

## The Contribution of the New Media to the Public Opinion Formation Process in the Turkish Republics and its Place in Education

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### Abstract

With the development of computer and internet technologies, new media has become indispensable to daily life in the digital age. The concept of public opinion, which is at the centre of many research topics in the field of communication, has also interacted with new media in this context. Thus, new media tools have begun to be seen as critical elements in the processes of public opinion formation. This study aims to investigate how new media affects public opinion formation processes in the Turkish Republic and to contribute to the relevant literature. The most important result of the study is that in the postmodern age, new media is one of the dominant elements that direct the thoughts and attitudes of individuals in the public opinion formation processes. Another critical finding in the study is that the use of new media in the Turkish Republics increases yearly. In this context, digital diplomacy has begun to be used more intensively among member countries. Finally, in the current conjuncture, new media has a strategic importance in disseminating propaganda materials, and young people in the Turkish Republic are the segment of society that uses new media most actively in public opinion formation processes.

**Keywords:** Digital Diplomacy, Forming Public Opinion, Social Media, Turkish Republics, New Media.

### Introduction

For the Turkish Republic, the media has gone through many different phases from the Tsarist Russia period to the 21st century and has fulfilled various functions under the control of various powers. In this context, according to Temir (2021), it is possible to examine the functions of the media in the period from Tsarist Russia to the present day, on the axis of the Turkish Republics, in three phases chronologically: the Tsarist Russia period, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics period and the post-independence period. However, in this study, the post-independence period, which started after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, will be discussed rather than the first two periods because the relevant period is the intersection of the emergence of new media and the independence of the Turkish Republics with the dissolution of the USSR.

Mass media and new media can direct the thoughts and attitudes of society and individuals. In this respect, new media is one of the most effective elements in forming public opinion in the digital age. However, each society has its own media consumption practice, which develops depending on many parameters such as freedom of information, digital maturity level of the country, national mentality, internet speed, and historical and spiritual values. For example, according to Imamova (2011), one of the most critical problems faced by the people of Central Asia is the lack of access to accurate, reliable news closely related to their lives because the regimes tightly suppress the media. Therefore, there is an increasing need for non-governmental press and electronic media elements by consumers in the Central Asian geography.

The agenda of the media mainly constitutes the agenda of the public. Popular social media platforms such as Twitter (X) and Facebook (Meta), which have large user bases, especially in Turkey and the world, serve as newspapers as well as being used for entertainment purposes (Durmuş and Gezgin, 2020). This is an essential function for social media platforms because two-way communication increases the pressure of new media on conventional media and affects the agenda-setting process of traditional media. In this study, from a dialectical perspective, the effect of new media on public opinion formation in the Turkish Republic and the position taken by conventional media in the relevant process have been examined.

### Public Opinion, New Media and Education

Although the concept of public opinion is a concept that is at the centre of many issues in the field of communication, there is no standard definition of the concept of public opinion that everyone agrees on. There are many definitions of this concept in the literature. In this respect, the notion of public opinion is at the top of the

list of concepts waiting to be explained. According to Gökçe (1996), it is possible to discuss the studies on defining the concept of public opinion in two main groups: The definition of the concept of public opinion within the framework of political science and the definition of the notion of public opinion in terms of other social sciences. In the eyes of political scientists, public opinion is depicted as the norm that determines the action plan of the legislative, executive and judicial bodies of the state, which is described as the separation of powers or is created by opinion leaders in other fields of social sciences, the understanding of public opinion is that the person's views, behaviours, business and private life are within the individual. It is related to the opinions and attitudes of the society in which it lives. In this context, the definition of public opinion varies according to how it is handled from a political and individual perspective, as stated above.

While well-established communication theories are discussed together with mass media, and the effects of conventional media on people in the process of forming public opinion are intensively investigated, there are not enough studies in the literature on how valid the relevant theories are in digital media environments in the digital age we are in (Koç, 2020). However, when traditional mass media have begun to lose their relative effectiveness and internet-based information technologies have become increasingly widespread, it does not seem possible to consider the concept of public opinion independently of new media. In this context, while researching issues related to public opinion formation and digital diplomacy, considering what impact new media can have on these processes will make it possible to approach the concept of public opinion formation from a more holistic and broader perspective.

