

Who is spreading the virus? An analysis of TV news coverage of disinformation about COVID-19 in Turkey

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic characterizes a process that is capable of reorganizing modern institutions with an unprecedented impact in history. In this process, people's access to accurate information gains prominence. The negative correlation between the increasing volume of information in social media and access to accurate information may canalize people back to traditional media. Would it be correct to say that the news produced in traditional media (particularly in TV broadcasting) does not contain disinformation? This article examines the disinformation in TV news by analysing the news texts about the Coronavirus in the main news bulletins starting from the week when the first case was diagnosed. This paper, which tries to understand how

COVID-19 was projected to the society in the early days and thereafter how the society was canalized against the global crisis, analyses at how political power is represented, framed, and how news discourse is constructed in COVID-19 news. The two most-watched news bulletins in Turkey throughout March and August in 2020 (ATV and FOX TV) were examined using descriptive analysis. In the analysis, it was found that the news discourses, which are polarized as pro-government and opposition, are projected in a context that praises or criticizes political power. In the study, it was concluded that the causalities and consequences of the crisis are decontextualized by instrumentalizing and/or tabloidizing.

Keywords: disinformation; media; populist communication; COVID-19; TV News.

Introduction

TODAY'S world is rapidly moving towards becoming a place where conflicting concepts are experienced simultaneously. In this time, which we can theoretically describe as the late modern period, the pressure generated by the developments

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and results experienced in the political, economic, and technological fields on societies, basically on individuals, is gradually increasing. Especially with the manipulations structured through media tools, the society is conditioned on the negative and the positive is devalued. The risk factor that increases with the discourses of globalization subjects people to the government in power against external threats. Yet, such threats/dangers can only be eliminated by modern institutions. They're the ones to prevent terrorist attacks and who can find the antidote to the virus.¹ On the other hand, the information flow of all these developments is provided by media tools. In this context, the quality of the information that is put into circulation through information channels becomes important.

On the same day when the World Health Organization declared² COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, the news of the first case was aired in Turkey. In the second week of September, it was announced that at least 28 million people in the world were infected by the virus and nearly one million people died.³ It is possible to say that the COVID-19 pandemic, which was intensely emerged in the Asian continent in the first periods of the pandemic, then in Europe and now in the American continent, forced all our communication practices and lifestyles to change. Increasing infollution, especially with the circulation of false and inaccurate information basing our communicative forms of action on the negative, is one of the dominant factors that negatively affect the crisis environment. The incarceration of people at home has increased the use and importance of information access tools in line with the precautionary measures taken by states and the statements made by scientists (Oliveira *et al.*, 2021; Islam *et al.*, 2020). Similar to what happens in the rest of the world, numerous disinformation circulated through social media tools reaches people in Turkey. However, the idea that disinformation only circulates through social media devices in this crisis environment leads to the danger of ignoring the propagandist nature of the mass media (Brown, 1937; Taylor, 1992; Chomsky, 2002; Miller, 2003; Bagdikian *et al.*, 2004; Tehranian, 2004). This is a situation that should not be ignored, especially in populist political governments that tend to become authoritarian. In this respect, considering the intricate relationship between the political authority and the media,

1. This issue is closely related to risk society theory. Pankaj Mishra (2017, p. 141) conceptualizes the current era as the Age of Resentment and describes the negative situationality based on the dark heritage of enlightenment as a crisis of legitimacy. Similarly, the mutual relationship between the concept of risk and power requires an emphasis on the theory of risk society. Because Beck's conceptualization of risk society suggests that in late modernity, the risks are growing like never before. Global problems such as global warming, nuclear disasters (Chernobyl, Fukushima Daiichi etc.) and Covid-19 alter the perception of threats. Similar changes can be observed in communication technologies, politics and social life. Giddens and Beck consider that all these developments are a reflection of the dark legacy of enlightenment, in other words, the pattern of exploitation created by the instrumentalized reason (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1996).

2. www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-n-covid-19-11-march-2020.

3. www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/.

the way COVID-19 and the government's struggle against it are shown in the news bulletins becomes crucial. Because COVID-19 still constitutes a high risk in Turkey.

Media images of the COVID-19 pandemic that create a global crisis environment ensure that measures are taken to protect against the harmful effects of the virus by contributing to society's level of knowledge about the disease. However, in the early days of the pandemic, the disinformation bombardment about COVID-19 spreads rapidly, preventing the understanding of the new state⁴. According to Agamben (2020), this new state of exception creates an epistemological breakage about the past and an authoritarian new contingency. At this point, although online platforms enable liberal communication as an alternative media, they become the main source of disinformation.⁵ The fact that almost all of the studies conducted on disinformation and media are social media studies recently also confirms this (Boberg *et al.*, 2020; Colliander, 2019; Tucker *et al.*, 2018; Buchanan & Benson, 2019; Shu *et al.*, 2020; Chesney & Citron, 2019). The negative image created in the eyes of the citizen by the loss of trust in social media indicates a tendency towards traditional media as an information tool (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). However, the intricate relationship of the ownership structure of media organs with the political power in Turkey leads to accusations that television broadcasts are not transmitting accurate information (Christensen, 2007; Aydın, 2015; Karlıdağ & Bulut, 2016). While this situation turns COVID-19 into a political phenomenon, it causes differences of opinion by polarizing the public's view about the pandemic. In this context, examining the news on TV used as a tool of political populism every five months helps us to better understand the reflexes of the political authority during the pandemic process. Most of the current communication studies conducted on disinformation and media focus on online platforms and overlook the importance of television. 88% of the population in Turkey watches news programs on television as the primary source of news about Covid-19.⁶

Therefore, considering the intricate relationship between political power and traditional media, it becomes significant how the news bulletins demonstrate the struggle of Covid-19 and the power against it (Covid-19). In countries fueled by populism, such as the UK, Brazil, India and Russia, Covid-19 still has a great risk. The research

4. What is mean here is the perception of the world that is changing with the political climate that is automatically authoritarian, the society that is insecure and subordinated to power, and the new communication practices.

