

# The Impact of New Media on Democracy and Human Rights Advocacy in the Middle East: A Study of Turkey (2010–2024)

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## ABSTRACT

This study looks at how digital media has changed democracy and human rights advocacy in the Middle East, with a special focus on Turkey between 2010 and 2024. Particularly as traditional media channels grew more constrained, new media platforms like social media, blogs, and digital outlets have offered substitute venues for political expression, activity, and mobilization. Notwithstanding Turkey's democratic system, dissent and free speech were hampered by the emergence of authoritarianism, media censorship, and human rights abuses. Although official surveillance, legal crackdowns, and digital repression pose serious obstacles to new media, which has developed as a crucial advocacy tool, questions have been raised regarding its viability and impact. Habermas's Public Sphere Theory, which highlights the media's function in promoting public discussions that are vital to democracy, serves as the study's compass. According to the study, new media was essential to massive mobilizations like the Gezi Park demonstrations because it revealed violations of human rights and raised awareness of Turkey's domestic conflicts throughout the world. However, the promise of new media to promote long-lasting democratic change was curtailed by repressive policies, internet shutdowns, and government targeting of digital activists. In order to maintain democracy and human rights advocacy, the report suggests bolstering protections for digital rights, stepping up foreign support for media freedom in Turkey, and funding independent media and digital literacy initiatives.

**Keywords:** New Media, Democracy, Human Rights, Digital Activism, Turkey.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the Middle East, the emergence of new media has significantly changed the dynamics of democracy and human rights activism by offering previously unheard-of venues for political expression, citizen mobilization, and opposition to authoritarian governments. In Turkey, new media—which includes blogs, social media sites, and independent online publications—has become an essential instrument for opposing official authority, elevating underrepresented

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voices, and advancing democratic principles (Howard & Hussain 2013). Since 2010, there has been a noticeable change in the media landscape in Turkey due to the country's complicated political landscape, which includes both authoritarian tendencies and democratic institutions coexisting more and more. Critical coverage of government policies and human rights breaches has been scarce in traditional media, which is frequently restricted or controlled by the state (Yeşil 2014).

As a result, new media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have emerged as crucial forums for public participation, political discussion, and abuse reporting.

The revolutionary impact of internet activism in Turkey was demonstrated by events like the 2013 Gezi Park protests, where new media allowed for global solidarity and real-time mobilization (Tüfekçi 2017; Papaoikonomou 2024). State retaliation, including as internet shutdowns, cyber surveillance, restrictive legislation, and the criminalization of online protest, has been prompted by the growing influence of digital advocacy (Freedom House 2022).

From 2010 to 2024, the rapid growth of new media in Turkey has continued to redefine the boundaries of political activism, social engagement, and human rights advocacy as traditional media outlets became more aligned with state interests. As a result, citizens turned to digital platforms to voice dissent, organize protests, and expose violations that would otherwise go unnoticed. The decentralized nature of new media allowed for the creation of virtual spaces where activists, opposition groups, and regular citizens could share information, mobilize support, and form transnational networks of solidarity. This study builds on that tradition by adding a media-centered dimension.

However, social media became a potent equalizer, allowing grassroots groups to resist censorship and contest prevailing state narratives. Local struggles gained visibility on international platforms thanks to the use of hashtags, viral videos, and live streaming as means of evading state-controlled information flows. By bringing attention to topics like police brutality, minority rights, and freedom of expression, new media also significantly contributed to the world community's increased understanding of Turkey's democratic and human rights conditions.

Furthermore, the state swiftly realized how disruptive these internet platforms could be and implemented advanced countermeasures. Cyberattacks, algorithmic manipulation, and surveillance technology have become standard strategies for tracking, managing, and stifling online activism. Tighter legal frameworks resulted in the arrest and prosecution of bloggers,

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journalists, and social media users who were allegedly disseminating “fake news” or dissent. During protests or politically sensitive times, internet outages and content restriction were used as tools to sabotage mobilization efforts.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, new media continues to be a two-edged sword that presents risks of greater governmental control as well as hope for democratic expression. Turkey’s democracy and human rights advocacy are still being shaped by the changing digital world, which reflects the intricate conflict between authoritarian tenacity and citizen empowerment.

In Turkey’s changing political landscape, this study aims to evaluate the dual roles of new media as a site of contestation and a stimulant for democratic engagement. In light of growing digital repression, the study investigates how new media platforms have influenced democracy and human rights advocacy by looking at the years 2010–2024.

The following goals are intended to be accomplished by the paper:

1. To investigate how new media outlets work to further democracy and human rights in Turkey from 2010 to 2024.
2. To examine the tactics used by the Turkish government to manage digital activities and new media through censorship and control.
3. To evaluate how new media affects citizen participation, political mobilization, and the reporting of human rights violations in Turkey.
4. To assess new media’s potential as a long-term instrument for promoting democracy and human rights in Turkey, as well as its obstacles and constraints.

### **Method of Research**

Using a qualitative research methodology, this study examines how new media has affected democracy and human rights advocacy in Turkey from 2010 to 2024 through a methodical content analysis of secondary data. Peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, government and non-governmental organization (NGO) papers, policy documents, credible news items, and online publications are all examples of secondary sources that are solely used in this research. Important international organizations that provide information on media freedom and human rights circumstances in Turkey include Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters Without Borders.