With the development of computers in the 1950s, the foundations of the Internet were laid, and accordingly, communication technologies entered the process of rapid digitization in the 1960s and 70s. In 1989, the Internet became available to the public and took its current form. These critical developments in the field of informatics paved the way for the emergence of the concept of new media, and in fact, the concept of new media first emerged in the 1970s. However, there are also studies in the literature that date the emergence of new media to earlier periods in the historical process. For example, he dates the birth of new media back to the 1830s. According to Manovich (2011), new media represents the convergence of computing and media technologies because Manovich argues that computing and media technologies started with Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine and Louis Daguerre's Daguerreotype. In addition, it is possible further to diversify the definitions of new media in the literature. For example, according to Liewrouw and Livingstone (2020), new media includes social contexts related to information technologies, inventions and devices that increase the communication capabilities of individuals/institutions, communication activities organized using these devices, practices developed to convey information, and social regulation shaped around new media tools. Or organizations. According to Binark (2007), since all digital devices and applications such as the Internet, computers, smart mobile phones, PDAs, game consoles and the like have now become a part of the body, the concept of new media, which includes all these technologies, has become a part of the routines and societies of people/societies. It is a phenomenon that transforms daily life practices. In short, although there are different opinions about the emergence and definitions of new media in the literature, the concept of new media essentially gained importance as computers, the Internet, and information technologies began to be integrated into the field of communication from the last quarter of the 20th century to the present day. In addition, when we look at the progress of new media, it is seen that it is a mixed media type because new media is directly connected to many other communication channels such as computer technologies, communication, telecommunications and publishing, as briefly mentioned above.

### **The Relationship between New Media and Education in Terms of Their Importance in Forming Public Opinion and Digital Public Diplomacy**

Daily life is an area where fundamental values and principles are legitimized in terms of social organization, where common values are shared or rejected by individuals forming various segments of society, and where ideologies, which are the whole of thoughts that form a political and social doctrine, become public, that is, become known to everyone (Büyükbaykal and Yanmıyan, 2018). It is a known fact that ideologies, which can therefore be considered an extension of people's daily routines socioeconomic and sociocultural practices, surround the lives of individuals in many aspects. Therefore, various ideologies that affect daily life are imposed on society by political and economic authorities through media and advertisements. In this context, new media environments are among the first channels that come to mind that can be used to influence, direct people, and create public opinion because new media is a constantly active world. People interact with each other at all times in new media environments. Rushkoff (2018) defines this state as being online and, in parallel, states that the digital age has ten important features: time, space, dimension, identity, choice, purpose, accuracy, openness, confusion and socialization. In addition, he states that he sees computers and networks as living entities rather than tools and that such technologies will be the dominant element in characterizing the future of how people live and work. In summary, according to Rushkoff, it is possible to program people in societies that interact with each other, primarily through new communication technologies due to the digital revolution. Therefore, in digitalized public diplomacy, where

creating public opinion is the primary goal, new media tools seem to be the ideal tools that governments can use to obtain public consent on any issue, persuade the public, or program people according to their interests.

The emergence of new media-based digital public diplomacy indicates that traditional diplomacy is no longer seen as the only form of diplomacy in international relations in the postmodern era. For example, in the report titled Turkish World 2040 Vision, direct support is given to productions such as television series, films, digital content, animations and documentaries that draw attention to the shared history, culture and values of the member countries, establishment of joint production companies and R&D units to expand the target audience, and new artificial intelligence-based innovations. Some plans include focusing on media activities and establishing entrepreneurship centres for digital media. In this context, it is understood that the Organization of Turkish States aims to benefit from traditional diplomacy and new media-based digital diplomacy to the maximum extent, as mentioned above. New media platforms, which have become the most critical mass communication tools of the 21st century, have the power to determine individuals' thoughts and behaviours on many issues. In other words, new media has the potential to influence and direct societies significantly. The power behind the new media's influence on society is the internet because it has led to the formation of a virtual public space in the information age, and, at the last point, it has begun to be seen as the most critical element that mobilizes large masses. In this context, the internet and new media have created the necessary infrastructure for the formation of the network society and have become the agora of the network society in social media (Durmuş and Gezgin, 2020). New media includes the internet context and all types of media that allow digital content to be carried and transferred to other users. Therefore, new media has radically changed the perspective of forming public opinion. The social actions and digital activism movements that have taken place in Turkey and various other countries in recent years prove this.