5. The power of online platforms to lead the society by producing disinformation drew attention with the propagandist information circulated during the US elections and Brexit process. These platforms, especially used by populist politicians to lead their people, proved that false, misleading, and directive information can be powerful enough to influence electoral processes. For this reason, it is observed that online platforms experiencing loss of trust have begun to take various steps (such as content monitoring, complaint mechanisms, removal of inaccurate information, etc.) to prevent increasing disinformation (OECD, 2020).

6. Please follow the link for the results of the research: www.ipsos.com/tr-tr/koronavirus-turkiye-toplumunda-nasil-bir-etki-yaratti.

conducted through the Turkish media will provide insight into the news media of countries where populist politicians are active. The interpretation of the mutual relationship between populism and polarization in the context of news language provides a framework for making sense of social polarization.⁷ This study aims to determine whether disinformation related to the Covid-19 global crisis is produced through television news. Attendantly, the research examines the context in which the two main news bulletins, which are opposed and have the highest ratings (reaching the most people) in prime-time between March 2020 and August 2020 in Turkey, report on Covid-19 which is a global crisis. Çelik's (2020) latest research on "televisuel logic" and Gencel Bek's (2004a) analysis on tabloidized news media offer a useful methodology to reveal the features and changes in the news. In the study, the descriptive analysis method was used to investigate the disinformation in news texts about COVID-19 and to find out how actors related to the news are represented.

Media, Disinformation and Propaganda

'We're not just fighting against an epidemic; we're fighting against an infodemic. Fake news spread faster and more easily than this virus, and are just as dangerous' (Who, 2020). Although the warning of the World Health Organization against the danger of disinformation points to the inaccurate news circulating on online platforms, we have to keep in mind that the same amount of disinformation is also produced in traditional media. Furthermore, we should remember that the concept of disinformation does not belong to a post-truth period, that its roots date back to the 1920s in modern terms, and it is one of the most important weapons of psycho-political war (Rid, 2020, p. 2). In the modern period, the government in power reproduces its legitimacy and ideology using media through which it indirectly communicates with the public in the form of visible and/or invisible propaganda.

In critical theory, the media is used to create an audience in which the views of the dominant ideology. While Marcuse (2013) sees the media as a control mechanism and political propaganda medium that produces one-dimensional thought and behaviour; Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), on the other hand, see it as an industry that enables the production of the consent of the new form of social control in which commercial interests are anticipated. Especially in regimes that tend to become authoritarian, the government in power monopolizing the media channels shapes people's imagination of the outside world and enforces them to think in their way (Anceschi, 2015; Man-aev, 2014; Dukalskis, 2017; Chomsky, 2002; Zollman, 2019)⁸. As Foucault also

7. The increasing political and social polarization in Turkey demonstrates that neo-populism strengthens the understanding of politics through social dichotomy. The dichotomies built on the discourse of the public will are practices that deepen social polarization (Karaömerlioğlu, 2020). The closest example of this can be seen in the Constitutional referendum in 2017, which resulted in 51% and 49% (NTV, 2017).

8. Chomsky and Zollman indicate that the media is also used as a propaganda tool in liberal countries.

stated, the power's own existence depends on the production, organization, and distribution of information (Sheridan, 2005, p. 129). In this respect, news discourse produced in media organizations that already have a relationship of interest with the existing economic and political system serves the discursive order of populist politics, especially in times of global crisis. This discursive order is not produced in the form of boring propagandist news in authoritarian regimes but by the tabloidization of the news and the creation of an infodemic by simultaneously providing accurate and inaccurate information (falsifying each other)⁹. The circulation of contrasting information also leads to the politicization of the news and the polarization of society.¹⁰ According to Carl Schmitt, polarization politics is one of the main features of the right populist movement: "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy" as like "...good and evil in the moral sphere, beautiful and ugly in the aesthetic sphere" (Schmitt, 2007, p.26). In this context, the disinformation produced in the traditional media and its use as a propaganda tool is a result of populist politics. At this point, there is a profound relationship between disinformation and populist politics (Hameleers, 2020; Bergmann, 2020). Waisbord states that populism impedes the common consensus in both ideological perspectives, regardless of right or left. The intricate relationship between the increasingly powerful populist politician and the commercial media maintains populist politics. Thus, the basic principles of democratic teaching are hindered by disinformation, preventing the formation of the common good and the negotiation environment. The Longman English Dictionary's below the definition of disinformation also supports this view¹¹: "False information which is given deliberately in order to hide the truth or confuse people, especially in political situations." This becomes concrete with the existence of a regime based on populism propaganda aimed at reproducing Orban's power in Hungary, Putin's in Russia, Bolsonaro's in Brazil, and Erdogan's in Turkey, through the media.¹² Thus, today's idea of "new right-wing" rationalizes and establishes its own hegemony with broadcasts

9. This is closely related to the concept of doublethink mentioned by George Orwell in his novel. According to *1984*, doublethink is "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them (Orwell, 2000, p. 100)."

10. Data from The Reuters Institute Digital News Report on the subject reveals the relationship between news discourse and polarization in Turkey. "More widely, the high levels of political and media polarisation in Turkey have been a fertile breeding ground for misinformation over the last few years (Nielsen et al., 2019, p. 114)."

11. www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/disinformation.

