On 19 March 2015, Turkish Policy Quarterly (TPQ) convened a panel discussion on social media freedoms in Turkey as part of a multi-pronged project supported by the Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, titled the “State of Democracy in Turkey.” The panel brought together policymakers, diplomats, academics, journalists, civil society representatives, and students from Kadir Has University for an open discussion about the status of Internet and social media freedoms in Turkey. The event was also broadcasted live online, and screened at five universities around Turkey (Okan University, İstanbul Yeni Yüzyıl University, Kayseri Abdullah Gül University, Eskişehir Anadolu University, Van 100. Yıl University). The following analysis reviews the main arguments and comments made by the speakers and participants.

* This review was put together by TPQ’s editorial staff. The complete video of the event can be accessed at: http://turchispolicy.com/event/Turkiyenin-Sosyal-Medya-Gorunumu-Turkeys-Social-Media-Landscape-19-MART-2015-ISTANBUL-31 (in Turkish).
The subject of social media freedoms in Turkey first surfaced in a widespread way during and in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests in 2013. The protests were characterized by the instrumental use of social media to express dissent and to call for political change. During this time, social media supplanted traditional media sources – which were wary to cover the protests – as the primary news source for the public. The protesters criticized traditional media sources for succumbing to government pressure and pointed to the government’s increasingly authoritarian tendencies. The government, on the other hand, criticized social media users for disseminating false information to provoke masses against the government. This was made clear by then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s comment on Twitter: “The best examples of lies can be found there. To me, social media is the worst menace to society.”

Following the Gezi Park protests, the state’s social media policies became an increasingly debated topic both domestically and internationally, with critics raising concerns about the government’s tighter grip over the Internet.

Since the protests, there has been a steady rising trend in social media usage throughout Turkey. According to the “Digital, Social and Mobile in 2015,” 52 percent of Turkey’s 77 million population is active on social media. The same report also claims that an average Internet user in Turkey spends 2.9 hours on social media per day.

On the other hand, the trust in traditional media is declining. According to research conducted by Kadir Has University in a project titled “Social and Political Trends in Turkey,” people who believe the media is free in Turkey declined from 38.5 percent in 2013 to 24.6 percent in 2014.

1 “Social media and opposition to blame for protests, says Turkish PM,” The Guardian, 3 June 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/02/turkish-protesters-control-istanbul-square
Against this backdrop, on 19 March 2015, *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (TPQ) organized a panel discussion on Turkey’s changing social media landscape to better understand the reasons and justifications behind government restrictions of social media usage. The panel featured Kadri Gürsel, columnist for Al Monitor, Gökhan Ahi, information law specialist at Ahi Law Office, and Aslı Tunç, Professor of Communication at Bilgi University. CNN Türk’s senior editor Ahu Özyurt moderated the panel. The speakers took up topics related to freedom of online expression, including relations between the government and social media corporations, the possibility that social media could replace traditional media as the more credible news source, the risk of information manipulation, the concept of citizen journalism, and the dynamics between businesses and social media.

**Social Media and the State**

In her presentation, Aslı Tunç pointed to the fact that in recent years, official requests from Turkey to remove content from Twitter have increased by 154 percent. “Russia and Germany follow Turkey in second and third place,” she said. She explained that Turkish officials generally assert the violation of personal rights in justification of their requests. Regarding user account information requests Turkey is second, following the US, which makes up 56 percent of the total requests. Tunç confirmed that there was a sharp increase in Twitter users in Turkey – close to 15 million currently – following the Gezi protests. Thus, Twitter was more closely monitored by the government.
Gürsel echoed Tunç’s position. He claimed that the government’s practice of citing violations on personal rights is used systematically to curb and suppress freedom of expression in Turkey. He explained: “Even though there is currently no legislative regulation that targets social media directly, it is being controlled by an over-interpretation of the current laws in place.” Gürsel underlined that the government uses judiciary methods to intimidate its strong critics. “Compared to China or Iran, Turkey uses more sophisticated methods to limit freedom of speech,” he claimed. Among these methods, he cited defamation cases, having the journalists fired, advertisement embargoes, and restraining TV appearances, etc. Ahi added that due to their high operation costs, traditional media sources and broadcasting networks are especially susceptible to these methods.

Commenting on the same topic, Ahi claimed that during the Gezi protests, police detained 20 Twitter users just to intimidate other users that were actively following and commenting on the events. “As a consequence people started deleting their posts,” he asserted. According to the speaker, this situation brings up the issue of self-censorship, which is just as dangerous, if not more so, than censorship itself. Ahi claimed that in an Internet environment that is becoming restricted, the right to remain anonymous is one of the main ways to ensure freedom of speech. “Anonymity is guaranteed as a right in Council of Europe’s ‘Declaration on Freedom of Communication on the Internet’ in 2003; Turkey has signed this document and thus it has a place in Turkish law.”

He explained that if a person should be otherized, attacked, condemned, or denigrated that person has the right to remain anonymous. During the lively Q&A session, one participant brought up the question of whether the close surveillance of social media by the government creates a panopticon effect and subsequently makes users self-censor. Tunç agreed that this may be the case but on the other hand she explained that the same effect also applies to the governments and other state institutions. “Just as the government watches the citizens, citizens

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5 The Panopticon is a type of institutional building that allows a single watchman to observe all inmates of an institution without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched. As the inmates cannot know if they are being watched they must act as though they are watched at all times and control their own behaviour constantly.
also watch the government,” she said. Thanks to Twitter, a citizen can reach out and directly send a message to a politician. This interactivity brings accountability and transparency for both sides.