In summary, the development and popularization of the Web in parallel with the Internet has brought new media platforms to the fore. As the use of new media became more widespread, people began to express their problems and reactions in new media channels. In this context, new media has allowed individuals to create public spaces and determine their agendas. In addition, due to its features, new media has also begun to function as an organizational area in organizing social movements. In this respect, it has become the starting point of public opinion formation processes as an instrument that paves the way for social interaction.

### **The Role of New Media in the Public Opinion Formation Process in Turkish Republics**

With the introduction of new media into the field of communication, developments such as the ability of people to instantly communicate with anyone on the other side of the world via the internet, to follow events and news in various countries daily, and so on, have accelerated the interaction of different cultures. In this context, it has become more accessible for people from different cultures with different backgrounds, experiences and views to come together, get to know each other better, and discover their differences and similarities. In other words, new media has paved the way for the fusion of different cultures and accelerated international interaction in many aspects. Considering the historical ties between Turkey and the peoples of related Turkic-speaking states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, new media can accelerate the integration mentioned above process.

The Caucasus and Central Asia are strategically some of the most critical subsystems in the world. There have been many conflicts in both regions from ancient times until today. Moreover, this conflict potential still maintains its warmth today (Akıncı and Kaba, 2023). Therefore, the new media is essential in establishing peace in these regions, ensuring stability, increasing security, strengthening mutual trust, achieving consensus in shared interests and creating public opinion in the Turkish Republic. For example, the foreign policy understanding of each of the states in the South Caucasus region, called Transcaucasia by the USSR, is quite different from each other, and in this context, Azerbaijan and Turkey; Armenia to Russia; Georgia, on the other hand, feels closeness towards the USA (Yılmaz, 2006; Yılmaz, 2018).

Many countries worldwide have used the media to convince people in other countries of the superiority of their systems. For example, the Soviets used international broadcasting to introduce the ideology of communism to the world and establish a global network. Similarly, the USA established the Voice of America (VOA), which produces digital, television and radio content in more than 45 languages to reflect the American perspective on international issues and introduce other nations to its political system and culture. VOA, a multimedia broadcaster founded by the U.S. Government in 1942 to counter Nazi propaganda, provides news, information and cultural programming via the internet, mobile media, social media, radio and television to an estimated weekly global audience of over 326 million. As can be understood from this information, new media is the most essential communication tool states use in the digital age to pressure other states and societies and create public opinion. The USA started to work to create public opinion in its favour in this geography approximately 70-75 years ago by making radio programs in Central Asia through VOA in the 1950s (Imamova, 2011). From this point on, when we look at the studies carried out in Turkey, it is stated that the TRT-INT channel, established in 1990, was the

first television channel broadcasting cross-border in the country and that the purpose of the establishment of the channel was to prevent the weakening of the ties between citizens living in Europe and Turkey. In addition, TRT's first broadcast for the Caucasus and Central Asian Turkish Republics was with the TRT-Eurasia channel, which was established in 1993.

On the other hand, "www.trtvotworld.com" was launched in 2008, and content in 41 languages started being presented to the world public. In this context, TRT became the fifth largest broadcasting company in the world among the broadcasters in the new media service environment. TRT-Avaz channel was established in 2009 in order to appeal to a population of approximately 250 million in 27 countries and 13 autonomous republics and started broadcasting in Turkish, Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Turkmen (TRT). In summary, by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the new media, TRT has served as a bridge in both creating public opinion and implementing Turkish foreign policy in these countries by bringing the Central Asian Turkic Republics and Azerbaijan, which have a common language, social memory and culture with Turkey, closer together.

Studies in communication-related disciplines in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia have increased significantly compared to the pre-1991 period because while most of the region was off-limits to Western academics and other researchers during the Soviet period, after the collapse of the USSR, more communicators and media researchers had the opportunity to conduct research in this geography. Has achieved (Freedman, 2011). In this study, an evaluation was made on the impact of new media on public opinion formation processes in five Turkish Republics (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) that gained independence after the collapse of the Soviets.

