COVERING DISASTERS, NATURAL OR OTHERWISE: MEDIA, POLITICS, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN POST-EARTHQUAKE TURKEY

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Introduction**

On 17 August 2000, the somber first anniversary of the Marmara earthquake, the mainstream Turkish media found a sole reason for celebration. Alongside lengthy reports of vigils in remembrance of the dead and protests of the state’s anemic relief efforts, the media celebrated its partnership with civil society and all but declared an end to a state that was at once heavy-handed and ineffectual. Amplifying this theme, an article that compiled a list of the earthquake’s “winners” and “losers” placed the media and civil society in the former category and a host of state agencies charged with disaster response in the latter one. Hürriyet, a high-circulation mainstream newspaper, described this praise as well deserved, stating that journalists had effectively “exposed all the naked truths” of the state’s inability to provide for its population.1

In general, the media deployed lengthy articles and broadcasts of heavy civic turnout and vibrant social protest, outstripping coverage of official visits and speeches.2 Such articles lamented not only the inability of the state to provide long-term relief but also its continuing collusion with unscrupulous contractors whose shoddy constructions

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had pushed up the death toll. Thus, the anniversary came and went in a manner that would seem to confirm the opinions of scholars and analysts, drawn on the media’s initial reports, that the legitimacy of the Turkish state had come tumbling down (Koru 1999; Savvides 1999; Kasaba and Bozdoğan 2000).

Indeed, in the initial weeks after the earthquake, journalists published articles that used sarcasm, anger, and unflattering comparisons against the state’s incapacity and lack of coordination in rescue and relief efforts. One columnist wondered why an otherwise intrusive state managed to reach its own earthquake victims well after rescue teams sent from Japan had begun pulling people from the rubble. On the same day, another writer asked, “Why is it that, while journalists managed to reach the disaster area in minutes, hours passed and ambulances, doctors, civil defense teams, police and gendarmes were nowhere to be seen?”

Such images of the state’s weakness, lack of coordination, and lack of accountability were sustained as rescue efforts shifted to relief. The media scrutinized the daunting task of housing the hundreds of thousands of homeless, and journalists reported the most minute details of relief, from the overdelivery of bottled water in one camp to the arrival of tents without poles in another. The print media was so aggressive in portraying the Turkish state as ineffective and uncoordinated that even a review article of Jason Goodwin’s book on Ottoman military history, Lords of the Horizons, became an arena for making an unfavorable reference to the state. The reviewer discussed the Ottoman army’s organizational efficiency during the siege of Vienna and noted


4 Bekir Coşkun, “Serin devlet,” Hürriyet, 19 August 1999; the title of Coşkun’s article is semantically significant. “Serin devlet” is a play on the phrase “derin devlet,” The latter translates roughly as “deep state” and implies the relative intrusiveness and omnipresence of the Turkish state. “Serin devlet” translates as “calm state” and indicates the passivity and indifference of the state in disaster relief.


6 Note, for instance, the wording in Cevat Geray, “Depremden ders alabildik mi?” Cumhuriyet, 8 December 1999. The article describes state organizations, local and national, as “ineffectual,” “weak,” and “uncoordinated” (respectively, etkisiz, güçsüz, and esgüdümsüz).

that the Ottoman Empire had managed to set up a tent city to house 200,000 soldiers and feed them fresh bread. Quoting from the book, the reviewer informed his readers that this efficiency went hand-in-hand with cleanliness and orderliness: “A city of tents was established with straight streets, and orchards and flower gardens belonging to the Grand Vizier that was larger and more orderly than Vienna,” The review’s author concluded that it was regrettable that no inspiration was drawn from the Ottoman example in present-day Turkey, where tent cities housing earthquake victims were sinking in mud.8

A cursory examination of the Turkish press thus suggests an unprecedented unity among reporters and journalists about the need to reform a corrupt and ineffective state and compel official accountability to the needs of society. These themes appeared in dailies as diverse as Cumhuriyet, Hürriyet, Zaman, Akşam, Akit, and Sabah, where articles denouncing a passive and corrupt state ran adjacent to reports of civic organizations and journalists running to the assistance of the earthquake’s victims.9

In light of press coverage of rescue and relief efforts following the Marmara earthquake, this article has the following objectives: First, the article attempts to assess whether the media’s criticism of the state was indeed unanimous and sustained. The evidence presented suggests that after an initial show of unity, the Turkish media was quick to abandon sustained criticism of the state. Qualitative criticism of the state’s shortcomings, and calls for reform, gave way to a combination of reports on Greek-Turkish friendship concerts and sensationalistic political scandals as well as the usual debates on secularism and religious revolt, all of which relied on the earthquake as symbolic background. In these reports, a combination of sensational images and politicized debates served to shift the focus away from the long-term social and political dislocation caused by the earthquake and the reforms that would be necessary in municipal disaster responsiveness.

