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**THE POWER AND THE PROBLEMS OF THE MEDIA IN TURKEY AND  
POLITICAL-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF TURKISH MEDIA ELITES**

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**Abstract**

The media is one of the most important institutions in society. It is a reality that media play very substantial role in the production and social distribution of knowledge. In addition to that, mass media provides the greatest communication opportunities to the people. Also, contemporary media provides very distinctive weapons to obtain power, wealth and prestige in the society.

Is the media, especially Turkish media voice, eyes and ears of the public or is it voice and operating arms of powerful dominant groups in the society? Is it heard the voice of public to the political elites or is it the major and very affective weapons of politicians helping them by manipulating social-economical problems of society and canalizing the interest and energy of the public to different subjects? The major objective of this study is to search all these and this kind of questions, In addition to that, this paper will concentrate on the matter of homogeneity and social consensus among Turkish media elites Also, political identity and religious affiliations of Turkish media elites will be examined.

**Keywords:** Communication, Media, Turkish Media, Media Elites, Turkish Media Elites, Media and Politics, Political Elites, Second Government Or Other Government.

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## 1.A GENERAL VIEW ON MEDIA, ITS POWER AND INFLUENCE

The first and most primitive form of communication is body language. Human beings first used their body and non-verbal languages to manifest their sentiments and needs. As noted by Barrett and Braham (1995: 5-6), in spite of increasing sophistication and complexity of interaction between people, and technological inventions in communication technologies, this first form of communication has not lost its importance and validity today. It is the lifeblood of communication, especially interpersonal communication.

Of course interpersonal communication, local communication or regional communication are very important research topics for social scientists. Nevertheless, this research is a study of elites (Arslan, 1999) and for this reason it should be concerned with communication on a larger scale, in other words mass (public) communication. The modern mass media in Turkey will be the subject matter of this paper.

Mass media provides the greatest communication opportunities to the people and plays a very substantial role in the production and social distribution of knowledge. The term of media contains various kind of disclosures: television, radio, press (includes newspapers, journals and magazines) are the most influential mass media apparatus. As stressed by some scholars, media recreates, reshapes, reproduces and interprets the existing social forms, relations and order. They are not only the tools of entertainment but also one of the most effective ways of influencing and changing attitudes and behavior in individuals. The symbols, gestures, numbers, words, pictures, signs not only carry messages, but also they create and interpret the human world.

There are two opposing ideas about the influence of media: media are “passive transmitters” or “active interveners” in the shaping of messages. According to the followers of the idea of the “passive transmitters”, media are a “mirror to reality”. It reflects reality as objectively and impartially as possible free from any bias (Barrett & Braham, 1995: 70).

Marxist accounts argue that, the media is not free from bias which distorts objective reality. Media and their products are shaped by the ruling political and economic class. In Connell's words, the media is a kind of megaphone of ruling class ideas (ibid. 71). The power of the media is highly related to the power of contemporary ruling classes. As stated in the German Ideology by Marx and Engels (1970: 64) "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production". Also, Miliband and some other researchers argue that (Barrett & Braham, 1995: 54), "the function of mass media is to legitimize the state in capitalist society and, by extension, delegitimize those forces or groups that can be seen to be actively or potentially in opposition to the dominant interest".

Studies in semiology and linguistics on the mass media have brought new extensions to the Marxist approaches which are "Structuralist Studies", "Political Economy" and "Culturalist Studies". There are some theoretical differences between these paradigms. Structuralist accounts are frequently informed by Althusserian Marxism. It gives priority to ideology instead of the economic base of the mass media. Whereas, according to political economists, ideology, which is determined by the economic base is less important than economy in the cultural production process. Ownership and control of the mass media are two important factors that effect the ideology of media production.

Culturalist studies take the opposite view to economic reductionism. They reject the formulation of "base/superstructure" that tries to explain the relationship between ideas and material forces. Culturalists conceptualize the culture "as both the means and values which arise amongst the distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships" (Barrett & Braham, 1995: 76). Culturalists argue that the media is a powerful shaper of public consciousness and popular acquiescence.

