

# THE PRESS' STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL IN TURKEY DURING THE PANDEMIC

*The most important duty of the press in extraordinary and challenging conditions is, without causing indignation, to inform the public correctly and provide factual news. Media institutions around the world were put to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many struggled to survive through support mechanisms facilitated by their governments. This article will cover the struggles faced by conventional media outlets in Turkey, ways the Press Bulletin Authority supported these outlets, and how they prevailed under strenuous circumstances during extended periods of lockdown.*

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**T**he novel coronavirus broke out in an animal market in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in China, and spread around the world in December 2019. The pandemic has had strong and unsettling effects in various fields, namely economy, culture, international relations, technology, sports, and science. The virus has created a new world order, so much so that Ross Gerber described COVID-19 as the “September 11 of the New Generation.”<sup>1</sup>

Different policies and procedures were brought on by the fact that the pandemic spread quickly and threatened the entire world and impacted the global economy. The leading practices were measures taken by states or local governments, such as flight restrictions, quarantine, state of emergency, and rules on the preservation of social distance.

The suppression strategy seeking to limit mobility by holding the masses at home for a period of time was found to be more rational than the population immunity strategy, which to the contrary allowed the virus to propagate without interference.

Turkey has encountered coronavirus later than European countries, thanks to the measures taken. In the realization that the disease will spread, Turkey took into account the measures taken by countries already dealing with this virus while forming its response.

With the ever evolving communication and information-sharing opportunities, many people depend on an intense flow of information in today’s world. Information is power, and people who have the correct information dominate; there is therefore a greater need for accurate and objective information in order to prevent danger of directional selectivity, disinformation, and manipulation in the current world order.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Post-Truth Period***

While false information and rumors have arisen throughout history for various reasons, fake news has been spreading more rapidly with the increase in Internet use. The post-truth period, in which facts are distorted and the truth is devalued, has emerged especially in the political sphere.

<sup>1</sup> Ross Gerber, “COVID-19 is This Generation’s 9/11, And Other Ways Life Will Never Be The Same Again,” *Forbes*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2020/04/09/covid-19-is-this-generations-sept-11-and-other-ways-life-will-never-be-the-same-again/#6afe9ced49e1>

<sup>2</sup> Ersel Kiraz, “Social Media and Perception Management: Social Media Disinformation in the UK’s Brexit Process,” *Paradoks Economics, Sociology and Policy Journal*, Vol.15 No.1 (2019), pp. 1-18.

### *Western Media vs. Turkey*

It is evident from the digital content of the Western media's coronavirus news that there is a manipulative and perception-altering approach toward Turkey. Media outlets have tried to build certain perceptions against Turkey, particularly around images and content that had no relation to Turkey. For example, the BBC used the photo of Kılıç Ali Paşa Mosque in Istanbul as visual for a news article titled, "US travel ban, Irish school closures and more," despite the news content having no relation to Turkey. Although Turkey had not yet reported any cases of COVID-19 on the date the article was published, the attempt was to create a perception that there was a pandemic in Turkey as well. Likewise, a photo of the Sultan Ahmet Mosque in Istanbul was used as a visual in a *New York Times* article titled, "Trump Suspends Travel From Europe for 30 Days," in a similar attempt to the BBC's. CNN International, Russia Today, the Associated Press, the Independent, and the Guardian featured similar views during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

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Although the main concern of the world media was the global pandemic of COVID-19, this situation was explicitly exploited by a large part of the Western media to both shift attention away from their countries and to use it as a manipulation tool for Islamophobia and anti-Turkey propaganda.

### *Disinformation via Digital Media*

It is clear that digital media has become a primary source of information and news, and has turned into an area where disinformation is frequently encountered. The distribution of fake news, unconfirmed information, user-sourced content as "certain" or "real" on social media, the use of deceptive visual elements in contents, and the very rapid spread that is not subject to any control mechanism are all significant problems.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Dirty perception operation from the international media and their extension in Turkey! They targeted our country in coronavirus news," *Takvim*, 16 March 2020, <https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2020/03/16/uluslararasi-medya-ve-turkiyedeki-uzantilarindan-cirkin-aldi-operasyonu-koronavirus-haberlerinde-ulkemizi-hedef-aldilar>

<sup>4</sup> Özlem Doruk Şahin, "Verification Platforms in Post-Truth Period: Teyit.Org Example, The Role of Communication in the Transforming World," *International Symposium Proceedings Book*, 15-16 March 2018, pp. 151-63.

An academic study investigating allegations that had been made on social media in the week following 11 March 2020, right after the first patient was seen in Turkey, found that most of the information posted was inaccurate.<sup>5</sup> The WHO addressed the pandemic-related information pollution on social media as an “infodemic”, implying that the infodemic is as harmful as the virus in threatening public health.<sup>6</sup>

The increasing impact of fake news, particularly via social media, has led to discussions about how to carry out the battle against fake news. Verification platforms that monitor the allegations on social media and ensure that fake news is identified and conveyed to the public have become critical mechanisms.<sup>7</sup> The number of such platforms is increasing, both in the world and in our country. These mechanisms are crucial to raising awareness for users that fall into the “producer” (i.e., producing the correct content) and the “consumer” (i.e., reading and interpreting content correctly) categories on social media platforms.