With an emphasis on how new media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and independent blogs, have aided in political expression, citizen mobilization, and human rights advocacy, the content analysis is carried out by recognizing, classifying, and interpreting themes and patterns that surface from the chosen documents. To track the development and influence of digital communication in connection to significant political and social events, the materials are tagged thematically. Particular focus is placed on recorded examples of online activism, such as the Gezi Park demonstrations in 2013, and the ensuing governmental reactions, including platform bans, legislative restrictions, internet shutdowns, and surveillance methods.

To evaluate the wider effects of new media on Turkey's democratic landscape, the analysis combines case studies, comparative assessments, and longitudinal insights. The study guarantees trustworthiness, contextual richness, and analytical depth by combining data from several trustworthy sources. Without the requirement for primary data gathering, this methodology enables a thorough understanding of the relationship between political advocacy and digital media technologies in an increasingly authoritarian setting.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is important because it offers insights into the larger Middle Eastern context and critically examines the ways in which new media has impacted democracy and human rights activism in Turkey. Examining Turkey's experience between 2010 and 2024, the study demonstrates how digital platforms may be transformative in elevating underrepresented perspectives, promoting political mobilization, and bringing attention to human rights abuses in a setting that is becoming more authoritarian.

In addition to educating policymakers, civil society organizations, and international agencies about the opportunities and difficulties of digital engagement in semi-democratic regimes, the findings will add to scholarly discussions on the relationship between technology, politics, and human rights.

This study is significant as it provides a critical understanding of how new media has influenced democracy and human rights advocacy in Turkey, offering insights into the broader Middle Eastern context. By examining Turkey's experience from 2010 to 2024, the research highlights the transformative role of digital platforms in amplifying marginalized voices, facilitating political mobilization, and exposing human rights violations in an increasingly authoritarian environment.

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The findings will contribute to academic debates on the intersection of technology, politics, and human rights, while also informing policymakers, civil society organizations, and international bodies about the challenges and potentials of digital activism in semi-democratic societies. The study is pertinent to ongoing initiatives to assist democracy and human rights in the Middle East since it also makes recommendations to protect online activists, advance media freedom, and boost digital rights.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In order to evaluate the potentials and limitations of new media in promoting democratic ideals and human rights advocacy in Turkey, the conceptual framework for this study is based on the interaction of new media, democracy, and human rights advocacy within the political landscape of Turkey from 2010 to 2024. It looks at how digital platforms function as alternative spaces for political participation, citizen engagement, and resistance against authoritarian tendencies. The framework emphasizes the part that new media play in amplifying marginalized voices, exposing human rights abuses, and shaping public discourse, while also taking into account state responses like censorship, surveillance, and repression.

### **News Media**

The term “new media” describes internet-enabled digital communication technologies that support user-generated content, decentralization, immediacy, and interactivity. New media, as opposed to traditional media like print, television, and radio, allows for two-way communication between information providers and consumers.

New media, according to Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (2006), is the fusion of computing, telecommunications, and content creation. They highlight how it allows for real-time engagement across a range of platforms, such as social media, blogs, and podcasts. According to Mark Poster (1995), new media is further distinguished by its decentralized and non-linear structure, which democratizes communication by empowering people to produce and distribute content.

Interactivity, convergence, participatory culture, and instantaneity are among the fundamental characteristics of new media. According to Henry Jenkins (2006), convergence has made it harder to distinguish between media producers and consumers, resulting in “prosumers” who actively shape the media environment. In a similar vein, social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have emerged as key players in participatory culture,

where users organize protests, hold political conversations, and create online communities (Castells 2012). According to Clay Shirky (2008), new media's immediate nature allows political ideas and campaigns to spread virally without going via conventional gatekeepers.

Democracy is significantly impacted by new media. According to Shirky (2008), it is a potent instrument for grassroots mobilization and civic involvement since it reduces obstacles to collective action.

According to Zizi Papacharissi (2010), this digital revolution is a "networked public sphere," encouraging diversity and candid conversation while warning against the emergence of echo chambers and disjointed narratives. New media is framed by Howard and Hussain (2013) as a "liberation technology," especially during the Arab Spring, when internet tools made it easier to coordinate opposition against authoritarian regimes and disseminate information.

New media's democratic potential is not without its difficulties, though. The utopian perspective of digital activism is criticized by Evgeny Morozov (2011), who cautions that authoritarian governments may use the same technologies for disinformation, censorship, and surveillance. Yesil (2014) provides an example of how the Turkish government has limited freedom of expression online, monitored internet usage, and passed restrictive laws in response to digital activism.

New media also plays a vital role in human rights advocacy. Zeynep Tufekci (2017) illustrates how platforms like Twitter were important during the 2013 Gezi Park protests, offering space for real-time reporting and global support. Similarly, Castells (2012) believes that social networks amplify local fights to an international audience, so broadening the scope and influence of human rights campaigns.

New media is a dynamic and contentious concept, though. It is criticized for being vulnerable to polarization, manipulation, and surveillance, but it is also praised for its ability to democratize communication and empower underrepresented groups. Particularly in countries like Turkey where authoritarian and democratic tendencies coexist, the dual nature of new media—as a tool of control and a tool of liberation—requires careful scholarly and political attention.

Digital communication technologies made possible by the internet and distinguished by user-generated content, decentralization, immediacy, and interactivity are referred to as new media. New media creates a more dynamic and participatory communication environment by

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enabling two-way communication between content providers and consumers, in contrast to traditional media like print, television, and radio.

