

T.C.
BAHCESEHIR UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL
THE DEPARTMENT OF FILM AND TELEVISION

**THE CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE INTERNET
IN TÜRKİYE: THE RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION IN THE
INDEPENDENT DIGITAL NEWS MEDIA**

PHD THESIS

YAĞMUR ÇENBERLİ

ISTANBUL 2025

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ABSTRACT

THE CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE INTERNET IN TÜRKİYE: THE RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION IN THE INDEPENDENT DIGITAL NEWS MEDIA

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Cinema and Media Research, PhD Program

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In this dissertation thesis, the critical political economy of the internet is investigated with a focus on the relations of production in the independent digital news media in Türkiye. The infrastructure of the internet, which consists of the internet service providers and the digital platforms, and the internet governance are problematized in terms of establishing their impact on media freedom. In order to explore this intrinsic relationship of the news production with the distribution process, 29 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the journalists who work at the independent digital native news organizations and the experts on the telecommunications, digital platforms and the internet governance. As a result, it is found out that the distribution process dominates the relations of production, which is the consequence of the commodification of the independent digital news media by the internet service providers and the digital platforms. This reveals the alienation of journalists that causes self-censorship and modification in the news production to become the instruments of bargaining in order to preserve the existence of the independent digital news organizations at the expense of media freedom.

Keywords: Political Economy of the Internet, Internet Governance, Media Freedom, Internet Infrastructure, Independent News Media

ÖZET

TÜRKİYE'DE İNTERNETİN ELEŞTİREL EKONOMİ POLİTİĞİ: BAĞIMSIZ DİJİTAL HABER MEDYASINDA ÜRETİM İLİŞKİLERİ

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Bu çalışmada internetin eleştirel ekonomi politigi, bağımsız dijital haber medyasının üretim ilişkilerini odağa alarak araştırılmıştır. Medya özgürlüğü üzerindeki etkisinin anlaşılması amacıyla internet servis sağlayıcıları ve dijital platformlardan oluşan internet altyapısı ve internet yönetişimi araştırmanın ana sorunsalını oluşturmaktadır. Haber üretiminin dağıtım süreciyle olan içsel ilişkisini ortaya koymak için bağımsız dijital doğumlu haber kuruluşlarında çalışan gazetecilerden ve telekomünikasyon, dijital platformlar ve internet yönetişimi alanındaki uzmanlardan oluşan toplam 29 kişi ile derinlemesine yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Görüşmelerin sonunda dağıtım sürecinin üretim ilişkilerine egemen olduğu ve bu egemenlik durumunun bağımsız dijital medyanın internet servis sağlayıcıları ve dijital platformlar tarafından metalaştırılmasının bir sonucu olduğu bulgusuna ulaşılmıştır. Gazetecilerde yabancılaşmaya neden olduğu gözlemlenen bu tespit, medya özgürlüğü pahasına bağımsız dijital medya kuruluşlarının varlıklarını korumak için otosansürün ve haber üretim sürecindeki değişikliklerin bir pazarlık aracına dönüştürüldüğünü ortaya çıkarmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İnternetin Ekonomi Politigi, İnternet Yönetişimi, Medya Özgürlüğü, İnternet Altyapısı, Bağımsız Haber Medyası



To My Grandfather, İsmail Hakkı Çenberli

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
BİK	Press Advertisement Agency (Basın İlan Kurumu)
BTK	Information and Communication Technologies Authority (Bilgi Teknolojileri ve İletişimi Kurumu)
DNS	Domain Name System
DoS	Denial-of-Service
DDoS	Distributed Denial-of-Service
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Global Network Initiative
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICANN	International Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IPI	International Press Institute
ISP	Internet Service Provider
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
IXP	Internet Exchange Point
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NWICO	New World Information and Communication Order
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

RSF	Reporters Without Borders
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
TNAP	Turkish Network Alliance Platform
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
URL	Uniform Resource Locator
U.S.	The United States
USA	United States of America
VPN	Virtual Private Network
WGIG	Working Group on Internet Governance

Chapter 1

Introduction

“[Google] Expanding connectivity in Africa with Umoja” (Quigley, 2024), “Google Unveils \$1 Billion Investment in Thailand’s Digital Infrastructure” (NDTV, 2024), “Elon Musk’s \$1.5 Billion Bet: SpaceX to Invest Big in Vietnam’s Digital Future” (Monica, 2024), “Meta dives deep: \$10 bn subsea global cable to dominate internet traffic” (Singh, 2024), “Vodafone and Google sign billion-dollar AI partnership” (Farrington, 2024), “Vodafone Turkey, Cisco and Qwilt to bring the future of content delivery to 25 million subscribers nationwide” (Broadcast Beat, 2022)... These are the titles of a few short articles that demonstrate the concentration of the content production, distribution and the internet infrastructure. The initial thoughts of this dissertation thesis were formed during the process of the controversial sell of Twitter to Elon Musk who is the owner of the satellite internet company Starlink and SpaceX that launches the Starlink satellites. A phenomenon that was thought to be buried in the first decade of the 21st century, i.e. the AOL-Time Warner merger (Arango, 2010), seems to be rising back on its feet. The control over the information flow has elevated to a new level in the age of digital capitalism in a way that reminds the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debate and the Non-Aligned Movement. The promise of the internet as manifested by Barlow (1996), Tim Berners-Lee, Vint Cerf and Bob Kahn seems to have fallen in the commercial hands of the oligopolistic market structure. The trend in the information ecosystem towards the increase in the investments of the agents of distribution in the internet infrastructure indicates the deepening global inequality in terms of fair and equal access to information. For this reason, media and communication systems must be addressed from a holistic approach by including the field of governance and political power as well as the economic power and the capitalist actors that dominantly consist of the internet service providers and the digital platforms. What makes this possible is the discipline of political economy from a critical perspective. In this context, it is important to reveal the intrinsic relationship between the state, the internet service providers (ISPs), the digital platforms and the independent digital news media as one of the vital information source of the society.

As the IPI Turkey Digital Media Report (Kızılkaya & Ütücü, 2021) demonstrated that the independent digital news media establish itself as the new mainstream media of the country, the strict control over the information flow through governance and the market forces poses immense risks against the media freedom and democracy. Between 2014 and 2023 43.769 news URLs were blocked to access and 38.145 news URLs were removed (Akdeniz & Güven, 2024). These decisions were taken by the Criminal Judgeships of Peace based on the law and regulations enacted by the Parliament, and implemented by the ISPs (except the content removal decisions). Additionally, Türkiye is listed as the 4th country that requests the content removal the most from Google for more than 90,000 content between 2013 and 2022 (Euronews, 2023). Moreover, the digital platforms either suppress or remove content based on arbitrary implementation of their community standards. According to the 2023 report of Human Rights Watch, Meta censored more than 1,050 content published about Palestine between October and November 2023, and this censorship continues since then. Specifically in Türkiye, the plurality in the Google search results for news has been decreasing since 2021 (Kızılkaya, 2024) and the accusations regarding to the censorship on the independent digital news media through Google Search's core updates further clamp down the news media and information ecosystem (Gazete Pencere, 2024). Therefore, the freedom of expression and media freedom must be ensured by the states as the fundamental human rights, and the private corporations such as the ISPs and the digital platforms must be reminded and forced to respect the human rights as well.

Considering the recent happenings in the communication sphere, a brief examination on the background of this situation would help contextualize this structure. A new type of social and economic structure started to occur in the late 20th century with the dissemination of the internet to the public. Since “[n]ew information technologies are not simply tools to be applied, but processes to be developed” (Castells, 2010, p. 31), information society and digital capitalism have become the definitive characteristics of this structure. The promise of globalization, freedom and equality among people and cultures seems to be the reality for certain group of people who have the means to access to that promise and to be an illusion for the rest of the world. Issues such as the acceleration in the privatization policies of the

telecommunications and the internet infrastructure, the concentration in the hands of few, the deregulation policies in the communication market and yet, tightening control mechanisms by the state and also by the corporations need significant attention in terms of production, distribution and freedom of information and news. In spite of the common perception on diverse and multi-directional flow of information via the internet, we are entangled in a one-way flow of information in a quite similar manner of the traditional media. For this reason, we must remember that the right to communication does not only include the right to information and freedom of expression, but also it should involve the right to produce and distribute information to ensure media freedom (Mattelart, 2011, p. 514). Since news media serve to public good and democracy by producing and disseminating information, the relations of production in the digital news media must be problematized in terms of the political and economic processes in the internet infrastructure.