### **Azerbaijan**

The 2nd Karabakh War, which took place between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020 and lasted 44 days, found comprehensive coverage in both the national media of the two countries and the international media. So much so that social media and other cyber channels have become the continuation of the physical battlefield in the digital environment since September 27, 2020, when the war started. Therefore, the 2nd Karabakh War was not only a physical conflict but also moved to new media platforms among the information sources of the parties. In this context, the Armenian and Russian media shared anti-Turkey posts on social media and other online networks through terms such as Pan-Turkism, Neo-Ottomanism and discourses such as Turkey's increasing influence in the Caucasus, thus creating public opinion against Turkey in the international arena, especially in the Armenian and Russian communities. They tried to create it (Kirdemir, 2021).

On the other hand, Turkey provided open diplomatic support to Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War and carried out public opinion-raising activities in Turkey and Azerbaijan, other Turkic Republics and internationally, primarily through various new media platforms. These new media-based public opinion formation efforts bore fruit during the war, and especially as a result of social media sharing, the consciousness of one nation, two states, and brother country consciousness came to the fore in the public opinion of Azerbaijan and Turkey as never before. On the Armenian side, the trust in Russia has been shaken significantly (Yerevan, AFP). The idea that the security policies based on the Collective Security Treaty Organization should be reconsidered after the war has become widespread in the Armenian public. The Armenian government even demanded that the Armenian government withdraw from the CSTO as soon as possible.

There have been social movements demanding In this context, the Speaker of the Armenian National Assembly, Alen Simonyan, and the Chairman of the Armenian Security Council, Armen Grigoryan, also clearly emphasized that the CSTO alliance did not meet Armenia's expectations (Ghulinyan and Gerz, 2022). Various sociological studies conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center Armenia show that in 2011, 81% of Armenians saw Russia as their closest friendly country. However, this rate is 35% in 2022, which is historically high. It is seen that the rate of Armenians who see France as their closest friend has decreased to a low level, and on the other hand, the rate of Armenians who see France as their closest friend has increased from 7% in 2011 to 36% in 2022 (CIVILNET). According to the Turkey Trends Research 2022 report findings, 54.8% of the Turkish people see Azerbaijan as the most reliable partner, close friend and brother country for Turkey (Aydın et al., 89). On the other hand, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute data, Azerbaijan and Armenia meet more than 80% of their total arms imports from Russia. However, by frequently expressing on new media platforms that it is very disturbed by Russia, which it sees as its closest ally in the recent past, selling weapons to Azerbaijan, Armenia is trying to create a public opinion on this issue in both Armenia and Russia, thus trying to prevent Azerbaijan from supplying arms from Russia. Is working. In this context, it is possible to say that new media is used as a tool of pressure on societies to protect the interests of countries. During the 2nd Karabakh War, Twitter

was one of the parties' most frequently used new media channels to create a specific public opinion and perception. In this context, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia used Twitter as soft power.

### **Kazakhstan**

After Kazakhstan declared its independence, significant changes occurred in the media structure of Kazakhstan. According to Kazakh political scientist Nurtazina (cited in Han, 2020), it is possible to talk about two important factors behind these changes in the Kazakhstan media. The first is social changes in Kazakhstan society, and the second is the commercialization of the media, which the government monopolizes, and innovative developments that require radical changes in the media typology.

### **Kyrgyzstan**

As a result of the positive developments in Kyrgyzstan, after it gained independence, Western policymakers and academics presented Kyrgyzstan as the democratic island of Central Asia because Kyrgyzstan was a country that adopted a more open politics and pluralistic democracy than its neighbours in the 1990s (Anderson, 1999). Although the fact that Askar Akayev, the first president of Kyrgyzstan, who took office after the dissolution of the USSR, was a leader who emphasized democratization, the rule of law, marketization and the importance of the media, was influential in showing Kyrgyzstan as an island of democracy in Central Asia, Akayev did not take part in the Tulip Meeting held in 2005. As a result of the revolution, he was removed from his post and replaced by Kurmanbek Bakiyev. From Bingöl (2018) perspective, Kyrgyzstan is the most democratic of the Central Asian republics, and therefore, explaining the Tulip Revolution solely through the rhetoric of democracy and freedom is insufficient to make sense of what happened because geo-cultural factors play an essential role behind this revolution. In this context, The key to the Tulip Revolution is the global competition between the ADB, China and Russia. If we need to evaluate these events in Kyrgyzstan in the context of new media, The reflection of the anti-Akayev protests in the media, especially on television, triggered large-scale public debates in the country. Thus, the media enabled the opposition parties and the Kyrgyzstan public to support the anti-Akayev demonstrations more substantially.