Real-time engagement across platforms including blogs, podcasts, websites, and social media is facilitated by the convergence of computing, telecommunications, and content creation. A more democratized flow of information results from this convergence, which allows individuals to actively create and distribute content in addition to accessing it. New media platforms, in contrast to linear broadcast media, are non-hierarchical, enabling dispersed communication that gets beyond conventional gatekeepers.

The interactive and participatory aspect of new media is one of its distinguishing characteristics. Users are becoming active players who both create and consume content, rather than passive consumers of information. People are increasingly behaving like “prosumers,” blurring the lines between media creators and consumers. This participatory culture relies heavily on digital platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, which promote groups, allow for political dialogue, and make it easier to plan protests.

New media’s immediate nature makes it possible for messages to be spread instantly and quickly reach audiences around the world. Because of this ability, new media has become an effective instrument for social movements, civic engagement, and political campaigns. New media gives people and organizations the ability to organize and express their issues more successfully than ever before by removing obstacles to group action.

New media broadens the public sphere in the context of democratic engagement by offering more varied and open forums for political discourse. It improves information availability and provides channels for underrepresented voices to be heard. However, it also presents problems like disinformation, echo chambers, and splintered conversation, all of which can erode deliberative democracy.

Additionally, new media has been crucial in exposing violations and advancing human rights. Viral material, live updates, and worldwide connection allow activists to bring attention to local struggles and abuses in real time. It becomes a key instrument in rights-based advocacy by bridging the gap between local resistance and international solidarity.

However, authoritarian resistance frequently accompanies the uplifting potential of new media. In response to digital protest, governments have implemented legal limits on internet use, censorship, and surveillance. These responses highlight the dual nature of modern media,

which, depending on how it is used and controlled, can be both a platform for freedom and a tool for control.

Furthermore, new media is a complicated but transformative phenomenon. technology simultaneously raises concerns about monitoring, governmental repression, and information disorder, even as technology enhances civic involvement, democratic participation, and human rights advocacy. Its influence on modern society is still being discussed and critically examined, especially in delicate and transitional situations.

## **Democracy**

In political and philosophical terms, democracy refers to a form of government where the people themselves, or their chosen representatives, hold the power. Principles including political equality, the rule of law, popular sovereignty, and widespread participation in decision-making are essential to democracy. But because of historical events, social dynamics, and technical advancements, its meaning and application have changed dramatically over time.

Ancient Athens, where citizens actively participated in governing, is where the classical underpinnings of democracy first emerged. In Politics, Aristotle distinguished democracy from polity, which he considered to be a more stable and equitable form, by defining democracy as the rule of the majority, usually the poor, acting in their own best interests. However, the extent of Athenian democracy was constrained, as non-citizens, women, and slaves were not allowed to participate in politics (Dahl 1989).

Representative democracy, in which elected officials act on behalf of the people, is the most common type of democracy implemented today. The foundation for liberal democratic thought was established by philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) and John Locke (1689), who placed more emphasis on the collective will and decision-making than Locke did on the defense of individual rights and the consent of the governed. Schumpeter (1942) provided a procedural view of democracy as a system in which leaders struggle for the votes of the people, departing from these normative principles. Later, Robert Dahl (1971) developed this into the idea of “polyarchy,” emphasizing characteristics like institutionalized plurality, public contestation, and inclusivity.

The tone of contemporary views on democracy is more critical. The difficulties in upholding democratic principles are exemplified by the rise of so-called “illiberal democracies” (Zakaria 1997), when electoral processes coexist with reduced institutional balances and civil liberties. Noting reversals in formerly democratizing countries, Diamond (2008) further



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expressed concern over a worldwide democratic recession. Both benefits and difficulties have come with the digital age: online platforms increase transparency and engagement (Shirky 2008), but they also make it easier for false information to proliferate, exacerbate polarization, and give authoritarian monitoring capabilities (Morozov 2011). Scholars have responded by promoting deliberative conceptions of democracy that prioritize discourse, rationality, and public participation over merely electoral processes (Habermas 1996; Dryzek 2010).

Democratic regimes in the Global South, especially in Africa and the Middle East, frequently combine official institutions with unofficial customs like patronage and clientelism. African societies were subjected to Western liberal democracy, which Ake (1996) criticized for failing to take into consideration local political realities and social situations. However, other academics stress the importance of local institutions, civic education, and grassroots movements in promoting democratic deepening (Gyimah-Boadi 2015).

When considered collectively, democracy becomes a complex and ever-changing idea. The concept of democracy is always changing, from its traditional focus on direct citizen engagement to current worries about internet participation and authoritarian reversals. Strong institutions, civic culture, socioeconomic circumstances, and the ability to change continuously are all necessary for its success.

When examining digital media and political change in Turkey, this conceptual framework accomplishes two main goals. First, it offers a critical baseline by which to measure whether Turkey satisfies fundamental democratic norms, especially those pertaining to civil rights, media freedom, and public involvement. It would be difficult to evaluate the importance of digital activism or recognize the effects of official repression without this foundation. By portraying Turkey as a mixed regime—where formal democratic elements coexist with authoritarian actions like media control and dissent suppression—it also guarantees contextual relevance. As a result, the idea of democracy is not only employed as an ideal but also as a critical instrument to examine how and why democratic characteristics are being undermined or rearranged in real-world situations.