Based on this understanding about the right to communication, Türkiye's landscape of the communication industry, in particular the internet, is quite problematic. Türkiye's status is listed as "not free" in 2024 as it was previously for many years in a row in the Freedom on the Net annual reports (Freedom House, 2024). The country is ranked 158 out of 180 countries in the Press Freedom Index 2024 (RSF, 2024) and positioned as the highest risk-scoring country in terms of media pluralism among 27 EU member and five candidate countries (Bleyer-Simon, et al., 2024). According to the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, there are 91.3 million internet users in Türkiye by the end of 2023 (Freedom House, 2024) and 442 telecommunications operators are active in the information and communication technology market (BTK, 2021). Yet, the telecommunications infrastructure is rather poor and access to the internet is relatively expensive. The inadequate telecommunications infrastructure, connection interruptions and power shortages affect the connectivity and access to information, in particular in the eastern regions of the country (Freedom House, 2024). In addition to the poor internet infrastructure, the internet in Türkiye is reported as the least affordable in 2022 among the European countries by the Inclusive Internet Index Report (2022). Besides, in times of crisis the government blocks access to certain digital platforms through the ISPs and neither the state nor the ISPs feel any responsibility to make an explanation to the public (Freedom

House, 2022). As the various data from different sources demonstrate the dreary media landscape in Türkiye, there is a strong relationship between the internet infrastructure, news media and freedom in terms of the telecommunications market structure, access to the internet and information. Therefore, it is of great importance that the structure that makes information and communication available to societies must be constructed in a fair, independent and equal manners, which is the main motivation of this dissertation thesis.

1.1 The Literature Review on the Political Economy of the Internet

An examination of the first years of the internet's reach to the public will provide a more comprehensive understanding of its current structure. Başaran (2005) points out two major types of inequality on the internet: constructing the internet as a private industry and one-way flow of information (from the USA to the rest of the world) (p. 36). The inequality on the internet whose market structure has been established as a private industry leads to digital divide between have's and have not's in terms of access to hardware, connection and media literacy education (Başaran, 2005, p. 36). Başaran (2005) points out that the background of the inequality in the information flow is based on the necessity to connect the U.S. first as a pre-condition of creating a global network due to the fact that the internet was invented in the U.S. soil and thus, information spreads to the world from there (p. 36). Therefore, Başaran (2005) argues for the need of the critical political economy of the internet in order to reverse this inequality and to work for a more diverse, open and accessible communications systems (p. 36). A critical analysis of the internet's political and economic structure will not only help overcome the inequalities in the information sphere, but also will help establish media freedom as well.

The development of technology, on the other hand, has been instrumentalized to increase the oppression of the ruling class. "[T]he ways technology, in being inextricably bound up with prevailing relations of ownership, production, and consumption, is used as an instrument of domination and control, generating consequences that affect virtually all communicative relations among humans" (Huspek, 1997, p. 265). Yet, despite all the pessimistic understanding, the information revolution provided a more interactive and decentralized sphere compared to the old

traditional media (Jones, 1994, p. 146). Wasko (2014) states the opportunities available to public through “the idea of commons” in her work where she reevaluates the political economy of media in the 21st century, i.e. Wikipedia, which is not a private property, free of charge and available to all (p. 266). The opportunities that the internet has to offer foster a global collaboration and solidarity where the economic interests have been overshadowed (De Filippi & Vieira, 2014, p. 5). Thus, the concept of digital is capable of encapsulating a “commons-based peer production” through information and communications technology (Wittel, 2014, p. 399). Yet, this understanding of digital harbours some positive and negative aspects. The positive aspect is that it allows grassroot movements to flourish, however it also does not reflect the current reality of the control mechanisms that are shaped by the ownership and market structure. Besides, concepts such as Wikinomics and crowdsourcing are some of the latest contributions to the discourse of the post-industrial information society (Freedman, 2016, p. 88). Even though the idea of commons seems revolutionary, Parker (1994) called on the growing centralization in the communication industry through standardization, transnationalization and global concentration in the hands of few twenty years before Wasko (2014) did. Therefore, there are many steps to take before enjoying the internet commons. It is true that this free-of-charge collaborative peer-production does not rely on the classical market economy since we are dealing with an entirely different economic model:

The web becomes the land of the free, not because of ideology but because of economics. Price has fallen to the marginal cost, and the marginal cost of everything online is close enough to zero that it pays to round down.
(Anderson, 2009, p. 92)

The reason is that what makes a commodity in the digital age is not its monetary equivalent, but its adaptation into the market exchange system (Freedman, 2016, p. 100). To be more clear, the use value of the commodity, in particular information, has lost its importance and its exchange value has become the dominant force in the digital market.

Due to this replacement of use value with exchange value, information gained a critical role in the digital environment. In the 21st century, rather called the digital age, power heavily relies on information (Hassan, 2008, p. 191). What is distinctive in the society is that the determinants of power, which gets its strength from information, are the free market and commodity rather than the governments or state institutions (Hassan, 2008, p. 191). The basic unit of this informational power is data and its reckless usage, storage and process at the will of private companies as well as the governments immensely increased its importance in the global economy. “Technological innovations represent the classic form of expanding of information technologies, the computer and the [i]nternet, a new field of commodification emerged.” (Fleissner, 2009, p. 234) The data-driven economy – also called data capitalism (West, 2017), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015), the information-industrial complex (Powers & Jablonski, 2015) or platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) – allow profit-seeking corporations to “commodify and monetize all manner of data” (Tusikov, 2019, p. 124). Meta, Google, Apple are a few examples of this argument. For instance, in spite of the fact that Google search engine does not require a fee from users, Alphabet (the parent company of Google) does not step back from the search engine. The reason is simple: Google derives profit from advertising and metadata collected from all kinds of users, which is a tactic that we all are familiar from the free satellite television stations sponsored by the advertising industry (Fleissner, 2006, p. 51). The way that digital platforms work positions these transnational corporations as social means of production (Hebblewhite, 2014, p. 211). The reason why is that an algorithm that has the ability to process personal information and create an identity available to the world produces a product in addition to the fact that the same personal information of the user is used against the user by the advertisers to sell new products at the same time, which turns communication systems into the economic means of production (Hebblewhite, 2014, pp. 211-212). In this sense, Smythe’s (1977) audience commodity repositions itself in the digital age. The most important commodity produced by the media industry is the audience itself that is manufactured and sold to the advertisers (Prodnik, 2014, p. 337). Therefore, such usage of the internet means productive consumption or rather “prosumption”, which puts forth the concept of digital labour (Fuchs, 2014, p. 357). Fuchs (2014) states that through prosumption, digital platforms create prosumer-commodity that is utilized by being sold to the

advertisers in return of the targeted ads between advertisers and social media companies (p. 357). In this ecosystem news might be the product of the journalist who might seem to be the rightful owner of news from the audience's perspective, however the digital news media have been stripped away from their rights of ownership. The whole industry has turned out to be the subjects of the ISPs and the digital platforms in which the journalists are obliged to do their job by the rules of the profit-oriented corporations.

