

Freedom of Media, Democracy and Gezi Park

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Abstract—This article provides a conceptual framework of the freedom of media and its correlation with democracy. In a democracy, media should serve the publics' right to know and reflect human rights violations and offer options for meaningful political choices and effective participation in civic affairs. On that point, the 2013 events at Gezi Park in Turkey are a good empirical example to be discussed. During the events, when self-censorship was broadly employed by mainstream Turkish media, social media filled the important role of providing information to the public. New technologies have made information into a fundamental tool for change and growth, and as a consequence, societies worldwide have merged into a single, interdependent, and autonomous organism. For this reason, violations of human rights can no longer be considered domestic issues, but rather global ones. Only global political action is an adequate response. Democracy depends on people shaping the society they live in, and in order to accomplish this, they need to express themselves. Freedom of expression is therefore necessary in order to understand diversity and differing perspectives, which in turn are necessary to resolve conflicts among people. Moreover, freedom of information is integral to freedom of expression. In this context, the international rules and laws regarding freedom of expression and freedom of information – indispensable for a free and independent media – are examined. These were put in place by international institutions such as the United Nations, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the European Union, which have aimed to build a free, democratic, and pluralist world committed to human rights and the rule of law. The methods of international human rights institutions depend on effective and frequent employment of mass media to relay human rights violations to the public. Therefore, in this study, the relationship between mass media and democracy, the process of how mass media forms public opinion, the problems of mass media, the neo-liberal theory of mass media, and the use of mass media by NGOs will be evaluated.

Keywords—Freedom of expression, democracy, public opinion, self-censorship.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE need to communicate is fundamental to human nature. It derives from the instinct of self-preservation. Consider the hungry infant crying for food or the desperate gestures of a dying person, conveying the intensity of the battle for life and the need for assistance to prolong it. In both instances – a cry or gesture – a message is communicated and invariably evokes a response. Thus, human beings seek to communicate with one another.

As human society becomes more complex and organized, the need for information and communication also increases, and its content and means tend to become complex and sophisticated, as well.

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The free flow of information and ideas lies at the heart of democracy and is crucial to the effective respect of human rights. In the absence of respect for freedom of expression, which includes the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas, it is impossible to meaningfully exercise a right to vote. Human rights abuses take place in secret, and there is no way to expose a corrupt, inefficient government [1].

II. INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND INFORMATION

International intergovernmental institutions like the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) promote standard principles for protecting freedom of expression and freedom of information, but the implementation of the rules is delegated to individual governments. Therefore, a question remains as to the level of such freedoms individual governments are willing to ensure.

An individual's right to information is not only curtailed by official censorship: self-censorship by various media and arbitrariness on the part of those concerned with releasing information, as well as deliberate manipulation by the media through suppression, distortion, or exaggeration are all forms of censorship [2]. The absence of the legal recognition of individuals' right to information in many countries is unusual, as such countries are members of the United Nations, the General Assembly of which adopted Resolution 59 in 1946, stating:

"Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and is the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated... Freedom of information requires as an indispensable element the willingness and capacity to employ its privileges without abuse. It requires as a basic discipline the moral obligation to seek the facts without prejudice and to spread knowledge without malicious intent..."

The Universal Declaration for Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly in 1948 is generally deemed the flagship statement for international human rights. Article 19 – binding on all states as a matter of customary international law – guarantees the right to freedom of expression and information in the following terms:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Furthermore, the very purpose of UNESCO is to strive "to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image." At that

time, UNESCO reported to the United Nations General Assembly that two thirds of the world population lacked even minimum access to information about contemporaneous world events. Thus, the right to be informed is linked with an individual's right to freedom of speech and publication. In the exercise of these rights – as with other natural rights – the right is limited only by that which is necessary to secure other individuals' exercise of the same right. These limits are generally determined by law and further enshrined in the constitutions of some nations. Indeed, the articulation and incorporation of citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms into the basic law of many nations owes its inspiration to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [3].

