

# The Gezi protests have shown the rampant institutional bias in Turkey's media which now leaves little room for facts.

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*The past month has seen a wave of protests across Turkey against the increasingly authoritarian government. **Burcu Baykurt** looks at media coverage of the protests, and finds that there are concerns from both sides that pro-government and alternative media are distorting and 're-constructing' the facts to favour the government or the protestors. Also, worrying are the increasing written, verbal, and online attacks on members of the foreign media. For now, there is little room in Turkey for professional journalism that reports as objectively as possible.*



From a couple dozen activists occupying Istanbul's Gezi Park to almost month-long protests in several cities, since May 27, Turkey has experienced an unprecedented wave of uprisings. While many pundits and analysts are tripping over each other to explain what those protests mean for democracy a la Turca, let's take a look at the media that have played a crucial role in the protests from the start. Not because social media have triumphed –again- in organizing masses and spreading information. They did, but that is not news anymore post-Arab Spring. The real story is that the media, and journalism to be more precise, have become the common foe that has united those on either side of the political polarisation the country has been going through. For the protestors, the media have emerged as one of the acute symptoms of their political concerns; for the government and AKP supporters, they have spurred, if not orchestrated, the uprisings.

Turkey is no stranger to mass demonstrations, but, for the first time, the multitude have actively made the media coverage of their grievances an essential part of their protest. In the most heated days of the Occupy Gezi demonstrations, the media blackout resulted in a popular Twitter hashtag, #korkakmedya (coward media) followed by regular sit-ins outside news organizations where hundreds chanted "sell-out media" and waved money. When the blackout ended and news organizations turned their cameras to the protests, however, people were not only discontented with the coverage, but they did not trust the "facts" – however contentious that term is in itself. For some, facts were tilting toward the official perspective, downplaying the levels of police crackdown and silencing alternative voices. For others, facts were being *re-constructed*, wrapped with the biases of their institutions.



Media in Taksim Square Credit: Eser Karadağ (Creative Commons BY ND)

Owned by a handful of conglomerates that constantly seek to [tender public contracts](#), many news organizations in Turkey can be identified as pro-government no matter what their political views are. After last week when [a former AKP deputy was appointed](#) as the new editor-in-chief of the seized *Akşam* newspaper, it is fair to say that pro-AKP news organizations now constitute the majority of the media landscape. There are always rough political lines that distinguish a liberal newspaper from a conservative one in almost every country, but now in Turkey those lines are so heavily drawn and so incestuously connected to the political and economic circles that many journalists (have to) throw their professional ethics out the window.

Hasan Cömert, who recently resigned from his job at *NTV* due to its coverage, or lack thereof, of the protests, [says](#) that when a journalist embarks on a career in Turkey, the first thing she has to learn is not how to report but where to draw the lines of her coverage. Although people in Turkey have known of [such media control](#) for a long time, with the Gezi protests those issues hit home. Birsen Altayli, a *Reuters* reporter who asked a question to Prime Minister Erdoğan during a live press meeting on TV that was not “pre-approved,” was immediately [accused of misinforming the public](#) – by asking follow-up questions apparently. Several journalists who tried to cover the protests in the streets have become [targets of violence](#) themselves as they were assaulted, verbally abused, and detained by police. (I’ve been trying to track and document violence against journalists in Turkey during the protests [here](#)).

Pro-government media, along with the official viewpoint that blamed the protests on a vaguely defined “[interest rate lobby](#)” and foreign media, soon started going after certain journalists. The daily *Takvim*, for example, [published](#) a fake interview with *CNN*’s Christiane Amanpour on its front page with a headline that read “Dirty Confession.” In the interview, Amanpour was quoted as reporting on Gezi protests “for money.” It was only a small disclaimer inside that revealed that the interview was a spoof. Last week, the news director of *Takvim* [petitioned an Istanbul prosecutor’s office accusing Amanpour](#) of “inciting hatred and enmity” and “praising the crime and the criminal” – infamous clauses of the Turkish Penal Code (TCK) that have enabled Turkey to jail the [most number of journalists in the world](#).

Slandering journalists took a different, and highly personal, turn when Ankara’s pro-AKP mayor, Melih Gökçek, [singled out Selin Girit](#) of the *BBC Turkish Service* as an “English spy” who was orchestrating the protests – because she was reporting on and quoting protestors in her coverage on Twitter. It was Gökçek’s “democratic reaction” to expose what journalists such as Girit were doing, and to rally his followers in popularizing hashtags on Twitter and bullying Girit for committing journalism. This week, Turkey’s deputy PM, Beşir Atalay, [was heard in a video](#), saying, “international press directed the episodes in Gezi Park,” and he did not fail to tie foreign media ownership to Jewish Diaspora.

Underlying the government officials’ attacks on the international media is their political manoeuvres to deflect the criticism that comes from their own political base. And it partly owes to the fact that some media’s reductive framing of “[Turkish spring](#)” was found to be offensive to AKP supporters. Erdoğan’s government is duly elected and quite popular, and the protestors have made it quite clear from the start that they are not seeking to overthrow the government.

It is, however, quite predictable for the media, and particularly the international media, to bury their own value judgments, ignorance, and routines into their coverage particularly when it comes to protests that are traditionally framed as “[a disruption to the norm](#).” Sometimes those frames evolve as the momentous protests transform into full-fledged movements, and sometimes the media’s interest is mostly limited to the “events” such as police crackdown or mass demonstrations – in Turkey’s case, for example, the media’s gaze has rarely turned from clashes in squares to the flourishing [neighbourhood forums](#) where people eagerly experiment with direct democracy.

The brutal reality about the media in and on Turkey is that room for professional journalism that dispassionately reports facts and earns people’s trust is quickly shrinking. Whether news comes from inside or outside, it is either laced with the institutional biases of news organizations, which are usually rooted in political and economic interests, or perceived as “manufactured” because a journalist is always assumed to be on one side of the political spectrum. In a way, Turkey’s case is not entirely different from many European countries and the United States that try to seek

the plurality of facts amidst the inflammatory voices of the biased media. In many of those countries, at least, there are some journalists who still aspire to reporting facts with objectivity even though most know that [it is never a reality](#). However, in Turkey's media environment, it seems that there is not much aspiration, expectation or encouragement left for "facts."

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

**Burcu Baykurt** – *Columbia University*

Burcu Baykurt is a Ph.D. student in Communications at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Previously, she studied Political Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London and completed her M.A. in Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University. She tweets as [@burcubaykurt](#).



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