A brief note from the history should be underlined at this point in order to clarify the distinction of knowledge from information. In the process of the transition from oral culture to writing, a division occurred between knowledge and information, in which the beginning of the commercialization of knowledge was marked by the invention of the printing press in the 15th century (Traue, 1997, p. 23). Traue (1997) presents the abundance of information and its dissemination speed caused by the printing press as the foundation of this division that prioritizes the marketability of information (p. 23). This commercialization process of knowledge paved the way for the transformation of information, and also news, into a commodity. After the emergence of new media, commercialization and commodification became more apparent as a result of the inevitable consequences of the structural transformation of social relations, which was carried through the exploitation of microelectronics that the mass media have become a part of (Robins & Webster, 1988, p. 47). According to Robins and Webster (1998), the convergence as the outcome of this transformation cannot be only evaluated from the perspective of the media content since all aspects of society from work and consumption to the structure of politics and communication have faced a radical transformation by the changes in capital accumulation that were substantiated by the information technologies and new media (p. 47). The assumption for the 21st century was the increasing convergence in technology and the disappearance of the borders of the different parts of communications such as telecommunications, broadcasting or information technologies (D'Haenens, 1999, p. 150) and from a favourable standpoint, convergence was defined as a cultural transformation, the search for new information of the consumers and the building connections among mass media content (Jenkins, 2006, p. 20). However, this techno-

optimist perspective is inadequate to analyze the current digital environment and its commodification processes.

The most extensive analysis of the commodification of information could be found in Schiller's (2007) work. By conceptualizing the process as information capitalism, Schiller (2007) points out that information capitalism goes far beyond than the media and communication environment (p. 25). From a biopolitical standpoint, Schiller (2007) claims that biochemistry and biotechnology must be considered when handling information capitalism. The revolutionary change in production and consumption of information is intrinsically connected to the developments in biotechnology and convergence in media (Schiller, 2007, p. 25). The products of Apple or AI technologies that track our eye movements on screen for the advertising purposes support his claim. Schiller (2007) warns against this unprecedented depth of manipulation and control over society: "biotechnology is the creature of a full-blown corporate capitalism." (p. 25) Graham (2000), on the other hand, calls this process as hypercapitalism in which the every corner of social life becomes an instrument of commercialization and commodification (p. 138). According to him, in the hypercapitalism three stops of classical economy – production, distribution and consumption – are not independent, separate processes. As knowledge is distributed and consumed, it is produced at the same time that also accelerates the process of more knowledge production (Graham, 2000, p. 138). This is what makes hypercapitalism distinctive from any sort of capitalism that the humanity experienced so far. However, the concept of hypercapitalism acts as a hint of the annihilation of space. Mosco (1999), even though he does not use the term hypercapitalism, draws attention to the significance of the need for physical communication for humans and questions the possible outcome of the after-globalization in case globalization comes to an end. In that case, it is the duty of the communication scholars in the political economy field to turn to the local happenings to assess the concepts such as the relations of power in terms of space and time both on a global and local scale (Mosco, 1999, pp. 105-106). By building his argument on this basis, Mosco (1999) argues a need for "the creation of local and regional high-technology zones that transform spatial, social and cultural relations in a region to the detriment of democratic ideal and the public sphere." (Mosco, 1999, p. 106) Mansell and Javary (2003) embrace a similar approach. By

establishing trustworthy online social platforms a more inclusive virtual local, and also global, communities might be developed (p. 3). In spite that these analyses fall short to comprehend and reveal the commodification process of news media in terms of the production relations, they are significant in order to establish the connection between media freedom and the capitalist market structure.

Nonetheless, this transformation has led to structural changes in many aspects of human life that could be interpreted as paradigm shift started with IBM's launch of standardized personal computer in 1981 (O'Reilly, 2004). The liberal view perceives this paradigm shift built on new media technologies and information society as an opportunity for growth and welfare derived from the innovation and the market competition (Mansell & Javary, 2003, p. 4). On the contrary, according to Mansell and Javary (2003), the critical perspective suggests that for the sake of their mutual interests ISPs know when to leave the competition behind due to the fact that the traffic on the internet best serves when the ISPs cooperate, which brings more profit (p. 4). Even a new concept was derived to describe this situation. A geopolitical concept of the World War II, Pax Americana, was adopted by the information revolution as Pax Technica that indicates an institutional collaboration between governments and the industry in terms of the organization of political, economic and cultural areas, which bears the force of captivating or liberating society (Freedman, 2016, p. 86). However, the former than the latter seems to be more viable promise considering the conditions and circumstances of the digital capitalism. We are all consumers, producers and distributors in the digital age. As knowledge labour we accomplish those three processes at the same time with one click. Fuchs (2011) reveals what happens to knowledge in a so-called internet commons environment. Despite that one of the ways to produce it is collaborative and social, "knowledge is appropriated by capital", which creates another exploited class out of the producers of knowledge (Fuchs, 2011, p. 280). This argument could be elaborated by claiming that the exploitation does not happen only through production, but also it happens through the creation of the distributors and consumers out of the same producers for the same products that they have produced. Mosco and Mazepa (2016) asserts that this does not mean a structural change, it means that offline power relations have been applied to the online environment (p. 164). The scarcity of resources, unfair appropriation of power and the

unequal reproduction of social conditions in the physical world carried onto the virtual world.

The production and consumption of new media in their commodity form means that scarcity has to be created by, for example, the use of copyright, controlling access, promotion of obsolescence, creation and sale of audiences and by favouring some kinds of new media over others. In the case of the internet, [this happens] by bundling services and ‘walling off’ electronic spaces through the use of payment systems and maintenance of a large number of people without the capacities for informing themselves... (Mansell, 2004, p. 98)

The extension of the neoliberal structures and policies onto the digital environment demonstrates that we are bounded by the same old discussions, only on a deeper and more connected level. The reason why is that regardless of which class we belong to, each of us is labour in this system.

1.2 The Literature Review on the Political Economy of the Internet in Türkiye

The studies on the political economy of the internet in Türkiye, on the other hand, generally revolves around either the economic aspect of the internet or the production and distribution processes of the media content and form. Although those studies embrace a critical perspective of political economy, they fell short in building and demonstrating the connection between media freedom, political economy and the infrastructure of the internet. Works on the economic aspect mostly investigate the transformations caused by e-commerce and digitization of the economic activities (Saatçioğlu & Öncel, 2018; Öncel, 2020). Saatçioğlu and Öncel (2018) argues that globalization and digital technologies triggered a structural change in economy, which caused the emergence of the “new economy” concept referring to the economic effects on information technologies and the internet. The authors analyze the ways in which the globalization and the internet affect the e-commerce and political economic developments of the internet in Türkiye (Saatçioğlu & Öncel, 2018). However, their

study leans more towards economy rather than a comprehensive analysis of the political and economic structures.

On the other hand, very few studies on the communications field focus on the discourse on technology, capital accumulation and ownership structure on the internet, digital journalism, advertising, content production, distribution and business models. Yaylagül (2013) points out that in order to comprehend the internet and the computer technology social structure and context must be investigated. From a historical point of view, Yaylagül (2013) demonstrated the role and function of global capitalism in hegemonic relations within the context of dependency, production and reproduction. He concludes that computers and the internet are the fundamental parts of this new capital accumulation and information order without delving into the analysis of the infrastructure of this new order. In her literature review work, Berkman (2014) discussed how the relations and mode of production have formed the new media structure from a discursive level of technology and digital communication based on the critical political economy approach. In this work Berkman (2014) laid out the studies of similar approaches to paint a picture in the field. Following the globalization approach, a doctoral dissertation thesis by Şener (2006) titled as “The Internet as the New Public Sphere of the Global Capitalism: The Internet Usage of the New Social Movements” focuses on the internet usage of the third-wave social movements against globalization. Even though the subject is indirectly relevant to the political economy of communication, the scope of the research involves an understanding of the internet as an affordable and more democratic public sphere for the activist groups in spite of the obstacles such as commercialization, digital divide and lack of pluralism. Another dissertation thesis published from the Political Science department of the Middle East Technical University problematizes digital divide, digital inequality, concentration and the internet content (Gül, 2015). Gül (2015) aims to demonstrate the connection between the content and the user through the internet industry in Türkiye by drawing attention to the commercialization of the online content, the standardization, the ownership and the monopolistic market structure. Another content and market related study concentrates on the clickbait journalism. Beştaş and Kırık (2019) base their argument on postmodernism and argue that news is commodified for the purposes of gaining more clicks and thus more advertising revenue. This results in a mentality that

embraces the “more news, more advertising” motto and blurs the boundary of the difference between news and advertisement (Beştaş & Kırık, 2019), which not only falls into the realm of political economy but also into the realm of ethics. A similar perspective on digital journalism is discussed by Aydoğan (2013) based on the concept of “desktop colonialism” developed by Geray (2005). Again, this study takes the issue from a critical perspective on the globalization of communication and capitalist accumulation.