Furthermore, “media literacy”, which aims to read and analyze the content with the consciousness that it may not be true, enabling social media users to create correct content through their own accounts, has also gained great importance during the pandemic.

Information pollution caused by fake news on the Internet has been one of the most disruptive factors in fighting the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, citizens of Turkey have continuously been asked by the authorities, especially by the Ministry of Health and the Coronavirus Scientific Board established under the ministry, to respect and share only the information communicated by official institutions.

### ***Traditional Media during COVID-19***

In addition to being an emergency situation for public health, the pandemic has also left the public vulnerable to communication crises. At this point, the importance of ethical and principled reporting of the conventional media and reporting experiences gained from past crisis periods surfaced. The importance of newspapers with a deep-rooted understanding of journalism and the reflex to obtain accurate information has increased.

<sup>5</sup> Ali Fikret Aydın, “Disinformation in Social Media in the Post-Truth Period: Covid-19 (Novel Coronavirus) Pandemic Period,” *Asia Studies-Academic Social Studies*, Vol.4, No.12 (2020), pp.76-90.

<sup>6</sup> “WHO Director-General’s Remarks Foreign Policy and Global Health Initiative Minister of Health Virtual Meeting,” *World Health Organization*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-remarks-for-eign-policy-and-global-health-initiative-minister-of-health-virtual-meeting>

<sup>7</sup> Nurhan Kavaklı, “Use of Internet Verification/Confirmation Platforms Among University Students,” *Electronic Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.18, No.69 (2019), pp. 398-411.

<sup>8</sup> Turkish Academy of Sciences (TÜBA), “Covid-19 Pandemic Evaluation Report,” 2020, <http://tuba.gov.tr/en/news/about-academy/tuba-covid-19-global-outbreak-evaluation-report-published>

Although digital media, especially social media, is prone to manipulation, the view that interactive media facilitates the work of professional journalists, and that journalism is positively affected by it, outweighs the negative predictions that interactive media will end traditional journalism.

As in many areas all over the world, the coronavirus pandemic has also affected the dynamics of print media. On 25 March 2020, the Government of Canada stated that it would take action to support the publishing and news industries. This action was pronounced as a step toward serving Canadians' ability to receive reliable news and information about the coronavirus and, accordingly, make the right decisions to stay healthy and safe.<sup>9</sup>

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*“Official announcements, which is the most important source of income for local press in Turkey, experienced a decline.”*

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On 17 March 2020, authorities in Jordan, Oman, Morocco, and Yemen issued decisions suspending newspaper printing and distribution during the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> The Italian Government paid a 600-euro bonus to journalists who could not work due to the coronavirus.<sup>11</sup> The *Guardian* referred to the rapid decline in advertising due to the economic impact of COVID-19, and wrote that media organizations have started to dismiss many employees.<sup>12</sup>

In the US, leading newspaper chains, including Gannett, which is the biggest publisher of the US as well as the publisher of *USA Today*, and Lee Enterprises, which includes 13 Virginia-based newspapers, such as the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and *Roanoke Times*, introduced cuts in staff wages and leave with reduced wages.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “COVID-19: The Government of Canada is taking action to support the publishing and news sectors,” *Office of the Minister of Canadian Heritage*, 25 March 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/news/2020/03/covid-19-the-government-of-canada-is-taking-action-to-support-the-publishing-and-news-sectors.html>

<sup>10</sup> “Jordan, Oman, Morocco, and Yemen suspend newspaper production, citing COVID-19 fears,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 25 March 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/03/jordan-oman-morocco-and-yemen-suspend-newspaper-pr/>

<sup>11</sup> Fabio Cavalera, “Italian Government recognises 600-euros bonus for journalists who cannot work due to Coronavirus,” *International Sports Press Association*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.aipsmedia.com/index.html?page=artdetail&art=27886>

<sup>12</sup> Adam Gabbatt, “US newspapers face ‘extinction-level’ crisis as Covid-19 hits hard,” *Guardian*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/09/coronavirus-us-newspapers-impact>

<sup>13</sup> Bob Lewis, “COVID-19 is the story of this century, and many newspapers may not survive to cover it,” *Virginia Mercury*, 6 April 2020, <https://www.virginiamercury.com/2020/04/06/covid-19-is-the-story-of-this-century-and-many-newspapers-may-not-survive-to-cover-it/>

### ***Newspapers in Turkey during the Pandemic Period***

In such a period, when accessing factual information is vital, whether the print media will be affected by the negativities experienced is out of the question. For example, official announcements, which is the most important source of income for local press in Turkey, experienced a decline. The decrease in income from the announcements of foreclosure sales was particularly effective in this since courts were closed.