As a political system and a philosophical ideal, democracy denotes a system where the people's will, either directly or through elected representatives, determines the governing authority. Principles like popular sovereignty, the rule of law, political equality, and inclusive participation in decision-making are fundamental to the democratic concept. Democracy has

changed over time as a result of historical events, cultural transformations, and technical breakthroughs. The customs of ancient Athens, where individuals actively participated in governance, are where democratic ideas first emerged. According to early political theorists, democracy is a system where the majority, who are frequently people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, hold power and make decisions primarily for their own benefit. Although direct involvement was possible under this model, it was exclusive and only applied to a tiny portion of the population, mostly free male citizens.

Democracy is more frequently practiced in representative systems in the modern era, where people choose representatives to act as their representatives. This change brought with it the concepts of promoting civic duty, balancing state power, and protecting individual rights. Contemporary viewpoints broadened the definition of democracy to include more extensive institutional characteristics including accountability, pluralism, and involvement rather than just conducting elections. While some opinions highlight the importance of inclusivity, transparency, and contestation in defining a strong democracy, others place more emphasis on procedural processes like regular elections and party competition.

Democracy is no longer taken for granted as an undisputed benefit in modern debate. Even if it still has a lot of normative appeal, practical applications frequently fall short. Conventional wisdom has been called into question by the rise of governments that uphold electoral procedures while eroding civil liberties. These regimes serve as examples of the conflict between authoritarian content and democratic form. Furthermore, democracy now faces both opportunities and difficulties as a result of the digital age. Digital media can improve access to information and encourage civic engagement, but it can also increase divisiveness, disseminate false information, and facilitate state surveillance. Alternative models like deliberative democracy, which place more emphasis on inclusive discourse and well-informed decision-making than merely voting, are gaining popularity.

In many regions of the Global South, such as Africa and the Middle East, democracy frequently functions inside hybrid systems that combine official democratic institutions with unofficial power structures like clientelism and patronage. In these situations, socioeconomic disparity, shoddy institutions, and a lack of political accountability usually make it difficult to implement democracy. Even though some nations have undergone democratic transitions, the consolidation of democratic norms and practices is still precarious. Increasingly, it is believed that strengthening democratic culture requires localized strategies that incorporate traditional governing processes and emphasize grassroots empowerment.

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In the context of examining new media and political change in Turkey, this conceptual study fulfills two crucial purposes. First, it offers the framework for assessing how well Turkey's political system conforms to democratic standards, especially with regard to civil rights, media freedom, and public engagement. It would be challenging to evaluate the importance of new media as a platform for political expression or to ascertain how state-imposed limitations affect online activity without this framework. Second, it aids in placing Turkey in the group of governments known as hybrids, which blend authoritarian behaviors like censorship and dissent suppression with democratic ones like elections. The study can investigate how and why democratic governance works by viewing democracy as a spectrum rather than a rigid model. Despite the official existence of electoral institutions, the study can investigate how and why democratic elements are being eroded by viewing democracy as a spectrum rather than a set paradigm.

Lastly, comprehending the political function of new media requires a grasp of this conception of democracy. A free press, access to a range of opinions, and a forum for public discussion are necessary for a democracy to work. Therefore, the study investigates whether digital platforms in Turkey have increased democratic opportunities or if they have turned into contested areas that are governed by the state and are monitored, suppressed, and monitored.

### **Human Rights Advocacy**

The strategic initiatives taken by people, civil society organizations, international organizations, and legal institutions to advance, defend, and guarantee the implementation of fundamental human rights as guaranteed by international, regional, and national legal frameworks are collectively referred to as human rights advocacy. These rights, which include freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, freedom from torture, and the right to a fair trial, are drawn from legally enforceable agreements like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and universal standards like the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Advocacy activities include media campaigns, policy lobbying, international pressure, and grassroots organizing and lawsuits.

Following World War II, human rights activism gained prominence, especially with the establishment of the United Nations and the ensuing international agreements. In order to record violations, increase public awareness, and advocate for legislative changes, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International were essential

(Clark 2001). This transnational campaigning is known as a “boomerang pattern,” according to Keck and Sikkink (1998), when domestic organizations avoid recalcitrant governments and look for foreign friends to put pressure on them.

As digital technology has grown, advocacy has changed, allowing for quick mobilization, worldwide solidarity, and real-time reporting (Khagram, Riker & Sikkink 2002). However, through monitoring, internet censorship, legislative restrictions, and the criminalization of dissent, authoritarian governments have also stepped-up repression. Advocacy in these situations frequently entails significant personal risk, especially for journalists, attorneys, and activists.

Human rights activism has two functions in modern authoritarian or hybrid regimes: it acts as a check on state power and as a spur for democratic reform. However, in response, governments frequently enact laws that are restrictive, harass civil society, and co-opt organizations that are supposed to protect rights (Carothers & Brechenmacher 2014). Therefore, the strength of civil society networks, political space, media freedom, and legal protections all affect how effective advocacy is.

Human rights activism is both urgent and contentious in Turkey. The Turkish government has carried out massive crackdowns on civil freedoms since the failed 2016 coup attempt, shutting down non-governmental organizations, detaining journalists, and firing thousands of public employees. Human Rights Watch (2021) claims that there has been a major decline in the freedoms of assembly, expression, and the judiciary.