Going beyond the issues of content, Gül (2014) draws attention to the need to study on the internet from three different vantage points: the internet’s role on the organization of labour, mode of production and the new accumulation order; its tendency to become a mainstream quality by standardization of tastes and like; and the concentration in ownership of the internet industry. Gül (2014) also offers that alongside the governmental regulations, the capitalist pressure, in other words “soft censorship”, and the surveillance capabilities are important factors when assessing the ownership structure. His argument are one of the few that suggests the need to seek ways for alternatives.

When it comes to the political economy of the internet in terms of infrastructure and thus the structure of telecommunications, majority of the academic works in Türkiye have been produced in the discipline of economics. Üçer whose research area is economics and history published many articles on the history, structure and privatization of telecommunications in Türkiye (2018a; 2018b; 2019, 2021). By developing an historical perspective in his works, Üçer (2019) argues that privatization of Türk Telekom caused the loss of employment, the lack of investment and dissemination of telecommunications services. Zeren and Yurtkur’s (2012) paper “Türkiye’de Telekomünikasyon Altyapısının Ekonomik Gelişmişliğe Etkisi: Coğrafi Ağırlıklı Regresyon Yöntemi” (The Effects of Telecommunications Infrastructure on the Economic Development in Türkiye: A Geographically-Weighted Regression Approach) also holds an economic approach, in which they claim that the telecommunications infrastructure has a positive effect on the economic development both in national and local levels. However, it is important to acknowledge that the

social and political inequalities are also another decisive factors that influence the relationship between the infrastructure and the economic well-being.

A sub-topic of the telecommunications field could be more practical to understand the political economic implications of the infrastructure. Net neutrality is a widely discussed area in the international academia. Yet, very few studies have been published on the subject in Türkiye. There are only two doctoral dissertation theses that were specifically published on the net neutrality in Türkiye and both of them are from the economics departments of Marmara University and Istanbul Technical University. In his dissertation thesis titled “Regulation and Competition in Telecommunications: The Case of Network Neutrality”, Köksal (2008) questions the benefits and harms of the ISPs in case of their stepping back from net neutrality. Erkul’s (2022) dissertation thesis also aims to demonstrate the connection between the ISPs and content providers in terms of net neutrality. Erkul (2022) suggests an unprecedented balance, which is the regulatory bodies’ usage of termination fee as a leverage to increase the social welfare in the country and the agreement on the complementarity between the ISPs and the content providers. Another notable work on net neutrality handles the issue from the perspective of freedom of expression and legal practices in Türkiye. Aydın, Ceyhan and Aydın (2013) claim that the crucial point in this debate is accesstiering. In their paper “Net Neutrality Concept in Terms of Freedom of Expression and Its Applications in Turkey” (2013) the argument relies on the direct relationship between the net neutrality and freedom of expression, which in practice differs from the regular forms of censorship. All of these works develop a unique perspective for Türkiye, yet the literature still needs more research to develop a comprehensive critical political economic approach on the state of the internet and its infrastructure in regards to social, political, economic inequalities, access to information, media freedom and digital news media.

The most comprehensive work in and for Türkiye has been accomplished by Funda Başaran (2000; 2007; 2010; 2016a; 2016b), Aylin Aydoğan (2016b) and Haluk Geray (2016a; 2016b). In their various works, Başaran, Aydoğan and Geray lay out the telecommunications industry and the infrastructure of the internet in Türkiye from a framework of the critical political economy. They not only offer an historical

analysis and depict the regulations in the country, but also base their arguments on the political economy theories of Marx, Babe, Schumpeter, Freeman and Schiller, which make their works prominent contributions to the literature in Türkiye.

Geray (2016a) states that information-intensive economics creates both a rich and less competitive environment for big corporations where knowledge and information are degraded to the means of profit-making (p. 35). In this economic environment the competitiveness of companies relies more on building their own network rather than their own individual strength. This creates a dependency of companies to the infrastructure invested and built by the nation-states (Geray, 2016a, p. 35). Based on a Marxist approach, Başaran (2016a) adopts Schumpeter's long-waves theory and the views of Neo-Schumpeterians, such as Freeman and Soete, in order to explain the structure of the telecommunications industry. Based on these views, Başaran highlights that monopolies are beneficial to construct the competition based on innovation, not on pricing so that the sufficient investment could be made (Başaran, 2016a, p. 74). At this point, Geray (2016a) makes an emphasis on the universal service in telecommunications and its impact on the market. He defines the universal service concepts as providing basic communications services with a reasonable cost, which could be possible through state-controlled monopoly (Geray, 2016a, p. 86). With these theoretical backgrounds, Başaran and Geray explain the past and current market structure in Türkiye's telecommunications industry. In spite that these works explain the situation in the mid-2010s, they found a base to understand today's internet structure and contribute this work to create the relationship between media freedom and the internet infrastructure.

The aspect of the digital platforms in the relations of production of the digital news media is mostly discussed around the transformation from the traditional to digital media, changing practices in the newsrooms and the influence of social media on journalism. Yıldız and Özmen (2023) analyze the seven social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Whatsapp, Instagram, TikTok and Telegram) in relation to their use in the journalistic practices and concluded that the journalists in Türkiye pursue independent journalism in the social media platforms. In addition to the claim on the independence and social media, Sine and Sari (2018) also found out that the

journalists use social media platforms as news sources as a result of the interviews conducted with eight journalists. In addition to the social media use as news sources, Kurt (2014) argued that social media increased the interaction among journalists. This interaction has further increased and transformed into an influencer style-journalism in TikTok according to the researches published by Erol (2022), and Çetinkaya and Dondurucu (2023). Both studies specifically focused on the journalists on TikTok and stated that the journalists embrace a more entertaining style in the news production process (Erol 2022; Çetinkaya & Dondurucu, 2023). From a broader perspective, Saran (2020) deals with the relationship between journalism and digital platforms based on algorithms and their impact on the news production process. As a result of the semi-structured interviews, Saran (2020) found out that the reactions of the audience and the algorithms on the digital platforms determine the decision-making process of the news organizations. These studies contribute to the literature in terms of the demonstration of the influence of the transnational corporations on the digital news production practices.

The studies focused on the political economy of the internet and digital news media mostly discuss the issue in terms of the ownership structure, business models, news production processes and social media use of the digital news outlets. By building the argument that the digital news outlets reinforce the current hegemonic structure Kılıç (2019) states that these media outlets function as news agency journalism and use social media users as news sources (p. 317). On the other hand, based on the research that I conducted for my master's dissertation thesis, which is partially published as a book chapter, I found out that the digital news media have emerged as an alternative to the traditional mainstream media and their rise is due to the oppressive political and economic circumstances in Türkiye as a result of the semi-structured interviews with the journalists who work at digital native news outlets (Çenberli, 2020). While underlining the sustainability crisis that the digital news media have been going through, Çevikel (2020) proposes that these organizations should seek ways to sustain their business through revenues generated directly from the audience such as paywalls and audience donations. These works present a comprehensive analysis regarding to the political economic structure of the digital news media in

terms of the organizational issues such as sustainability, precarity and editorial decisions.