The intergovernmental Council of Europe, composed of 47 member states, is devoted to promoting human rights, education, and culture. One of its formative documents, *The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, guarantees freedom of expression and information as a fundamental human right. Article 10 states: "Freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential foundations of a democratic society, one of the basic conditions for its progress and for the development of every man". This value has also been recognized by international courts, such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which has noted that "a society that is not well informed is not a society that is truly free" [4].

For the media to be effective in the promotion of human rights, it must be responsible in its own respect of such rights. The media can be influential and at times detrimental to the rights of individuals when it does not demand unfettered freedom itself. The European Convention, Article 10, states that the exercise of freedom of information can be subjected to conditions, restrictions, and penalties, as may be necessary in democratic society. Such restrictions may be required for the protection of the privacy of individuals, to prevent the dissemination of hatred towards other groups, and to prevent the incitement of racial discrimination [5].

Another important institution designed to protect human rights is the European Court of Human Rights: the judicial body of the Council of Europe. Its constitutional instrument, the European Convention, evaluates cases of human rights violations. It advocates:

"Freedom of the press affords the public one of the best means of discovering and forming an opinion of the ideas and attitudes of their political leaders. In particular, it gives politicians the opportunity to reflect and comment on the preoccupations of public opinion; it thus enables everyone to participate in the free political debate which is at the very core of the concept of a democratic society" [6].

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has also stressed the importance of freedom of expression to the political process: "The free communication of information and ideas about public and political issues between citizens, candidates and elected representatives is essential" [7].

The independent monitors of UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization –

promote freedom of the press and information. Unfortunately, according to Freedom House's Press Index, only 17% of the world's people live in countries that enjoy a free press, while 43% live in countries that have a manifestly unfree press [8].

The OSCE Representative on the Freedom of the Media was established in 1997 to serve the citizens of member countries. The OSCE observes media developments in 57 participating states, providing early warnings regarding violations of the freedom of expression and promoting full compliance with press freedom commitments. OSCE participants claim: "Freedom of information enhances government transparency" [9].

Information is central both for both the promotion and protection of human rights, whether at the national or the international level. Without the basic knowledge that human rights are being violated, no individual or organization can effectively provide protection.

The efforts of international institutions, such as the United Nations, to promote freedom of information have generally been a failure, despite the fact that the Commission on Human Rights created a Subcommission on the Freedom of Information and of the Press. The main reason is "the equally irresponsible position taken by those governments, unfortunately in the majority, which control the press and other information media and use them as instruments of policy" [10].

Freedom of information implies not only the right to inform, but the right to be informed specifically elaborate on rights to information, such as the right to access information held by public bodies. The content of rights is not static. The ECHR, for example, has held that rights are a living instrument that must be interpreted in the light of contemporary conditions. And recently there have been developments regarding this very issue: the political bodies of the Council of Europe are making strides toward recognizing the right to information as a fundamental human right [11], whereas the Committee of Ministers adopted a Recommendation on February 21, 2002, which includes the following provision: "Member States should guarantee the right of everyone to have access, on request, to official documents held by public authorities. The principle should apply without discrimination of any ground, including national origin". Furthermore, freedom of information is now widely recognized in international laws [12]. Nearly 70 countries around the world have adopted comprehensive "Freedom of Information" legislation to facilitate access to records held by government bodies. A few countries have issued decrees, but much work remains to achieve truly transparent governance [13].

One important consideration moving forward is the effort to bridge the gap between the norms and reality. The needs for dispersing knowledge and effective educational materials are apparent. Instruction in fundamental human rights should be a positive experience associated with progress, and in this way the deficiencies in protection in various societies should be brought to light [14].

There are other obstacles to the promotion of freedom of information. States are often reluctant to take responsibility for ensuring a free flow of information to which its citizens have a right of access and which individuals need both for personal development, as well as for effective participation in their community and society. Self-interest tends to make governments selective in the information made available to the public, and often states' information services tend to produce propaganda rather than socially relevant information. Other common constraints include restrictive legislation and administrative censorship. The more authoritarian a government becomes, the more constricted the flow of public information.

The imposition of "emergency rule" – a phenomenon increasingly common in some parts of Asia – brings in its wake censorship of news and information and control of the media. In countries in which the media is under state ownership or control, a form of self-censorship is invariably practiced, either as a matter of policy or as a product of managerial expediency [15]. Contemporary society is increasingly influenced by the media; the correspondingly greater importance of media control has subsequently led national and international leaders to regard unrestricted flows of information with suspicion. They believe that journalism is too important to be left in the hands of journalists themselves [16].

