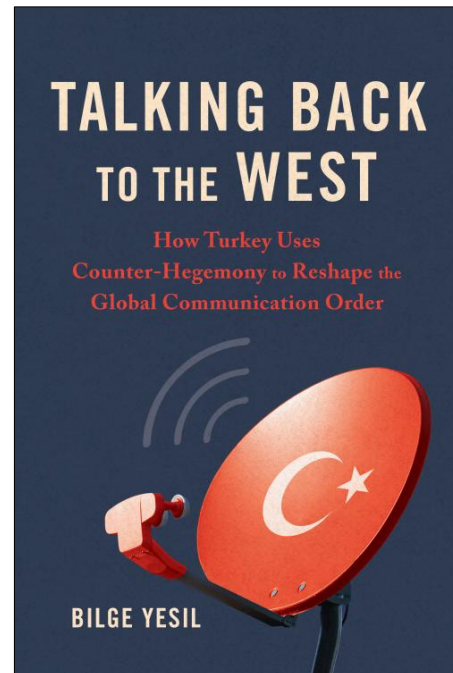


Bilge Yesil, **Talking Back to the West: How Turkey Uses Counter-Hegemony to Reshape the Global Communication Order**, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024, 250 pp., \$28.00 (paperback).

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For the last decade, scholarly and popular interest in disinformation and the phenomena of “fake news” and “post truth” has exploded. In Europe and the United States, influence operations surrounding the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s first election quickly turned attention to the efficacy of new methods of propaganda circulating through social media and other nontraditional media forms. In the same years that audiences attentive to Western media were learning about concepts like “echo chambers,” the ruling party in Turkey, the AKP, and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, were already consolidating control over all domestic media outlets and social media content and distribution. In ***Talking Back to the West: How Turkey Uses Counter-Hegemony to Reshape the Global Communication Order***, Bilge Yesil offers a history and analysis of Turkey’s highly sophisticated global communication and disinformation network, which far surpasses influence operations targeted at U.S. and UK audiences.



Talking Back to the West pairs a mapping of the political-economic structure of media ownership and production in Turkey with analyses of media content, focusing on English-language content produced or translated for foreign audiences. As Yesil demonstrates, all contemporary domestic Turkish media outlets have some ownership or patronage relationship with Erdoğan and the AKP, and, as described in chapter 2, some foreign media outlets like Deutsche Welle and Voice of America have been required to obtain broadcasting licenses that enable government control of their content (Freedom House, 2018, has listed Turkey as “Not Free” since 2018). As Yesil outlines in chapter 5, these relationships and content control mechanisms even extend to historical fiction television dramas and other internationally distributed entertainment series such as *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* (marketed on Netflix as “the Turkish *Game of Thrones*”; p. 117). The clientelist network of connections between private media companies, production studios, printing presses, pro-AKP television channels, and the Turkish state broadcasting agency, as well as AKP control over state regulatory agencies, produces an environment where only one perspective exists in Turkish media and Turkish media exports.

As *Talking Back to the West* explains in each chapter, much of the sophistication of Erdoğan’s media control rests on his manipulation of widely agreed-on problems within the contemporary global media landscape. Chapter 1 analyzes Erdoğan’s calculated criticisms of Western global media hegemony that creates “unbalanced representation of the Global South in international news” (p. 33). Chapter 2

begins from the Turkish Directorate of Communications' assertion that national governments need to serve as a "strong bulwark against the crisis of truth' and a means of fighting against 'lies, disinformation, terrorist propaganda, digital fascism, media imperialism, and cyber bullying'" (p. 48). These critical positions about global media and international power relations have been advanced by activists on the left (and some on the right) in Western contexts and are widely shared. Erdoğan manipulates these positions to achieve his own domestic and international political goals. For instance, criticizing Western global media hegemony enables Erdoğan to characterize himself as standing up to the West when he constructs an insular, AKP-friendly media universe, closes dissenting news outlets within Turkey, and rejects all criticism of his own authoritarianism by Western media. Yesil demonstrates how Erdoğan and the AKP coopt familiar problems of global media and institute highly politicized solutions.