Ahi also commented on the government’s subjective interpretation of laws. He cited an example from January 2015 when the Turkish government threatened to shut down Twitter and Facebook if they did not block accounts sharing official reports of a situation involving trucks of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) that were stopped for a search on their way to Syria back in January 2014. They were claimed to have been carrying arms. The government based its request on the need to protect the personal rights of MIT. “How can we talk about the personal rights of a government agency?” Ahi asked.

Citizen Journalism: Is it Possible?

In light of rising criticism regarding the integrity and objectivity of traditional media sources, the speakers turned to a discussion about the rise of “citizen journalism,” its contribution to information dissemination, and its place within Turkey’s media landscape. Gürsel made the claim that citizen journalism, through social media usage, has a limited capacity to replace the traditional media as a news source. He argued that all content must go through an editorial process in order to be considered reliable. He called the term “citizen journalism” derogatory to the profession of journalism. According to Gürsel, there are three principles a media user should have in order supply reliable content: independence, professionalism, and honesty. “Regardless of the medium, these principles apply,” he said. “A journalist should have all three together and if just one principle is missing, media cannot perform its intended purpose.”

While stressing the fact that citizen journalism can in no way substitute the work of professional journalism, Gürsel argued that the restrictions on media freedom in Turkey have all but destroyed Turkish journalism in both law and practice. In this sense, according to the speaker, the media as the “fourth power” is not able to carry out its intended purpose: encouraging citizens to make responsible, informed decisions. Gürsel quoted the Freedom House report on Turkey, which highlights the deterioration of media freedom in the country.

choices rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation, and serving as a “watchdog” over elected representatives to ensure they uphold their oaths of office and carry out the wishes of those who elected them.

Ahi disagreed with Gürsel about citizen journalism, stating: “In an environment where the traditional media cannot carry out its duties, disinformation and manipulation is prevalent, and transparency of the government is low, we must have citizen journalists.” He also noted that through social media, citizen journalists who are dissatisfied with the traditional media’s version of reporting can exercise agency by disseminating a different narrative. Therefore, Ahi argued that social media – along with new media in general – should be referred to as the “fifth power.” Its role should encompass checking and balancing the traditional media as well. “Social media is a platform where the citizens can actively intervene in other powers’ decisions and practices,” he explained.

Tunç, in her comments to the debate, elaborated on Ahi’s point. She claimed that during the 2000s a similar debate in the US ensued, lasting for 10 years. In the end it was decided that new and traditional media should co-exist and carry out their activities in harmony. Social media users decided not to call themselves journalists.

Commenting on the existence of disinformation that is prevalent in social media, Tunç – while agreeing that some posts can be misleading – claimed that social media has its ways to weed out false information. “This is all thanks to its interactive nature,” she explained. However, she also mentioned that social media should not be regarded as an absolute panacea to the freedom of expression problems, underlining
that “the question of whether it is right to entrust freedom of expression solely to profit-seeking companies needs to be asked as well.”

One online participant asked if the widespread use of social media could be a game-changer for civil society. Tunç clarified that social media can serve to mobilize citizens in real life by engaging them in the virtual world. However, she underlined that mobilization only occurs when a particularly event affects large segments of society. To further clarify Tunç’s position, Ahi pointed to the mass mobilization through social media following the attempted rape and murder of Özgecan Aslan on 11 February 2015 by a minibus driver. Following the murder there was a nationwide outrage and call to the government to more aggressively combat violence against women. Most of the mobilization was done thanks to the social media.

*The Economic Dimension of Internet Policies*

Both Tunç and Ahi criticized the amendments proposed to Law No. 5651 on Regulating Broadcasting in the Internet and Fighting Against Crimes Committed through Internet Broadcasting. Tunç expounded more on the negative impact that Internet restrictions have on the Turkish economy: “With the new amendments all Internet activity will be kept under file for two years. Which international company would invest in a country that probes so deeply into their company activities and secrets?” She also pointed to the possibility that the government could use the data collected to pressure those companies.
Social media is increasingly used by companies that want to increase their competitiveness against their rivals. Turkey’s digital advertisement spending has increased from 20 to 23 percent in 2014. As Tunç underlined, this is a lot more than EU countries where the average is 11.5 percent. With over 40 million Internet subscribers countrywide, Tunç emphasized that all sectors will need to integrate with the Internet in order to stay competitive. She further explained: “In 2013, Turkey generated 63 billion dollars from the Internet economy. Considering the 3.6 trillion dollar global value of the Internet economy, Turkey currently earns two percent of that. In order to further increase its share, the laws adopted by the government must protect the investors.” Another potential obstacle towards Turkey’s integration with the Internet economy is the fact that per EU standards Turkey is an insecure state for data transfers. “No international company can turn a blind eye to this. We boast on being the 17th biggest global economy but in the global information society index we are 44th,” stated Tunç. These points illustrate how Internet restrictions could have serious economic implications for Turkey in the long-term.

The speakers’ presentations left the impression that pressure on traditional and social media in Turkey is two-fold: the first is government-rooted financial pressure on media conglomerates and social media companies, and the second is the political and legal pressure on journalists and social media users.

Social media freedoms are important for the quality of a democracy. Although the speakers had mixed opinions on the role that social media could play as a reliable news source, there was a consensus that these new media avenues provide a platform for promoting civic engagement.