The Marxist approach and the liberal approach have opposing views. The liberal tradition underestimates the impact of the media. As stated by Curran et al. (in Barrett & Braham, 1995; 63), "Marxist critiques have contributed to a growing recognition within empirical communication research that more attention needs to be paid to the influence of media on the ideological categories and frames of references through which people understand the world".

## 2. MEDIA AND POLITICS

Is the media voice, eyes and ears of the public or is it the voice and operating arm of powerful dominant groups in society? Is it the major and very effective weapon of politicians helping them by manipulating the socio-economic problems of society and canalizing the interest and energy of the public to different subjects? Different writers may give different answers to these questions, but in reality the media is extremely powerful and provides effective weapons to obtain power, wealth and prestige in society.

The relation between the media and politics (especially governmental elites) has a reciprocal character. The media supports political parties for two reasons: economic ties and ideological ties or both. The media may support political parties in several ways. Firstly, the media is highly influential in the process of elite circulation in general and political mobilization in particular. In a very basic situation, it may support a political party as the creator of public opinion by broadcasting its voice, policies and ideology. It may also serve a political party by attacking and being the opposing voice to combatant political parties. Also, political or government elites need the support of the media in the formation of popular majorities and to be successful in the decision making process.

For this invaluable service, when the political party comes to power, it opens all the channels of credit to the supporter media group, and makes the necessary legislative arrangements in favour of them. Furthermore, they can open the advertisement opportunities of the public sector to the media group which has supported them on very favorable terms.

Marxist analysts see the media as being locked into the power structure. They accept the media as the reproducer of the perspectives of dominant institutions. Governmental elites in particular have opportunities to put pressure on the media and to control them by using their political power. They may also attempt to restrict freedom of information by using the label of “secret” or reasons of “national security”. In addition, they may put pressure on television companies and forbid, reschedule or withdraw some programmes. This kind of restriction can be observed, not only in Turkey but in most other countries (Etzioni, 1993: 183-4).

According to some Marxist scholars “media portrayals of elections constitute dramatized rituals that legitimize the power structure in liberal democracies; voting is seen as an ideological tool that helps to sustain the myth of representative democracy, political equality and collective self determination” (Barrett & Braham, 1995: 62).

### **3. THE MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY**

Turkey is one of the most rapidly developing and urbanizing countries in the world. The latest technological developments and innovations can be seen in every part of the social fabric of contemporary Turkey. Parallel to this rapid development and urbanization, Turkey has lived through a very important media revolution through out the 1990s. Several international and hundreds of local and national television channels, and more than a thousand radio stations have been broadcasting in contemporary Turkey. According to the latest statistics (which were published by Ankara University, Faculty of Communication, Media Documentation Unit in July 1999), there are 3,500 printed media apparatuses (including daily-weekly-monthly newspapers, journals and magazines), 1056 radio stations and 280 television channels (230 local, 15 regional and 35 national) (Hurriyet Newspaper, 27.7.1999).

As in other countries (Curran et al. in Barrett & Braham, 1995: 57-58), usage of high technology has given to the media the opportunity of creating large scale mass audiences in Turkey. Urbanization and industrialization created a society that was volatile, unstable, rootless, alienated and innately susceptible to manipulation. Urbanized human beings become relatively defenseless, an easy prey to mass communications since they are no longer anchored in the network of social relations and stable, inherited values that characterize settled, rural communities.

As in some other countries, the media are predominantly owned and controlled either by large business groups or the state who dominate economic and political power in Turkey. As stressed by Necati Dogru one of the most effective Turkish columnists, the Turkish media are financially dependent not only on the state but also on the private entrepreneurs who are the owners of large scale capital (Nebiler, 1995: 56-7).

The political economy of the media is an important factor that has a significant influence on the outcomes of the mass media. The control of the economic dynamics of the media is highly related to the content of messages emanating from it. The meaning of messages is usually determined by the economic base of organizations. Advertisements are the lifeblood of the media, and organizations usually take into the account the needs and benefits of the advertiser.