The media operate in an era of great technological change, and these new technologies make information a basic tool for change and growth – indispensable for the consolidation of human rights. The media should be the custodians of human rights and should help guarantee people's freedom, including the right to free communication. But if the press itself is not free, it becomes impossible to raise issues of human rights on a national scale. Only by continuously exposing such issues – bringing them to the attention of not only governments but the people – the media can encourage a greater awareness of the need to protect human rights [17]. While a free and responsible media are essential to the protection and promotion of human rights, for this freedom to be real, some of that mass media must independent of the ownership and control of the state. Preferably, there should be a plurality of media representing different interests.

The media are essential for revealing human rights violations and for creating awareness about repressive situations. Media attention is often instrumental in garnering public support for political changes, as demonstrated in recent years in the Republic of Korea and the Philippines. To fulfill these functions, the media must have access to the places where human rights violations allegedly occur, but such access is often blocked by repressive regimes, such as in apartheid South Africa beginning in 1986 [18].

A free press cannot survive without an independent judiciary. The liberties of citizens – as with those of the press – are in safe hands when two conditions are present: a) liberties and freedoms are actively exercised, and b) opposition by governments is reined in by an independent

judiciary. Without these conditions, freedoms remain but illusions written on scraps of paper [19].

Some non-governmental organizations, like Amnesty International, Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch are devoted mainly to the protection of free and responsible flow of information.

III. HOW THE MASS MEDIA FORMS PUBLIC OPINION

There is a dialectical relationship between media and public opinion, characterized by mutual interdependence and interaction. The degree depends on their historical development and the prevalent social and political atmosphere in their respective society. A policy of openness is therefore a fundamental precondition for the process of democratization as a whole. Openness has a profound effect on media and public opinion, as media provide channels for the expression and formation of public opinion, and public opinion recursively influences press, radio, and television, suggesting their relative efficacy.

Mikhail Gorbachev, who ushered in a policy of openness in the Soviet Union, noted: "It is necessary that newspapers, radio, and television should reflect life itself; the working people should speak in their own language about new things that are becoming part of our reality, about their problems and ideas" [20].

The principle of openness, which is a precursor for providing human rights, is indeed the basis of society. This implies not only that people must be informed of certain problems, but society is obliged to discuss such problems, as well. The ultimate aim is to formulate and evaluate various solutions to problems under consideration.

This works only when a population is informed and public opinion has a more solid basis in actual information. In the process of democratization, mass media play a decisive role. As a result of accurate information, the creation of an enhanced public opinion becomes more dynamic, the intensity and polarization of opinion increases, and competence levels rise among the general public [21].

Mass media constitutes a powerful and pervading force in our lives as we are daily bombarded with media messages. Most of the information we receive about our communities, our states, and our nations come by television and radio. Our understanding and attitudes toward people and events are influenced by the selection of information and views communicated through such media. Therefore, effective use of the media for the purpose of advancing human rights is crucial, because it provides a potential avenue for public understanding and education. Mass media can solve a variety of significant public problems concerning the prevention of human right abuses [22].

For the media, advertising provides a dependable revenue source, but as commercial requirements that evolved from industrialization demand greater space for advertising, the importance of real, journalistic contributions is sometimes lost in the shadows. Meanwhile, the production of news content is being monopolized by news and advertising agencies such that the media are almost exclusively disseminating prepackaged

messages. Agencies sell their products reflecting their own values and priorities to the press and broadcast media, which in turn pass it on to the public [23].

IV. MASS MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

In a democratic system, the relationship of the media to government may be expressed as the media guarding against abuses of power by office holders. The media must consist of diverse opinions and sources: a robust, uninhibited, and open marketplace of ideas in which opposing views meet, contend, and take stock. Beyond that, media should serve the public's "right to know," offering meaningful political choices and nourishing effective participation in civic affairs.