The strongest moments of analysis in the book come when Yesil expertly combines system-level mapping of the AKP's political power over all media with a content-level analysis of media narratives that serve AKP policy interests. For instance, chapter 5 analyzes historical fiction television dramas beginning with one of the most famous, *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, but also including a variety of series that constitute the "post-*Resurrection* boom" (p. 119) in Turkish television production (in 2017 Turkey became the second-biggest exporter of fictional TV series with 25% of the global market share; p. 116). These series reinforce explicit AKP nationalist themes that depict Turkey as the leader of Muslims against the West and Turkish Islam as morally superior to Western materialism. Yesil's interviews with viewers outside of Turkey confirm the uptake of these Turkish nationalist messages, and Yesil's analysis of Saudi, Egyptian, and Emirati government response (banning all Turkish series) confirms foreign perception of these series as threats. *Talking Back to the West* effectively maps the connections between AKP foreign policy goals and the Party's influence over content in Turkish media exports.

Partly due to the closed Turkish media ecosystem, there are moments in the book when the amount of evidence needed to demonstrate authoritarian control of a media outlet at the structural level leaves little room for the content-level analysis that would otherwise demonstrate the same thing. As Yesil points out, the only individuals willing to be interviewed for the book were people who had both "quit their jobs *and* left Turkey" (p. 8; emphasis in original). This acknowledged lack of access to insiders requires additional sourcing to establish the bias of a station like TRT World, an English-language outlet of the Turkish state's Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT), which claims to be as neutral and unbiased as the BBC. As a result, in chapter 3 an analysis of TRT World documentaries on Western Islamophobia refers primarily to the titles of these documentaries, single-sentence summaries, and author-generated themes in them rather than any content from these documentaries.

At other moments, the book does not quite engage in necessary comparative analysis between different government regulations of media systems. Chapter 2 states that authoritarian regimes use a German anti-misinformation law as justification for their oppressive restriction of speech and Internet freedoms. The chapter moves on to a truly insightful analysis of both the way Erdoğan manipulates Internet safety laws to restrict all speech freedom in Turkey (whether online or not) and the way Turkey replicates its own media regulatory system throughout other Central Asian nations to normalize the restrictive Turkish approach. Without a comparative analysis of the supposedly legitimate German law, however, readers rely on two unstated presumptions: first, that government regulation of speech

freedoms is desirable, and second, that Germany's regulation of speech freedoms is the right kind of government regulation. The moments of limited content or comparative analysis leave a reader with an uncomfortable choice between trusting the author despite unexplained presumptions or siding with an authoritarian regime.

The sophisticated media and disinformation regime of Erdoğan and AKP positions these minor criticisms as if they were a trap laid by Erdoğan himself. Familiar questions about validity across disciplines since the 1960s like "How does the scholar know?" or "From what perspective is the scholar making their judgments?" sound eerily like pro-AKP disinformation to create doubt about a critical scholar's expertise. In a country where the government has fired tens of thousands of academics and teachers since 2016, scholarly debate easily translates into material consequences. As Yesil demonstrates in chapter 1, the AKP has accustomed audiences to an extreme relativity of perspectives that enables it to control the "authoritative" narrative. State control over what is truthful allows a state to cast doubt on scholarly judgments as well. It may be the case, then, that authoritarian media regimes have transformed all scholarly analysis into political-activist work that can no longer rely on the presumption of scholarly objectivity for validity. Indeed, one extremely important contribution of Yesil's book is the explanation of the AKP's deep influence over purportedly scholarly think tanks like the SETA Foundation, academic journals like *Insight Turkey*, NGOs like Bosphorus Global, and formerly independent broadcasters like Anadolu Agency and TRT. It may now be incumbent on scholars analyzing authoritarian media regimes to thematize their own political commitments within their work in ways that depart from the traditional perspective of "scholarly objectivity."

If the "post-truth" era creates new pressures on scholarly output, then *Talking Back to the West* is an invaluable starting point and reference text for resisting Turkish state media manipulation. Anyone trying to understand Turkey through its English-language media must also consult Yesil's work to understand the sophisticated AKP-Erdoğan disinformation network shaping that media. Chapter 1 is an especially necessary guide to the most prominent English-language global outlets of Turkish news and the variety of patronage networks and styles of bias that influence their reporting. A deeply ideological pro-AKP think tank like SETA may publish unbiased scholarly work in order to establish an institutional reputation that legitimizes its other deeply politicized reports. Formerly trustworthy broadcasters like Anadolu Agency and TRT may still produce useful professional journalism, but it will not be critical of the AKP, conflict with AKP ideology, or report domestic events problematic to the AKP. As Yesil shows, this journalism also actively advances AKP policy interests and political narratives. Both *Talking Back to the West* and Yesil's (2016) previous book, *Media in New Turkey*, are essential roadmaps to Turkey's clientelist and corrupt authoritarian media landscape.

References

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