

# The media and the failed coup in Turkey: Televised, Tweeted and FaceTimed, yet so 20th century

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The attempted coup on the night of 15 July 2016 in Turkey was my first ‘networked’ coup experience. It was a lovely summer evening, and I was enjoying a night out after work with friends when I got the news on one of my WhatsApp groups. It unfolded in front of my eyes on three screens: my TV, my tablet and my phone. It stirred early childhood memories of the 1980 military takeover declaration being read on the TV screen and a vivid memory of watching the so-called post-modern coup in 1997 on prime-time news.

Despite a seeming plurality of current affairs programmes, talk shows and prime-time news coverage and use of hashtags over the summer, the most pivotal questions continue to remain in the dark. But, it is believed that the attempt was an act of the movement headed by Fetullah Gülen, an Islamic cleric who has lived in the United States since 1999. The movement, which is now known as Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ), is believed to have infiltrated all sections of Turkish bureaucracy, including the army, over the course of the last 30 years. In 2014, it was declared to constitute a national security threat. The government has since fired thousands of police officers, prosecutors and judges whom it considered to be working for the movement. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) did not, however, always consider FETÖ to be a threat. Its media operated as a partisan pro-AKP media until 2013, when leaked tapes of a corruption scandal soured their relationship. The state of the media, especially in the second term of the AKP government, was yet another example of the intrinsic relationship between media barons and governments in Turkey. This complex relationship in the political communication domain has been marked with military interventions in the last 50 years and is filled with irony.

The night of the abortive coup was laden with contradictory trends in its unfolding media sphere, blending archaic measures such as taking over the state broadcaster Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) in Ankara, which stirred a feeling of time travel to the 1980s, and ‘FaceTiming’ the coup. I followed the social media timeline and chat threads until the early hours of the morning while I panicked over the sonic booms of jets flying low over my residential building. The next day, and in the many days that

followed, I was overwhelmed with keeping up with the rolling 24-hour news coverage on traditional, online and social media.

For many commentators, the use of the Internet made the main difference in the failed coup because we are living in times of 'cyber-power' and using it is more effective than capturing TV stations.<sup>1</sup> Jumping so quickly onto the 'digital media' bandwagon of a superficial analogue–digital dichotomy, however, does not do justice to the analysis of the complexity of the communication and media scene during and after the coup. The mediation of the abortive coup involved the use of both new and traditional media networks. Furthermore, the re-making of the media sphere in the post-coup context via the application of emergency rule measures demonstrates that old power structures are still in place regarding the hegemonic relationship between politicians and the media.

The first democratically elected government in Turkey was ousted by the first military intervention in 1960 and its leaders, indicted for abusing radio broadcasts for propaganda, among other accusations, were later executed. The TRT Corporation was founded in the post-coup context as an autonomous public broadcaster in 1964. It held the monopoly in broadcasting until 1990, but the second military intervention on 12 March 1971 repealed the TRT's autonomy and eventually turned it into a mouthpiece of the government.

The military coup of 12 September 1980 also held print and broadcasting media under tight control and the introduction of neoliberal economic policies after the coup paved the way for business elites, with investments in finance, banking and construction, to takeover media outlets to gain intellectual and political influence. The consolidation of ownership created a mutual dependency between the state and media. Journalistic values were jeopardized by clientelism as media owners became dependent on state loans and benefits. Hence, Turkey suffered some of the worst media freedom records in the 1980s and the 1990s.

On 28 February 1997, the Islamic-leaning democratically elected coalition partner, the Welfare Party, was ousted from the government after the National Security Council declared it to be a threat to national security. The party was the AKP's predecessor and was led by the late Necmettin Erbakan. The so-called 28 February process was labelled as a 'post-modern coup' and was considered to be the result of secular resistance from both the military and civic circles backed by the mainstream media, which were in the hands of the conglomerates. Many critical commentators at the time blamed the mainstream media for being statist and supportive of the status quo, which was under the influence of the military. When the AKP came to power in 2002, one of its missions was to minimize the hold of the military on democratic institutions.

In 2008, the AKP experienced a similar turn of events. The Constitutional Court levied on its leaders a heavy fine for anti-secular activity. Although the court did not ban the AKP, the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a champion of free speech when he first came to power, 'embarked on a systematic campaign to silence his opponents'.<sup>2</sup> He openly challenged the editorial policies of the media organizations which did not support AKP policies and called on the public 'not to read' such newspapers. He also embarked on establishing a media system known as the 'pool media', a pro-AKP media owned by pro-AKP businessmen.