Democracy is exacting in its expectations for the media, requiring that the media play multiple roles and provide various services with respect to the political system. Among them:

- Surveillance of the socio-political environment: objectively reporting on developments in the welfare of citizens.
- Meaningful agenda-setting: identifying the key issues of the day, including the forces that have formed and may resolve them.
- Serving as a platform for intelligible and illuminating advocacy by politicians and spokespersons of other causes and interest groups.
- Providing dialogue across a diverse range of views, as well as between power holders and the public.
- Serving as a mechanism for holding officials to account for the exercise of their power.
- Providing incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved in rather than merely follow the political process.
- Serving as a principled resistance to forces outside the media that would subvert the media's independence, integrity, and ability to serve its audience.
- Respect for the audience as concerned and capable of making sense of the political environment [24].

Because the media can pursue democratic values only in ways compatible with the socio-political and economic environment in which they operate, it is no easy task to achieve and serve these ideals. The arrangements of political communication derive their resources from the society of which they are a part, underscoring the importance of the freedom of expression and information. Because of the important role mass media plays in the improvement of democratic values generally and human rights specifically, the promotion of human rights and democracy depends on active involvement of the media and the media's degree of respect for freedom of thought. Therefore, a socio-political and economic environment that provides the foundation for freedom thought and information is crucial [25].

By its nature, television focuses on the visual: scenes of demonstration, battle, and natural disaster. Only the new or ground-breaking story warrants airtime. Countries where cameras cannot move freely or where footage is delayed will be underrepresented. (Indeed, reportage on the third world is

generally limited for this reason). Long term issues such as the historical baggage accompanying a country's political situation, topography, factionalism, and ideology are further inhibitors to television coverage [26].

V. THE NEOLIBERAL THEORY OF MASS MEDIA

Neoliberal theory has played a decisive role criticizing state-protected media, especially in the field of broadcasting and telecommunications. Such media are cost-inefficient and ridden with restrictive practices. State-protected media are further criticized for ignoring the interests of the advertising industry. Finally, neoliberals attack the paternalism of state-protected media. They claim the principle of public-service broadcasting supposes that the whole nation can and should have access to an identical number of channels, each offering programs with wide appeal for all tastes. Therefore, they argue, public-service broadcasting stifles individual needs and concerns. It confines and diminishes public choices, as decisions are not subject to continual, detailed justification. The universal claim of the BBC that "others can inform some people all of the time, or all of the people some of the time" is a mask for a particular brand of paternalism. In the view of neoliberals, monopolistic public regulations of public media are not justifiable. It is a kind of socialism, and the aim of media should be to dispense with the socialist view, instead developing a system of market-based competition that provides readers, viewers, and listeners with as many alternative news sources as possible. Thusly, the public is deemed sovereign: the ultimate judges of their own interests. In the field of communications media, the competitive market is a mechanism for discovering – by trial and error – what consumers want, how these wants can be supplied with the least cost, and whether new and challenging ideas and tastes will catch the public eye [27]. Therefore, public-service broadcasting must become leaner, more competitive, and more efficient. The growth of new media – principally cable and satellite broadcasting – renders the public-service broadcasting model vulnerable. New technologies undermine the privileged, protected position of broadcasting, offering qualitatively greater consumer choice and hence – by facilitating market competition in both spheres – a new potential for publishing and broadcasting. The abolition of public service monopolies would usher in an age of the "liberty of press," encompassing not only books, periodicals, and newspapers – i.e., the media of the early modern era – but also sophisticated electronic media such as television, radio, and advanced telecommunications systems. While neoliberals want a free, uncensored media and communication system, at the same time they are opposed to the attempts of citizens to extend the rule of law, reducing the arbitrariness and secrecy of political power [28].

VI. MASS MEDIA AND NGOS

As discussed in a colloquium, the media – particularly audio-visual media – seldom refer to NGOs, and when they do, they often portray the work of NGOs negatively. But in

democratic society, the activities of NGOs are the foundation of two fundamental freedoms: the freedom of expression and the freedom of association. NGOs enable citizens to take part in specific experiments aimed at improving the political, social, economic, or cultural functioning of their communities and societies.