The second and related aim of this article is to present a preliminary explanation for the sources of the qualitative shift in the Turkish press in the context of scholarly articles on the media and the public sphere. It will be shown that scholarship on the Turkish media tends

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to highlight the liberating aspects of diversity in print and broadcast news, in the context of democratization and the public sphere, whereas the broader theoretical and comparative debates suggest that in a variety of settings, the liberalized media is often associated with a debasement of the political and social information that enhances the public sphere. In discussing press views on relief, rescue, and the consequences of the earthquake, this article places the Turkish media in the latter category and suggests that the Turkish case fits the crisis-of-political-communication model. Before outlining and analyzing earthquake coverage in the Turkish media, the following section discusses the comparative debates on the role of the media in the public sphere.

Debates on the Media and Its Role in the Public Sphere

Studies on the Turkish Media

Scholarship on the Turkish media, diverse in its thematic approach, includes articles on censorship, privatization, and media elites. Most of these studies, despite their thematic variation, adopt a position that considers the media part and parcel of Turkish civil society and a counterweight to the authoritarian state. This theme, which draws an apparent boundary between the state and civil society and places the media in the latter category, is generally not replicated in the ongoing theoretical debates on the media outside the Turkish context. The comparative debates suggest a crisis in political communication catalyzed in part by privatization and political biases in the media that have potentially negative effects on public information—effects that can disrupt associational life, social debates, and views on democratization.

In their research on the Turkish media, Aksoy and Robins suggest that an inevitable expansion of social representation and perspectives followed the liberalization of the Turkish media during the mid-1980s and 1990s. Specifically, liberalization in the media, among other cultural industries such as film and music, allowed long-marginalized ethnic, religious, and gender identities to express themselves on national television and in the press (Aksoy and Robins 1997). The reporting styles of private TV channels and dailies such as Sabah presented Turkish society in all its aspects; they rapidly captured the attention of national audiences tired of the Westernized and sanitized programming of official newspapers and TRT, the state broadcasting
network. According to Aksoy and Robins, this ongoing process generates an "alla turca media landscape" that enters the mainstream, adopts global elements, and quickly turns into a form of civil society.

A similar scholarly piece on privatization and the media by Hakan Yavuz opts for a more systematic study of ethnic and religious identity in the context of shifting media networks. According to Yavuz, emerging media networks bring to the forefront of national life editors, journalists, and talk-show personalities who enter the public sphere and fragment the previously hegemonic authority of nationalist state elites (Yavuz 1999a). The opinions, accents, and stage presence of Kurdish and Alevi counterelites who staff the new media networks serve to disseminate re-imagined ethnic and religious identities. While unofficial identities often get standardized in the process and lose their local characteristics, the ultimate result is the fragmentation of authority, the debunking of sanitized versions of national identity, and an awareness of differences that are necessary for a vibrant public arena.

In a study of press views on democratization, human rights, and Turkey's future membership in the European Union, Şahin Alpay (1993) documents a variety of nuanced positions skillfully debated by journalists. He describes the journalists' diverse opinions and notes that they are all underlain by a desire to expand democratization and human rights in Turkey and halt military takeovers. Although Alpay faults journalists for not being more resistant to state censorship in defense of democratic rights, he states that the press is nonetheless the biggest part of civil society in Turkey (p. 88).

Overall, these studies imply that the (liberalized) Turkish media enables both the dissemination of multiple social and political perspectives and a mutual awareness of differences. This, in turn, enhances the diversity of the public sphere and democratic accountability. Yet most of these studies simply describe the public airing or presentation of multiple/new perspectives, and they leave unexplored or undertheorized the mechanisms by which these presentations are then debated within the public sphere or communicated across different audiences. In other words, the focus is on representation of multiple perspectives within potentially divided segments of the media. This approach comes at the expense of a communicative focus, which would explore how the media might or might not promote a meaningful dialogue in the public conducive to solving sociopolitical problems and enhancing the quality of democratic life. Because a variety of studies both within and outside
the Turkish context emphasize the public sphere as a pluralistic site of
democratic communication among free citizens, the communication
between segments of the public sphere and the role of the media in
this communication deserve analytical attention (Göle 2000; Edwards

*Comparative Debates on Political Communication*

The recent comparative scholarship on the media identifies an
ongoing crisis in political communication (Bucy and D'Angelo 1999)
and challenges the theoretical assumptions of the above-mentioned
scholarship on the Turkish media, which connects liberalization and
competition with a healthy public sphere. The debates are necessarily
complex and broad, but three brief examples are particularly relevant
here. First, liberalization according to some scholars often limits the
content of the public sphere. Scholars identify corporate control and
the interest in profit margins as breeding sensationalism and con-
stricting the range of expressed opinion (Bagdikian 1992). While schol-
ars of the Turkish media make a gesture to the perils of post-liberal-
ization consolidation, they are generally dismissive of its stifling
effects on the quality of reporting and the production of information

