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The background of the cover features a low-angle shot of several tall, lattice-structured communication towers against a clear blue sky. To the right, the Turkish flag is flying on a tall pole. The overall scene suggests a focus on technology, media, and national identity.

# Navigating the Nexus of Intelligent Media, Politics, and Academia: The Case of Türkiye in a Global Perspective

## About Contemporary Turkish Studies

Contemporary Turkish Studies (CTS) is a recognised research group consisting of academics affiliated with the European Institute and other LSE departments. The group mainly focuses on the politics and economy of Türkiye and its relations with the rest of Europe. It is led by the Chair in Contemporary Turkish Studies, Professor Yaprak Gürsoy, who provides academic leadership through interdisciplinary and critical research, teaching and related public activities.



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## **Summary of the Workshop on Media, Politics, and Academia**

The workshop, titled *“Navigating the Nexus of Intelligent Media, Politics, and Academia: The Case of Türkiye in a Global Perspective,”* was hosted by Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE on 29 November 2024. The event convened academics, media practitioners, and policymakers to explore the multifaceted interplay between media, politics, and academia, particularly in the context of Türkiye. The discussions were structured across three thematic sessions—past, present, and future—followed by a keynote address by Prof Selçuk Şirin.

This report summarizes the key points and recommendations that were discussed in the workshop. For more information on the keynote address, please visit CTS past events page.

## Key Takeaways

**Historical Fluctuations in Media Freedom:** Since the Ottoman Empire, media freedom in Türkiye has experienced significant fluctuations, with periods of openness followed by crackdowns, influenced by political climates and governmental efforts to control narratives.

**Impact of Digital Technologies and Academia:** Digital technologies have both empowered independent media in Türkiye and posed risks such as the spread of fake news, creation of echo chambers, and political polarization. Additionally, these technologies have influenced academia by promoting the simplification and debasement of academic content, often driven by social media metrics.

**Challenges and Opportunities of Artificial Intelligence (AI):** AI in media presents challenges like disinformation and surveillance but also offers opportunities for improved journalism and information dissemination, requiring careful management and ethical considerations.

**Strategic Recommendations:** Key strategies include enhancing media literacy, supporting independent journalism, regulating media ownership, and establishing global standards for ethical AI use in journalism.

## **The Past - Assessing Media Freedom and Pluralism in Historical Context**

The workshop explored the historical evolution of media freedom and pluralism in Türkiye, focusing on how governments have historically sought to dominate narratives. Key historical milestones were outlined, including the establishment of the Ottoman Empire's first newspaper, *Takvim-i Vekayi*, in 1831, subsequent reforms during the Tanzimat era, and the Second Constitutional Era of the Ottoman Empire. During the early Republican era, the focus on nation-building under the single-party rule of the Republican People's Party led to significant restrictions on media freedom. Thus, periods of openness were followed by crackdowns, and the pendulum historically swung back and forth between reform and control depending on the political climate.

While media censorship is not new, it does not occur only in Türkiye either. Various methods are used globally, including a wide variety of instruments ranging from misinformation and dissemination of fake news to prosecutions of journalists. The main reason for the use of these techniques is for the state and governments to control the narrative, guided by a feeling of fear from alternative information that would be disseminated by free press. In the Turkish context, this fear is particularly relevant due to the role that the Turkish press played in the 28 February 1997 post-modern military coup, where media networks played an important role in bringing down the coalition government of the day.

Discussions in the workshop highlighted the erosion of press freedoms under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, including media acquisitions by pro-government entities, legislative constraints, financial hurdles, and judicial pressures on journalists. Examples of censorship and disinformation laws were presented as emblematic of broader efforts to consolidate control over media narratives. Türkiye's recent improvement on the Press Freedom Index, moving from 165th to 158th place, was noted, though participants agreed this progress remained insufficient.

In Türkiye, measures to regulate social media platforms have resulted in the blocking of over one million websites. While these actions aim to manage online content, they also impact freedom of information, creativity, innovation, and economic growth. This approach can lead to cultural isolation by limiting the exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives. Similar regulatory trends are observed globally, such as the 2023 UK Online Safety Act and Australia's ban of social media usage for under 16s. Looking ahead, challenges related to press freedom in Türkiye may persist, including issues of access and funding.

## **The Present - Knowledge Production under Digital Influences and Political Polarization**

The workshop examined how digital technologies and political polarisation influence knowledge production and the relationship between academia and media. It was noted that despite all the challenges, independent media platforms in Türkiye have been resilient. They have been using digital tools to fight back, providing alternative perspectives and challenging the dominant narrative. However, the rise of citizen journalism, individually driven platforms and independent news sites is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, alternative voices can get heard, traditional gatekeepers and state control are bypassed, and wider audiences are reached. But on the other hand, digital technologies can be the breeding ground for fake news, hate speech and disordered information. There is the potential danger of creating echo chambers and strengthening societal divides and political polarization.

In terms of relations with academia, the advent of new digital technologies has significantly influenced the production of knowledge, often leading to its debasement. Social media platforms, in particular, have been instrumental in reducing the quality of knowledge by promoting the simplification and trivialization of academic content. The constant need to have more followers, more likes, more shares, as well as the goal to reach wider audiences, overshadows the importance of being engaged with complex ideas in a thoughtful way. This phenomenon is further exacerbated by the erosion of academic freedom, a consequence of the very tools and platforms that were initially intended to democratize information.