Most of the academic works in the field of political economy of the internet in Türkiye focus on the economic factors and the transformation caused by digitalization. Yet, the need to develop a critical political economy perspective from a holistic approach that involves the internet infrastructure, its governance and media freedom still remains to be fulfilled in Türkiye. It is quite safe to state that the articles and books published by Aydoğan, Başaran and Geray establish a Marxist approach that demonstrates an understanding of the internet not only as a superstructure, but also as base, which directly links the infrastructure of the internet, access to information, news media and media freedom.

1.3 Purpose of the Study and Hypothesis

Considering the discussions up until now, access to information and news has been a critical subject since the emergence of Web 2.0. As the digital divide deepens, the initiatives of the profit-oriented organizations along with the state policies over media and information pose a global threat for production, distribution and consumption of news in terms of free-flow of information. The structure of the telecommunications industry, the digital platforms and the infrastructure of the internet evolve around the private property and the state control which problematizes the question of who controls the internet. In this context, the aim of this dissertation thesis is to investigate the political economy of the internet in Türkiye and answer why the relations of production in the independent digital news media obstruct the media freedom by examining its relations with the state, ISPs and the digital platforms. In doing so, the objective of this dissertation thesis is to explore the ways in which how media freedom could be established in the digital environment. In order to accomplish this aim this research focuses on the internet governance in Türkiye, its effects on the journalists, the political economic consequences of censorship attempts such as access blockings and cyber attacks, the impact of the ISPs and the digital platforms on human rights, journalists's perception of the internet as means of production, digital divide, dependence on the digital platforms, decentralization of censorship, the copyright issue and artificial intelligence (AI) as the upcoming information distribution and

control mechanism. Differing from the previous works in the field, I believe that this dissertation thesis will provide a valuable contribution to the literature of the political economy of the internet by revealing the intrinsic relationship between the internet governance, the ISPs and the digital platforms as the constitutive subjects of the internet structure, and media freedom.

In the second chapter, the theoretical framework of the research is established from a Marxist critical approach of communication. This framework helps build the ground work of the argument of this research stating that a holistic approach, which integrates the internet infrastructure and its governance into the relations of production and the distribution process of the independent digital news media, must be embraced. In order to achieve that, digital capitalism and its background in the context of global communication systems are explained based on Marx's (2018) understanding of relations of production, and use and exchange value in relation to communication and technology. Fuchs's (2020) categorization of information in terms of its economic organization further contributed to the theoretical foundation of this dissertation thesis. Building onto this base, the commodification of information as an obstacle in front of the knowledge society has been dealt with mainly through Schiller's (2007) socioeconomic approach to information as resource and commodity and Bell's (1999) explanation of information technologies within the concept of the post-industrial society. Finally, these political economic arguments are connected to the internet governance in the context of media freedom. Mattelart's (2000) emphasis on the distortion of freedom of expression as freedom of commercial expression, Hamelink's (2000) argument regarding to the threats posed by the market forces against the free speech and Trawny's (2017) demonstration of the dialectical relationship between technology, medium and capital fulfill the overall theoretical argument of this dissertation thesis.

Methodology of the research is explained in the third chapter. The research design is determined as the qualitative research method and the semi-structured in-depth interview is chosen as the primary source of data collection. In total 29 people were interviewed and their identities kept anonymous throughout this work. In terms of the relations of production of the independent digital native news media and media

freedom, the interviewees were asked about the political and economic impact of the internet governance, the practices of the ISPs in relation to the disruptions in the information flow and the internet as means of production, and the practices of the digital platforms in regards to the dependence of the news media, corporate censorship and the algorithmic structure. Two issues were later included in the early phase of the data collection as a result of the statements of the interviewees. The issue of cyber attacks as another method of censorship and the rapid entry of AI into the daily practices have been added into the research and included in the chapters of the research analysis.

The fourth and fifth chapters are dedicated to the analysis of the research. In order to understand the relations of production in the context of media freedom political and economic function of the law and regulations that organize the digital information and news ecosystem must be analyzed. For this reason, the fourth chapter consists of the internet governance, which examines the issue from a human rights perspective and delves into the problems such as its effects on the news production process, self-censorship and censorship mechanisms of access blocking, content removal and cyber attacks. The fifth chapter explores the analysis of the distributors of information under the title of the Actors of Commodification on the Internet. This chapter is divided into three sub-chapters in which the first sub-chapter is on the ISPs, the second sub-chapter is on the digital platforms and the third sub-chapter is on AI.

As a result of the in-depth analysis of the digital news production and distribution processes in the fourth and fifth chapters, it is found out that as the government objectify the information and thus the news through law and regulations, the ISPs and digital platforms commodify the news through their practices, which causes alienation among journalists. In an environment as such AI emerges as an upcoming threat against the media freedom. These conclusive remarks are laid out extensively in the Conclusion chapter of the research.

The outcome of this dissertation thesis demonstrates that the distribution process holds a determinant power over the news production process and dominates the relations of production in the independent digital news media. Based on this

outcome, from a pragmatic perspective, the independent digital news media drifts with the current to sustain their existence at the expense of bargaining media freedom. It is their defense mechanism in this system of digital capitalism.



Chapter 2

A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Political Economy of the Internet

The paradigm shift in the concept of space losing its grounds and the shrinkage in the concept of time led to a breakthrough in the world of communication. This revolutionary change is the outcome of three technological revolutions. The first was the steam power that triggered the Industrial Revolution, the second was the invention of electricity that established the decentralization and liberated information transmission from transportation, and the third change is the technological revolution started in the mid-20th century and led by the inventions in telecommunications, the internet being the most transformative one (Bell, 1999). The tendency of what is economic is to integrate small communities into a more comprehensive and broader communities in time as well as to accelerate the socialization of the forms of human interaction, which for capitalism results in, for the first time in history, the creation of a world economy that connects isolated communities to each other (Lukacs, 2018, p. 266). As communications is one of “the forms of human interaction”, this vital paradigm shift not only cause transformation in politics, finance or trade, it has shaken the roots of the information sphere including mass media and the news industry. Capitalism created networks through globalization of the means of communications as the result of the historical necessity. Thus, our perception regarding to news, whether on the production phase or on the consumption phase, has altered for good. The propulsive force has been the globalization and the networks facilitated by the internet. Another force has been the need for and access to information. The last but not least, the definitive force has become capitalism that has torn apart the boundaries through digitalization.

In this theoretical framework, the critical political economy of the internet will be dealt with through its constitutive elements that are digital capitalism, internet governance, information ecosystem and media freedom. The framework starts with the political economy of the internet and digital capitalism and then continues with the debates on the information and knowledge society through problematizing the commodification of information and the news. In the end, internet governance and media freedom is put into context from a critical political economic perspective. All

of those elements are the definitive and transformative phenomena that form the internet and the digital news media industry of the 21st century.

2.1 The Political Economy of the Internet and Digital Capitalism

The critical political economy of the internet problematizes the neoliberal construction of the internet through the telecommunications industry and the content providers in the name for creating a global information ecosystem, which marked a new era that consists of commercialization, privatization and concentration (Bolaño & Vieira, 2015). This rather new theoretical phenomenon in constant change finds its ground mostly on the studies of the political economy of communication and digital capitalism. These two approaches also contribute to the disclosure of the active role that the media and communication systems play in the bundle of relations between capitalism, democracy and society. McChesney (2013) identifies two aspects of political economy of communication. The first aspect is the analytical one that “examines the institutions, subsidies, market structures, firms, support mechanisms and labor practices that define a media or communication system.” (McChesney, 2013, p. 64) This phase also reveals the function of governments, which lays down the transition to the second aspect. The second aspect of the political economy of communication investigates the governmental policies and regulations that infamously establish and strengthen the market-led rules that dominate the media environment (McChesney, 2013, p. 64). In this regard, McChesney’s (2013) definition offers a holistic approach to the understanding of the political and economic processes of the media and communication systems.