Second, a large portion of the comparative debate on political com-
munication is devoted to the effects and production of "framing,"
Framing refers to the ways in which the media presents specific prop-
erties of a story to encourage readers and viewers to develop specific
understandings of these stories (Oliver and Myers 1999; Robinson
1999; Entman 1993; Gamson 1992). Because journalism is written as
narrative with human actors who carry a variety of motives and
beliefs, objectivity is elusive if not impossible. "As new events unfold
and changes appear in the conditions of people's daily lives, human
agents are typically identified as causal agents in a morality play
about good and evil or honesty and corruption" (Gamson 1992, p. 34).
Scholarship on the Turkish media, on the contrary, implies that the
most insidious "framing" was an aspect of the official, nationalist
media that presented to the public highly distorted images of events
and history in an effort to promote modernization, nationalism, and
Westernization. While some authors acknowledge that the liberalized
media will produce its own narratives (Yavuz 1999a), the overall
assumption in the literature is to view this alternative production as a more accurate or "real" representation of the social and political debates in the national context (Aksoy and Robins 1999, p. 1940; also see Aytekin 2000; Yumul and Özkirimli 2000).

Finally, a host of theoretical studies suggest that media in a wide variety of regional and political settings suffer from a pronounced imperviousness to criticism and a stiff resistance to reform (Bucy and D'Angelo 1999; Snyder and Ballentine 1996; Dahlgren 1992). This is likely a function of the political biases, entrenched organizational practices, and reporting styles, as well as the belief prevalent among journalists that the media is a harbinger of civility and in some places the guardian of democracy (Finkel 2000). Yet much of the scholarship on the Turkish media ignores the meager prospects for organizational and professional reform in the press and instead views the liberalization process as the embodiment of reform. As a result, attention is seldom paid to the political predispositions, framing processes, and internalized beliefs that persist beyond privatization.

With these debates in mind, the following sections describe the content of press articles on rescue and relief efforts and the long-term consequences of the Marmara earthquake. The articles and analyses reveal that the initial unity and multiplicity of voices in the press calling for major reforms and accountability in the state were not sustained. A major qualitative shift with two tendencies occurred in the nature of reports on relief and the consequences of the earthquake. The first tendency was the abandonment of calls to make the state more democratic and to seek justice for the earthquake's victims. This agenda was replaced by popular and sensational articles, among them reports on Greek-Turkish earthquake diplomacy and articles that described the earthquake as divine punishment for aggressive secularism. The second tendency was a fragmentation in the media, generally along the lines of the secular-Islamic debate, which involved an impressionable amount of "framing"—omissions and exaggerations about the causes and long-term consequences of the earthquake. This second tendency further detracted from articles on reform in the urban sector, long-term-relief needs, and overdue improvements required for municipal disaster response. Furthermore, the fragmentation reveals that journalists in both the secular and the religious press used the earthquakes as a backdrop for labeling the other side as a threat to social stability and democratic well-being.
These trends suggest that the Turkish media is undergoing its own crisis of political communication, with potentially adverse effects on the production of social and political information—a public good that underpins associational life and democratic communion in the public sphere. While it is difficult to predict the long-term effects of this fragmentation on the public sphere, this article takes a step toward integrating the Turkish media into the debate on crises of political communication and questioning the unique status that scholarship grants to the liberalizing Turkish media.

Press Coverage in the Wake of the Marmara Earthquake

Initial Unity

Because the earthquake occurred in the early morning of 17 August 1999, the newspapers that circulated hours later had little opportunity to assess the full magnitude of the damage. Hürriyet's headline that day plainly announced “Earthquake,” with a subheading that read, “6.7 Richter; 286 dead; 1673 injured.” The following day, as reports indicated the true extent of the devastation, the press opted for sensational headlines that laid the blame for the death toll on building contractors. Zaman and Hürriyet carried headlines such as “This is called murder” and “Scoundrels,” followed by articles accusing contractors of criminal and unscrupulous behavior.10 While left-of-center newspapers such as Radikal and Cumhuriyet used slightly less sensationalistic tones, the Turkish press and broadcast media unanimously orchestrated a lynch atmosphere.11 Unsubstantiated claims that up to 90 percent of the construction in Istanbul had been done with substandard material were published next to photographs of the solid villas contractors had built for themselves, along with the contractors' names and photographs and addresses.12 Labeled “lower than the PKK” by one columnist,13 hundreds of terrified contractors, scrupulous


11 Zaman is a high-circulation religious daily. Radikal and Cumhuriyet are both left-of-center dailies, although Cumhuriyet is at times distinguished by its nationalist and aggressively secular rhetoric.


13 Fatih Altaylı, “Bunlar PKK'lıdan daha alçak değil mi?” Hürriyet, 18 August 1999.
and unscrupulous alike, found it prudent to pack up and head for the safety of their provincial hometowns.

