

Bilge Yesil, **Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State**, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016, 230 pp., \$79.69 (hardcover), \$27.92 (paperback).

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In the era of “fake news,” there is no more appropriate time to investigate public-private media partnerships and their effect on global geopolitical society—a society that seems to get smaller with each passing day. Author Bilge Yesil examines and attempts to dismantle the myth of Turkish media democratization through privatization in her book **Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State**. In her sophomore offering, Yesil turns her attention to “what happens when authoritarian tendencies clash with neoliberal logic”¹ in a nation-state plagued by media censorship, cronyism, and deep-seated nationalism. In essence, she asks what happened to the mythical Turkish model that “blended Islam, democracy and a market economy” (p. 1). Her thoughtful history of Turkey’s media system dating back to the Roaring Twenties (and beyond) and her analysis of its contemporary consequences provide a far-reaching, if imperfect, benchmark for exploration of media systems in comparative perspective.



Yesil accomplishes her goal of exploring “Turkey’s political economic, social and cultural terrains through the lens of the country’s media system” (p. 2) by weaving a rich (if succinct) tapestry that attempts to fill the gaps in existing literature. One such gap is the underexamination of Turkish media in relation to the country’s politics, economy, society, and culture in the age of globalization. Additionally, as Yesil sees it, most analyses of Turkey are written from a political science perspective, which has resulted in a widespread disregard for culture at large. To fill these gaps, Yesil applies a systematic analysis of Turkey’s composite system that symbiotically integrates private/commercial and public/state media initiatives. Although it is not an entirely novel approach, *Media in New Turkey* convincingly enters the conversation with other scholars of authoritarian regimes (and Turkey specifically) through a political economy lens, applying a hybrid historical analysis method that integrates interviews with Turkish media professionals into the broader argument. This book likely will appeal to Middle East scholars, media scholars, and those in the general public with an interest in and knowledge of Turkey and the Middle East at large, offering a primer and specific case study on Turkish media and its relationship to the Turkish state and its associated culture(s). This offers up the possibility for comparative multisite studies that can illuminate theories of globalization.

¹ The quotes from Yesil without page numbers were captured during her panel talk at Georgia State University in October 2017.

The book is divided into six chapters, each of which broadly outlines a specific era or turn in the history of Turkish media and its intersections with the political-socioeconomic arena. Chapter 1, "Politics and Culture in Turkey," investigates "Turkey's political economic history and culture . . . specifically within the main pillars of statism, nationalism and secularism" (p. 17). Chapter 2, "Political Economic Transformation of Media in the 1990s," focuses on the convergence of a military coup, neoliberal restructuring, transnational capital and culture, broad investment in the telecommunication sector, and the rise of communication broadcasting. Chapter 3 takes a deeper dive into the "lost decade" and turns an eye toward perceived Kurdish ethnic nationalism and the corresponding legitimization of "the national security paradigm with the collaboration of law enforcement, the intelligence community, elected officials and the media" (p. 51). Chapter 4 identifies a sea change in the formerly secular Turkish state, laying out how Turkey's historical shifts in political economic forces paved the way "for political actors, specifically the Islamist AKP, to rise to power" (p. 72). This was accomplished, in part, through "state centric media discourses" created via the "privatization of state-owned enterprises on a massive scale" (p. 75) and a seemingly pro-European Union AKP party. Chapter 5 moves into the contemporary period by building on the subject of public-private media partnerships that saw a major forced restructuring and a corresponding drastic negative impact on press freedom. This move, Yesil argues, was the contemporary result of rabid political partisanship, political economic influences, and the increasingly invasive nature of the ruling AKP party in media affairs. What is not completely clear here are the ways in which the AKP party used media restructuring tactics to entirely change the media landscape during this period. This privatization at the hands of an authoritarian regime seems to be the unifying theme of this book. Finally, chapter 6 picks up the story of Turkey's nationalist media in the wake of the Arab Spring. These six chapters are bookended by a stage-setting introduction and a summarizing conclusion, plus an epilogue that acts as an update to the original manuscript.

Media in New Turkey broadly succeeds in its goal to explore "Turkey's media system as a byproduct of the tensions between forces of decentralization and centralization and illuminate the dialectical relationships between market imperatives and state prerogatives, democratization efforts and nationalist, statist currents" (p. 107) and its attempt to focus on Turkish media as an indicator of these forces. However, some critique of the work is appropriate despite Yesil's often eloquent prose. First, its wide-ranging methodological approach with no clear consolidating framework packs a lot of information scattered across decades into 145 pages. For those not already well-versed in Turkey's history, supplemental research is required to fully understand Yesil's argument. This approach also runs the risk of glossing over some important topics that may help make the author's case more strongly. The result is a lingering question as to whether she successfully extends the research into the area of culture.

Second, the position of the author as a Turkish born but U.S. educated academic currently residing in the United States, as well as the focus of her book on urban areas, necessarily precipitates a rather bourgeoisie framing that does not represent the varying levels of nuance and potential AKP opposition within the nation. Third, as argued by other scholars of authoritarian media systems, such as Maria Repnikova (2017) in her book *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism*, there is a broad assumption that the Turkish media is, if not entirely homogenized, certainly made up of passive actors laboring under the constraints of the neoliberal authoritarian state. Additionally, Yesil's use of media professionals' interview quotes seems somewhat superficial and leaves the reader wondering

how much of her methodological approach relied on substantive interviews. Finally, although it was not Yesil's focus, a careful examination of the interplay of gender in the rise of Turkish neoliberal authoritarianism deserves attention insofar as narratives of national security always rely in some way on gendering. Further, there is an obvious lack of female actors in the Turkish system and some may argue this issue of gender is a more far-reaching variable of Turkish culture than that of ethnicity.

Comparative works that could clarify some of these limitations include Soner Cagaptay's (2017) *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*, Cihan Tugal's (2016) *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism*, Kerem Oktem's (2011) *Angry Nation: Turkey Since 1989*, and David L. Phillips's (2017) *An Uncertain Ally: Turkey Under Erdogan's Dictatorship*. Several journalists with roots in Turkey also have tackled this issue from a more popular perspective, including *Cumhuriyet* editor in chief Can Dundar (2016; *We Are Arrested: A Journalist's Notes from a Turkish Prison*), *Today's Zaman* Ankara bureau chief Abdullah Bozkurt (2013; *Turkey Interrupted: Derailing Democracy*), investigative journalist Aydogan Vatandas (2013; *Hungry for Power: Erdogan's Witch Hunt and Abuse of State Power*) and Ece Temelkuran (2016; *Turkey: The Insane and the Melancholy*).

Since *Media in New Turkey* was published, Yesil has said she feels as though the media system in Turkey is swinging back to a state-owned apparatus following the 2016 coup attempt. During her panel talk at Georgia State University in October 2017, she publicly stated the AKP regime has reinitiated its strategy of taking over assets from media companies to put up for sale and sell back to president Erdogan's friends and sympathizers. It seems there may be no end in sight to the authoritarian neoliberal state in Turkey. Perhaps a follow-up book is in order?

References

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