Looking back to the history of globalization would be helpful to understand the phases of the current communication structure. Mattelart (2000) sees the beginning of globalization in the connection of the communication systems of the nation-states to the international networks and the deregulation policies to achieve this connection in order to make the necessary changes for the new order to settle. “... like ‘internationalization’ in the late nineteenth century, it is intended to encompass the entire process of unification of the economic field, and, by extrapolation, to account for the general state of the world.” (Mattelart, 2000, p. 75). Thompson (2019) illustrates how internationalization of communication explained by Mattelart (2000)

served globalization in practice and therefore identifies three key developments for the globalization of communication in the late 19th century and early 20th century: the development of the underwater cable systems by the European empires, the foundation of the international news agencies and the division of the world as specific working areas for those news agencies, and the emergence of the international organizations regarding to the allocation of the electromagnetic spectrum (Thompson, 2019, p. 190). Even though the political and military concerns were decisive in the development of the underwater cable networks, commercial interests emerged as a primary focus especially since the British Empire was aware of the strategic importance of the fast communication (Thompson, 2019, p. 192). Thompson (2019) states that by laying the cables from Britain through Southeastern Asia and Australia (the Middle East was left out) in the second half of the 19th century, the first global communication system was built (p. 192). This infrastructural development paved the way for the news agencies to grow internationally.

In order to avoid any conflict in competition, those agencies decided to divide the world into separate working zones. In spite of the financial independence of the news agencies, the agreed zones were divided in accordance with the regional economic and political dominance of the countries they belonged to – Reuters's zone was the regions that cover the British Empire and the Far East; Havas's regions were the areas under the control of the French Empire as well as Italy, Spain and Portugal; Wolf's zones were Austria, Scandinavia and the Russian territories (Thompson, 2019, p. 193). This new structure corresponds to the concept of "complex connectivity" as suggested by Tomlinson (2017). Complex connectivity indicates that globalization determines the features of the modern life and also refers to a field of connections and dependencies that are fast-developing and increasingly concentrated (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 12). This structure could also be interpreted as that news media is attributed the role of reflection of the countries they are generated from. For this reason, it is of significance to reveal the role played by the news media during the establishing process of the globalized capitalist world order. Consequently, the most often-neglected the infrastructure of telecommunications emerges as the key to the freedom of communication and the internet. As the internet grows rapidly as an industry, neoliberal policies stepped in to solidify digital capitalism. Schiller (1999) positions

the internet as “a leading element” in the global telecommunications system and points to the peril that “at stake in this unprecedented transition to neoliberal or market-driven telecommunications are nothing less than the production base and the control structure of an emerging digital capitalism.” (Schiller, 1999, p. 37) On this account, the structure of the internet allows it to position and influence both the base due to its production aspect through infrastructure and the superstructure in relation to its consumption aspect through content.

Many years before the invention of the internet, Marx understood how production and consumption reproduce each other in a constant motion. In *Grundrisse* Marx (2018) describes a dialectical relationship between the production and consumption: Production produces consumption through three stages; the creation of the consumption material, the identification of the consumption style, and the creation of the need, thus in return, the consumption produces the end-target of the producer. In this immediate identity production is consumption and consumption is production, in other words, consumptive production and productive consumption (Marx, 2018, p. 133). This whole process also refers to the social reproduction where production, distribution and consumption becomes a unity in value creation leading to profit in the hands of digital communication technologies, media and the internet (Graham, 2000, p. 137). Even though Marx did not intend to explain the relations of production in the communication industry, with this analytical approach, Marx foresees the shape and form that the media and communication industry (or systems) would take in the digital age by the occupation of knowledge through commodification of information. He projected the two-way relations of production and the prosumption with its producer in the 21st century, which occurred as a consequence of the communication technologies. To Marx (2018) it is clear that the exchange is a part of production and immanent to the production process. In this sense, exchange is the mediating element between the consumption and distribution defined solely by production (Marx, 2018, p. 141). Within this context, the digital platforms as an element of the exchange process are immanent to the production and its process as well.

The bourgeois society is the most developed and the most versatile organization of production and ideally is expected labour to reflect itself back to the

society, which defined the exchange value (Marx, 2018, pp. 150-165-166). Yet, this expectation does not occur in the post-industrial society in spite of the fact that the bourgeois society preserves its strength more than ever. The claim of capitalism and its bourgeois relies on the assumption that the individual's own labour is the source of the property rights, however the social relations of production requires the circulation process that transforms the product into a social commodity, which identifies its exchange value and use value (Marx, 2018, p. 248). What Marx discusses for the capitalist and labourer in the era of digital capitalism could easily be adapted to the media and communication system in the age of digital capitalism. Since the production is intrinsic to social reproduction, the audience and the communicative activities, especially on the internet, have become one of the essential elements of production.

What makes today's political economic structure distinct whether it is called digital capitalism (Schiller, 1999; Pace, 2018; Fuchs, 2021), which is the preferred term in this work, hypercapitalism (Graham, 2000) or hypercommercialism (McChesney, 2013) is its driving force behind that diffuses it on a global scale through digital media and communication technologies (Graham, 2000, p. 139). In digital capitalism the exchange value has slowly but surely dominated the use value, and information as commodity has acted as a lever in this process. The discrepancy between the expectation from the internet and its transformation into a hypercommercial world proves this assertion. The commercializing of public life (McChesney, 2013) has been achieved through the internet. The investments and developments in the communication infrastructure have become the main factors forming today's digital capitalism (McChesney, 2013, p. 49). The ore of the age of digital capitalism have become the information, which channelled the corporations to an information-oriented structure by means of research, production and the sale of information products and services (Schiller, 1999, p. 76). For this sake, even public opinion has been commodified and the actions during the leisure time has transformed into an economically productive deeds which, in fact, indicates unpaid labour in digital capitalism (Graham, 2000, p. 136). Therefore, the value of the public-good theory comes forth again when explaining the internet and media. McChesney (2013) underlines the correlation between journalism, the internet and democracy. Informed citizens could participate effectively and constructively in the process of democratic

practices of a country, however if journalism lost its essence in service to the public good and became a gear of the market forces, then democracy would fall and the market would rule. From a similar point of view, McManus (2017) finds a correlation between the journalists's response to the market forces and the decrease in the public interest of news media. Deriving from McManus's (1994) terminology of market-driven journalism and Radin's (1996) concept of contested commodity, Jackson (2009) conceptualizes news as a contested commodity. According to Jackson (2009), technological developments in media and their impact on the society increased the disruption in the news production process and the resignation of journalism to the market forces, which caused the news to become a contested commodity (p. 149). In this regard, McChesney (2013) attributes a great deal of responsibility on the shoulders of the internet:

If the [i]nternet is worth its salt, if it is to achieve the promise of its most euphoric celebrants and assuage the concerns of its most troubled skeptics, it has to be a force for raising the tide of democracy. That means it must help arrest the forces that promote inequality, monopoly, hypercommercialism, corruption, depoliticization, and stagnation. To do so would put the [i]nternet in the crosshairs of really existing capitalism. (McChesney, 2013, p. 62)¹

At this point the need to delve into the roots of the desire to detach information from the restrictions of time and space emerges. The concept of mobilization becomes the keyword for both pre-digital and post-digital capitalism. Thus, transportation of humans, information and commodities becomes the fundamental characteristic of capitalism (Fuchs, 2021, p. 81). What was and is mobilized for production, distribution and consumption designates the feature of that particular era. The comparison made by Castells (2010) between the industrial mode of development and the information mode of development demonstrates this designation. The sources of productivity in

¹ The lower case 'i' is the choice of the author of this dissertation thesis. The internet should be treated as any other medium that is as much of significance in terms of production of, distribution of and access to information. The internet is not something sacred that is beyond our control.

the industrial mode of development and in the informational mode of development explicitly differ from each other. In the modern period started with the Industrial Revolution new energy sources were the primary source of production and growth, whereas in the postmodern period in which the information reigns the productivity is intrinsically dependent on information and communication technology (Castells, 2010, pp. 16-17). For capitalism this necessitates the reliance to information due to the fact that the processes of production, distribution and consumption are interlocked to information technologies (Pace, 2018, p. 257). By coining the term technofeudalism Varoufakis (2023) explains this interlocking of three processes as the central to the “integration of communication, entertainment, e-commerce, foreign investments and ... online financial services.” (p. 133) Therefore, media and communications appear to be active players in the process of production, distribution and consumption. Communications as “means of social production” has a functional role in transmitting the symbolic meaning of “power, wealth, influence and status” (Fuchs, 2020, p. 88). By conceptualizing the happenings in communications as communication work whose job is to produce information, Fuchs (2020) puts all the processes and relations of communication into the context of labour and capitalism and denies the immateriality of information, but he asserts that it is intangible which is also the outcome of social production of communication work (p. 90). Beginning in the 1980s the information revolution constantly reconstructs itself according to the needs of the advanced capitalism as the information technology has restructured the capitalist system (Castells, 2010, p. 22). There is a dialectical relationship built on the grounds of capitalism, however this dialectical relationship is not an imperative one.

