronic approach that delineates the institutional, ideological and communicative transformations from the late Ottoman Empire to the establishment of the modern Republic and into the present day. At every historical juncture, the mass media both illustrated and mediated significant changes in political orientation, state-society dynamics and civic participation.

Late Ottoman and Early Republican Period

The late Ottoman Empire was characterised by a transition from imperial absolutism to constitutional experimentation that was catalysed by both internal reform movements and external pressures. The Tanzimat reforms (1839-1876) were a pivotal period in the centralization of state authority and the bureaucratisation of governance which also fostered the emergence of a proto-political culture focused on legal equality, administrative rationalisation and civic identity. The Young Ottomans and Young Turks, two intellectual movements that critiqued the empire's stagnations employed newly established print media particularly

¹Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176-177.

²Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 52.

³Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach and Melvin L. DeFleur, "A Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects," *Communication Research* 3, no. 1 (1976): 3-5.

newspapers like *Tercüman-ı Ahvâl* (1860) and *Tasvir-i Efkâr* to disseminate ideas of constitutionalism, public opinion (*efkâr-ı umumî*) and national sovereignty. These publications constituted as first instrument for political socialisation and mass mobilisation thereby establishing the foundation for modern Turkish political culture [4]. The formation of Turkish Republic in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk fundamentally transformed political culture through a vigorous top-down modernization and secularization initiatives. Atatürk's concept of the 'new citizen' lies on secular, rational and devoted to the nation-state was disseminated through a nascent state-controlled media apparatus. Institutions like *Anadolu Ajansı* (1920) and the newspaper *Hakimiyet-i Milliye* served as ideological instruments of the single-party regime (1923-1946). These institutions promoted Republican nationalism Westernization and civic obedience [5].

In order to consolidate state ideology through the aural dissemination of government policies, cultural codes and national celebrations, TRT (*Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu*) formally introduced radio transmission in 1927 [6]. This era was characterized by a parochial-subject political culture as defined by Almond and Verba in which the populace was mostly passive and the political elites were seen as the only legitimate actors in determining national fate. The public realm was rigorously regulated and dissented views were suppressed under the pretext of national cohesion.

Multiparty Period and Political Polarization (1950-1980)

The transition from single party to a multiparty system in 1946 which culminated in the triumph of Democrat Party's (DP) in 1950. This change is considered to be a fundamental rupture in Turkish political culture. It was the first time that political participation was extended meaningfully to the rural and conservative segments of society which resulted in the introduction of a culture that put greater emphasis on participant-oriented culture. The DP utilized radio and the press as instruments for mass appeal but the liberalization of the media sector resulted in a partial diversification of political narratives [7]. Newspapers such as *Hürriyet* (1948) and *Milliyet* (1950) began appealing to wider audiences with more populist approach. However, the expansion of political participation also unleashed ideological polarization. The 1960s and 1970s saw the proliferation of political parties throughout the ideological spectrum from the socialist left to Islamist right and the media landscape became more politicised. Publications like *Cumhuriyet* aligned with Kemalist-secular elites but *Tercüman* and *Yeni Asya* reflected center-right and religious-conservative worldviews [8].

Television was introduced in Turkey in the late 1960s and its operation was remained under stringent state supervision

through TRT which functioned as an ideological medium for government policies and nationalist propaganda. Despite limited access, televised speeches, documentaries and cultural programs subtly contributed to the formation of national consciousness often marginalising ethnic, religious or ideological dissent. This period had recurrent military interventions which transformed political norms and solidified a culture of deference to military authority particularly in 1960 and 1971. The media was often restricted or co-opted throughout these periods which resulted in variable degrees of civic freedom and political engagement. According to Şerif Mardin, Turkey's political culture is ensnared in a center-periphery dynamics. The secular elite in the core seeks to mitigate the growing influence of conservative and Islamist groups on the periphery through legal constraints and symbolic means [9]. The multiparty period encouraged more public participation and ideological plurality. In contrary, it culminated significant political divisions and resulted in instances of authoritarian regression. The media during this period oscillated between liberal openness and state-imposed conformity hence encourage a fragmented and unstable political culture.