Another problem that challenged newspapers was the lockdowns imposed on weekends and official holidays. Unavoidable restrictions on public health have resulted in the closure of places that normally allow newspapers to meet with their readers. Newspaper purchases from dealers also decreased, reflecting negatively on circulation. Although the WHO stated that the possibility of transmission of the virus through newsprint is very low, newspaper readers were hesitant to touch commercial products in this period, and abstained from touching newspapers as well.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the exchange rate, which increased as a result of the economic fluctuation experienced all over the world, caused the paper and printing costs of newspapers to increase.

### ***Support from the Press Bulletin Authority***

The Press Bulletin Authority has taken a series of measures to ensure that newspapers continue their activities as a “basic public service” that provides accurate and fact-checked information about the COVID-19 crisis.

In this scope, at the Board of Directors meeting dated 23 March 2020, the Press Bulletin Authority enabled the copies of the newspapers that are usually required to be sent to the Institution daily, to be sent weekly. Furthermore, advertisement prices, which is normally designated according to the sales of the newspaper, did not change during this period. As a result, newspapers were able to publish official advertisements according to pre-pandemic rates despite the drop in sales. The Press Bulletin Authority considered advertisement costs within the scope of force majeure due to the pandemic.

Additionally, while application deadlines for financial aid to journalists' associations were extended, debt collection procedures for journalists who had borrowed money before the pandemic were delayed for three months upon request. Also, the newspapers that had the right to publish official advertisements in the same

<sup>14</sup> “Can coronavirus be transmitted from newspapers?” *Sputnik Türkiye*, 24 March 2020, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/yasam/202003241041672631-gazetelerden-koronavirus-bulasir-mi/>

publishing region with at least two newspapers were given the opportunity to publish rotationally.

At the meeting of the General Assembly of the Press Announcement Institution on 13 May 2020, “General Assembly’s decision numbered 212 regarding the implementation of the legislation in force within the framework of the law numbered 195 during the process of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic”, was taken to be valid until 30 June 2020, and was promulgated in the Official Gazette dated 15 May 2020, with the number 31128.<sup>15</sup>

These early period measures, which were taken to ensure that periodicals were not adversely affected from the pandemic in terms of actual sales, delivery obligation, and number of staff, have received positive feedback from the sector, especially from newspapers and professional organizations. A total of 421 newspapers benefited from rotating publication rights as part of the support package. Many outlets were able to continue their work as a result of these measures.

In the support package, newspapers were given the right not to publish during days there were a lockdown. In order to gain the right to publish official announcements and advertisements, it was deemed appropriate for newspapers within the waiting period to be published at least two days a week. Until 31 July, the condition of submitting copies was not stipulated for newspapers and magazines which had the right to publish official advertisements.

For the decreases in the actual number of sales (print-distributor-subscriber, etc.) stipulated in accordance with the relevant articles of the Official Announcement and Advertisement Regulation, the pandemic was regarded as a compelling reason, and conditions for the actual number of sales in Articles 2 and 3 of the General Assembly’s decision numbered 212 were applied.

These packages were prepared to support journalists working in the field under difficult and risky conditions and print media outlets continuing their publications without interruption. This important step allowed periodicals not to be adversely affected by the procedures they usually have to fulfil to receive official announcements and advertisements, which are the biggest sources of income for newspapers.

Furthermore, white-collar newspaper employees, who benefitted from the short-time working allowance, were accepted as having worked within the full and complete

<sup>15</sup> “General Assembly’s decision regarding the implementation of the legislation in force within the framework of the law numbered 195 during the process of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic,” *Official Gazette of Turkey*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2020/05/20200515-4.pdf>

extent of the minimum staff of newspapers as permitted by the Turkish Employment Agency.

Due to the continuation of the coronavirus, the duration of Articles 2 and 3 of the General Assembly's decision numbered 212 have been extended for one month each by the decision of the Executive Board.

### ***The Print Media's Role in Fighting COVID-19***

At a press workshop held in July 2020, Communications Director of the Presidency of Turkey, Prof. Fahrettin Altun, expressing his support for the media, said: "Our media sector has exerted great efforts to raise the awareness of our nation and to inform it more accurately during the pandemic period. Your help is priceless. On this occasion, I would like to express my gratitude to the distinguished employees of our press sector."<sup>16</sup>

In the early stages of the pandemic, the Press Bulletin Authority called on newspapers to make a joint headline, with the slogan "Stay Home, Stay Healthy", to combat coronavirus effectively by raising awareness and creating consciousness among the nation. During this extraordinary period of global crisis, the support of the print media as well as the exemplary struggle presented by Turkey cannot be ignored. The Turkish press once again acted with a consistent and responsible publishing approach. The Turkish press also showed that the print media, whose problems and future are a subject of discussion in the socio-economic and cultural arena, continues a reliable source of information as an emergency communication channel.

<sup>16</sup> "Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanı Prof. Dr. Fahrettin Altun'un Basın Çalışanlarının Haklarının İyileştirilmesi Çalıştayı'nda açıklamalarda bulundu [The Presidency of Turkey Director of Communications Prof. Dr. Fahrettin Altun made statements at the Workshop on Improving the Rights of Press Employees]," *CNN Türk*, 22 July 2020, <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/son-dakika-iletisim-baskani-altundan-onemli-aciklamalar>