Domestic and international advocacy groups are still essential for recording violations and interacting with global entities such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). For instance, the ECHR denounced the case of Osman Kavala, a well-known civil society leader who had been imprisoned for years without being found guilty, and it sparked advocacy efforts all across the world.

Despite these initiatives, surveillance, media vilification, and imprisonment under anti-terror laws are all faced by human rights defenders in Turkey. However, new tactics have helped sustain global attention and pressure, especially digital activism through social media campaigns (like #FreeOsmanKavala). Furthermore, even in situations where domestic channels are restricted, legal mobilization through international entities has proven to be an essential conduit for accountability.

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Nonetheless, the relevance of global solidarity and the tenacity of civil society in the face of persecution are demonstrated by human rights activism in Turkey. Advocacy continues to be a vital tool for upholding civic liberties, protecting human dignity, and promoting democratic transformation as political space becomes more constrained.

### **Digital Activisms**

The deliberate use of digital tools, particularly the internet and social media, to affect social and political change is known as “digital activism”. In order to gather support, spread knowledge, and plan actions for advocacy, protest, or resistance, it entails using online resources including websites, blogs, hashtags, videos, and social networks (Joyce 2010). Digital activism uses the immediacy, accessibility, and interconnectedness of digital environments to reach a larger audience with less barriers to involvement than traditional forms of activism, which necessitate physical presence (Tufekci 2017).

The capacity for networked mobilization is one of the characteristics that distinguish digital activism. Digital networks enable decentralized, horizontal coordination of movements, frequently without hierarchical leadership, as Castells (2012) points out in *Networks of Outrage and Hope*. This arrangement makes it easier for citizens to directly oppose authority and get over gatekeepers in traditional media. As an illustration of the function of digital activism in authoritarian settings, activists utilized Facebook and Twitter during the Arab Spring to plan protests, record atrocities, and foster international solidarity (Howard & Hussain 2013).

The low cost of interaction is another important factor. According to Shirky (2008), digital platforms enable regular people to take part in civic activities like petitions, hashtag campaigns, and livestreamed protests by lowering the financial and logistical expenses of organizing. Minority groups and young people in particular now have more authority to voice their complaints and demand responsibility because to the democratization of activism.

Scholars do, however, also highlight hazards and restrictions. In *The Net Delusion*, Morozov (2011) warns that authoritarian governments have adapted to the digital era and are stifling online protest through censorship, monitoring, and disinformation. “Slacktivism,” in which online involvement does not result in offline influence, is another problem that digital activism may face (Christensen 2011). Additionally, the reach and variety of digital campaigns may be restricted by algorithmic filtering and the echo-chamber effect (Pariser 2011).

Digital activism is nevertheless a potent form of modern civic engagement in spite of these obstacles. For example, the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey demonstrated how, despite governmental repression, digital means allowed for quick mobilization and global awareness (Tufekci 2017). Digital activism is a crucial term in examining the interplay between media, democracy, and state authority because of its dual character as a tool for empowerment and a target of repression.

A revolutionary approach to civic involvement is digital activism, which uses internet resources to promote social or political change. It is distinguished by the use of social media platforms, blogs, hashtags, and websites to plan demonstrations, disseminate information, and rally support from the general public. Digital activism functions within a flexible, decentralized framework that enables participation from almost anywhere, in contrast to traditional activism, which usually depends on in-person meetings and official organization. The ability of internet activism to mobilize quickly through networks is one of its main advantages. Because online platforms are participatory and decentralized, activists can organize actions, communicate instantaneously, and avoid traditional or state-controlled media outlets. Because of this, internet activism works particularly well in authoritarian environments where public areas and traditional media are strictly controlled. Additionally, it promotes global visibility and solidarity, magnifying regional struggles on a worldwide level.

The accessibility of digital activism is another important aspect. People with little financial means or political capital can participate in public discourse thanks to digital platforms, which lower the entry barriers for civic engagement. This has made it possible for marginalized groups, like minorities, women, and young people, to organize around common causes and express their concerns because digital venues are participatory, activists can create horizontal networks of support without official leadership or institutional support.

Digital activism does have certain drawbacks, though. Authoritarian governments can use the same technology that give activists more power for propaganda, censorship, and surveillance. Digital tools have been used by governments more and more to suppress opposition, control public opinion, and monitor dissent. Furthermore, not every online activity results in observable consequences. The issue of “slacktivism”—brief online engagement without tangible action—raises questions regarding the breadth and durability of internet movements.

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Furthermore, echo chambers—where users are only exposed to opinions that support their preexisting beliefs—can result from the algorithms that organize online interactions. This may increase polarization and reduce the possibility of forming wide-ranging coalitions.

Despite these obstacles, internet activism nevertheless has a significant impact on political mobilization and discourse, particularly in situations when more conventional forms of engagement are limited.

In conclusion, digital activism is a complicated and dynamic phenomenon that presents threats as well as opportunities. By making activism more immediate, accessible, and global, it has completely changed the terrain of political participation. However, it also raises fresh concerns over the efficacy, safety, and inclusivity of civic engagement through digital media.