The 1980 Coup and Media Reconfiguration

General Kenan Evren's orchestrations of the 1980 military coup constituted a significant juncture in Turkish political history. It aimed to transform political culture by the elimination of ideological extremism and fostered a regulated conception of national unity. All political parties were prohibited and media outlets were subjected to stringent surveillance. TRT once again became the primary platform for national communication, now infused with the junta's discourse of depoliticization, economic liberalization and patriotic discipline [10]. While political culture was forcibly 'neutralized' in the public sphere, the 1980s paradoxically witnessed a significant liberalization of the economic and media sectors. Following Turgut Özal's ascendancy to prominence in the mid-1980s, private broadcasting and commercial newspapers expanded tremendously. Channels like Star TV (1990) and Show TV (1991) dismantled the TRT monopoly. These emerging channels introduced entertainment-driven, consumerist media culture [11]. This liberalization did not necessarily democratise political culture rather fostered a new triangle of media-politics-business where conglomerates like Doğan had immense influence over electoral rhetorics and policy narratives. The historical trajectory outlined above reveals that Turkey's political culture has never been static. It has evolved from a paradigm of passive subjecthood under strong state control to one characterised by a pluralistic and often polarised political engagement that began as cohesive nationalist discourse and evolving into a contested and fragmented political sphere. Mass media has significantly participated in all phases, not only in reporting events but also in molding ideologies, reinforcing hierarchies and opening spaces for dissent.

⁴Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, *Osmanlı'da Bilim ve Teknoloji* (İstanbul: IRCICA, 2004), 258-60.

⁵Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993), 123-27.

⁶Nilüfer Timisi, *Radyo ve Demokrasi: Türkiye'de Radyo Yayıncılığı ve Siyasal Katılım* (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 1998), 34-38.

⁷Kemal HKarpat, *Turkey's Politics: The Transition to a Multi-Party System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 213-20.

⁸Zehra F. Arat, *Political Culture and Democracy in Turkey* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 91-94.

⁹Şerif Mardin, "Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?" *Daedalus* 102, no. 1 (1973): 169-190.

¹⁰Metin Heper and Ahmet Evrim, eds., *State, Democracy and the Military: Turkey in the 1980s* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 47-50.

¹¹Barış Çoban, *Medya ve İktidar: Türkiye'de Medya Siyasetlişkisi* (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2012), 88-92.

Mass media as a political actor in late 20th century turkey

The second half of the 20th century constituted a pivotal era for Turkish mass media. It functioned as both a communication medium and an active political actor intricately intertwined with power structures, ideological conflicts and evolving state-society dynamics. Especially from the post-coup 1980s until the late 1990s, the Turkish media underwent a dual transformation. It transformed from a state-controlled ideological apparatus to a privatised but politicised instrument of persuasion. During this transitional period, the media both reflected and shaped political culture, oscillating between liberalization and instrumentalization, freedom and dependency.

Post-1980 Coup: Depoliticization and State Monopoly

The 1980 military coup was a calculated initiatives by the Turkish Armed Forces to recalibrate the nation's political culture via the imposition of depoliticization, the suppression of ideological extremism and reestablishment of state supremacy over civil society. The National Security Council (MGK) enacted strict censorship regulations and reinstated the TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) as the exclusive and centralized media entity^[12]. The TRT broadcasts were rigorously scrutinized and ideologically sanitized that emphasise the narratives of national unity, development and state legitimacy.

This supervision extended beyond content regulation. It aimed to redefine the media-consumer dynamics, encourage depoliticised citizenry characterised by passive consumption and nationalistic homogeneity^[13]. Through this context, political communication via media was drastically curtailed and civic engagement was confined to what the state considered permissible. However, the uniformity of this media regime began to deteriorate from the mid-1980s primary as a result of the economic liberalisation measures implemented by Prime Minister Turgut Özal. Emphasizing privatisation and open markets, Özal encouraged the entry of private capital into the media sector, establishing the groundwork for a commercially competitive but politically compromised media ecosystem^[14].