12. Umberto Eco (2006, p. 14) makes similar criticisms for Silvio Berlusconi, the former Italian Prime Minister, in his book *A Passo di Gambero / Guerre calde e populismo mediatico*. Some populist politicians, who sometimes fail to establish hegemonic dominance in media ownership, may target the news media. Populist leaders can make use of the news media when they need ideological grounds or a strong opponent. S/he may even try to dismantle major media outlets and take control of the government with the argument of achieving pluralism in the media (Kellam & Stein, 2017).

aimed at gaining people's consent through the media.¹³ But when examining the positive correlation between the news media and people's political attitudes, "we should rarely expect to find straightforward causal links (Nielsen *et al.*, 2019, p. 114)." The relationship between populism and the media requires a broader perspective, which should not be reduced solely to the use of media by populist actors. At this point, the changing dimensions of media ownership structure should not be overlooked. For commercial media, many elements such as the populist leader's discourse, agenda headlines and the media performances of populists give rise to a form of relationship in which both sides benefit (Moffitt, 2016). This form of relationship is advocated by ideas which argue that the news media has contributed to the rise of populist actors. Journalists have the potential to bring up populist rhetoric (Krämer, 2014). In fact, although populist politicians are considered negative in some countries, it is possible to find a large amount of populist content in news content (Wettstein *et al.*, 2018). When we approach the relationship between the news media and populism through Turkey, we can find out that the JDP is the political party that makes use of the media most effectively. One of the most important reasons for this is that there is "more political interference and less professional journalism" (Erdoğan & Erçetin, 2019, p. 67).

The neutralization of left-wing politics, the depolitization of society in Turkey following the Military Coup on September 12th, which enabled the institutionalization of the new right-wing paradigm, and instrumentalization of the news by commercializing the media coincide with the same period (Kırkpınar, 2009, p. 172; Sunay, 2009, p. 22; Özçelik, 2011, p. 86; Sönmez, 2010). This situation turns into a neoliberal conservative media ownership after Erdoğan comes to power in 2002 and helps the political power to establish its own hegemony. In this process, Uzan, Çukurova, and Doğan groups, which are the biggest names in the media sector, are liquidated (Aydın, 2015, p. 49). And after the Islamic-conservative capital, which started to gain ground after the 1990s, took over almost the entire media industry with the AKP government, they are transformed into media ownership corporations under the control of the political government in power. Thus, a hegemonic media block is created with horizontal, vertical, and cross monopolizations. Audience research studies conducted by RTUK (The Supreme Board of Radio & Television) in 2018 also indicate that

13. Mass media, which play a central role in the reproduction of ideology, help accelerate the rise of a new hegemonic culture (Lears, 1985, p. 588). This can also be observed in the migrant debate in Europe by instrumentalizing the migration phenomenon of the far right. Ferruh Yılmaz states that the populist far-right is successful in bringing racist hegemonic expressions to the center through the media. (2012, p. 377). When sampled through Turkey, the studies indicate that the media is working hard to restore the hegemonic order and gain the consent of the people by reproducing populist themes (Erçetin & Erdogan, 2021).

75.7% of the society watches TV that is owned by those politically affiliated.¹⁴ And 90% of TV channels in the same year are broadcasted under the control of political power¹⁵ (Çelik, 2020, p. 5).

The concentration of television channels on a particular political ideology puts the medium at risk of ideological monologism. This ideological monologism produces disinformation that constantly repeats the same emphasis to dominate and reproduce the existing discourse. For example, during the Gezi Park protests in 2013, news with manipulative and misinforming content by the media channels supporting the government, circulate in newspapers, television channels, and online platforms.¹⁶ In Turkey where homicides of women have increased in recent days, following the talks about the possible abolition of the Istanbul Convention, a considerable amount of disinformation that is unrelated to the convention is produced on television channels: 'It prepares a legal basis for homosexuality or damages the Turkish family structure.' As can be seen, although the disinformation produced in the media has become popular with COVID-19, it is not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, asking the question 'why is disinformation so popular today?' is important to understand the propaganda of "the world will never be the same."¹⁷ When stating that the main purpose of producing disinformation is "the historical process of erasing itself from history", Eric Cheyfitz (2017, p. 15) refers to the liquidation of modern institutions

14. In the table, Doguş Group, Ciner Group, and Acun Media are considered as media companies with political connections; Available at: www.rtuk.gov.tr/assets/Icerik/AltSitelere/televizyonizlemeegilimleriarastirmasi2018.pdf.

15. It should also be stated here that in this process of ownership concentration liquidation and detention has continued in the opposition press. In 2019, RTUK fined 4 million lira for channels. At least 190 journalists were fired. At least 586 news items were censored (BIA Media Monitoring Reports, 2019, please following the link; <https://bianet.org/5/100/218959-the-ends-justify-the-means-in-purging-critical-media>). As of 2020, seventy two journalists are in prison (Please following the link; <https://tgs.org.tr/cezaevindeki-gazeteciler>).

16. Disinformation such as associating the Gezi Park protests with a coup, claiming that it is a game of foreign conspirators, saying that women wearing headscarves were attacked, rumours about drinking alcohol in the mosque were produced in mainstream news bulletins & discussion shows, and that's how the society was polarized. For detailed information, please following the links; *Ne Olyuyor?* on CNN Turk on February 17, 2015 www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRHaq2zyYVs; ATV main news bulletin on June 03, 2013 www.atv.com.tr/webtv/atv-ana-haber/bolumler/1031?id=bf62a239-16a4-48ac-a778-e76e14a2149c; Erdogan's speech to the community at the airport after his Africa trip www.youtube.com/watch?v=hga-3m4MkW8.