Mass media (television above all) have gradually grown accustomed to organizing themselves as purveyors of fiction, show business, and entertainment – allowing audiences to escape from reality rather than informing them [29]. As such, mass media will hesitate to report civic activity if it is opposed to prevailing political doctrine. As recently seen in France, the media had been reluctant to explicate the real nature of the Moroccan regime, but was influenced by the impact of Gilles Perrault's book, *Notre ami le roi*. Under the book's influence, the media changed tack: while many NGOs had long denounced the human rights situation in Morocco, the media suddenly confirmed NGO analyses, sought out their point of view, and in the end, took their knowledge on board. Thus, as political doctrine or consensus changes, the media immediately record the change and adapt to it [30].

In an age of commercialism, the media seek rapid information full of strong emotion, violence, blood, and death. Under such circumstances, NGOs are incapable of realizing the conspicuousness offered by the media. Most of them proffer only precise facts often bound up with rigorous, demanding, and elevated concepts of collective civic-mindedness – all of which are based on hard-won experience and knowledge. Their reports make for arduous reading, their descriptions are detailed, and their suggestions are reasonable and thoughtful. But none or little of this is of interest to the mainstream media. Even accounts of abuses and violations of human rights seem worn to saturated, contemporary media outlets, which are indifferent to such interminable agony [31].

VII. PROBLEMS OF MASS MEDIA

Journalists, just as ordinary people, have a vague notion about the content of human rights. They know that torture is wrong, as are forced disappearances. It is common knowledge that arbitrary arrest constitutes a violation of human rights.

Ideally, the media is free, critical, and constructive: free from external control over reporting, critical of both public authorities and private concentrations of power (including transnational corporations and other enterprises), constructive in making a space for suggesting and proposing ideas for better outcomes. The media is expected to reflect the concerns of ordinary human beings and be supportive of values inherent to human rights. But much of the information on human rights violations is now being made available by non-governmental organizations, some of which skillfully develop their own information channels. Amnesty International and similar organizations are highly respected, and often used as sources by the media [32].

It is only through mass media that the knowledge produced by NGOs reaches the general public: indeed, it is through mass media that human drama and empathy with the victims may be best evoked.

Newspapers and broadcasting companies are frequently subject to far-reaching censorship laws that cut deeply into the freedom to impart information provided for by the Universal Declaration, Article 19. Reporters are often confronted with harassment of various forms. They are threatened, sometimes molested, and even killed by death squads, armed forces, or extremists. More frequently, they are simply barred from access to the places where violations occur and thus assume great personal risk to pursue their investigative reporting. Even when they have the facts, they face obstacles placed in their way by government authorities: reporters sometimes face expulsion when they file information on violations or when the information is published outside the country concerned.

External control over editorial policy is at times held by powerful, private interests, which may have an equally strong interest in blocking information about rights-related problems. Information on the dangers of certain pharmaceutical products – or the harmful environmental effects of chemical, nuclear, or other industrial activities – have from time to time been blocked through such influence [33].

The particular media enterprise – i.e., the newspaper concerned or the broadcasting corporation – is not always free from external control over editorial decision-making. In some instances, media are not only owned but directed by their governments. Government funding by itself does not imply a threat if editorial control remains independent, which is the case in some but certainly not all instances. If it is not independent, the freedom to investigate violations for which the government is responsible is naturally curtailed.

Finally, there may be problems within a media enterprise itself. Western media is increasingly commercialized: the goal to impart solid, reliable information is gradually yielding to an interest in marketing only those bits and pieces of a story that are easy sells. It is a burden for newspapers as well as for readers to devote serious, consistent attention to human rights issues without succumbing to ideological or commercial biases [34]. In this respect, the media have been remarkably passive, unaggressive, and uncritical. This attitude coincides with scant coverage of questions of human rights, even those promoted within the United Nations. News reporters are not dependent upon the United Nations to paint a picture of the world's atrocities, and these atrocities are what are ultimately given priority in the news [34].

VIII. THE GEZI PARK PROTESTS AND MASS MEDIA

Gezi Park is located adjacent Taksim Square in downtown Istanbul, Turkey. When the country's ruling party planned to cut down the trees to resurrect a historical building and make a shopping mall, a small group of environmentalist youth resisted and protested the government.