Media Liberalisation and the rise of oligarchic ownership

The early 1990s saw a significant transformation in Turkish media with the advent of private broadcasting. During the year 1990, Magic Box/Star One became Turkey's first private commercial TV channel which caused a disruption in the monopoly held by TRT. This event also heralded a new media epoch that was defined by sensationalism, entertainment and political satire^[15]. Newspapers such as Sabah, Hürriyet and Milliyet targeted broad audiences by merging tabloid forms with ideological affiliations, therefore, effectively intertwining business motives with political objectives. Despite seemingly a progression towards democratisation, this liberalisation paradoxically

entrenched new forms of political dependency. Media ownership increasingly concentrated among substantial holding companies (e.g., Doğan Group, Uzan Group, Çukurova Holding) many of which were immensely involved in government contracts, tenders and regulatory negotiations^[16]. As a consequence of this, journalist often compromised their editorial independence in order to preserve amicable connections with political elites. This period also witnessed the consolidation of media-politics-capital triads. Media barons exerted excessive influence over public opinion while collaborating with ruling parties for the purpose of gaining monetary benefits. An illustrative instance was the intimate association between Prime Minister Tansu Çiller and various media conglomerates during the 1990s resulted in selectively favourable coverage and deliberate suppression of oppositional voices^[17].

The media as ideological battleground in the 1990s

The decades of 1990s were characterised by rising ideological polarisation and the media played pivotal role in both the creation of political tensions and its amplification. The emergence of political Islam particularly through the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*) under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan challenged the secular establishment and unsettled the Kemalist bureaucracy. In response, media outlets became instruments of ideological combat. The newspapers inclined to secularism like *Cumhuriyet* and *Radikal* defended the Republican order. In the same way, conservative and Islamist-leaning media outlets such as *Yeni Şafak* and *Zaman* promoted alternative visions of morality, governance and civil society^[18]. A critical turning point came with the 'Postmodern Coup' of February 28, 1997 when the Turkish military with the support of secular media orchestrated a memorandum process in order to oust the Welfare Party-led coalition government. This event marked a significant turning point. During this period, mainstream newspapers including Hürriyet and Milliyet actively campaigned against the Islamist administration. They published daily headlines that delegitimised Erbakan's leadership and reproduced military talking points^[19]. Television coverage framed Islamists as a threat to democracy which resulted in the creation of a discursive environment. This atmosphere was favourable to involvement of elite. In this sense, mass media functioned as a proxy of military and bureaucratic power not as a neutral democratic forum.

Simultaneously, alternative media spaces emerged in response to growing censorship and mainstream bias. Kurdish publications, socialist magazines and feminist periodicals sought to carve up niches in society where under-represented groups could publish and debate the status Quo. The vulnerable situation of media plurality under an authoritarian regime was exposed, however, when several of these outlets were subjected to physical

¹²Nilüfer Timisi, *Radyo ve Demokrasi* (Ankara: İmgeKitabevi, 1998), 91-93.

¹³Ayşe Çavdar and Pelin Tan, *Türkiye'de Medya ve İktidar* (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2004), 65-70.

¹⁴Heper and Evin, *State, Democracy and the Military*, 123-26.

¹⁵Esra Arsan, "Turkey's Media Ownership and Its Effects on Journalism," *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012): 647-661.

¹⁶Barış Çoban, *Medya ve İktidar* (İstanbul: AyrıntıYayınları, 2012), 112-118.

¹⁷Zehra F. Arat, *Politics and the Media in Turkey: A Relationship of Dependency* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 155-58.

¹⁸Ece Temelkuran, *İçKitabı* (İstanbul: Everest Yayınları, 2008), 38-45.