Academics themselves are complicit in this process, participating in a surveillance culture that includes self-surveillance and the pervasive influence of image-based performance. Algorithmic tools that predict user preferences and showing more content in agreement with pre-set views further reinforces biases. These forms of surveillance not only shape the behaviour of academics but also influence the nature and dissemination of knowledge.

In response to contemporary societal dynamics such as populism, education is often seen as a solution, yet this perspective can inadvertently fuel greater polarization between the so-called 'people' and 'the intellectual elites.' The creation of echo chambers within academia can serve as a tool for control, where appointments are influenced by loyalty to prevailing ideologies.

To counteract these trends, it is crucial for academics to adopt a critical stance, remain conscious of these influences, and teach students to do the same. Exhibiting resistance through various means, such as addressing issues of



disability, decolonization, and patriarchy, can help challenge the ideal human subject narrative. Recognizing the grey areas and the agency we possess allows both students and educators to imagine and work towards alternative futures.

## **The Future - Society and Politics in the Age of Intelligent Media**

The workshop discussed integration of AI into media, society, and politics, which presents several challenges. AI is a tool for enhancing content creation and audience engagement, however there are concerns that it can spread disinformation. Even though AI can handle certain tasks like summarizing facts or generating basic reports, it cannot yet think critically, make ethical judgments or tell a good story like a human can. Furthermore, AI has the potential to amplify fragmentation and polarization by intensifying confirmation bias and boosting extreme views from opposing sides. This can lead to a more divided society where individuals are increasingly entrenched in their beliefs.

AI enhances surveillance and censorship capabilities, creating a modern-day Panopticon where individuals are constantly monitored. The implications of AI extend to warfare, bias, and the financial and economic sectors, where its influence can be pervasive and unpredictable. The uncertainty surrounding AI's full capabilities and impacts underscores the adage, 'we don't know what we don't know,' highlighting the need for cautious and informed approaches to its integration.

Conversely, AI also offers potential benefits in shaping media, society, and politics. In considering these, we should not assume that media has deterministic power over society and politics. It is essential to recognize that societal and political influences are reciprocal, and the public also shapes media. Being overly critical of media and social media usage can backfire, leading to unintended consequences. The vast influx of information facilitated by AI can enhance journalistic practices, resulting in more comprehensive and accurate reporting. Likewise, media and social media platforms, when used responsibly, can provide significant benefits, including improved journalism and the dissemination of valuable information.

To navigate the complexities of AI's influence, several recommendations are proposed. It is crucial to understand how AI operates by combining technological mechanisms with scholarly insights. Maintaining distance and awareness of filter bubbles can help mitigate the risks of echo chambers. Viewing technology as a tool rather than an end in itself allows for more strategic and ethical use. For journalists, demonstrating compassion, empathy, and sound judgment is vital in



reporting. Diversifying news media sources can also contribute to a more balanced and inclusive media landscape. However, developing AI literacy is not just up to individuals and there needs to be transparency and accountability from the tech companies that control powerful algorithms.

In order to harness the positives that come from AI and mitigate the negatives, participants of the workshop called for robust regulatory frameworks to balance technological innovation with democratic values. International collaboration was identified as essential to address global challenges posed by AI-driven media manipulation. Discussions also touched on the geopolitical implications of intelligent media, emphasising the need for inclusive governance to manage these emerging technologies.

## Recommendations

Throughout the workshop, participants proposed actionable strategies to foster independent journalism and intellectual depth. Key recommendations included:

1. **Enhancing Media Literacy:** Integrating comprehensive media literacy programmes into school curricula to build public resilience against disinformation.
2. **Supporting Independent Journalism:** Providing sustainable funding for alternative media platforms to ensure diverse and unbiased reporting.
3. **Regulating Media Ownership:** Introducing laws to prevent monopolisation and ensure fair competition in media markets.
4. **Showing Academic Awareness:** Digital platforms offer new opportunities but also risks, necessitating collaborative strategies to ensure intellectual independence.
5. **Promoting Ethical AI Use:** Establishing global standards for AI in journalism to prevent manipulation while encouraging innovation.
6. **Empowering Grassroots Movements:** Emphasizing the role of grassroots efforts in challenging dominant narratives and recognizing the resilience of alternative media in Türkiye.
7. **Learning from Global Examples:** Sharing insights from other countries to inform and inspire adaptive strategies for Türkiye.

## **Concluding Reflections**

The workshop concluded on an optimistic note, recognising the formidable challenges facing media and academia but also celebrating the resilience of independent voices. Participants emphasised the need for sustained collaboration among academics, policymakers, civil society and media practitioners to uphold democratic values in an increasingly complex media landscape.

Future workshops were proposed to delve deeper into the intersections of technology, media, and governance. As the digital age continues to evolve, such dialogues remain critical to ensuring a transparent, inclusive, and democratic information ecosystem.



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### Contemporary Turkish Studies

The London School Economics  
and Political Science  
Houghton Street  
London WC2A 2AE

Email: [ei.turkish.studies@lse.ac.uk](mailto:ei.turkish.studies@lse.ac.uk)

Telephone: +44 (0) 20 7955 6971

<https://linktr.ee/turkishstudies>

The information in this report can be made available in alternative formats, on request. Please contact: [ei.turkish.studies@lse.ac.uk](mailto:ei.turkish.studies@lse.ac.uk).

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