In order to develop a holistic approach the tangible and intangible dimensions of communication and its technologies must be asserted. Communication work has two aspects; physical communication work that creates communication technologies, and mental communication work that creates information which generates social meanings (Fuchs, 2020, p. 90). Fuchs (2020) developed his idea based on the culture industry, which claims that communication work has proletarianized structures consequently open to exploitation in the process of class relations (p. 90). The proletarianization was indicated through the changing roles of the communication users in Castell’s (2010) analysis. Castells (2010) makes a distinction in the three

stages that the telecommunications technologies have undergone in the late 20th century and the early 21st century, which are the automation of tasks, an experimentation of uses and a reconfiguration of applications. In the first and second stages learning by using was the main characteristic, however in the last stage users were actively involved resulting in the reconfiguration of networks and creating new applications (Castells, 2010, p. 31). Castells (2010) argues that this situation caused another paradigm shift, which enables users as doers in control of technology and specifically the internet and turns human mind into a direct productive force rather than being the decision-maker of the production process (p. 31). Yet, this mighty force attributed to human mind was a privilege of the developed countries.

This paradigm shift has not reformed or transformed the age-old social struggles and political rights. Networks have become instruments to reinforce the expansion and dissemination of these struggles since the telecommunication networks were built in the North America and the Western Europe for the purposes to connect with their colonies, which consequently this deeply-rooted structure ties the telecommunications system with imperialism at the core (Schiller, 2014, p. 156). In the current structure of the capitalist nation-state world, the information control is not only an objective to maintain dominance over the colonized regions, but also an objective of the governments to govern the information flow within the boundaries. Consequently, this may cause lack of investments for the regions where the information control is deemed to be unprofitable for the political and economic power. Moreover, this isolation of the people who live in those areas through the disruption of communication might even be preferable for the states that have authoritarian characteristics. For this reason, in this newly-begun era, the infrastructure of digital communication earns a special significance in regards to the relation of the capital accumulation to the investment in the digital infrastructure in which “digital capitalism is the *modus operandi*.” (Pace, 2018, p. 263) This is vital to acknowledge the dialectical relationship between the digital communication as infrastructure and digital communication as superstructure.

This early determinant process of the structure in the news production and distribution indicated a crucial restriction of media freedom as well as the freedom of

information. This structural determination embedded imperialistic attributes, such as concentration and transnationalization, into the media systems (Fuchs, 2020, p. 289). However, there are number of attempts to create a change in the course of media and communication systems. In the academic arena, Thussu (2007) demonstrates the ways in which that the one-way capitalist structure doesn't have to be the only order. Due to the rise of neoliberalization that brings along the policies of deregulation and privatization in the telecommunications, in particular the satellite networks and broadcasting, and the digitalization facilitate the distribution and dissemination of the non-Western countries' content, i.e. Qatar's Al-Jazeera and Venezuela's Telesur (Thussu, 2007, p. 21). After a century from the foundation of the international system of information and news media, a new movement led by UNESCO, NWICO, voiced their objection against the injustice and inequalities in the processes of production and distribution of news and therefore its consequences in the consumption phase, which is overall the assertion of cultural imperialism where the developing countries are muted.

Although this campaign lost its influence after the withdrawal of the U.S. and the UK that cause a significant loss in the UNESCO budget, NWICO increased the awareness of the problems caused by the order of the international news organizations (Thompson, 2019, p. 195). The management of the spectrum allocation, being the third key development according to Thompson (2019), gained importance mostly after the International Telegraphy Union, which would become International Telecommunication Union in 1932, turned its attention on the radio and frequency used by the ships (p. 197). In the International Radiotelegraph Convention (1906) and the World Radio Management Conference the spectrum allocation was a priority for the first time and notifying the Union was enough to declare the right to ownership of that spectrum (Thompson, 2019, p. 197). As the demand increased, ITU divided the spectrum fields into three: Europe and Africa, America, Asia and South Pacific. However, the systems specific to each zone were under pressure by the demand and also by those countries that were left out of the international telecommunication field (Thompson, 2019, p. 197). These founding stages in the globalization of communication and news media established and accelerated the long-term accumulation and concentration in the media industry whose direction was determined

by the conglomerates (Thompson, 2019, p. 199). There were three determinant factors for the development of the new media technologies, especially in the end of the 20th century: 1) a new layout of cable systems that allows more electronic information to transmit, 2) the increase in usage of satellites that are compatible with terrestrial cable systems aiming to make long-distance communication possible, and 3) the increase in the digital methods for processing, storing and acceleration of information (Thompson, 2019, p. 201). The globalization of communication caused the international circulation of media products, which created an environment where one-way flow of information has ruled (Thompson, 2019, p. 202). Although the reasons for the foundation of the international organizations, the inequalities voiced in UNESCO and objections against the imperialistic communication order have been long forgotten, they could be enlightening to analyze the structural problems of media and communication systems and also offer solutions for today's asymmetrical relations of power in regards to the industry and the society.

The (trans)formation of the understanding of the spatial distance not only facilitated the transmission of materials, but also reassured the unbalanced power relations. The state of connectivity, formed by the communication technology and mass media, determines the perception of closeness (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 15). And this perception of closeness was shaped by the countries who already have means to determine, which what would be the starting point of the Non-Aligned Movement that brought the asymmetry in the flows of trade, communication and information to the international arena (Mattelart, 2000, p. 66). The purpose of the Movement was to resist the Western/Northern dominance and establish a new order that reforms the international economy and communication towards a more egalitarian system. According to Tomlinson (2017), the success of globalization can be measured by the correspondance between overcoming of the physical distances and overcoming of the cultural distances (p. 18). The connectivity provided by media technologies not only is a sphere for the rebuilding of identities and the cultural meanings emptied by deterritorialization, it also brings opportunities to build common global cultural policies and the mutual feeling of dependency as well as media that allows long-distance communication produces new cultural/political alliances and solidarity (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 52). However, globalization and this mutual feeling of

dependency emerged out of it do not reflect an equality of power among different countries. The Non-Aligned Movement exposed the inequality in information and the dominance of the North over the South. For the first time in media history these countries manifested that on the contrary of its foundational principle of public benefit, the global news industry serves the needs of the transnational corporations and the imperialistic benefits of the developed countries (Herman & McChesney, 1999, p. 23). However, these contra-flows, as Thussu (2007) conceptualized, achieved to be no more than a limited alternative narrative to the hegemonic media environment.