¹⁹Cengiz Çandar, "Postmodern Darbe ve Medya," in 28 Şubat ve Medya, ed. Ruşen Çakır (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 1999), 27-43.

repression, forced shutdowns or legal prosecution ^[20].

The Media's Role in Shaping Late 20th Century Political Culture

The Turkish media had evolved into an influential but ambivalent institution by the late 1990s. It had facilitated to expand political awareness and diversify ideological discourse but also opened the door to more manipulation, repression and elite capture. During this period, political culture was characterised by three main trends: (a) A growing cynicism toward political elites and media narratives, (b) A more fragmentation of civic identity along ideological and sectarian lines, (c) Limited but persistent attempts at grassroots political participation particularly through new forms of civic associations and independent journalism.

Thus, the Turkish media of the late 20th century were essential in creating political meaning as well as transmitting political information. It laid the framework for digitally mediated culture of 21st century by influencing people's relationship with the state, understanding of national issues and ideological positioning.

Digital Media and the Reshaping of Political Culture (2000-Present)

The dawn of the 21st century introduced a profound transformation in Turkey's political communication landscape. The inception of Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the commencement of the digital media revolutionised political communication. Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP restructured state-media relations and redefined the contours of political culture by embedding media strategy into its governance paradigm. The expansion of the internet, social media platforms and digital journalism has stimulated new kind of political engagement, resistance and surveillance. This section examines the transformation of Turkish political culture during the last two decades due to media that facilitate both authoritarian consolidation and grassroots mobilization.

Media capture and the construction of a new hegemony

The media environment was systematically restructured after the AKP's 2002 election triumph. The AKP led government first took advantage of the public's discontent with old secular elite and their associated media houses by deliberated encouragement of the expansion of pro-government media outlets like *Yeni Şafak*, *Sabah* and *A Haber* ^[21]. The Turkish government enable the transition of media ownership from secular-liberal corporations to conservative-populist and pro-government media outlets by using a combination of legal mechanisms, state tenders, advertising budgets and regulatory instruments which reduces the influence of secular-liberal conglomerates like the *Doğan Group* and enhance impact of politically loyal business groups like the *Türkuvaz Media Group* ^[22]. This change contributed to establish a dominant narrative in the

media that mirrored the AKP's conservative populism, Islamic morality and Turkish nationalism ideology. Critical voices were marginalised as news coverage was progressively skewed to support *Erdoğan's* charismatic leadership ^[23]. The AKP's successful use of media to project a populist ethos depicts itself as the authentic voice of 'the people' against an elitist and corrupt establishment that reflects a deeper transformation in political culture to emphasise identity politics over institutional pluralism.

The rise of social media and digital counter publics

The surge in accessibility to the internet in Turkey substantially transformed the information ecosystem from less than 20% penetration in 2004 to more than 75% by 2020. Facebook, Twitter (now X), YouTube and Instagram like digital platforms provide pivotal arena for political discourse, satire and mobilization especially among urban youth, minorities and oppositional actors ^[24]. The obvious example of this transformation occurred during the Gezi Park protests in June 2013 which started as a small environmental sit-in and escalated into a nationwide anti-government insurrection. Protesters used social media to organize action and challenge the silence or misrepresentation of mainstream media. The phrase 'The revolution will not be televised' became emblematic when state-aligned networks broadcast documentaries or soap operas during mass demonstrations ^[25]. Hashtags such as #direngezi and #HerYerTaksim trended globally that shows the efficiency and use of digital platforms as counter-hegemonic public spheres ^[26].

On the other hand, the state's surveillance and persecution became more severe after Gezi demonstration. The AKP swiftly enacted measures to criminalize online dissent, expand the legal definition of 'terrorist propaganda' and impose metadata retention requirement. A Directorate of Communications was established under the presidency to monitor digital discourse and regulatory bodies such as BTK (Information and Communication Technologies Authority) were granted extensive powers to block websites, monitor IP addresses and restrict content ^[27]. By 2021, more than 450,000 websites had been prohibited and thousands of social media users encountered prosecution for defaming the president or disseminating 'fakes information' ^[28].

