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Media Policies in Turkey Since 1990

Abstract

In Turkey, Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) was the one and only institution that has the broadcasting rights until 1990. However, the international impacts of policies regarding deregulation and privatization of media environment has begun to open up a new era in Turkey by the national policies of Motherland Party (ANAP) that started to be in power in early 1980s. Consequently, within this new era Turkish media scene is subjected to the polarization of new radio and television broadcasters those will be the dominant actors to shape the media sector in Turkey starting from 1990s upto now. This paper aims to trace back the early history of 'private' broadcasting in Turkey by giving particular attention to the dynamics of recently emerging media market. By doing so, the underpinning aspects of media industry of 2000s in Turkey can be better evaluated.

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Introduction

Until 1990, the word "television" was, in Turkey, immediately associated with TRT, the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation. The constitution of the Republic of Turkey had awarded the sole broadcasting rights to the TRT.

Although the constitution specifically stated that all radio and television broadcasts would be conducted in conformity with the principles of impartiality, TRT had never been politically impartial - the status of the TRT was typical of government influence at the executive level. The director general and the members of the administrative council were appointed by the council of ministers. For this reason, TRT had always been responsive to the government's wishes. With some exceptions, the general directors had occupied their positions at the discretion of the government.

In mid 1990, however, with the receipt of the first signals of a privately owned television station, which started broadcasting to Turkey via satellite from Federal Germany, there began a new era in Turkey's television. Although perfectly aware of its obvious illegal position, the government did not hesitate to give the green light to Turkey's first private television channel Star 1, established by the young dashing business executive Cem Uzan and Ahmet Özal, who happened to be President Turgut Özal's son.

As the curtain of this new era went up, one by one a whole host of new, private radio and television channels began to reach the Turkish viewers.

At first, receivers and satellite dishes were needed to watch these broadcasts reaching Turkey via satellite. The private television companies started a campaign together with the dish-manufacturing firms to improve the sales of the new satellite dishes, or in other words, in order to extend the penetration of their own broadcasts. As it turned out, the privately owned channel, Star 1, would not have to wait for the results of the dish selling campaign in order to reach a far greater number of viewers. The mayors of several cities in various parts of Turkey, claiming that they had no other motive than that of opening up new horizons for the viewers, established "television stations" in their own regions. The basic feature of these stations was to turn the hitherto satellite broadcasts into terrestrial ones; that is, to receive the satellite broadcasts through satellite dishes and to emit them to the local receivers. In this way, a large number of viewers in several different regions of Turkey were suddenly presented with the opportunity of watching these new and "private" television channels without going to any extra trouble at all to receive them. In actual fact, these developments were the first signs of a great storm that was soon break in the sphere of television.

By the mid 1990, there were seven private channels broadcasting nationally in Turkey via satellite. When the five TRT

channels were added to these, a rather dramatic picture emerged. In fact, that was not the whole of the picture portraying the state of television in Turkey, as there were also hundreds of local television channels of varying sizes, especially in the big cities. The common feature of all these channels was their use of electromagnetic waves.

It was at this point that the first storm -"The Frequency Storm", as it may be called- broke. These television stations, which should have broadcast their programs at certain frequency intervals, started using the available electromagnetic spectrum irregularly, without a license to do so.

Thus, as an outcome, the totally unplanned usage of the already limited frequency capacity led to the introduction of the viewers to a brand new concept which they had never before met -"Electronic Pollution". The electronic pollution reached such heights that Turkish viewers almost came to the point where they wished for the old days when there was only one television channel to watch. This was due to the fact that there was no longer any guarantee that they could watch any broadcast with the same clarity or quality of picture and sound as they had received it even the evening before.

Moreover, the institution that was responsible for the planning and organization of all frequency usage and bore the obligation of preventing such chaos, the Wireless General Directorate (TGM), could do nothing but stand by helplessly in the face of these developments. In actual fact the TGM had accused the transmission stations of breaking the law and had managed to temporarily close down a number of them. However, the judges of the local courts where such cases were heard looked warmly upon the arrival of new channels.

Regulatory Structure - "The Battle for New Legislation"

The main problem was that there was neither a law to regulate newly emerged private radio and television stations

nor a regulatory body to assign frequencies to private operators and regulate channels.

By 1993, no concrete steps were taken to provide a new law to regulate electronic communications. The developments concerning the new legal arrangements were taking place at a snail's pace.

One of the reasons for the delay, was the vastness of the technical problems that had to be solved. In order for the radio frequencies to be assigned to private and public institutions, a highly detailed frequency plan of the whole country had to be made.

Another factor underlying the delay in change of the law pertaining to telecommunications was that a great many people are satisfied with the situation. The private television companies were also endeavoring to maintain good relations with the government because of their fears that the new law concerning telecommunications might eventually bring them more harms than good. Furthermore, the private television companies wanted the present incongruous situation to continue for as long as possible because they established a costly technical infrastructure and signed long-term contracts for the lease of their satellite channels. Even though these channels use the radio frequencies allocated to Turkey, they did not pay any license fee.