17. www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-world-will-never-be-the-same-in-some-ways-it-may-be-better-zf02nk6bf; www.theaustralian.com.au/world/the-times/coronavirus-the-world-will-never-be-the-same-in-some-ways-it-may-be-better/news-story/e0daa2e0de4106857555d35ea7c82498; <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-five-things-that-will-never-be-the-same-again-because-of-covid-19-11968739>; www.aa.com.tr/en/health/how-will-we-shape-post-coronavirus-world/1798060; <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/08/us/life-after-coronavirus-changed-laurie-garrett/index.html>; www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/28/after-the-coronavirus-australia-and-the-world-can-never-be-the-same-again; www.bbc.com/news/world-52643682; www.foxnews.com/health/fauci-says-world-may-never-return-back-to-normal-after-coronavirus-outbreak.

and says that ideologies in the global world do not have the power to affect societies anymore and that is why states dominate societies through disinformation. The suppression of critical thinking in a neo-enlightened age due to an abundance of disinformation and information contains the danger of disconnection of communication channels that can be established between the past and the future. Because the ability to think critically depends on the ability to think historically. This situation parallels with Benjamin's view of history. In this context, the positive correlation between the rise of populist policies and increasing disinformation indicates that disinformation is used as an effective tool in times of crisis.

Various breaking points in Turkey's history emerge as a result of populist policies and disinformation production. Violence targeting Greek minorities takes place in Istanbul on September 6-7, 1955. In the years when there was no television broadcasting, disinformation produced through newspapers and radios causes forced migration of minorities, which diversify the social and cultural structure of the country. The news that the house where Atatürk was born in Thessaloniki was bombed and a bombing attempt was made against the Turkish consulate had turned into uncontrolled looting that spread "to the entire city and suburbs, to the Asiatic side and to the Princes Islands where there was a Greek population" (Sarıoğlu, 2017, p. 54). Similarly, during the Maraş massacres in 1978 and the Çorum massacres in 1980, the murdering of Alevi people with fake news such as "the mosque has been bombed" and "the water has been poisoned", has an important place in polarizing the society and creating the institutional existence of existing political authority. And the political authority, which has recently begun to lose its institutional power, resorts to disinformation produced by the news on TV in order to consolidate its power. Narrativization of incidents such as the suspension of the solution process (Aşkın, 2015), the extradition of the Pastor Brunson (Akgül, 2019), saving bar associations from custody with the multiple bar associations bill¹⁸, alleged theft of votes in municipal elections¹⁹, by directly addressing emotions in the context of nationalism and religion, in a sense, places latent disinformation to a supra-ideologic position. According to Žižek, this situation can occur in several different ways such as missing information, false information, and lies in the news production processes of the dominant media. All these informative processes should be regarded as disinformation as they force the fact of the truth to bend. However, a more important issue is that, in the post-truth era, people do not feel a desire for the truth because they wend their way to their feelings rather than objective facts.²⁰ This emotional state is closely related to Cheyfitz's thought of

18. Parliamentary speech entitled Ten Lies of the Justice and Development Party, published on the internet by Republican People's Party's deputy Sera Kadıgil from her account, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExC_5nooaMQ&t=320s

19. www.dw.com/en/turkeys-erdogan-decries-vote-theft/a-48253485.

20. Žižek, S. "How to Watch the News with Slavoj Žižek", Episode 3, Fake News, RT international news channel; www.rt.com/shows/how-watch-news-with-slavoj-zizek/454423-fake-news-truth-lie/.

“erasing history itself” (p. 15). In a period when truth loses its importance, there is no need for memory either. Thus, the channels established between the past, the present, and the future are destroyed by creating an amnesic society and the propaganda of ‘the world will never be the same’ can take place.

The strong link that can be established between the increase in the amount of disinformation and post-truth gives us clues about social relations in the future. At this point, many reasons such as people’s failure to comply with the measures taken against the global crisis, disbelief in the pandemic, harming themselves and their environment with wrong applications as well as the increase in the amount of disinformation, the acceptance of circulated disinformation by people as accurate information, and its polarizing effect, offer important data for communication researchers to explain the meaning of today’s changing communication paradigm. Briefly speaking, mainstream news bulletins on TV play a critical role in shaping society’s view of certain events since they are currently the most-watched and most reliable tools/sources of information.

Methodology

The purpose of qualitative research is to preserve the social meaning created by protecting the content of the data, rather than transforming the analysed data into another form through mathematical coding (Lindlof, 1995, p. 21). In other words, the purpose of qualitative research which collects textual data is not to obtain statistics from pieces of texts, but to reveal their meaning (Creswell, 2011, p. 18). In this way, with the description of both actors and themes in news texts, the structure related to how the discourse is constructed becomes prominent. In the analysis section of the study, the method of descriptive analysis was used. According to this analysis method, the resulting data are summarized and interpreted according to the previously determined themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016, p. 239). Accordingly, due to the size of the dataset obtained from the archives of television channels within the framework of the themes defined in 184 newsletter content, news texts are distinguished according to the thematic framework (Creswell, 2011). News texts were selected according to the themes distinguished by three categories: scientific, political and social. The analysis process of news texts divided into themes can be defined as follows: News texts related to Covid-19 were noted from the main news bulletins monitored from the archive. The main thematic categories were developed through the noted news texts. News texts within the main categories were analysed by interpreting them on a category basis through the theoretical framework (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 70).

The analysis part of the study will focus on the analysis of news bulletins’ texts that can be associated with COVID-19. Within the framework of the commercial channel ownership structure, I pay attention to the relationship established between news stories, ownership structure and representation of the political authority. I find

it important which themes are used in the evening news, where information about COVID-19 reaches the greatest number of viewers. The research includes all broadcasts of prime-time news bulletins on ATV and FOX TV in March and August. From 1 March 2020 until 31 August 2020, two television channels reaching the most viewers were selected through the ratings of the main news bulletins all evening.²¹ The fact that these two channels with the highest ratings (FOX TV and ATV) have two opposing views is also significant in terms of showing the extent of polarization in society.²² According to the rating results, the vast majority of the population prefers to watch anti-government broadcasts, while the other part follows broadcasts supporting the government. The reason for choosing these dates is to be able to understand the change in the nature of disinformation regarding COVID-19 in the first and last stages of the pandemic and to establish a relationship between the perception of coronavirus by the society and the increase in the number of cases. Access to a total of 184 main news bulletin data was obtained from the archives of these two channels. News not related to COVID-19 are excluded to limit the analysis. However, although not directly related to COVID-19, news that could indirectly be associated with COVID-19 were included in the analysis. Thus, with the findings obtained from the analysis, a relationship was established between by whom and how disinformation is produced and the main reasons why the pandemic has not been brought under control from the very beginning. And then this relationship was discussed in detail. While very little of the daily news focused on COVID-19 in early March, the coverage of related news has increased day by day following both the emergence of the first case in Turkey on March 11 2020 and the declaration of the pandemic.