### **Empirical Literature**

Digital empowerment and state repression interact in a complex way, according to empirical research on new media's role in democracy and human rights advocacy in Turkey. According to a number of studies, new media has changed how people participate in politics by offering different forums for action and public discussion, especially in situations when the government controls traditional media. Many people believe that the Gezi Park protests in 2013 marked a sea change in Turkish digital activism. Tüfekçi (2017) asserts that social media sites like Facebook and Twitter played a crucial role in exposing police brutality, providing real-time updates, and organizing citizens. According to Tüfekçi, the demonstrations served as an example of how new media can subvert narratives controlled by the state and promote public mobilization. In a similar vein, Howard and Hussain (2013) point out that during and after Gezi, the Turkish internet space developed into a crucial platform for voicing disapproval and rallying support for democratic principles.

Scholars also highlight the Turkish government's response to online activity, which is marked by censorship, surveillance, and judicial crackdowns. Although alternative voices were first given a forum via new media platforms, Yeşil (2014) claims that the Turkish government swiftly adjusted by enacting restrictive internet regulations, censoring websites, and detaining online activists. Turkey's internet environment is categorized as "not free," according to Freedom House (2022), with growing official control diminishing the emancipatory potential of digital activism. Furthermore, Akdeniz (2016) provides concrete evidence of how the Turkish government used social media blackouts and internet shutdowns to impede online human rights

advocacy and democratic participation during politically sensitive times like elections and terrorist events. Similar to this, Kalaycıoğlu (2020) notes that regulations aimed at “fake news” and “cybercrimes” have been used as a tool to silence critics, which has caused online users to self-censor.

Digital platforms have continued to be robust venues for advocacy in spite of these obstacles. For example, Turkish activists have cleverly exploited VPNs, encrypted messaging apps, and anonymous social media accounts to evade official surveillance and carry on with their advocacy activities (Akgül & Kırıldoğan 2015). Human rights violations have been effectively brought to light by hashtag movements including as #Soma, #MeTooTurkey, and #KadınaŞiddeteHayır (No to Violence Against Women), which have even attracted international solidarity.

Additionally, empirical research shows that between 2010 and 2024, new media in Turkey has been a double-edged sword, supporting human rights advocacy and democratic movements while also being targeted by the government for repression. According to the literature, even if digital platforms have changed advocacy tactics, in order to have a lasting effect, digital rights, legal safeguards, and international assistance are needed to combat the rise of authoritarian rule.

An important turning point in the development of digital activism in Turkey was the Gezi Park protests in 2013, which demonstrated the potential of new media as a potent instrument for mobilization, real-time information exchange, and the exposure of human rights violations. By overcoming the limitations of traditional media, social media platforms proved crucial in enabling individuals to plan demonstrations, disseminate footage and pictures of police violence, and interact with audiences both locally and internationally.

This incident showed how internet platforms may be used to magnify underrepresented voices and subvert state-controlled narratives. But the Turkish government also reacted quickly and forcefully to the new media’s increasing influence. Following Gezi, the government passed restrictive legislation aimed at online protest, increased internet restriction, and stepped-up monitoring. Websites were blocked, digital platforms were frequently banned, and online activists were arrested and prosecuted. The state’s aim to keep control of the digital public sphere was reflected in these regulations, which significantly constrained the space for digital activism and free expression. Furthermore, social media blackouts and internet shutdowns frequently occurred during times of political unrest, including elections or security crises, which



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further reduced democratic participation. Laws intended to stop “fake news” and cybercrimes were used as weapons against dissenting opinions, instilling fear and promoting user self-censorship.

Notwithstanding these challenges, activists persisted in adapting by getting around limitations with the help of anonymous accounts, VPNs, and encrypted chat apps. Campaigns using hashtags to draw attention to gender-based violence and human rights abuses gained momentum, increasing awareness both domestically and abroad. Thus, in Turkey’s complicated political environment, digital activism continues to be a powerful force.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Jürgen Habermas’ Public Sphere Theory, a fundamental framework for comprehending the function of the media in democracies, serves as the basis for this investigation. Habermas defines the public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) as a space where private citizens convene to discuss public issues rationally and critically, influencing public opinion and promoting democratic responsibility. The approach emphasizes how important media, civil society, and communication are to promoting political engagement, openness, and support for human rights.

The Turkish setting, where traditional media outlets are frequently the target of restriction and official control, makes Habermas’ paradigm especially pertinent. New media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter become alternate digital public spheres in these kinds of settings. In which individuals oppose human rights abuses, organize for democratic reforms, and contest official narratives. Despite its advantages, the theory has drawn criticism for its romanticized view of equal access and involvement, ignoring the ways in which sociopolitical hierarchies, governmental repression, and structural injustices can restrict the inclusion of public debate, particularly for underrepresented voices.

Yochai Benkler’s Networked Public Sphere model, which builds on Habermas’s concepts in the context of digital communication, is also incorporated into this study to broaden the theoretical scope. According to Benkler, the internet has changed the way public discourse is organized by facilitating peer-to-peer, decentralized communication and cooperative engagement among various communities. The networked public sphere permits more flexible, interactive, and grassroots-driven forms of public participation than the conventional public sphere, which frequently depended on institutional gatekeeping engagement. It highlights how

digital media not only facilitates information dissemination but also empowers users to produce, share, and amplify content that can influence political outcomes and policy debates.