Moreover, according to Bingöl (2018), what happened in Kyrgyzstan due to Akayev not following a policy in line with the expectations of the USA is not surprising. In this context, it is possible to infer from Bingöl's comment that the USA may have supported the creation of an anti-Akayev public opinion in the country through new media tools. In summary, it is seen that the media played an essential role in the events that took place in Kyrgyzstan in the post-independence period, and it is understood that the new media was especially effective in removing Akayev and Bakiyev from power.

### **Uzbekistan**

Uzbekistan is the most populous country in the region, with a population that constitutes almost half of the total population in Central Asia. According to Imamova (2011), although Western media organizations can only reach 4% of media consumers in the country, they still need help maintaining their readership, listeners and audience in Uzbekistan. Imamova also states that foreign media organizations operating in Uzbekistan generally need help continuing their publishing activities due to a lack of resources and that national multimedia companies are in a stronger position than foreign media organizations. In addition, according to the latest data, over 1500 mass media organizations and channels are operating in Uzbekistan, one of the largest media markets in Central Asia (TIKA). A study on media consumption and literacy was conducted by the US Agency for International Development in 2019 in Uzbekistan with a sample group of 1,000 people. It was found that television was the most popular media in Uzbekistan, and 82.6% of the participants used a mobile phone or smartphone to communicate with other people. It was concluded that they use phones, 45% do not follow the print media, 40.6% read news online, and 36% read magazines and newspapers in digital format.

### **Turkmenistan**

Turkmenistan is considered one of the most mysterious countries in the world. According to Schmitz and Volters, citizens' access to independent news sources in Turkmenistan is minimal, and the technical tools necessary for the public to organize in situations that concern the public are also minimal.

In 2020, it was decided to create a strategy to switch newspapers and magazines from paper to digital in Turkmenistan. This initiative, which seems logical at first glance, could not achieve the expected efficiency when it came to implementation due to the country's weak internet infrastructure. Worse than that, it caused people with limited access to the internet, living in rural areas, and without a smartphone or computer to become even more disconnected from the media (Jamartov, 2021). According to the IREX Media Sustainability Index, the media in Turkmenistan is seen as far from its purpose of informing citizens or creating an environment for public debate on important issues in the country, and a separate report also states that media organizations and digital platforms in

Turkmenistan do not have preventive mechanisms to control content to reduce disinformation. Emphasis is placed. However, in addition to all these negativities, new media also supports the formation of public opinion in Uzbekistan on various issues. In this context, to give an example of the impact of new media on the public opinion formation process in Turkmenistan, the term coronavirus was the most searched word in Turkmenistan, according to Google Trends data, during the period when the government started to take preventive measures in the Covid-19 pandemic (Jamartov, 2021). In this context, social media mediated the formation of public opinion about taking the necessary measures against the COVID-19 epidemic in Turkmenistan during the pandemic period.

### Conclusion and recommendations

In terms of its features, new media allows individuals to create agendas and influence traditional media. Thus, the power of forming public opinion is shifting from conventional to new media. Significant global developments such as pandemics, wars and other social movements in recent years are accelerating structural changes towards more digital, mobile and platform-oriented media environments. Therefore, in the digital age, new media channels are becoming the most suitable medium for disseminating propaganda materials and educating individuals in public opinion formation. In this context, digital diplomacy has begun to be used more intensively in international relations between the Organization of Turkic States member countries. As a result, in the postmodern age, new media is one of the most critical mass media tools that direct the thoughts and behaviours of societies in the processes of public opinion, and the use of new media in the Turkish Republic is becoming increasingly widespread, especially among young people. In this context, new media is of strategic importance as a propaganda tool in the public opinion formation processes in the Turkish Republic in terms of correctly directing the society in general and especially the young population.

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