COVID-19 news constitutes the agenda of the evening bulletins analysed between the 11th and 31st of March. During the first week of March, the pandemic did not draw enough attention on either of these two channels. Only brief information from the world is given in the middle or at the end of the bulletins. And in August, ATV's main news bulletin seems to have lost its interest in COVID-19, while news reflecting the economic, political and social effects of COVID-19 is of priority on the agenda of FOX TV.

Scientific Disinformation – Scienfodemic

COVID-19 comes to the fore in Turkey's agenda after the official announcement of the first case seen in the country. News about COVID-19, which Who declared a pandemic on March 11, were given in the form of information about the world's

21. Please follow the link to check the day-by-day ratings of the channels; www.medyafaresi.com/rattingler.

22. At this point, it is worth remembering that the media in Turkey has been structurally transformed since 2002. The political authority's domination of the Turkish media has changed the ideological structure of the media and transformed it into a one-voiced media structure (Aydin, 2015).

agenda either in the middle or at the end of the bulletins before this date. The main news bulletins attended by scientists to talk about COVID-19 were also on the screens, especially throughout the first weeks of March.

Scientific explanations about the virus that caused a global crisis helps us understand how society will react against the outbreak. When the news bulletins broadcasted on ATV and FOX TV in the first half of March are examined, it is observed that incomplete, magazinish, accurate, and/or inaccurate scientific data are given altogether. For instance, in ATV's news bulletin dated March the 9th, some populist views have been shared that the coronavirus will progress in a variable manner around the world according to gene differences and that the Turkish gene will be less affected by the virus. Thus, Turkish society is glorified and reflected as the only nation that survives a virus that affects the entire world. This parallels nationalist discourses such as "Turks have no friends other than Turks" or "A Turk is worth the world", which have taken place in Turkey's history from past to present. Hence, it is seen in the society that discourses such as "The virus does not affect us" or "Corona does not infect us, we are Turkish people" are supported by the arguments of scientists. So all of these problematic areas inhold the potential to impair the quality and credibility of science in Turkey.

Scientists attributing the presence of zero cases in Turkey to taking very good precautions indicate that scientific knowledge has become politicized. The positive image of the government against the outbreak is provided through the appreciation of the projects of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education by scientists. The styles of statements, which ATV used in its news bulletins dated March the 11th and March the 22nd, that are far from objectivity and populist, also support this. To remind you of these statements, they are as follows: "We are far ahead of Europe in taking precautions, Turkish doctors are the best in the world" and "Turkey is a perfect country. Health Minister manages the process very well." However, when the number of cases in April and the spread of the outbreak are examined, it is seen that the measures were not taken early enough. In addition to that, below practices also indicate that the country was late in taking precautions: quarantine on a city basis, not across the country; being late in postponing football games²³; umrah tours being allowed in January and February²⁴; non-quarantine for those returning from umrah in the early period. In this context, degradation of the objectivity of scientists by politicization causes the interruption of the methods necessary for the society to reach accurate information.

23. Statements by football coach Fatih Terim on the necessity of postponing football leagues due to the virus on March 15, 2020 and him catching Covid 19 immediately after his announcement came to the fore in Turkey. For Fatih Terim's statement: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcTBEQfwY_Y&t=41s.

24. Head of Specialization for Hajj and Umrah made the below statement: "There is no crisis to hinder the Hajj and Umrah organization." Available at: www.aa.com.tr/tr/koronavirus/umre-ve-hac-organizasyonlarinda-koronavirus-ile-ilgili-onlemler-alindi/1745335.

Although FOX TV's image of "opposition channel" prevents scientists from engaging in political discourse, the channel's production of disinformation is at the same level as ATV's. In its broadcast dated March the 7th, a scientist says, "There are many types of coronavirus, the human type is not something to be afraid of. I personally do not think it has any fatal effect on strong individuals," and this statement makes the pandemic frivolous. Likewise, in the news bulletin of ^{atv} dated March the 23rd, a member of the scientific committee says, "If the sense of taste and smell decreases, it does not mean that you have caught Corona. Many other factors such as season etc. affect this," causing inaccurate information about coronavirus to circulate. Because, in later times, it has been understood that the loss of taste and smell is one of the most important symptoms of COVID-19 (Gautier & Ravussin, 2020). Stating the symptoms incorrectly causes carrier individuals to circulate in the community and can accelerate the spread of the pandemic. All these problematic statements devalue information by degrading it, and it triggers infodemic by moving away from the truth.

It can be said that the ambiguity of access to accurate information as a result of excessive accurate and inaccurate information, that is conceptualized by the World Health Organization as infodemic, was produced with the differentiation of the interpretations of scientists especially during the days when COVID-19 became news for the first time in Turkey. So much that, infodemic emerging on social media in Turkey turns into scienfodemia in main news bulletins and discussion programs attended by scientists. The most important consequences of this situation are the destruction of the society's capacity to think about the coronavirus or the reduction of the global crisis to a generally accepted incidence. Especially in the first weeks of March, while there were still no cases in Turkey, scientists' participation in mainstream news bulletins making statements such as "the sun will end the virus", "mask does not block the virus, but rather increases the spread", "SARS has not visited Turkey, neither will this one", "nasal cleansing with saline solution" extensively draws attention. In this context, it is possible to say that disinformation is not only produced from political, economic and social contents and that scientific knowledge can also be transformed into disinformation in times of global crisis.

