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Turkish press coverage of the Syrian conflict and the possibilities of peace journalism

Aysun Akan

Izmir University of Economics

Faculty of Communication

Context

- Syrian civil war, erupted in 2011, has been one of the bloodiest wars in the Middle East in recent years causing thousands of human casualties, destabilising the region and uprooting thousands from their homelands.
- Turkey, as a border country to Syria, has a close eye on the Syrian conflict and face political problems not only in domestic but also in international politics. Reporting on Syrian conflict is crucially important in this context as the allies and enemies in constant change and shift.

- Mainstream media, in general, coverage of conflict serves to encourage perceptions of conflict and in essence it is war fuelling (Galtung (2007). The assumption is that the public receives its information from the media and media news is framed in favour of conflict. It then follows that this will influence popular perceptions of a conflict. If we assume that media has a role in influencing public perception then media discourses on conflict may also influence polity outcomes.
- In short, if such an assumption has a force, then prevalence of war or peace journalism have a potential to effect both public perception and the political decision makers.
- Thus studying news coverage of conflict is important for the students of media to underline the impact of media on ongoing conflicts and on public perception.
- It is therefore vitally important to highlight the implications of war journalism, which favours the points of view of those in power, for people belonging to different sides of the conflict (ethnic, religious et.)
- The Turkish press coverage of Syrian conflict is characterised by war journalism, in which press favours the points of view of those in power. The existing literature on war journalism in Turkey demonstrates a series of implications of such journalistic practices for a peaceful coexistence of neighbouring populations.

Methodology

- This analysis is based on data gathered from three Turkish daily newspapers, *Hürriyet*, *Yeni Şafak* and *Cumhuriyet*.
- For this presentation 45 news stories from each newspaper are selected out of 970 (*Yeni Şafak* 400, *Cumhuriyet* 250, *Hürriyet* 320) published between 20-27 January 2018. This period signifies the beginning of the Turkish military involvement in Syria.
- In the selection process of the media outlets, the political orientation of the newspapers is taken into account.

- **Hürriyet** is usually referred to as the “Admiral Ship” of the mainstream media. It has the second highest circulation among other dailies. It is part of the Doğan Media group, which has been involved in disputes with the government, though not an opposition newspaper, rather adopts a middle-of-the road approach. Recently (on 6 April 2018, take-over was completed on 17 May 2018) it is sold to a pro-government Demirören business group. It’s circulation between 22-28 January 2018 is **315, 269**.
- **Cumhuriyet**’s circulation is the lowest among the selected outlets. With its irreconcilable Kemalist and secularist orientation, it represents a harder oppositional position to the government’s policies within the mainstream media. It’s circulation between 22-28 January 2018 is **34,188**
- **Yeni Şafak**’s editorial position has been supportive of the government’s policies. . It’s circulation between 22-28 January 2018 is **111,320**. It is currently owned by the Albayrak Group, which is renowned for its close relations with the Prime Minister Erdoğan.

War Journalism

- Mainstream media, in general, coverage of conflict serves to encourage perceptions of conflict and in essence it is war fuelling. Galtung (2007) assumes that media coverage fuels war. The assumption is that the public receives its information from the media and media news is framed in favour of conflict. It then follows that this will influence popular perceptions a conflict.
- if such an assumption has a force, then prevalence of war or peace journalism have a potential to effect both public perception and the political decision makers.

War journalism

- it is war oriented.
- conflict is isolated from its context
- it tends to search for the causes and solutions in the conflict arena
- war is a zero-sum game between the involved parties.
- 'they' are always the problem
- the focus is on the visible effects of the war
- it is propaganda oriented; main concern is to expose the lies, crimes and weaknesses ... of the 'other' it tends to cover-up its 'own' weaknesses and crimes...
- it relies on the elite as a source of information and opinion
- it is victory oriented
- its coverage ends when the war is over.