Within days, however, press coverage decisively shifted to the relief efforts and to the inadequacy of the state’s response. All newspapers published highly critical accounts of lapses in earthquake relief, accused the government of inaction and indifference, and demanded that state officials remain accountable for not having declared a state of emergency in a timely and proper manner. Nationalist, mainstream, secularist, and pious dailies all attacked the inefficiency and uncoordinated actions of the state. *Akşam*, a nationalist daily, declared an otherwise-intrusive state to be “bankrupt,”¹⁴ *Hürriyet* columnists accused Ankara of inaction and foot dragging, and of colluding with contractors.¹⁵ *Cumhuriyet* accused the “57th government” (the number being a reference to official instability and turnover in Ankara) of “oversleeping” and demanded a public explanation for why the army and civil defense teams were not summoned to help, as is done in all other countries.¹⁶ *Zaman* likewise accused all the ministries of undertaking relief with “primitive methods” and “maddening hesitation,”¹⁷ Journalists also deployed the foreign media against Ankara, publishing highly embarrassing international press reports from Europe and the Americas that focused on the colossal failure of the state rather than the earthquake itself.¹⁸

The above images of the state stood in stark contrast to those of civic organizations and private individuals whom the media praised for working tirelessly on behalf of earthquake victims.¹⁹ Overall, the initial reports of earthquake relief efforts portrayed an unprecedented unity among social actors and perhaps an equally unprecedented lack of coordination in the state. It was in this context that the press drew a clear boundary between the state and society and depicted the latter as a victim of the former.

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The initial consensus in the media did not last; the clean boundary that the press promoted between state and society began to fragment as uncomfortable political and social debates reemerged. In just under ten days following the earthquake, there was a noticeable split in the media on assigning blame, a related decline in articles on private and civic initiatives, and a deficit in investigative reporting on relief efforts. The various newspapers, which initially displayed consensus on the need to reform and systematize official organizations to make them more responsive to citizens’ needs, next entered into a highly polarizing debate, with each side offering an explanation of the “true” sources of corruption and the “real” causes of earthquakes. Much of the debate took place between secularist and religious dailies, which tended toward sensationalistic reporting styles and an attempt to delegitimize the other.

This fragmentation emerged with the “Durmuş affair,” which on the surface appeared to be little more than another instance of the media’s underscoring the inadequacy of official relief efforts. The affair began when newspapers published a statement by Osman Durmuş, Minister of Health and member of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), that Turkey was in no need of foreign assistance.\(^{20}\) Subsequent articles emphasized that the minister had rejected blood donated from neighboring Greece, yet it became apparent that he had also rebuffed other foreign medical assistance, including three American medical vessels en route to the disaster area. A number of newspapers, mostly mainstream ones, denounced Durmuş’s comments as racist and argued that it was the will of the “people” and “public opinion” that he resign.\(^{21}\) Newspapers and TV channels announced that they had been inundated with e-mail, faxes, and phone calls from what they described to be an outraged public demanding his immediate resignation. “The public ought to know,” wrote *Cumhuriyet*, “that the true dis-

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aster is that Turkey is governed by politicians such as the current Health Minister. It is going to be very difficult to care for the victims of this disaster."

There are two likely reasons for the way Durmuş’s comments were portrayed in the press and the ensuing reaction. On the one hand, Durmuş was part of a shaky and uncomfortable coalition, unprecedented in the history of the Turkish Republic. As a member of the most right-wing party in the coalition, he was in many ways an easy target for the mainstream media, and he presented an opportunity to personify the callousness and corruption of the state. Mainstream newspapers in the center-left and center-right made a concerted effort to proscribe the behavior of MHP by manufacturing consent among the public. This was a likely possibility, given that the minister’s comments were exaggerated by the media and that the media itself had set up telephone lines and polls whose clear intent was to bring about the minister’s resignation.

On the other hand, mainstream newspapers such as Hürriyet, Milliyet, and Sabah, as well as Cumhuriyet, found the minister’s comments extremely distasteful and inappropriate, particularly in light of the amount of foreign assistance that had poured in from abroad, notably from Greece. These newspapers had devoted significant coverage not only to the assistance of Greek rescue teams but also to the private donations, public opinion polls, and even e-mails from individuals in Greece. These newspapers had already declared an end to Turkish-Greek enmity and heralded a new era in bilateral relations (“earthquake diplomacy”). Behind the scenes, benefit concerts, journalist roundtables, and conferences on Greek-Turkish commerce were already in the works, with most of the initiatives being financed by the holding companies that owned the mainstream secular press. The mainstream secularist media, seeing the minister’s comments as disruptive, thus lost no time in denouncing him and demanding his resignation.

Religious and right-wing nationalist dailies reacted to the coverage of the Durmuş affair with distaste. Nationalist Akşam ran to the defense of Durmuş and openly questioned the motives for Greece's gesture to Turkey. The religious dailies, mainstream and otherwise, while not attempting to exonerate Durmuş or reinterpret his comments, implied that the campaign to unseat him was a farce orchestrated by what they perceived to be an all-powerful cartelized media. Articles connected this campaign to the secular media's courtship with Greece, which they felt was at once treacherous to Turkish nationalism and a betrayal of ties with Muslim countries. Zaman columnist Hasan Ünal accused the mainstream print media of adopting outright bias and a shabby reporting style better suited for the sensationalistic television channels. Ünal criticized journalists both for their prejudiced style of "settling accounts with the state" as well as for falsely accusing Muslim countries of not assisting in rescue and relief efforts. The prominence given to Greek and Israeli assistance in Hürriyet, Cumhuriyet, and Sabah resonated negatively with religious dailies, which responded not by documenting the assistance that had come from such countries as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, and Pakistan, but by questioning the motives and intent of Greek aid. Zaman, for instance, cautioned the media "to avoid making a mountain out of a molehill," arguing that Greece, with its history of enmity to Turkey, would change slowly if at all and that this required vigilance.