When the initially small group of protestors blocked the use of heavy machinery, police stopped them using tear gas and water cannons. The next morning, the police upturned and burned protestors' tents. Such excessive and early operations led to a gradual transformation of the events from a local protest into a national and international crisis [35]. It soon turned into one of the greatest civil protests in Turkish history.

Tweets and Face-book posts raised consciousness and called people to action. The next day, more and more, mostly young, people convened on the park with tents, books, and musical instruments, launching an unlikely festival surrounded by bulldozers and police [35].

The police began burning tents on the morning of May 30. As the weekend approached, police violence triggered yet more popular participation to support those at Gezi Park and lead to nationwide anger and unrest. On the evening of May 31, adjacent streets and public spaces were filled with the masses [36].

The excessive use of force by the police soon also sparked anti-government protests around the country. In many instances, police used tear gas, plastic bullets, and water cannons to disperse protestors [37].

The movement had numerous faces and components. After various groups occupied Gezi Park, they built tents to prevent the general public's access to the park, claimed control of the area, and transformed Gezi Park into a form of communal property. People occupied the park for two weeks. Later, when authorities attempted to evacuate the park with excessive, unjust police violence that bordered on criminal, clashes and injuries resulted. The media's curious failure to report the story, willing or not, allowed users of social media to inflate the situation. People of all ideological backgrounds rushed to Taksim to speak out against police brutality [38].

Allegedly motivated by environmentalist sentiments, the movement rapidly began to formulate political demands, targeting then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, demanding the resignation of the prime minister if not the government itself [39].

The mainstream media did not broadcast any of the events of the first days of police interventions, indicating openly that they were censoring their news and deliberately not broadcasting events that could be considered provocative or oppositional. Such a degree of self-censorship, regardless of the explanation, demonstrates that Turkey's media is not completely free and must filter its own news content while reporting [40].

The mainstream media showed very little of the protest in their programs and reports. CNN Turk aired a two-hour-long documentary about penguins, which in turn became a symbol of the self-censorship of the national media in general. Only a few, smaller television channels reflected on the massive protests going on at Gezi Park.

NTV, a news channel belonging to Doğuş Holding in Turkey, came under fire after airing a documentary on Hitler when the events began to unfold. The channel began reporting on the events at a late stage, but still tried to manipulate the news [41].

During the protest's most intense moments, only two media groups were broadcasting from inside the park: foreign media outlets, whose reporters roamed the park day and night, and an alternative media that was born from the Gezi Park protests itself and compensated for the lack of a reliable flow of information among the protestors and the public [41].

Although the mainstream media did not inform the people, social media – especially Twitter and Face-book – kept people informed about the events. It is not unsurprising that such social media became the immediate target of the ruling party. The police collected more than five million Tweets to identify criminal actions as the ruling party sought to reassert its power by controlling these new sites of popular resistance [42].

In the face of the self-censorship broadly employed by the mainstream Turkish media, social media filled the important roles of providing information regarding the protest's developments, as well as being a means of communication for those wishing to express their support. The government subsequently attacked social media companies and its users: Prime Minister Erdoğan even ranted: "There is a scourge called Twitter" [43].

Social media have become important communication tools for political protesters. While mass media are often censored or self-censor during large-scale political protests, social media channels remain relatively open and maybe employed to tell the world what is happening and also to mobilize broad and external support [44].

The Gezi Park protests revealed the utter weakness of the mainstream media in Turkey. Their dependency on the state and fear of retaliation by the ruling AK Party government prevented them from doing the job of providing accurate, objective accounts of current events [41]. During the events, protesters responded in various ways to the arrests, injuries, and casualties resulting from disproportionate use of police force, the misinformation campaign on the part of mass media, and the government's accusations [45].

A report by Amnesty International summarizes the Gezi Park events as follows: While violence continued against protestors, journalists reporting from the protests, doctors treating the injured, and lawyers defending their rights were also arrested and subjected to arbitrary and abusive use of force.