Peace Journalism

- Peace journalism is when editors and reporters make choices of what stories to report and about how to report them- that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict (Lynch & McGoldrick 2005, 5).
- The key issue for journalism is the awareness that media cannot and should not remain impartial in the face of conflict and that they should always offer citizenry ways of thinking about the resolution of conflict that fosters and encourages peace and increased democracy. The term peace journalism highlights the crucial role that journalists play while reporting on conflict and in conflict zones. this role means making choices about how to report while covering of conflict in such a way that leads to peaceful outcomes

Peace Journalism

- Supporting this definition of peace journalism Blasi (2004, p.2) states that “alternative ways of conflict reporting that can contribute to processes of de-escalation, peace building and reconciliation instead of escalating, exaggerating or ignoring conflicts” can be referred to as peace journalism. for Shinar (2008), another important point that needs to be kept in mind regarding peace journalism is the ways in which it urges us to focus on avoiding journalistic practices that might encourage violent outcomes or even war. The key for Shinnar (2008, 166) is in “paying attention to the peace and compromising stories and adverse effects that may have arisen or that may arise after the conflict”.
- Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) concur behind conflicts rather than just focusing on facts, figures and consequences regarding these conflicts

Peace Journalism

- it is peace oriented
- it tends to explore how the conflict arose rather than just focusing on the conflict
- it accepts that there is often more than two sides to a conflict
- context is always considered as an important parameter to understand the conflict
- war is not treated as an isolated event
- it focuses on causes, issues in their historical context
- it is proactive reporting, it strives to reduce the risk of an outbreak of violence
- it focuses on the less visible effects of war -trauma, damage to culture, environment...etc.-
- it promotes transparency
- all parties are given a room for an opinion aiming to promote empathy between groups
- it avoids dehumanising one side, instead it tends to humanise all parties, ultimately aiming to reduce the threat
- it attempts to expose lies and cover-ups on all sides
- it is truth oriented
- it is people oriented
- it highlights suffering across all levels of society
- evil doers are exposed regardless of their sides
- a greater space is given to peace-makers and independent opinions
- it is a solution oriented
- its ultimate objective is to prevent violence and war, but if the war takes place it promotes conflict resolution
- in the case of a war, the structural and cultural violence in the aftermath of a conflict it promotes reconciliation process to take place

Cumhuriyet Analysis

- 8 news stories reported the USA, Russia, England and other international actors' response to Turkey's military involvement.
- 1 report mentioned foreign press coverage of the war, which indicated as a sign of an international recognition of Turkey's strength.
- 12 reports directly quoted government and military sources, which emphasised Turkey's strength and success in its fight against the enemy. These reports underline the technological superiority of the Turkish military.
- 1 report emphasising the technological superiority of the Turkish military
- 1 report on D. Harvey and N. Chomsky who criticised Turkey .
- 2 reports on the views of the other side of the war
- 1 report on the German Social Democrat critique of the Turkish opposition leader's support of the war.
- internal conflict of other side reported
- 1 report criticising warmongering groups in Turkey
- 1 report critical of government's dependency on Russia and the USA
- 5 reports on the Syrian military's attack on civilians
- 1 report on Syrian politicians' critique of the Turkish government.
- 3 reports on the Turkish opposition critical views on war
- 5 reports on President's threat to opposition parties that opposes the war
- 1 report on the Religious Affairs Director's (supporting the government)

Hürriyet Analysis

- 20 reports government and the military sources and their account of the war. These reports include various lists of killed 'enemies', technological superiority of Turkish military, threatening speeches of government members.
- 4 reports on the civilian deaths caused by the 'terrorists'
- 1 reports on France's opposition to Turkey
- 12 reports on the international support for Turkey's involvement in war (the USA, the NATO, Holland, Iran, Turkish Cyprus)
- 5 reports Syrian civilians welcoming Turkish soldiers. one of these reports about how the Turkish soldiers prevented a terrorist being lynched by the people.
- 2 report on the atrocities by the Syrian soldiers (the newspaper refers them as terrorists) against their people.