The mass media have a great influence in changing knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings and behavior patterns of individuals. Individuals, social groups, organizations, social institutions, the whole society and culture can be affected by mass communications. The direction of this change can be either negative or positive. This depends on the conditions and controllers of the media. As McQuail argues (in Barrett & Braham, 1995: 96), in some circumstances the media play the role of the agent of de-socialization by challenging and disturbing the values held by parents, educators and other agents of social control.

The influence of the two largest media groups in Turkey the “Dogan Group” and “Sabah Group” are worth noting. These two groups exercise control over the most effective print or electronic media in Turkey. In fact more than half of the Turkish population are the audiences or readers of the products of these two media groups. Recently, Dogan Group and Sabah Group have merged their power under the umbrella of BIMAS and as a result have attained enormous power.

BIMAS media group play a very substantial role in Turkey in the late 1990s and wield much power over Turkish social and political life. This group owns the two most popular national and international television channels: Kanal-D (DTV) and ATV. Also, they are the owners of five of the largest and the most effective Turkish daily newspapers that are Hurriyet, Milliyet, Radikal, Sabah and Yeni Yuzyil. They also own or control approximately one hundred large or small scale journals, magazines and other daily or weekly papers, and many radio and television channels.

The BIMAS media group has had a widespread effect in Turkish politics in comparison with other Turkish elite groups through out the 1990s. They put massive pressure on the “Refah-yol” Islamist coalition government in the years of political crisis. In fact, they played a crucially

important part in abolishing the “Refah-yol” government. Also, the BIMAS group played a substantial role (formally and informally) in establishing the coalition government of the “Anasol-D”. They openly supported the parties represented in the coalition government and developed very friendly and interdependent relations with that government.

There are a couple of other relatively effective media institutions and media groups in Turkey. Nevertheless, their power is rather small in comparison with the BIMAS media group. However the “Cumhuriyet” newspaper must be mentioned: it was established in the first years of the Turkish Republic through the encouragement of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. It is the representative of a different kind of tradition amongst the media institutions, not only in Turkey but also in the world. It is a leftist intellectual paper and almost all of its columnists are amongst the most effective members of the Turkish media elite. It may be accepted as the most autonomous and rooted media institutions in Turkey. Its intellectual power is enormous when compared with its quantitative size.

There are about ten local, national and international state owned television and radio stations. Theoretically, all the state television and radio stations are independent and free from pressure by political elites. Nevertheless, the reality is different, and as in most European countries and the USA, they function as the operating arms of the political elites, particularly governmental political elites.

Also, almost every political or ideological group (from the Greywolves-Ulkucu Commandos to the radical islamists) have their own television channels, newspapers and journals depending on their size. The television channels TGRT, Kanal 7, Samanyolu TV, Mesaj TV and those newspapers Turkiye, Zaman, Milli Gazete, etc. are among the influential Islamist media organizations.

The mass media serves substantial and useful communication services to the people. However, it is not only a tool for communication but an important agent of socialization. As stressed by Scannell (1992, 13), the press and broadcasting are a part of the system of cultural production. They carry the cultural products into homes and living rooms. Nevertheless, there is the other side of the coin that the mass media may be used as a very powerful tool of propaganda or

brainwashing on a mass scale. The owner or controller of the media may bias the news and try to monopolize opinion and meaning. Also, the media may be used for cultural domination or as a threat to cultural identity. It may have some effect on the level of national cohesion.

In addition, the media may cause a collective reaction, like panic, riot or general public disorder. Also, provocative and ideological broadcasts of the media may encourage civil terrorism. “Istanbul-Gazi” and “Sivas-Madimak Oteli” cases carry very substantial examples about the role of the media on social panic and public disorder in society: Incomplete and misleading information caused widespread panic and civil disorder in Gazi in Istanbul in 1995. As a result of this provocative action, many people died or were injured.

Another example of the ideologically shaped content and provocative action of the media is the case of “Sivas-Madimak Hotel”: a group of Islamist militants organized civil disorder against the state and democracy. They incited the people about the cultural activities and festival, which was organized by mostly socialist and communist poets, artists, writers and scientists in memory of Pir Sultan Abdal (famous poet and cultural figure) in Sivas on 2 July 1993. They worked in co-operation with the local Islamist media. At the end of this civil terrorism and riot, the Madimak Hotel was set on fire and about forty leftist intellectuals were killed by the Islamist militants and mobs.