That being said, it is observed that the scientists, who were invited by ATV to the news bulletins after March 17th and by FOX TV after March 20th, have changed and some accurate information has also been provided since then. For example, while it is stated in ATV's news bulletin that there is no relationship between the air temperature and the virus, the members of the scientific board who are hosted by FOX TV criticize the inadequacy of the measures taken by the government and state that the pandemic could not be taken under control. Therefore, since there is no clear information about the coronavirus in its early stages, it can be said that some information has been tried to be conveyed through the experiences gained in other pandemics such as SARS,

MERS, and Influenza. The intricate relationship between the tabloidization of news and scientific disinformation continues, although it diminishes after mid-March. Mediatic statements such as “The fact that deaths from COVID in China are 1/3 less than in other countries is associated with higher salt consumption in this country.”, featured in ATV’s mainstream news bulletin dated August the 12th, ignore stringent precautions/measures taken by China.

Political Disinformation – Populist Politics News

Political news about COVID-19 should be approached in two different levels within the context of broadcasting policies of TV channels. While ATV is a pro-government channel owned by an Islamist conglomerate that undertakes state-sponsored projects; on the other hand, FOX TV is one of the world’s largest news channels broadcasting internationally. The news made by ATV constantly underline that the political power manages the process quite successfully thanks to the measures taken in the economic, social and educational fields. On the other hand, FOX TV, which is the most followed channel by the secular segment in the society, seems to be the only channel criticizing the political power during the COVID-19 pandemic with the texts it uses in the news bulletins and the comments made by its anchormen.

In the period analysed, it is seen that ATV constantly repeats the strong country image in the texts of its news about COVID-19. Some examples of this are: “From the very beginning, the epitomist country that is the most rigorous and transparent while fighting against the nightmare called Coronavirus is Turkey”, “Our fight against the virus is followed with envy in the West”, “We will make the 21st century the century of Turkey”. On the other hand, there is also a strange relationship between the frequency of statements that include the use of pandemic control methods at the highest level and placing all the responsibility on the citizens. Statements such as “the best protection method for everybody is to take measures on their own”, “the state took measures, responsibility belongs to the citizen”, “the biggest duty belongs to the individuals”, “the only way is voluntary quarantine” impose upon the consequences of the government’s imprudence and inability directly to the citizens. In particular, the constant emphasis on voluntary quarantine contradicts with the lack of regulation for working citizens. On the other hand, populist disinformation bases itself on a strong image by working up nationalist sentiments. By giving the following messages, it is emphasized that Turkey’s economy and political climate (advanced democracy discourses) are more successful compared to European countries and the USA ²⁵: March

25. In fact, in a news report dated March 29th, ATV reports that Italians are fulminating against EU through the statements of the extreme right’s representative Matteo Salvini. Also, in a news report dated March 31st, it uses a footage of far-right demonstrators burning the EU flag. Making the propaganda of Exitalia, ATV maintains a stance against the European Union by sharing only the actions of the far-right in its news bulletins.

18th – “Europe is in the tank” and “Italy’s medicine supply requirements have been left unanswered by France and Germany, Turkey rushed to help”²⁶; March 25th – “69 countries requested help from Turkey”; March 28th – “The scene in Europe and the USA is like doomsday movies because they did not take the virus seriously and slacked off, relying on their economic power”; March 31st – “The US throws in the towel” and “Giant help from Turkey to Spain”. The successful circulation of disinformation requires the presence of an unsuccessful competitor. However, when the decisions taken in the field of economy during the pandemic process are examined, there are some facts showing that there is a failure to satisfy compared to countries such as Germany, USA and Canada despite the efforts to create a “strong country” image. Some examples can be listed as offering “interest-free debt relief” and “low loan debiting” to the citizens and asking for financial support from the citizens through campaigns such as “Biz Bize Yeteriz Türkiyem”. To make insufficient support in the field of economy invisible, populist statements that include “comparison with the number of intensive care units in Europe” and such as “Western civilizations, the borders they drew and the rules they set are being imbedded in history one by one” are used.

On March the 7th, when there were still zero cases in the country, it is reported in the news that the Ministry of Education disinfects all schools and with this news, the thought that the government takes measures in advance is imposed on those who watch the news although such a measure has not yet been taken. In addition to this, although the Ministry of Education makes statements such as “we are ready for all kinds of scenarios”, it is seen that it does not take any measures to ensure equal opportunities in education. The fact that EBA TV and distance education models are implemented without any supportive campaigns for students who do not have a computer, internet access or satellite connection is also an indicator of this.

In the analysed period, FOX TV is the only channel criticizing the political power during the COVID-19 pandemic with the texts of its news and the comments made by its anchor-men. For instance, the channel makes news about the inequality of opportunity in education, the lack of regulation regarding the situation of working parents while the schools are closed, citizens’ anxiety about being unemployed due to COVID-19, and thus displays the effects of the pandemic on social life. On the other hand, it finds some of the measures taken, such as the economic stabilization package, insufficient, underlining that these are decisions taken only for the benefit of the capital and will be a shield for the employer, not the worker. For example, the question of the channel’s anchor-man (“There are millions of people with minimum wage in the workplaces that have been shut down. How will you protect them?”) that is asked in the news bulletin dated March the 16th, problematizes that the government, acting