Yeni Şafak Analysis

- 24 reports directly quoted government and military sources, which emphasise Turkey's strength and success in its fight against the 'enemy'. These reports underline the technological superiority of the Turkish military, lists of dead 'terrorists'.
- 4 news reports on the Russia support of Turkey.
- 2 reports on the USA's acknowledgement of Turkey's right to self defence.
- 8 news stories on the 'success of Turkish military in Syria (captured villages, killed terrorists, heroic characteristics of Turkish soldiers, pictures of bombed territories, superiority of war planes,...)
- 2 report on international media attention on Turkey's 'peace operation.'
- 4 news report on the evil deeds of the 'terrorists (how they use children as soldiers and bomb mosques).
- 1 news report on France's opposition to Turkey.

Overall Findings

- The coverage of newspapers of the Syrian conflict:
- Heavily privilege domestic political actors
- Justifies their point of view of the conflict
- Promotes violent solutions
- Opposition voices discredited or absent (except in Cumhuriyet but opposition opinions are used to criticise government)
- No space for the voices of the ordinary people

Results

- The result of the study reveals journalistic practices far from the principles of peace journalism.
- The reason peace journalism couldn't be put into practice, undoubtedly, has to do with the fact that larger capital media and the local media in Turkey lack the tradition of behaving independently from the political and military centre of Powers.
- Moreover since the mid-2000s, due to the rapid transformation in media ownership formed by the government's direct intervention and consequently a voluntary or fear-based dependency has been formed.
- Journalists don't feel the need to discuss and redefine their present mentality of journalism even when there is a sincere pro-peace choice. A recent study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Turkey Supplementary Report 2017 indicates that 49% of the participants believe news are fake and 40 % distrust news media (distrust in Turkish news media 27th among 37 countries)
- Unless the principles and codes of conventional journalism are deconstructed and questioned, it may not be possible to practice peace journalism, even if suitable conditions and intention for it exist. (Alankus, 2016: 37)

Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017, Turkey Supplementary Report

- «Trust and Distrust in News The most remarkable and significant point regarding the figures for overall trust and distrust in Turkish news media is that they are remarkably similar (see Fig 40). Forty per cent of people said that they trust most news most of the time, and 38% of people said they do not trust most news most of the time. The proportion who 'neither agree nor disagree' is 22%. This phenomenon can be attributed to the very polarised society and news media in the country, as we discuss in more depth later in this chapter by examining the media brands and political leaning.
- One might expect lower trust levels in a country where the media is largely controlled by the government. However, this may be misleading because it ignores the fact that trust may be high among those who agree with the government, which seems to be the case in Turkey.
- Although there is a high level of polarisation in the Turkish news media, there is also a sense that people nonetheless recognise some of the problems associated with high levels of government influence. Forty per cent of Turkish respondents trust news overall, while this figure increases slightly to 46% when they are asked specifically about trust in the news they use, indicating that these people perceive problems with the news as a whole.
- On the other hand, when we look at the share of those who 'disagree' with the propositions on trust, thereby reflecting distrust, it is striking that the level of distrust in Turkey is very high, at 38%. The proportion who 'disagree' with 'trust in news I use' is 31%, and the figure for those who 'neither agree nor disagree' is 24% in this category.
- All these figures are an indication of not only distrust in media coverage and content but also high polarisation. The respondents seem to be divided into two camps, either trusting or distrusting news media. People in either camp prefer to trust what they want to believe without questioning the reliability and accuracy of the news.» (Yanatma, Server. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017, Turkey Supplementary Report p. 30)

Implications

- In countries which have experienced ethnic, religious and sect based tensions and civil war and have paid for the media's provocative role in transformation of those tensions into violence (e.g.increasing racism against Syrian refugees, and violent confrontations in Turkey).

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