According to the presidents of the two most important Turkish media organizations- the Union of Turkish Journalists (Turkiye Gazeteciler Sendikasi) and the Association of Turkish Journalists (Turkiye Gazeteciler Cemiyeti)- the most important actual problems of the Turkish media are monopolization, anti-trade unionism and ethical corruption (the deviation from the ethics and values of media professionalism) (Nebiler, 1995: 19-22). According to them, monopolization may damage not only the freedom of the press, but also the job security of Turkish journalists, the ethical values of journalism and also democracy, because the freedom of the press is one of the most important principles of democracy. To Nail Gureli who is the president of the association of Turkish journalists, the freedom of the press is much more important than the individual autonomy of journalists because it involves the people’s right to learn about reality (Nebiler, 1995: 22).

The organizational structure of media institutions has significant effects on media outputs. Power and control are structured by the organizational hierarchy. Some media studies demonstrate that most media organizations are controlled indirectly via informal channels. Also, the power of the media is located at the top of the hierarchy of media organizations. As stressed by political economists, ownership and control of the media are important factors that affect the ideology of media production.

Nebiler (1995: 18) argues that about 70 % of the Turkish press is controlled by the associates of the BIMAS media group. This figure highlights the degree of monopolization in the Turkish media. It is also important to note that, these media groups not only work in the media sector, but also have interests in different sectors such as finance (insurance and banking), marketing, tourism, car industry, new technology etc. (Nebiler, 1995: 19). This may cause ethical corruption directly or indirectly.

As explained above the media is one of the most important institutions in society. If media owners and elites are so powerful, the identification of media elites is of great importance. Hence, a social portrait of contemporary Turkish media elites will be given in the remaining part of this chapter.

#### **4. RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS OF TURKISH MEDIA ELITES**

Religion is one of the most important social institutions. It plays a key role in the life of both individuals and societies. It is very sensitive to social reality and it may become a dangerous weapon in the hands of religious exploiters or clergy, as in Christianity in the Middle Ages and in many contemporary Muslim countries.

Turkey is a unique country in that it has a democratic political system, a republican regime and a secular state despite the fact that the large majority of its citizens are Moslems. As the result of a far seeing revolution, religion and politics were separated from each other by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as a major part of the Kemalist Turkish Revolution in the first quarter of the twentieth century. This revolution is usually known as “Laicism (or secularism)”. It can be called the first and the most important step in the direction of enlightenment in the Muslim world. As a result

of the Kemalist revolution, Turkey has taken a long distance on the road to democratization, rationalization, westernization and to becoming a European country.

**Table 1**  
Religious Belief of Turkish Media Elites

Religious Belief		Life After Death		Relation Between Religion and Politics	
	%		%		%
Very Strong	-	Exactly Believe	6.7	Totally Approve	3.3
Strong	10	Believe	16.7	Approve	3.3
Average	3.3	No Idea	10	No Idea	3.3
Little	40	Unbelieve	23.3	Against	23.3
No	46.7	Exactly Unbelieve	43.3	Totally Against	66.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 1** illustrates this argument. As in other Turkish elite groups, a large majority of media elites have little or no religious beliefs (Arslan, 1999: 143-4). Only 10 percent have strong religious ties. Also, a large majority of them do not believe in life after death. **Table 1** also demonstrates that a large majority of Turkish media elites are secular minded and supporters of laicism. Almost 90 percent of them are against a special relationship between religion and politics.

## 5. POLITICAL IDENTITY OF TURKISH MEDIA ELITES

There is domination of left minded journalists among influential Turkish media elites (Arslan, 1999: 144). **Table 2** clearly shows that the majority of Turkish media elites hold social democratic and socialist views. On the other hand, a large proportion of them did not want to talk about their political preferences for occupational reasons and preferred to be called “undecided”.

Turkish media elites have been largely affected by their fathers’ political choice when they were forming their own political identity. As can be seen from **Table 2** a large majority of their fathers hold leftist views too. Most of them are followers of the traditions of the Republican Populist Party which is a pioneer of social democratic parties in Turkey and was established by Ataturk in the 1920s.