26. This news contradicts the following statement by government officials on March 22nd: “Masks will not be exported.”

with the motto "the problem is global but the struggle national" in the field of economy, only feeds on populist politics and disinformation. At this point, FOX TV draws the image of a news channel that displays the questions posed by the opposition. It also helps to make the citizens' voices heard by displaying their speeches criticizing the government: "You don't need to take a leave of absence; they're asking you to take it anyway. They now have an excuse. They immediately send people away and that's unpaid leave. It's some people's lucky day, but they are not the poor people and labourers (FOX TV, interview on March the 13th)." Contrary to the news about people coming back from Umrah on ATV, FOX TV criticizes the state for having no plans for those who will come back from Umrah. In this context, ATV and FOX TV display the same news differently. In this context, ATV and FOX TV display the same news differently. This situation shows that the actors in the spread of the pandemic vary according to the news discourse of the channel. Although the government pursues a successful policy, according to ATV, the problem is individual. However, according to FOX TV, the problem is more about the government's pandemic policy rather than individuals. One of the most prominent news stories made by FOX TV during the pandemic process is the one proving that the first case seen in Turkey was before March 11th. Reporting that the former Commander of the Turkish Land Forces has actually passed away due to Corona, FOX TV shows that social media does not only produce disinformation and can be an alternative source of news and also reveals the wrong statements made by the Ministry of Health. FOX TV, which makes news about the production of disinformation with the statements made by the ministers, underlines that, by making contradictory explanations, all the responsibility is assigned to the citizens. In addition, it makes news about the fact that the political power, acting with the motto "Stay at Home", does not have any precautionary plans for the working population and that there is class discrimination. After Erdoğan says "quarantine yourself voluntarily", the following statement of the citizens appears in the news: "You're asking us to stay at home, but what will those who go to work do?". It is then shown that the economic crisis is tried to be concealed through disinformation. Unlike ATV, FOX TV adopts a discourse advocating equality of opportunity in education in the news it makes. On the other hand, the channel makes news about the following statements made by the Health Workers Union: "There is still a shortage of supplies in some hospitals. Disposable masks are expected to be used all day" and thus it refutes the statements made by the Minister of Health. A similar situation can be seen in the news made in August. The statements of the Turkish Medical Association, claiming that there is no transparency in the number of cases reported and that the intensive care units of hospitals operating as pandemic hospitals are full, are in contradiction with the data of the Ministry of Health.

Social Disinformation – The Banalization of News

A meaningful relationship can be established between the discourse produced in the mainstream news bulletins and what the target audience wants to hear. Television channels make their news choices in accordance with their own ideologies. They even produce the texts of the news reports in a way that the target audience would like to hear (Bourdieu, 1998). In all 122 mainstream news bulletins analysed, the discourses produced consist of sentences that the target audience of the channel wants to hear. The disinformation produced by ATV, which appeals to the conservative segment, through religion and nationalism, takes place through the constant affirmation of the actions of the opposition parties on FOX TV. In this context, it is possible to say that both channels have a commercial concern and produce their news texts with the aim of increasing their ratings.

Describing disinformation only through the relationship established between politics, economy and media causes its different dimensions to be ignored. Especially the profit-oriented policies of commercial broadcasting channels can directly affect the discourse and appearance of the news and put the crisis in a magazinish framework. In such a case, the tabloidization of the news contains in itself the potential to spoil the seriousness of the current state of crisis. Such that the news about the coronavirus addresses the ‘incident’ in a post-truth framework by distancing the ‘incident’ from itself and getting the crisis into a rut and simplifying it. For instance, ATV’s use of a thriller music and images unrelated to COVID-19 during the intro of the news bulletins in the first two weeks of March²⁷ keeps virus news away from the nature of a global crisis. While images of fights unrelated to the pandemic from abroad are shown in the first weeks of the pandemic when there were zero cases in Turkey, various news stories with dominant conspiracy theories appear on screens. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Commander’s statement claiming that “USA produced the virus” shows the importance of news selection in the production of disinformation. News about increased prices, depleted products, empty market shelves after the first case seen in Turkey are attributed to the uncontrolled behaviours of citizens. Without establishing a connection between economic crisis, inflation and increasing product prices, companies that make price increases are directly blamed. In addition, various news is displayed claiming that our social communication practices have changed: Changing the way of sincerely greeting people, how much importance is given to cleanliness because of the position of cologne in Turkish culture, etc. The fact that ATV directly attributes the form of greeting to Erdoğan under the name of “heartfelt greeting” and it reports this as “The President of the World Health Organization imitated Erdoğan” introduces Turkish culture as a superior culture. On the other hand, the fact that ATV,

27. ATV uses images from social media in the news intro, tries to make the virus news attractive with the scenes of children who are unable to balance and fall, people fainting, and people trembling on a stretcher.

which is close to the conservative segment, makes news about the birds that circumambulate the Kaaba, which was evacuated in line with COVID-19 measures, distracts people from the political, social, legal and economic consequences of COVID-19. The tabloidization of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has become mediatic, causes the pandemic to be considered unimportant by the society and makes it difficult to take the pandemic under control. People making fun of COVID-19 during an interview conducted in a coffeehouse where people are playing okey with their masks and gloves on, makes the pandemic frivolous: Discourses like “corona cannot enter the coffeehouse, the virus does not infect us, we do not eat bats anyway” in an interview conducted on March the 14th, “corona does not infect us, we are Turkish people, no problem” in an interview conducted on March the 15th, “Only God takes the life given by himself” should be considered in conjunction with unscientific arguments such as the Turkish gene discussed a little earlier in this article. Because populist science that gives people what they want to hear can lead to a trivialization of pandemics in such situations.

After the unavoidable increase of COVID-19 cases, changes are observed in the texts of news made. After March 21st, in the main news bulletin of ATV, the citizens who do not obey the restrictions are constantly shown on the screen as the culprits of the pandemic being spread with headlines such as “they could not stay at home”, “whoever said ‘I’m bored’ went out”, “this is called irresponsibility”, “our citizens do not heed the warnings”. However, this situation contradicts with the statement of the Minister of Internal Affairs: “Our citizens comply with all the measures we have taken so far.” On the other hand, especially after the bans imposed on citizens over the age of 65, elderly citizens are shown as the people spreading the outbreak, not as individuals who need to be protected from the pandemic, with the images of the elderly people not complying with the rules. However, the reflections of COVID-19 news on social life are often reported in the context of the magazine. Aids provided to those over the age of 65 who comply with the curfew measures force people to ignore the socioeconomic dimension of COVID-19.