Celebratory articles on Turkish-Greek friendship intensified throughout September and October 1999 as a host of official and unofficial visits occurred between Greek and Turkish foreign ministers, mayors, journalists, businessmen, and pop stars. While the original intent of most of these exchanges was to assist in relief, raise money for reconstruction, and exchange ideas on earthquake preparedness, mainstream secularist dailies highlighted their more frivolous aspects. Sabah carried an article reporting that the Greek press conferred sex-symbol status on Ahmet Işıkara, a short, gray-haired seismologist
who, as director of Istanbul's Kandilli Observatory, worked around the
clock to monitor seismic activity and inform the Turkish public. Milliyet published frequent reports on Greek-Turkish concerts and
criticized pop stars who failed to attend. In this context, Akit, a reli-
gious newspaper sympathetic to factions of the Fazilet Partisi (Virtue Party) and prone to sensationalist op-ed pieces, accused the govern-
ment and the secular media, which it described with the epithet "car-
tel," of allowing the Aegean to become a Greek lake and of obscuring
the divine causes of the earthquake.

This was not the only instance of fragmentation in the media. Mainstream secularist dailies, seeking to understand why the state
had been so inefficient at rescue and relief and to account for unre-
stricted urban development, chose to emphasize what they perceived
as the piecemeal dismemberment of Turkey's Kemalist past. A com-
mon theme in newspapers such as Cumhuriyet, Milliyet, and Hürriyet
was to portray a chronological unraveling of the Kemalist state pro-
ject. Moreover, the articles were framed not so the readers would walk
away with a stock of knowledge about aspects of relief, but rather to
give the impression that the situation was a consequence of having
corrupt politicians such as Durmuş and religious reactionaries in the
municipalities. Secularist papers thus published a significant number
of articles that expressed nostalgia for the Kemalist past; many of
these ran noticeably side-by-side with articles warning of religious
fanaticism.

Hürriyet, as a case in point, published an extensive narrative
detailing the Erzincan earthquake of 1939 and the rescue efforts of the
eyear republican state. The article tells the following story: After a
devastating earthquake, a quick-thinking local prosecutor in Erzincan
granted leave to jailed convicts so they could assist relatives affected
by the earthquake. These furloughs were given on the condition that
the criminals voluntarily return to prison when their assistance was
no longer necessary. President İsmet İnönü, while traveling to the
stricken region four days later to monitor relief efforts and provide
moral support, witnessed a scuffle at a provincial train station
between a man and gendarmes. Inquiring into the matter, İnönü

31 See, for instance, "Dostlugu'nun gücü," Milliyet, 24 September 1999.
33 "İnsanlık dersi," Hürriyet, 18 August 1999.
learned that the man was a furloughed prisoner who was attempting to board the train to return to prison. The guards refused to let him board, and the man was worried that he would not return to Erzincan in time to fulfill his promise to the prosecutor. İnönü was so moved by the man's sense of honor and duty that he decided to pardon all prisoners who took part in the relief efforts. The article ends with a description of the speed and efficiency with which the state provided relief at that time.

Journalists also made frequent references to the superiority and foresight of state-controlled construction and urban planning in the early republican era. One such article from Cumhuriyet praised the early republican state for its architectural, infrastructural, and technical advances, which ensured that human settlements could withstand earthquakes. Reporting statements from faculty at Istanbul Technical University, the article argued that urban planning and architecture were unsurpassed in organizational and technical efficiency in the early republican era. According to the article, these advances were personally assured and overseen by Atatürk, who aggressively integrated engineers into the state mechanism. This accumulation of technical knowledge, moreover, was said to be built on the advances of previous Anatolian civilizations that had developed architectural forms to cope with the region's seismic fragility. According to the article, this technical, scientific, and historical know-how was abandoned in the 1950s when political corruption ushered in a period of fitful and chaotic urban expansion in unsound locations. Another article notes that Atatürk's resort house in Yalova, near the epicenter of the Marmara earthquake, stood undamaged and was used to shelter families left homeless. The author considers the house a prime example of the early republic's architectural achievements, which he contrasts with the shoddy, illegal, and dangerous apartment construction spread across the present-day Turkish landscape.