The end came rather unexpectedly for all private radio stations and local television channels. The Ministry of the Interior published a circular on January 1993 that led to even further turmoil. With this notice that was sent out to the governors of all the provinces in Turkey, the Ministry announced that all private radio and television stations in Turkey were illegal and ordered that the necessary steps be taken for them to be closed down. It later became clear that this notice was covertly aimed at the Islamic radio and television stations that had recently begun to flourish in many towns all

over Turkey. Apparently, the National Security Council had held a meeting on the issue of the closure of radio and television stations transmitting these kinds of Islamic broadcasts and had ordered that these stations be closely observed.

The efforts to close down these stations failed because the scope of the operation had been much too wide. Apart from a few exceptions, all the private radio and television stations thus continued to transmit their own broadcasts until March 1993.

This time, the Wireless General Directorate, ordered the governors of Turkey's 76 provinces to close down the radio and television stations. It was declared that the stations were illegal and operating without licenses, causing frequency interference with vital air traffic, naval, coast guard and police communications. The provincial authorities were ordered to confiscate all radio equipment and transmitters if the stations did not cease broadcasting. The government made it clear that the ban would not be applied to private television channels that beam broadcasts from outside the country via satellite. The Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel said that until Turkey's laws governing wireless communications were changed, the private radio and television would not be allowed to operate. Prime minister was adamant to go ahead to close private stations. As a result, altogether nearly 700 local radio and television stations were shut down. The survivals of this operation were the private television channels reaching Turkish audience via satellites. The government didn't even touch the transmitters of these channels. They freely continued operating as usual.

The staffers of the defunct radio and television stations and people in general started countrywide protest action. People attached black ribbons to their car antennas, gathered around buildings where their beloved radios used to be, and collected signatures in protest of the government.

Meantime, it became clear for the entrepreneurs that the stability of the market and its long-term profitability hinged on

the government's ability to expedite a sound broadcast law that would facilitate and encourage competition and expansion in a secure political and economic environment.

The most important single obstacle for the privately owned television companies to overcome was the article 133 of the constitution that stated that "Radio and television stations in Turkey may only be established by the state." Despite the fact that all the political parties represented in the Turkish parliament were unanimously agreed that this article should be changed, any change to the constitution was constantly being brought to a halt by discord on the provisions of the amendment.

Finally, the Parliament passed in August 1993 the proposal to amend the constitutional article 133, lifting the state monopoly on radio and television broadcasting.

Following the Constitutional change, long awaited Law came into effect in April 1994. Radio and Television Law was passed by parliament to regulate both private and public service broadcasting. The law envisioned the establishment of a Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), to regulate the activities of the public and private television stations. This Council was assigned the duty of allotting frequencies, channels and transmission licenses to all broadcasting stations. Having experienced the results of the previous body working with next to no powers of sanction, the government decided to endow this new organ with the right to confiscate station's broadcasting license whenever it sees fit. According to law, the new Council was to be made up of nine members appointed by the Turkish Parliament.

The enactment of the law did not solve all the problems as it had been expected to do. In fact, the law drew many criticisms from different actors of the broadcasting policy community. First criticism was about the way which the Supreme Council was formed. The Council was believed to be overtly political.

According to critics, this would damage the impartiality of the Council. Secondly, the range of sanctions was considered as strict controls over the broadcasting stations.

The Attempts to Allocate Frequencies

The Council's first job was to prepare a detailed frequency plan of Turkey's national electromagnetic spectrum. For this purpose, the Council assigned Bilkent University to make a comprehensive frequency plan. Then, the Council made an announcement to all private television and radio owners to apply for operation licences and for frequency allocation. The announcement concluded that stations having not applied to the Council would be banned from transmission. By the end of 1995, applications were already being filed and the frequency plan was completed. Then, applicants started a long wait for the Council's decision to finalise the applications. The applicants were anxious that some of them would be out of the race as a result of frequency scarcity which would not accommodate all of them.

The competitive tender for frequency and channel allocation, was finally made in 1997. This competitive tender which was the first of the series, was to award the licences for local television stations. The Council's original plan was to first start with the bidders for local television channels, then to award the licences for national channels. But the Council had never had a chance to go over to the second phase of the original plan. The Council's decision to award licences for local television channels had been discussed throughly by the National Security Board of Turkey; the result of this discussion, was to 'advise' the Supreme Council to cancel its decision on the awards. The main motive behind The National Security Board's decision was the fear that Islamic circles were to be awarded with the television licences. Then the Supreme Council started looking for alternative ways for preventing Islamic capital from

entering the electronic media sector. Finally, by 1998 the Council in conjunction with the The National Security Board's advise, issued a new procedure to be followed by the bidders for both local and national licences. The new procedure required owners and top managers of the bidding companies to obtain a national security clearance document from the Primeministry. It will only be those applicants who will satisfy these requirements whose cash bids will be considered. The primary purpose of this obligatory procedure was to impede the Islamic and separationist companies. The Council announced its intention to complete the issuing process of national security passes by the end of 1999. As of 2001, seven years after the enactment of the Law all private radio and television channels are still operating without a licence.

Conclusion

By and large, the actions of policy makers have been limited to reactive policies, "designed to cope with, or adopt to, the consequences of changes, rather than anticipating (and so influencing) the consequences. The policy makers have not been concerned with the complex problems associated with political, economic and cultural aspects.

The regulatory policy in media reflects the forces of 'demand-pull' as well as 'technology-push', making broadcasting less stable sector.