Until the end of 2013, the pro-Gülen movement media outlets, notably newspapers such as *Zaman*, *Bugün* and *Taraf*, were considered to be part of the partisan media that

supported the AKP policies. The movement's media, now banned, have been instrumental in 'forming and manipulating a particular agenda by hiring journalists and academics, and provided them access to (often fabricated) state intelligence'.<sup>3</sup> *Taraf*, whose editors have since been jailed, particularly had a specific function in leaking the documents that triggered an investigation into the so-called secret criminal network, 'Ergenekon'. The case lasted for 9 years and, in 2013, officers, journalists, lawyers, generals and academics were found guilty of being members of the network and of plotting to overthrow the AKP government. The mission of *Taraf* during this period was to stir massive debate among media professionals about the ethics of dealing with leaked documents and journalistic responsibility.

The 'coalition' between the AKP and the Gülen movement broke up eventually at the end of 2013, when voice recordings of politicians, including the President, were leaked on the Internet, revealing one of the largest corruption scandals in modern Turkish history. Since then, a fight against the so-called 'parallel state' has been waged because the Erdoğan government believed that the Gülenists had leaked the recordings to topple their government. In that period, online media such as YouTube and Twitter were blocked several times and many journalists and editors of the newspaper, *Zaman*, were arrested.

In January 2014, the prosecutor of the corruption scandal, who also happened to be the prosecutor in the Ergenekon trial, was expelled from duty as part of the ongoing power play between the AKP and the Gülenists. In April, Turkey's highest appeals court 'overturned the convictions of 275 people, including senior military officers, accused of plotting a coup'. It turned out that the documents used as evidence in the trial were fabricated and the court could not establish the existence of the 'Ergenekon' criminal organization.<sup>4</sup> Since the last elections in November 2015, journalists and media outlets critical of AKP policies and President Erdoğan have come under increasing pressure. On occasions such as the bomb attacks in various parts of Turkey, social media access has been withheld or throttled as part of security measures.

The tables were turned on the night of 15 July coup attempt. President Erdoğan, who loathed Twitter, calling it a 'menace', and had openly criticized the people taking to the streets 3 years ago to protest at the Gezi Park events, calling them 'plunderers', resorted to online media broadcasts transmitted via CNN Türk screens. On that night, President Erdoğan addressed the nation through the CNN Türk editor's iPhone camera and microphone. Ironically, a licensee of CNN, CNN Türk belongs to the Doğan Media Group, on which Erdoğan had exerted drastic economic pressures, including levying heavy tax fines, since 2007 for being critical of AKP policies. Dire times necessitated a pragmatic approach for both media and politicians.

Indeed, the crucial point is certainly the fact that the putsch did not cut the Internet connection. It attempted to disrupt the wider telecommunications infrastructure and attacked the state-owned Turksat and privately owned Digiturk satellite communications networks. In Istanbul, a group of soldiers also attempted to takeover the private CNN Türk TV station and halt broadcasts. Instead, their attempt was broadcast live to millions of viewers. The Internet editors of CNN Türk later recalled<sup>5</sup> how they broadcast from five different floors of the channel's building and the Internet team distributed the live content on Facebook to hundreds of thousands of followers. Their videos on Facebook alone are estimated to have reached 8.5 million people. A survey of Tweets between 15

and 19 July<sup>6</sup> showed that there were nearly 20.5 million Tweets about the failed coup in Turkey.

President Erdoğan used his smartphone's FaceTime feature to ask Turks to 'go to the streets and give them their answer'. Crowds chanting 'God is great' followed his instructions. Erdoğan used his phone's digital media features because he did not have ready access to TV cameras. The use of FaceTime was labelled by CNN Türk as a 'world-wide journalistic achievement' and a 'call of democracy'. For techno-enthusiast commentators, the use of the Internet and social media 'reinforced democracy'<sup>7</sup> and curbed the power of the rogue soldiers that night. As one commentator on a Bloomberg blog put it, the messages of FaceTime, which were then amplified on social media channels, played a 'critical role in relaying – in real time – domestic and international support for the president and for Turkey's democratically and legitimately elected government'.<sup>8</sup>