On the one hand, such articles were published to criticize state officials for their indifference and incompetence in relief efforts. The description of İnönü's face-to-face contacts with earthquake victims was designed to give the reading public a dramatic counterpoint to the actions (or inactions) of the present governing coalition. Columnist

Bekir Coşkun made a particularly vivid point in an article deriding President Süleyman Demirel’s whirlwind helicopter tour over the disaster area as an example par excellence of official indifference, distance, and aloofness.36

On the other hand, such articles were framed as a warning to the public of the continuing advance of the forces of religious reactionaries (irtica). The secular media contrasted the scientific, technical, and organizational achievements of the Turkish Republic with statements by what the press described as “religious fanatics” (yobaz), who heralded the earthquake as divine punishment for aggressive secularism. Hürriyet, for example, published such statements allegedly made by an MP of the Fazilet Partisi, the religious party that had been blocked out of the government but was still prominent in many municipalities. Although the MP denied the allegations, Hürriyet pursued the matter, labeling him a “provocateur,”37 Cumhuriyet published articles on statements by prominent Nurcu businessmen who made statements connecting the earthquake to the banning of the headscarf in public institutions, as well as statements by revered spiritual leader Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, which had described earthquakes, including the 1939 disaster in Erzincan, as divine punishment.38

The trenches deepened in October 1999, following a protest by devout students against the banning of headscarves on university campuses. Hürriyet published a photograph of female students unfurling a placard that read, “Was 7.4 not enough?”—an apparent reference to the earthquake as divine warning.39 Secular dailies all but ignored the original aim of the protest and labeled the students as “fanatics who incite terror,”40 Akit refused to acknowledge the deep

36 “Bir enkaz var ki…,” Hürriyet, 21 August 1999.
37 See “İşte provokatör,” Hürriyet, 5 September 1999; and “FP’li Başkan: Asker aleyhine konuşma olmadığı,” 7 September 1999.
38 Respectively see “Deprem, 28 Şubat’ın cezalandırılması,” 11 October 1999; and “Nursi’ye göre yeraltında bomba var,” 13 October 1999. In the latter article, Cumhuriyet chose to focus on Said Nursi’s belief that the earthquake in Erzincan was caused by bombs divinely placed below ground. The mocking tone is unmistakable. Secular dailies such as Hürriyet and Cumhuriyet seem to have emphasized the more provocative and sensational of such articles while they ignored articles written with more reflective and theological logic; see, for example, Abdullah Aymaz, “Zilzal (5) İlahi kudretten koparma gayreti,” Zaman, 31 August 1999.
40 See, for example, Oktay Eksi, “7.4 düşsün başına!” Hürriyet, 8 October 1999.
insensitivity of the placard; its columnists retorted that the true lack
of respect and terror was the state’s denying the students a right to
an education.\footnote{A. İhsan Karahasanoğlu, “7.4 yetmedi mi?” \textit{Akit}, 9 October 1999.}

**Theoretical Directions**

The above narrative demonstrates a rapid qualitative shift in the
print media in the period following the Marmara earthquake. The ini-
tial unity displayed in criticizing official organizations and in demand-
ing accountability for the creaking relief efforts—as well as for official
collusion with a corrupt urban-development sector—faded quickly.
Partly, this unity was based on the overwhelming shock of the earth-
quake and on plentiful images of contractors fleeing the earthquake
region, homeless victims, and state agencies in astounding disarray.
Yet these images lost their novelty as both religious and secularist
dailies moved quickly through a host of topics and images, such as
Durmuş’s scandalous comments, the earthquake as divine punishment,
and high-fashion Greek-Turkish friendship concerts. Civic groups and
official organizations that were in dire need of publicity and needed to
diffuse necessary information found themselves facing a highly uninter-
ested media. As a case in point, one article in a woman’s journal
derided the media, secular and religious alike, for not giving adequate
coverage to the efforts of volunteers and aid workers and for engaging
in competitive shock tactics (i.e., for publishing gruesome pictures of
the dead, speculating wildly on the timing of violent aftershocks, and
disseminating pseudoscientific maps of Istanbul’s seismicity, which
sent some real estate values soaring and others plummeting).\footnote{Tülün Tankut, “Basın ahlakında sarsıntılar: ‘Şok görüntü,’ ‘Şok haber,’” \textit{Kadınlar Dünyası} (November 1999), p. 15. In the same issue, another article explained that among the long-term consequences of the earthquake is the loss of women’s positions in the labor market. Noting employment rates indicating that women in the disaster area were the first to be fired, the article calls for women to organize. Such articles, which reported on the specific aspects of social dislocation and attempted to pose solutions, were generally found in nonmainstream fringe journals and rarely made it to high-circulation dailies. See Dilek Uğuz, “Tehlike: Eve kapatılmak,” pp. 12-14.}

The qualitative shift in reporting themes and images related to the
earthquake can be tentatively understood as the following: First, the
liberalization of the media seems to have had a standardizing and
debasing effect on reports and articles. The concentration of news channels and papers into a handful of holding companies, and the drive for slim profits, brings pressure on journalists to present new and sensational images. While the thematic distortion that might occur can be overstated (see Finkel, 2000; Bagdikian 1992), research on media in diverse national markets suggests that multiple perspectives and necessary but unremarkable reports will be sacrificed for images that shock or entertain.

This increasing reliance on popular culture and sensationalism in the press is partly a consequence of the dominance of visual images over verbal information. The formatting of news in the private television media, highly dependent on visual currency over informative scripts, has generated a consequent trend in print articles (Entman 1993; Zarefsky 1992). In countries such as Turkey, where there is considerable overlap in both ownership and employment in television and newspapers, this phenomenon is likely to be pronounced. The potentially negative and standardizing effects of liberalization, which have been investigated in sectors such as urban development and the music industry (see Bozdoğan 1998; Özbek 1998), suggest the need to reevaluate the dominant assumption in the aforementioned studies of the Turkish media that liberalization is a pluralizing factor in public information.