From participatory culture to algorithmic fragmentation

The monetisation of attention and algorithmic design have steadily posed new obstacles to political culture. The digital platforms initially enhanced participation for marginalized voices. Turkish social media users increasingly inhabit ideologically homogeneous digital bubbles where

²³Cihan Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 139-146.

²⁴Yasemin İnceoğlu and Yaman Akdeniz, "Social Media and the Gezi Protests," *Global Media Journal-TR Edition* 4, no. 8 (2014): 11-23.

²⁵Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 126-29.

²⁶Göle, "Gezi-Anatomy of a Public Square Movement," *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 3 (2013): 7-14.

²⁷Engin Önder, "Turkey's Digital Censorship Infrastructure," *Index on Censorship* 45, no. 4 (2016): 18-25.

²⁸IFEX, "Turkey: Internet Censorship Expands," April 2021.

²⁰Ahmet İnsel, "Freedom of the Press in Turkey: The Limits of Tolerance," *Le Monde Diplomatique Turkish Edition*, April 2000.

²¹Ayşe Çavdar, "AKP ve Medya İlişkileri," *Birikim*, no. 282 (2013): 19-23.

²²Ceren Sözeri, "Medya Mülkiyeti ve Siyasalİktidar," *TeorikBakış*, no. 5 (2015): 77-90.

algorithms amplify partisan content and discourage deliberative engagement^[29]. This has exacerbated emotional polarization and reinforced echo chambers rather than promote democratic dialogue. The AKP, meanwhile, has modified its digital approach by deploying troll armies, bot networks and orchestrated propaganda campaigns. Research has documented the organised dissemination of pro-government hashtags, character assassinations of dissidents and fabrication of narratives intended aimed at delegitimize opposition figures and civil society actors^[30]. The digital sphere, formerly a domain of resistance, has transformed into a battleground of psychological warfare that undermined the democratic potential of online media. Concurrently, independent digital journalism has risen in importance via platforms like as *Medyascope*, *Diken*, *Bianet* and *GazeteDuvar*. These platforms use YouTube, podcasts and social media to circumvent restrictions and maintain investigative journalism. Despite being underfunded and legally precarious, such media serve as essential nodes in Turkey's fractured public sphere^[31].

Political culture in the age of digital authoritarianism

Today, Turkey exemplifies as a paradigm of 'digital authoritarianism' where advanced technologies are used to create an illusion of pluralism while suppressing dissent^[32]. Political culture under these circumstances is influenced by contradictory forces that increase civic awareness and expressive engagement juxtapose with widespread fear, surveillance and cynicism. Polling statistics from KONDA and MetroPoll indicate that younger voters exhibit significant scepticism towards state narratives, prioritised autonomy and prefer to get information from influencers and independent platforms rather than traditional news^[33]. This digitally native political generation encounters structural obstacles such as unemployment, economic instability and legal intimidation. In this context, 'resigned activism' emerges as dominant cultural paradigm characterised by sarcasm, satire and passive resistance rather than institutional engagement^[34]. The long-term consequences of this transition are undetermined; however, it indicates a profound transformation in the relationship between Turkish people and politics, authority and the public sphere.

Evaluation: Media's role in transforming political culture

The preceding historical and theoretical analysis demonstrates that mass media in Turkey has been far more than a vehicle for communication; it has operated as a key institution of political socialization, ideological contestation

and civic transformation. Evaluating its role requires assessing both its structural position within political power dynamics and its discursive capacity to shape perceptions, behaviours and identities across different epochs.