By integrating both Habermas's and Benkler's models, this study provides a nuanced theoretical lens to examine how digital platforms in Turkey serve as contested yet vital arenas for political expression, civic activism, and the promotion of human rights. The intersection of these theories allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how communication technologies reshape the dynamics of power, participation, and democratic resistance in an increasingly authoritarian context.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings discussion looks at the impact of new media on human rights activism and democracy in Turkey from 2010 to 2024. It examines how digital platforms might be used for both state surveillance and political mobilization. According to the report, new media faced severe legal restrictions and official censorship even as it empowered citizens, gave voice to underrepresented groups, and revealed violations of human rights. Despite these obstacles, digital activism continued, demonstrating the potential and constraints of new media in promoting human rights and democratic principles in Turkey's increasingly regulated digital environment.

#### **Objective 1: Examining the Role of New Media Platforms in Promoting Democracy and Advocating for Human Rights in Turkey (2010–2024)**

The results show that independent digital outlets and new media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have had a big impact on human rights advocacy and political participation in Turkey. Scholars contend that, particularly during periods of severe censorship of traditional media, these platforms offered substitute forums for political discourse, public mobilization, and the exposure of human rights abuses. Tüfekçi (2017) claims that the Gezi Park protests in 2013 showed how internet platforms allowed for the real-time planning of demonstrations, the sharing of images of police brutality, and international sympathy with Turkish protestors. Furthermore, according to Howard and Hussain (2013), new media established a “networked public sphere,” giving people the potential to demand openness and accountability. In a similar vein, Yeşil (2014) claims that new media has become essential for underrepresented voices, such as those of minorities, women, and human rights advocates, to highlight state abuses and demand justice to draw attention to violations by the state and call for justice.

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The results demonstrate how important new media platforms have become in Turkey for promoting human rights and democratic participation. Through these digital platforms, people were able to participate in free and open political discourse while avoiding state-run traditional media. Protests could now be organized in real time, uncensored information could be shared, and local issues could be amplified globally thanks to new media. Using social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, activists, opposition organizations, women, minorities, and human rights advocates documented violations, demanded accountability, and brought attention to topics that the mainstream media ignored. These changes improved advocacy efforts and democratic values by establishing a virtual forum for civic engagement.

### **Objective 2: Analyzing the Strategies Employed by the Turkish Government to Control, Censor, and Regulate New Media and Digital Activism**

The results demonstrate how the Turkish government quickly responded to the emergence of digital activism by enacting restrictive laws, implementing surveillance technologies, and institutionalizing censorship mechanisms. Akdeniz (2016) details how the government used internet shutdowns, blocked websites such as Twitter and YouTube, and arrested digital activists during politically sensitive events, such as elections and terrorist attacks. Kalaycıoğlu (2020) points out that the state's use of "cybercrime" and "anti-fake news" laws served to criminalize dissent and silence online. Freedom House (2022) categorizes Turkey's digital environment as "Not Free," citing widespread surveillance, prosecutions of social media users, and dwindling digital spaces.

The findings reveal that the Turkish government has implemented a systematic approach to curtail the influence of new media and digital activism. Strategies include enacting restrictive internet laws, monitoring online activities, and criminalizing digital dissent under the guise of combating cybercrime and fake news. Internet blackouts and social media bans were frequently used during protests, elections, and periods of unrest to disrupt mobilization and control narratives. The state also intensified surveillance and prosecution of online users, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship. These actions significantly weakened the role of new media as a free space for democratic participation and human rights advocacy.

### **Objective 3: Assessing the Impact of New Media on Political Mobilization, Citizen Engagement, and Documentation of Human Rights Abuses in Turkey**

The significance of new media in promoting citizen engagement and political mobilization was revolutionary. One notable instance of the use of digital networks to plan protests and reveal governmental violence is the Gezi Park demonstrations. Akgül and Kırılıdoğ (2015) claim that in order to get around government limitations and continue their activities, activists used anonymous accounts, encrypted messaging applications, and VPNs. With the help of hashtag campaigns like #Soma, #MeTooTurkey, and #KadınaŞiddeteHayır (No to Violence Against Women), people became more conscious of freedom of expression, gender-based violence, and labor rights. These initiatives show how civil society was able to use digital means to record human rights abuses, reach audiences around the world, and put pressure on the government to uphold its human rights obligations (Tüfekçi 2017).

The results of the research demonstrate that, particularly in situations where traditional channels were repressed, new media greatly improved political mobilization and citizen participation in Turkey. Digital platforms made it possible to link activists locally and internationally, organize protests, and elevate underrepresented perspectives. Protests at Gezi Park, for example, showed how new media made coordination possible in real time and exposed official violence to a global audience. Digital tools like VPNs and encrypted applications allowed activists to get around restrictions and carry on their activism in spite of censorship. Campaigns using hashtags to promote women's rights, labor rights, and freedom of speech show how new media has developed into a potent tool for exposing wrongdoing and calling for responsibility.

### **Objective 4: Evaluating the Challenges, Limitations, and Prospects of New Media as a Sustainable Tool for Democracy and Human Rights Advocacy in Turkey**

Despite its influence, research shows that new media in Turkey suffers several obstacles and restrictions. Yeşil (2014) emphasizes how pervasive self-censorship results from the digital realm's continued susceptibility to algorithmic manipulation, state control, and legal crackdowns. According to Akdeniz (2016), governmental persecution and digital fatigue make it difficult for digital activism to maintain long-term movements, even though it can quickly organize people. But academics also acknowledge Turkish protestors' adaptability and tenacity. While Tüfekçi (2017) contends that new media still provides an essential—albeit contentious—space for democratic engagement, Akgül and Kırılıdoğ (2015) highlight the innovative use of

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digital tools to evade surveillance. The future of digital activism hinges on advancing media literacy, bolstering digital rights, and securing global backing.