An additional example of the preference of images over information in the media occurred at the opening of the three-day “Conference for the Evaluation of the Marmara Earthquake” (Marmara Depremi Değerlendirme Konferansı), held in Istanbul on the first anniversary of the earthquake. After a speech by the mayor of Istanbul, Ali Müfit Gürtuna, a moment of silence was observed for the earthquake’s victims. The conference’s first panel included a host of international experts and officials speaking on the successes and difficulties in designing the infrastructure and organization for rapid disaster relief in urban areas. Among them was Violeta Seva, general manager of the Metro Manila Development Authority, who presented the detailed history of Manila’s highly regarded disaster-response program and discussed its potential for application elsewhere. The media ignored the information presented by Seva and other international representatives, information that would have enhanced public awareness of the

43 I owe this point to one of my anonymous reviewers.
deficiencies in Istanbul's disaster-management programs and avenues for reform. Instead, a variety of press and television representatives recorded the mayor's much-quoted speech about Greek-Turkish friendship, unscrupulous contractors, and generic praise for public resilience. Photographers and cameramen did their part by shuffling around the stage during the moment of silence to capture the image of the mayor with his head bowed in respect.

The second point to consider with respect to the media's reports on the earthquake and relief efforts was the trend away from reports on the earthquake's long-term consequences (i.e., reform in the construction sector, overhaul of official disaster-management programs, social dislocation, etc.) and toward a focus on political and social debates to which the earthquake and its consequences were tangential. As shown above, mainstream secularist dailies used the destruction caused by the earthquake as a chance to lament the dismantling of Kemalism, warn of the danger of religious fanaticism, and mourn the frustrations of modernization in Turkey. Religious dailies deployed the earthquake as a sign of retribution for human-rights violations, the oppression of veiled students, immorality, and the frustrations of their own version of modernity.

These politicized concerns, to a certain point, reflected the reemergence of familiar political debates in Turkey on the directions of state policy, secularism, and democracy (see Kasaba and Bozdoğan 2000 and 1998; Erdoğan 1999; Yavuz 1999b; Saktanber 1997; Arat 1991). After the initial unity and a thorough critique of official organizations, the dialogues in the press naturally fractured into diverse and contrary positions about the future of the state and the type of reform that would be necessary. However, the frames used by the press and the opinions expressed by journalists reveal an extreme polarization and the loss of moderate voices that normally span the secularist and Islamist divide. The sources of this intensifying hostile dialogue are likely the residual biases and political networks in which the press is embedded. Given the vacuum in state capacity and legitimacy created by the earthquake, the media initiated highly polarizing campaigns—note about how change would be effected but about who had the right to effect it. Substantial omissions, distortions, and "framing" processes were deployed in this press dialogue.

One particularly good example of such omissions and frames was the much-abused story of the Erzincan earthquake. Newspapers from
that time (27 December 1939) reveal that the state and its officials were less involved and less effective than columnists of mainstream secular dailies implied in 1999. While İnönü did tour the area and console earthquake victims in person,44 most other officials spent little time in the region. Representatives of the Interior and Health Ministries arrived in Erzincan on 1 January and returned to Ankara the following day, when they prematurely declared an end to rescue efforts.45 The early republican state’s relief efforts were also less than stunning. On the heels of İnönü’s decision to earmark 10,000 lira for the disaster area, Istanbul industrialists announced that their public campaign had raised 500,000 lira to provide food, shelter, clothing, and medicine to the homeless and injured.46 The efforts of private citizens and civic agencies seem to have outpaced those of officials in many respects. Finally, it appears that the relief efforts of the state in Erzincan did not lack for criticism. Increasing public protest seems to have compelled the Minister of Health to disclose the names and numbers of villages that state agencies had managed to reach only a full two weeks after the earthquake.47 At the same time, transcripts of political speeches suggest that the public had severely criticized the state for its inadequate relief efforts and apparent misappropriation of funds. Prime Minister Refik Saydam’s response was to remind the public of the overwhelming scale of the destruction and denounce all critics as enemies of the nation.48

The inaccurate image of the Kemalist past served the mainstream secular press well in its attempt to delegitimate Islamist views on state reform. In idealizing the past, the secularist press was able to deliver to the reading public contrasting images of a harmonious past and a sullied present. This tarnishing of an idealized social order was then presented as the result of social extremism and political corruption in which religious reactionaries were said to play a large part.