**Table 2**  
Political Identity of Turkish Media Elites and Their Fathers

Political Choice	Proportion (%)	
	Respondents	Respondents' Fathers
Liberal Right	6.7	20
Radical Right	6.7	16.7
Social Democrat	30	60
Radical Left	23.3	3.3
Undecided	33.3	-
<b>Total</b>	100	100

## 6. HOMOGENEITY AND SOCIAL CONSENSUS AMONG TURKISH MEDIA ELITES

As in other elite groups, there is a high level of social homogeneity among Turkish media elites in terms of basic social indicators. They possess a very high level and high quality of education. Almost 93 percent of them possess at least one university degree. In addition, 90 percent of them know at least one foreign language. Occupational satisfaction is very high among Turkish media elites. Almost 93.3 percent of them are satisfied with their social and occupational positions: a large majority of them occupy upper social class positions (Arslan, 1999: 145-6).

**Table 3**  
Social Consensus Among Turkish Media Elites

	Proportion (%)	
	Approve	Against
Abortion	76.7	13.3
Family Planning	96.7	3.3
White Collar Union	96.7	3.3
Idea on 8 Years Obligatory Education	93.3	6.7
Polygamy	6.7	86.7
Capital Punishment	16.7	80
Relations Between Politicians and Sheikhs	6.7	90

There is large degree of consensus among Turkish media elites on major social issues. Almost a hundred of them hold liberal ideas about the place of women in society. Almost 97 percent of them support family planning and the establishment of white collar unions. As can be seen from **Table 3** a substantial majority of Turkish media elites approve the introduction of obligatory

education from 5 years to 8 years. In addition, a large majority of them approve of abortion if it is necessary.

Almost 87 percent of Turkish media elites are against polygamy (both polygyny and polyandry). They do not support capital punishment either: 80 percent of them are against the death penalty. Like other Turkish elites, Turkish media elites are opposed to a special relationship between religion and politics. Almost 90 percent of them identified the relationship between politicians and religious sheikhs as very dangerous for the future of Turkish society and Turkish democracy.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The media provides very distinctive and influential weapons in order to obtain power, wealth and prestige in society. According to philosopher novelist Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, “*the press has become the greatest power within western countries, more powerful than the legislature, the executive and the judiciary*” (Rivers, 1982: 15). As argued by Astiz (1969), the media forms one of the most effective and powerful elite groups. The term media elites comprise the managers, editors, influential columnists and reporters.

Freedom of speech and information are the guardians of the relative autonomy of the media elites and their sub-elites. Rubin (1981: 7) argues that while freedom of the media is a political and legal right, institutional independence is a function of financial and economic conditions. As stated by Curran et al. (in Barrett & Braham, 1995: 69), there is a symbiotic interrelationship between media organizations and their environment. Media business is mostly private enterprise and most of the media institutions are economically dependent on their social and political environment. This relationship takes its roots not only from economic reasons but also the problem of “raw material”. On the other hand political parties and political elites require media power for expanding their voice to the voters or general public, to become more powerful and influential in the political arena and to be successful in the competition that characterises electoral politics. This “interface” interaction plays a critical role in the media production process.

The researcher of this paper shares the views of Marxist scholars that the form of outputs and the meaning of messages is usually determined elsewhere within the dominant culture. It is impossible to accept the idea of the complete autonomy of media professionals. Nevertheless, the idea of relative autonomy of media professionals is acceptable.

Media elites are one of the most powerful elite groups in society and the media plays a substantial role in contemporary politics. Politicians and political parties give priority to media relations. They are usually called the “fourth force” in contemporary democratic societies and sometimes they are as powerful as political elites.

The media have a crucial impact on individuals’ political attitudes and voting behavior. Rivers labeled the American media the “second government” or the “Other Government” (1982). According to him (1982, 213), the news media have the power to shape government policies. He also argues that America has a second government that acts as a check on the first and controls public access to it. The first one is the official government and the “Other Government” is the national news media (Rivers, 1982: 7-20). These findings are also applicable to Turkish society.

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