During the Gezi Park protests, the government made unprecedented attacks on the media, focusing in particular on an international media it accused of misrepresenting events and attempting to influence the tensions. A number of journalists working for international media organizations reported that they had received threats of violence. The government accused international media organizations such as the BBC, CNN, The Economist, and Reuters exaggerating or distorting the protests and that their reports amounted to disinformation. Journalists working for the international and opposition media in Turkey– as well as social media users– were targeted by police on the ground, subjected to verbal abuse, detention, physical violence, and other threats.

Editors and media moguls with strong business links to the government put pressure on journalists working for national media to refrain from any critical reports on the authorities' response to the Gezi Park events. The Journalists Union of Turkey reported that by July 22, 59 journalists had lost their jobs in relation to reports related to the Gezi Park protests. Twenty two had been fired and 37 forced to resign.

At the height of the events, authorities displayed complete intolerance for any form of protest, however passive. Even solitary figures, standing alone and silent in Taksim Square were detained for participating in what became known as the “standing man protest” [46].

Freedom House, a United States-based NGO involved in human rights issues, published a report in which Turkey’s status in terms of the Press Freedom Environment changed from partly free to not free:

“Status change explanation: Turkey’s status declined from Partly Free to Not Free as a result of a sharp deterioration in the press freedom environment in 2013. Journalists were harassed and assaulted while attempting to cover the Gezi Park protests that broke out in Istanbul in May, and dozens were fired or forced to resign in response to their reporting on the demonstrations. Throughout the year, other prominent journalists were fired over their coverage of sensitive issues like negotiations between the government and the separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) or corruption scandals involving Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his associates that emerged in December. The firings highlighted the close relationship between the government and many media owners, and the formal and informal pressure that this places on journalists.” [47]

IX. CONCLUSION

It is believed that in order to constitute a democratic society, a free and independent media must be an effective weapon for informing public opinion. Ultimately only public opinion can put pressure on governments and reshape the attitude of sovereigns; it is an effective sanction that may in turn be reflected in the constitution of a country. The weight of public opinion cannot be ignored: in the long run, educated public opinion is essential for protecting rights and developing further means for implementing international norms and regulations. The protection of certain rights – particularly the freedom of expression – is a precondition for the protection and development of others, since it is an important vehicle for educating the public. If an inclusive, investigative journalism or broadcasting culture is attained, it will prepare public opinion for both national and international changes – a fundamental change of attitude: a new awareness and respect for human rights [48]. But the contemporary situation of mass media with regard to human rights issues is a disappointment: they are highly commercialized and insufficiently interested in human rights violations around the world – perhaps even dismissive of them.

Although international norms and regulations promote and protect freedom of expression and freedom of information, they have not succeeded because the implementation of their rules are relegated to individual governments. The mere fact of the international standard has not changed the repressive attitudes and behaviors of authoritarian regimes.

The free flow of information and ideas is at the heart of democracy and crucial to respect for human rights issues. In the absence of real respect for the rights to freedom of expression and information, human rights abuses take place in

secret, and there is no way to expose a corrupt, inefficient government [49]. Furthermore, a free press and broadcast media cannot survive without an independent judiciary. Without it, the liberties of citizens, as with the media, are not in safe hands. Where liberties and freedoms are violated by a government, an independent judiciary is necessary to allow an opposition to stand unsuppressed against that government.

A unique example of censorship and self-censorship of the media was evident in Turkey during the Gezi Park protests. The mainstream media did not broadcast any of the events of the first days of police interventions, indicating openly that they were censoring their news and deliberately not broadcasting events that could be considered provocative or oppositional. They turned a blind eye instead of broadcasting the disproportionate use of police force.

Although the mainstream media did not inform the people, social media – especially Twitter and Face-book – kept people informed about the events. News of police brutality spread quickly on such social media. Meanwhile, the underlying message of the Gezi Park protests could be understood as a public demand for more accountability and freedom in both politics and media. It also showed the fragility of Turkey’s media structure [41]. Consequently, in an age of knowledge and information, effectively implementing censorship on the media has become difficult. New technologies offer many alternative means of communication, such that censorship amounts to little more than a delay of a few hours.

The internet has proven a powerful tool in both the manipulation and mobilization of civil society. Yet, governments still attempt to control in an authoritarian manner who can access the internet and what content they may access and use [50].

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