44 “İnönü Erzincan’da: Millî Şef muztarip halkın manaviyetini takviye etti,” Vakit, 1 January 1940.
45 “Dahiliye ve Sihhiye Vekilleri Ankara’ya dönüşüyorlar,” Vakit, 2 January 1940.
46 See “Ankara’ya dönen Millî Şef felaketzedelere 10 bin lira teberrü ettiler,” Vakit, 4 January 1940; and “İstambulluların yardımları yarım milyona yaklaştı,” Vakit, 6 January 1940. The privately donated fund would eventually come close to one million Turkish lira, a tremendous sum for that period.
47 “Sihhiye Vekilinin izahati,” Vakit, 11 January 1940.
48 “Başvekilin dünük nutku,” Vakit, 19 January 1940.
Many such articles, moreover, were presented in secular dailies alongside articles that made comparisons with Japan and Taiwan and praised the East Asian states for outstanding disaster response and social organization. In one such article, Ayten Görgün praises Japan for its “earthquake culture” and describes its hyper-responsive state and well-organized society. The author notes, in implicit contrast to religious obscurantism in Turkey, that in Japan even children can recite scientific explanations for earthquakes.\(^{49}\) Another author contrasts the responsiveness of Taiwanese officials following their 1999 earthquake and the efficiency and technical achievements of the state. He laments that Turkey is far from such an example, given its disposition to social chaos and to regressive beliefs that natural disasters are the embodiment of divine wrath.\(^{50}\) In their totality, such articles implied that the condition of the Turkish state was in part the result of antimodern, religious reactionaries and that the religious press was continuing the dismantlement by spreading false and irrational information on the causes of earthquakes. As such, the secular press was symbolically depriving the religious press in its diverse entirety of the right to propose future directions for reform.

The press reports and analysis presented above suggest an alternative to the arguments made by scholarship on the Turkish media. First, this article has rejected the simple analysis of the Turkish media as part of civil society (see Alpay 1993). Such analyses rely on a clear boundary between state and society, a theme present in some of the broader debates on democratization and statism in Turkey (for instance, Özbudun 2000). The identification of such a boundary, however, is an elusive task insofar as the media—in Turkey as well as in most other places—is in effect a corporate estate that is more connected to the market, holding firms, and political networks than it is to a broad societal collective.

While other scholars have deemphasized this approach by taking up the theme of media conflict and focusing on emerging media networks, they have prematurely determined that this process itself enhances the quality of the public sphere and democratic potential (Yavuz 1999a; Aksoy and Robins 1997). Although privatization and the consequent incorporation of new elites into the media landscape

\(^{49}\) “Depremle yaşammanın yolları,” \textit{Hürriyet}, 15 September 1999.

\(^{50}\) Hadi Uluengin, “İzmit-Tayvan çivisi,” \textit{Hürriyet}, 23 September 1999.
potentially can promote an awareness of social differences, this awareness does not necessarily result in a more inclusive or broader public sphere. The images and tone of communication across segments of the public sphere require elaboration. This is a crucial exercise, because commonly held definitions of the public sphere emphasize its character as an irreducibly pluralistic site of democratic communication among citizens (Göle 2000; Edwards and Foley 1998, p. 14; Schwedler 1995, p. 5; Toprak 1996).

Because much of the information (and conversation) that the public will use in associational life, political decisions, and attitudes toward democracy potentially comes from news and the media, the nature of communication among the different segments of the media could very well be representative of the relative inclusion and plurality of the public sphere and its democratic outlook. This point does not imply that a democratic public sphere requires polite or unemotional debate. Fully public democratic conversations will occur in settings where such debate and the expression of clashing opinions are bound to be uncomfortable (Schudson 1997). However, the extent of pluralism, cohabitation, and inclusiveness in the public sphere is likely to be reflected in the sets of norms that determine the ground rules for discussion and terms for pertinent speaking and appropriate listening. Scholars in the Turkish context have noted the communicative aspects of the public sphere and the normative goal of promoting democracy by sharing public and urban spaces among different cultural programs; yet this cohabitation has not been linked to media practices (Göle 2000).

The above articles in the context of the earthquake demonstrate that communication norms often were not in place among segments of the press in Turkey. The framing processes, omissions, exaggerations, and general tones of the articles presented suggest that the secular and religious press demonstrated a strong tendency to accuse each other of illegitimate behavior and inappropriate opinions. Diverse articles in the religious press on the causes of the earthquake were collectively mocked by the secular press, labeled indecent, and implied to be an example of religious reactionarism aimed at destroying social stability and democracy. The religious press responded by accusing the mainstream secular press of a combination of tyranny and human-

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51 It should be noted, however, that a common debate in Turkish studies is whether an officially secular, liberal-democratic public sphere can truly be considered value-neutral (Göle 2000; Toprak 1996).
rights abuses. These themes intensified and persisted months after the earthquakes. Combined with market pressures for sensationalist reporting styles, the result was the abandonment of informative articles on long-term consequences of reconstruction, official accountability, and civic initiative.

While it is difficult to make specific causal statements connecting the relative professionalism, multiple perspectives, and democratic attitudes of the press with the strength of the public sphere, this article has demonstrated that privatization and increased social representation in the press do not automatically lead to an enhanced public sphere. Comparative media studies that examine the Turkish case alongside Eastern European, Mediterranean, and Southeast Asian media markets—where aggressive liberalization has occurred in the context of persistent political polarization—are likely to be a fruitful avenue for research.

REFERENCES