Media as a producer of political meaning

In contemporary Turkey, the mass media have constructed and contested political attitudes rather than simply expressing them. In the early Republican period, media served as an instrument for state-led modernisation. The mass media also promoted secular nationalism and civic discipline in accordance with Kemalist doctrine. This phenomenon developed a subject-orientated political culture in which political participation was minimal and state legitimacy was unquestioned^[35]. After the introduction of multiparty political system and media liberalization, new narratives emerged in Turkey that enabled political competition, ideological differentiation and the formation of participatory identities. This was, however, followed by polarization and biased media institutions that intensified ideological divisions and diminished faith in media neutrality. As media evolved into a battleground for ideological conflict, especially during the 1990s, it further solidified identity-based politics that reinforce divisions instead promote deliberative engagement^[36].

Since 2000, new media has profoundly transformed public communication. It provides democratic channel to access political discourse and contributed to the fragmentation of the public sphere. The emergence of counter-publics during the Gezi Park protests created new opportunities for civic engagement and political criticism. However, these advancements have been increasingly threatened by state co-optation, algorithmic manipulation and digital repression^[37]. Thus, the media's revolutionary influences are twofold: it has facilitated moments of pluralistic awakening while also facilitating the consolidation of authoritarian hegemony.

Impact on Civic Behaviour and Political Participation

Media can directly influence political participation through dissemination of information. Beyond the dissemination of information, it can determine the kinds of political participation that are considered acceptable, feasible and desirable. In the single-party and military-intervention periods, media perpetuated passivity by excluding criticism and glorifying authority. On the other hand, the liberalised media of the 90s fostered a spectator democracy, where informed individuals were rendered politically powerless as a result of institutionalised corruption and media-political collaboration^[38]. Online petition, Hashtag campaigns, live streamed demonstrations and online political forums are few examples for new forms of engagement made possible by the digital era. These digital behaviours have redefined the concept of citizenship, shifted from institutional engagement (e.g., voting, party affiliation) to networked activism and identity expression^[39]. Particularly among Turkish

²⁹Suncem Koçer and Aslı Tunç, "Algorithmic Polarization and Political Disinformation," *Journal of Digital Media Studies* 8, no. 1 (2022): 44-58.

³⁰Yaman Akdeniz and Kerem Altıparmak, "Internet Censorship in Turkey," *Freedom House Report* (2020).

³¹Arzu Geybullayeva, "Turkey's Independent Media Are Surviving Online, But Barely," *Global Voices*, March 15, 2021.

³²Steven Feldstein, *The Rise of Digital Repression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 89-92.

³³KONDA Research, *Youth in Turkey 2021 Report*, accessed May 2022.

³⁴Ayça Alemdaroğlu and Alev Yıldız, "Youth, Disillusionment and Political Inaction in Turkey," *Middle East Critique* 29, no. 1 (2020): 85-102.

³⁵Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, 125.

³⁶Zehra Arat, *Democracy and Human Rights in Developing Countries* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1991), 165-170.

³⁷Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*, 203-08.

³⁸Esra Arsan, "The Death of Investigative Journalism in Turkey," *Global Media Journal-TR Edition* 5, no. 1 (2015): 88-102.

³⁹Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 67-70.

millennials who consume little traditional news and engage politics primarily through social media. Here political culture is becoming more expressive, symbolic and transnational ^[40]. This change is not devoid of contradiction while digital platforms enhance exposure and swift mobilization. They also risk fostering ephemeral, low-impact participation, what some call 'clicktivism' which may lack the organizational depth necessary for sustained political change. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of surveillance, legal threats and digital harassment fosters a culture of self-censorship and psychological withdrawal, muting the emancipatory potential of digital participation.

The limits of media transformation in semi-authoritarian contexts

A central limitation of media's transformative capacity lies in the nature of Turkey's semi-authoritarian regime wherein formal democratic institutions exist but are systematically undermined by executive overreach, media capture and the criminalization of dissent ^[41]. In these situations, the media's capacity to function as a watchdog forum and educator is consequential diminished. Instead, it often transforms into a domain of hegemonic reproduction, whereby only certain narratives are elevated while dissenting voices are marginalised.