However, it was not only the digital or telecommunication networks that spread Erdoğan's message. The call for taking to the streets was also delivered through the loudspeakers of mosques. A recent analysis of the online activity on social and digital media layered on the mosque networks<sup>9</sup> in Istanbul found that the mosques had played 'a significant role in mobilizing Turks who were against the coup', in addition to the digital media activity. Contrary to the general consensus about the role of social media such as Twitter and Facebook to 'save Erdoğan', it showed that President Erdoğan's speech was too late to mobilize people to his defence. The data retrieved in the study showed that some crowds were mobilized almost one-and-a-half hours before Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım and President Erdoğan made their appeals on live television. In addition to the mosque networks activated with *salah* prayers via loudspeakers, use of digital networks, including Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and SMSes by protestors, presented a bottom-up approach in organization and mobilization.

Within 10 days of the coup, people were invited via TV speeches or through direct SMSes to go out every night for 'democracy watches' all over the country. The watches culminated in a massive rally, organized by the President and attended by all the parties in the parliament, except the pro-Kurdish HDP (People's Democratic Party) on 7 August, known as the Yenikapı meeting. Yenikapı also reflected a political consensus for a 'unified Turkey' against military interventions.

A survey<sup>10</sup> conducted among 1853 participants from the 7 or 8 million people attending the democracy watches, however, showed that 62 per cent of the participants, most of whom were AKP supporters, said they were informed about the coup attempt on television, and 53 per cent said they decided to go out after President Erdoğan made a call on television. Only 9 per cent said they heard about it on social media, 1 per cent from the mosque and 24 per cent from their friends. There is a need to look more closely at the data presented by these two surveys to arrive at a clear analysis of the coup and the post-coup mobilization of the people, but traditional broadcast media seem to be more relevant in the maintenance of an 'imagined community' in times of crisis. The broadcast media, through commentators, editors, talk shows and so on also continued to place the conflicting messages received during a crisis in a meaningful framework, creating a sense of 'security' in a highly insecure setting.<sup>11</sup>

An analysis beyond a superficial digital versus analogue dichotomy is required to be able to make sense of the crackdown on media and journalists in the post-coup setting.

An emergency rule (*Olağanüstü Hâl Bölge Valiliği* (OHAL)) was declared on 20 July for 3 months. It may be renewed for up to a year, as President Erdoğan insinuated in a speech after the last security council meeting.

Reporters Sans Frontière's (RSF's) September 2016 report<sup>12</sup> on the state of the media in Turkey since the introduction of emergency rule divulges the extent of the purge in the media over the summer. On 27 July, a decree issued under the emergency rule ordered the shutting down of '45 newspapers, 16 TV channels, 23 radio stations, three news agencies and 15 magazines (plus 29 publishing houses) on suspicion of "collaborating" with the Gülen movement'. The RSF report estimated that in all, more than 100 newspapers, TV channels and radio stations had been shut down on the suspicion of their supposed links to the Gülen movement and 200 journalists had been jailed since mid-July. There are currently 101 journalists still in custody, ranking Turkey as 'the world's biggest prison for media personnel', a title the country has held since 2012. The purge is massive and is not limited to the pro-Gülen media outlets. On 29 September, the eighth executive decree of the emergency rule was issued, and it ordered the closing down of 20 pro-Kurdish, leftist and oppositional TV and radio channels and banned access to their websites.

In Turkey, military coups have always shaped the media scene and the democratic institutions that emerged after the intervention. The abortive coup attempt was no exception. But this time, digital and social media were also in the equation, challenging the existing power dynamics, catalysing bottom-up movements and new areas of control as well as struggle. We will soon bear witness to the making of a new media system; we just do not know how democratic, transparent and accountable it would be allowed to be. The coup may have been foiled, but many journalists, academics and members of the general public still fear that democracy might be suspended indefinitely under the emergency rule. The coup may have been televised, Tweeted and FaceTimed, yet its aftermath, in light of the latest crackdown, is still looking so 20th century. I am left with a feeling that not much has changed since my childhood.

## Notes

1. <https://medium.com/@thegrugq/cyberpower-crushes-coup-b247f3cca780#.y1r2vmv82>
2. *The New York Times*, 2012, 01, 05.
3. [http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/08/pre-coup-coup-and-the-media-intellectuals-in-turkey/#.V-\\_5t61wBLN](http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/08/pre-coup-coup-and-the-media-intellectuals-in-turkey/#.V-_5t61wBLN)
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9. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-09-14/how-turks-mobilized-against-coup>
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