The qualitative change in the news broadcasted in August is quite remarkable. Images where the social distance rule, which was constantly on the agenda in March, is violated are displayed and a false impression is created that the pandemic has been normalized. The politicization of the news and thus the effort to legitimize the actions of the government appear in the news about Hagia Sophia Mosque. Headlines such as “Hagia Sophia overflowed” and “Influx of visitors to Hagia Sophia” in the ATV news broadcasted on August the 1st put religious feelings in the foreground by subordinating precautions and measures taken. Disinformation hides behind the sacred when the news texts and images are displayed along with citizens who do not comply with social distancing. Normalization policies during the Eid al-Adha are also one of the important factors that speeded up the spread of the outbreak. However, normalization

in news discourse is built on texts such as the following: “The crowd seen around the Islands during the break helped the tradesmen. The shopkeepers are happy.” Hence, a similar situation is experienced in holiday resorts as a result of the “vacation loan” given by the government within the framework of the economic development plan.

It can be said that FOX TV also put the news in a tabloid frame in the first days of the pandemic. News like “the store shelves are emptied following the announcement of the first case in Turkey” and “the way people greet each other have changed” are approached on a more political line at later times. Similar to ATV, incriminating news for citizens and especially individuals over the age of 65 are displayed with headlines such as “farewell to soldiers”, “shore excursions” and “shopping mall images”.²⁸ When the news made in August are examined, it is observed that normalization is criticized in the context of the government’s pandemic policy.

Conclusion

This study aims to analyse the most-watched news bulletins in Turkey on a daily basis for six months to demonstrate how Covid-19 which is a global crisis, is handled through television, which is seen as the most reliable news source of society. The crisis can be described as the basic foundation of populist governments (Moffitt, 2015). In this context, the way in which the struggle of authoritarian populist power against the Covid-19 crisis is reflected in television news becomes significant.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, we became sceptical of the accuracy of the information conveyed through information channels. It would not be wrong to say that the global effects of the outbreak force us to change our thinking and experiencing practices about many areas such as society, science, economy, politics and health. We can say that COVID-19 is approached in different ways in the field of television news, which we use as the main information source in Turkey. The profit-oriented policy of commercial broadcasting shapes the relationship the channel establishes with the audience and the form and content of the news. In news discourse polarized as pro-government and opposition, the news addressed in the main axis of COVID-19 are actually reflected in a context that either praises or criticizes the political power. Instead of focusing on the causalities and consequences of the crisis, the news is decontextualized by instrumentalizing and/or tabloidizing.

In ATV’s news, COVID-19 is represented as a phenomenon that was taken under control as a result of the government’s successful policies but then started to spread again due to citizens and external factors (opposition, foreign conspirators). In the selection of the news; interviews with pro-government citizens were included, the discourse was strengthened, and religious and nationalist sentiments were allowed to

28. Here, the citizen’s disregard for the outbreak does not justify his/her actions. It is argued that as a result of the measures not taken by the government and the prohibitions it has not implemented; all responsibility should not be turned over to the citizens.

curb the outbreak. The production of disinformation is closely related to the government's populist policies and has been used to strengthen the image of political power in the economic, political and social fields. In all the news, the government was reflected in a positive perspective while other actors were reflected in a negative perspective.

Since FOX TV is the only national channel that can broadcast pro-opposition in the country, it is understood that it produces news discourse in a context that will please its potential audience. News elections together with interview selections and anchor-men's comments composed the main news bulletin with a perspective affirming the opposition and negating the government. The production of disinformation is closely related to the persistent positive image of the opposition and tries to lower the image of the political power in the eyes of the public. Unlike ATV, the government's pandemic policies are reflected negatively and the actions of the opposition parties are reflected in a positive context in all of the news. News bulletins underlining that COVID-19 cannot be controlled due to the wrong policies of the government, blame the political power.

The positive correlation between the increasing trivialization of objective information with post-truth discussions (McIntyre, 2018) and the increase of scientific disinformation in television news is one of the most striking findings of the research. In both channels, it has been observed that scientific information is transmitted to society with magazinish contents far from experimentation and observation. The publication of similar news content on both channels can be considered as one of the main factors preventing society from obtaining accurate information. Especially in July and August, a relationship can be established between the increase in the news that do not obey the prohibitions and the disinformative contents circulating on television channels in March and April. The two channels did not use a polarizing discourse in the production of scientific disinformation, although they reported news with opposing views, and prioritized popular and tabloid news content. Likewise, in Turkey, where the case was not indicated in the first week of March, the news about Covid-19 was handled with a non-serious view. This situation, when considered within the framework of the commercial structure of the news media, indicates that the channel is for profit rather than in the public interest. This reflex of commercial channels indicates that the news has become tabloid and that content and/or people that will be of interest to people are on the screen. This establishes the meaningful parallelism with Gencil Bek's analysis (2004b) of the news media in Turkey. When social and political disinformation is examined within the framework of the polarization of society in the news bulletins of both channels (Karaömerlioglu, 2020), it is observed that populist language prevails in the news bulletins.

Through the relationship between production of disinformation and populist politics (Hameleers, 2020), the spread of Covid-19 in television news is indirectly ma-

nipulated by demonstrating the people's non-compliance with the rules rather than the sufficient / insufficient measures taken by the political authority. Television news, in which the political authority can reproduce the populist power, change the form of propaganda and contribute to the reproduction of the hegemonic order. Thus, the impression is created that decisions are taken for the common good of society, but the spread of Covid-19 proceeds at an increasing rate since the public does not follow these rules.

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