Furthermore, the metamorphosis of media is unevenly allocated. Rural and conservative demographics of Turkey, historically associated with the AKP, continue to endorse conventional pro-government media. In contrary, opposition and reformist factions of Turkish society are progressively relegated to digital media spheres. This imbalance fosters a divisive political culture in which people exist across substantially distinct symbolic realms, exhibiting little overlap or common reference points. Notwithstanding these limitations, opposition persists. Independent journalists, exiled media outlets, and civil society organisations persist in contesting prevailing narratives, enhancing media literacy, and fostering alternative political visions. The evolution of political culture is a continuous and contentious process influenced by technology advancements, generational changes, and persistent efforts for democratic revitalisation.

Conclusion

The commencement of political culture in Turkey is meticulously connected with the historical transformations and structural dynamics of Turkish media environment. From the bureaucratic centralism of late Ottoman period to the authoritarian modernization of the early Republic and from the pluralist yet polarized media of the multiparty era to the digitized battlefield of contemporary politics, mass media has functioned to depict reflection and impetus of political transformation. It influenced Turks' understanding of politics and their political thought, sentiments and behavior.

This paper argues that the media's function in Turkish political culture is formative and dialectical. During the early Republic period, media constitute as state-controlled mechanism of social engineering, instilling loyalty, secular

nationalism and compliance. The multiparty era facilitated ideological diversity and political communication. In other hand, media contributed in the commencement of polarization, populism and instability in the Turkish realm. In the last decades of 20th century, privatization in the media houses initiated new era of commercialization and oligarchic dominance that strengthen the amalgamation of political elites and media moguls while constricted the realm for independent journalism. The genesis of digital media in the 21st century introduced new dynamics that radically transformed the terrain of political communication. New media platforms accelerated the conception of alternative publics and participatory political cultures remarkably demonstrated during the Gezi Park protests. However, this potential has been increasingly undermined by the consolidation of digital authoritarianism: algorithmic surveillance, trolling, misinformation campaigns and the criminalization of dissent have been used as instruments of hegemonic domination. Thus, the vibrant and plural digital spaces become fragmented and volatile.

The prevailed political culture in Turkey reflects these contradictions. The period is characterised by escalated ideological polarization, profound skepticism toward mainstream media, reduced credibility of democratic institutions and a generational shift in civic engagement. Young Turks from urban areas, technical savvy and active participant in global space engage in political activity through formal institutions as well as memes, influencers, live streamers and other online forums. This transition indicates a redefinition of political participation in contemporary Turkey that emphasise identity performance, emotional affiliation and networked activism above party allegiance.

However, this paper has also emphasized the metamorphic role of media is not deterministic which is accommodated by power dynamics, institutional frameworks, statutory obligations and technological infrastructures. Media may foster democratic deliberation or exacerbate authoritarian dominance. It may amplify marginalized voices or reproduce dominant ideologies. Its influence on political culture is thus contingent enabled by structure, activated by agency and contested in everyday practice. The Turkish experience provides valuable insights for comparative political communication studies. It illustrates the concurrent evolution of media systems and tandem with political regimes. The dual capacity of communication technologies to both simultaneously empower and constrain and the ever-changing nature of political culture which is shaped via headlines, tweets, broadcasts and silences. As Turkey continues to navigate the tensions between democratic aspiration and authoritarian consolidation, the media will remain a pivotal arena in the struggle for the prevailing political culture and future direction.

In summary, the Turkish media has been essential in influencing the nation's political culture. It has served as both an instrument of control and a platform for liberation, facilitating elite-driven modernisation while also fostering populist narratives and digital opposition. The influence is seen in the changing forms of political identity, the methods and significance of involvement and the developing relationship between people and the state. Nevertheless, with increasing authoritarianism and digital fragmentation, the revolutionary power of media remains conditional, incomplete and always disputed.

⁴⁰ KONDA Research, *Youth in Turkey 2021 Report*.

⁴¹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 122-129.

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