The results show that although new media has been instrumental in promoting democracy and human rights, it faces significant obstacles that hinder its long-term viability in Turkey: internet shutdowns, algorithmic manipulation, state surveillance, and restrictive laws have eroded the effectiveness of digital activism, pushing many citizens and activists into self-censorship; government crackdowns and digital fatigue often make it difficult for the rapid mobilization power of digital platforms to translate into long-term political change; however, Turkish activists have demonstrated resilience by ingeniously using technology to circumvent restrictions; and, despite these obstacles, new media still has the potential to be a vital space for advocacy, particularly if bolstered by improved digital rights, international solidarity, and media literacy to empower citizens and protect online freedoms.

### **CONCLUSION**

From 2010 to 2024, this study looked at how new media affected democracy and human rights advocacy in Turkey, emphasizing the intricate connection between digital platforms, official authority, and civil society. The results show that, especially in the face of suppression by traditional media, new media—in particular, blogs, social media platforms, and independent digital outlets—emerged as potent instruments for political expression, citizen mobilization, and exposing human rights breaches. The revolutionary potential of internet activism in promoting political engagement and elevating underrepresented voices was exemplified by events such as the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations.

But the investigation also revealed important obstacles and restrictions. Aggressive censorship tactics, such as restrictive laws, internet shutdowns, arrests of digital activists, and extensive surveillance, were implemented by the Turkish government in response to the growth of digital activism.

These tactics produced a harsh online atmosphere where activists and regular people alike began to self-censor and fear legal action. Turkish civil society shown tenacity in the face of these challenges by implementing innovative tactics including anonymous accounts, VPNs, and encrypted texting to carry on their campaign.

The study comes to the conclusion that although new media has increased the space for human rights advocacy and political involvement in Turkey, growing authoritarianism and

online repression pose a threat to the medium's long-term viability. Improving legal protections for digital rights, encouraging media literacy, and obtaining foreign assistance to maintain online freedom of expression are all critical to the future of digital activism in Turkey. In Turkey and the larger Middle East, new media may remain an essential forum for social justice, democratic participation, and the protection of human rights if these policies are reinforced.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study's main goals have led to the following suggestions for improving new media's contribution to democratic governance and human rights advocacy in Turkey. The persistent problems brought about by censorship, state control, legislative restrictions, and technical repression are addressed in these recommendations. The suggested remedies concentrate on institutional development, digital capacity building, legal reform, and international collaboration in order to overcome these limitations. These tactics work together to protect digital citizens' rights in Turkey's changing political landscape while bolstering new media's democratic potential.

### **Objective 1: To Examine the Role of New Media Platforms in Promoting Democracy and Advocating for Human Rights in Turkey (2010–2024)**

- Support for independent digital media outlets and social media campaigns that promote democratic dialogue and human rights is desperately needed. Countering state-dominated narratives requires institutional protection and strategic investment in these venues.
- To enable financial and technical support for regional digital journalism and human rights projects, international cooperation should be aggressively sought. Such assistance will increase transnational visibility and empower underprivileged groups.
- In order to develop people's critical engagement abilities and enable responsible involvement in democratic processes as well as educated online advocacy, digital literacy programs ought to be institutionalized.

### **Objective 2: To Analyze the Strategies Employed by the Turkish Government to Control, Censor, and Regulate New Media and Digital Activism**

- The oppressive internet and cybercrime laws that are now being used to quell dissent must be addressed through legal change. International human rights norms must guide the review and revision of these legislation.
- To make sure Turkey complies with its international commitments, it is important to support enhanced scrutiny by international human rights mechanisms, such as the

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European Court of Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteurs, and pertinent NGOs. Legal protections must be put in place to shield independent journalists, human rights advocates, and internet activists from invasive monitoring and politically driven legal actions.

### **Objective 3: To Assess the Impact of New Media on Political Mobilization, Citizen Engagement, and the Documentation of Human Rights Abuses in Turkey**

- It is important to assist civil society organizations in creating safe, cutting-edge digital tools for recording and reporting human rights abuses. To guarantee user safety, these systems need to have robust data protection features.
- To sustain popular awareness and political pressure on human rights concerns both locally and internationally, sustained online campaigning through targeted hashtag campaigns and digital mobilizations should be given top priority.
- Training courses ought to be created to give activists the skills and information required to guarantee online safety, such as secure communications, encryption, and the moral use of data for advocacy.

### **Objective 4: To Evaluate the Challenges, Limitations, and Prospects of New Media as a Sustainable Tool for Democracy and Human Rights Advocacy in Turkey**

To lessen disparities in access and participation, policies and investments in digital infrastructure that guarantee everyone has access to reasonably priced, safe, and open internet services must be given top priority.

- To exchange best practices, increase resilience, and promote support for one another in the face of authoritarian restrictions, institutional collaborations between international digital rights organizations and Turkish civil society actors should be developed.
- Psychosocial support for activists, measures to prevent digital burnout, and policy advocacy for the establishment of international standards that safeguard digital freedom and online democratic participation are all important long-term strategies for maintaining digital activism.

When taken as a whole, these suggestions highlight how important new media is to changing political participation and human rights advocacy in modern-day Turkey. Multilateral institutions, international allies, and domestic stakeholders must all maintain their commitment to its implementation.

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