The concept of alternative narrative should be emphasized, because one cannot make a difference unless it is fundamental and structural. Those contra-flows apply the model of the dominant organizations such as CNN. Although their initiatives are immensely significant, the contra-flows have been able to provide their own perspective only on the narration layer that puts the efforts to alter the information flow structure in a disadvantaged position. In this regard, the acknowledgment of the contra-flows as counter-hegemonic would be flawed since first and foremost they are profit-seeking entities and supporters of the free market that promotes the privatization and commodification of media (Thussu, 2007, p. 26). This situation applies to the internet as well. Hopes were high when the users from the highly-populated countries became more active online, the expectations were that their language would dominate over the English on the internet, but this would not come true since again it was a matter of the established structure and system. The dominance or rather hegemony has nothing to do with the population or demography. It is about political and economic power. "In the era of 'full-spectrum dominance' and the 'global information grid', a hybridised, glocal Americana is likely to circulate with faster velocity, greater volume and higher economic value." (Thussu, 2007, p. 27) Consequently, the Non-Aligned Movement stood against the mutual dependency created on the basis of one-way flow of information in which dialogue and recognition does not exist. Bauman's (2001) distinction between universality and globalization is quite striking to better understand what this adaptation refers to. In his view, universality was a proud project that aimed to bring change and good as well as providing equity and equality (Bauman, 2001, p. 75); yet globalization is to consent like a sheep to what is happening out there (Bauman, 2001, p. 38). What happened to the internet since the beginning is a

demonstration for the differences of universality and globalization. In spite of its early start as a dream of universality where people would cherish the abundance of information and knowledge in connection with each other regardless of where they are, the structure of the internet became globalized as the accelerated capital accumulation, corporatism, concentration and profit-making concerns have taken over.

From an historical perspective, Mattelart (2000) claims that this idea of universalization caused the internationalization of communication with its two components: the Enlightenment and liberalism (p. 1).

The invention of communication as an ideal occurred at a time when the prevailing ideas were those of modernity and the perfectibility of human societies. It was thus the product of a belief in the future. The Enlightenment thinkers prepared for its emergence by advocating trade as a creator of values. ... Established as a principle of human rights, the free communication of thought and opinions defied borders. (Mattelart, 2000, p. 2)

Yet, the ideals of the Enlightenment and liberalism only led to unjust relations of production, distribution and consumption. “Free communication of thought and opinions” meant the free market, free trade and flexible labour. However, as the globalization has prevailed, the state has transformed into a mechanism that regulates, administrates and monitors due to the need for the state to assemble people under one roof. This new structure of the nation-states caused a global space that has become a sphere for the cooperation among alliances of states (Bauman, 2017, p. 79). Weaker states play a crucial role in the maintenance of the global order. The unconditional freedom of mobility of the global finance, commerce and the information industry is highly dependent on the fragmentation of politics (Bauman, 2017, p. 85). Bauman (2017) argues that the separation of economics from politics and its exemption from the regulatory involvement caused politics to weaken which also leads to a shift in the distribution of social power (p. 85). The global communication network, which is

popularly accepted as the gate to an unprecedented freedom and the technological foundation of the long awaited equality, only allows a certain small group to enter (Bauman, 2017, p. 89). “Medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964) and it prevents the “trickling down” effect as an entity to sustain the world order (Bauman, 2017, p. 90). The advancements in communication technologies, global deregulation policy and the push from the U.S. government and the transnational corporations provoked the transformation of the media structure worldwide which reshaped the media industry as a “global system with national variants” (McChesney & Nichols, 2002, pp. 107-108). In relation to that, Herman and McChesney (1999) argues that through the advocacy of free flow of information transnational media corporations of the U.S. could work globally without encountering significant resistance of the nations and their states and expand their market (p. 17). This chain of thought has been promoted by that free press and democracy could only be maintained through the global free market structure (Herman & McChesney, 1999, p. 17).

This perspective demonstrates Marx’s (2018) argument on “productive consumption” and “consumptive production” for the information and digital media structure in the 21st century. Fuchs (2020) makes a crucial theoretical distinction that shapes what form of communication structure that we should pursue. This pursuit not only reveals the theoretical approach of this dissertation thesis, but also reveals the ideal communication environment to reach knowledge in an equal, fair and free manner. In this context, there are two types of organization structure for the information sphere, which are the “authoritarian economic organisation of information” and the “humanistic economic organisation of information”.

The *authoritarian economic organisation of information* is based on the class character of communication and knowledge production. The property-owning class is in control of the means of communication. The latter are organised as private property. The dominant class exploits knowledge and communication workers who produce knowledge and forms of communication. In capitalism, communication and knowledge are commodities whose sale yields profit. This

means that they are part of the system of capital accumulation. The *humanistic economic organisation of information* means that the means of communication are under collective ownership and form a common good, which means that knowledge products are gifts and not commodities. Such common knowledge goods are produced in self-managed companies (co-operatives). (Fuchs, 2020, pp. 104-105).

In spite that this categorization of the information organization does not put the emphasis on the commodification of information as a barrier in front of the knowledge society, it guides the way forward for the structure of a universal (instead of global) communication and the internet, and the knowledge (instead of information) society.

Information and communication technologies, including computers, play a vital role in accelerating the circulation of commodities in addition to their task of disseminating the political ideologies and commodity forms as commercial advertising (Fuchs, 2021, p. 31). Computers and their networks are universal machines for not only transmission of information products, but also for production, distribution and consumption. Concentration in the media industry occurs through ideological power that emerges out of information and the concentration of the dissemination power of ideas as well as the economic power (Fuchs, 2021, p. 39). Fuchs (2021) argues that in Marxism the fundamental argument is the need for the development of the new technologies in order to increase the productivity of capitalism, which requires scientific knowledge that allows quantitative increase in production resulting in a qualitative improvement (p. 54). In that way, knowledge becomes a productive force and creates an information economy (Fuchs, 2021, p. 54). Fuchs's interpretation of the process from knowledge to information economy also uncovers the commodification process of information that Schiller (2007) wants us to focus on.

All the concepts discussed until now such as globalization, universality, information, knowledge, commodification, and media and communications are intrinsically interconnected with each other and cannot be abstracted from class

relations if the main objective would be to reach a communication order free from exploitation. Even though Castells (2010) sees the reasons why the network society is a capitalist society in its global form and dependent structure of networked financial systems (p. 502), his lack of class analysis traps the network society in a deadlock. Through this financial system, all the sectors and industries are invested including media and the ultimate goal of the order is to make profit where democracy is even commodified (Castells, 2010, p. 503). In contrast of what is hinted by Castells (2010), technology does not determine societies, on the contrary it is embedded into the class struggles and not a reason of the social change but an instrument and an end (Fuchs, 2021, p. 66). The influence of the modern technology on society strictly depends on the consequences of the class struggles. “Digital capitalism is the collection of processes, sites, and moments in which digital technology mediates the structural tendencies of capitalism.” (Pace, 2018, p. 262) In order to build a true democratic society, digital media must be formed in a democratic way and included in the creation process of a participatory democracy (Fuchs, 2021, p. 68). Communication is the process of production and reproduction of the social relations and society (Fuchs, 2021, p. 76). Therefore, it is impossible to think of the communication system independent from the capitalist class relations and the mode of production.

Under the ideals of universalism, democracy and freedom, the global capitalist re-orientation of social life driven by the profit-oriented private benefits surpasses what could have been a crowning stage of a dream come true. Led by the U.S. “the global information infrastructure” was announced as the start of “a new Athenian Age of Democracy” by Al Gore, the vice president of the U.S. at the time, during the 1994 World Telecommunications Development Conference, in which private corporations were perceived as the salvation to re-establish the equality, solidarity and development of nations (Mattelart, 2000, p. 92). In other words, the capital accumulation through privatization and profit was presented in a shiny package of the liberal ideals. In this sense and under these conditions, free flow of information becomes a promotional motto of the cultural hegemony of the U.S. from the entertainment industry to news media (Schiller, 1996, p. 180). The controversy even moves further to the arguments claiming that what should be discussed is the concept of communication societies rather than information or knowledge societies since “globalization without dialogue

becomes homogenization and hegemony” (Hamelink, 2002, p. 41). Yet, this approach is a bit stretch, but still it touches a very crucial area. The critical political economy of communication must be integrated into and embraced by the political science as well as by the economic studies since at this point the impact, influence and effect of media and communication systems are undeniable.

The policies distancing from public good led the decline in journalism whose existential reason is public good and benefit. McChesney (2014) underlines the negative effect of the internet on journalism due to globalization. Any type of content disseminated without any charge and the radical transformation of advertising in the digital arena further increased the downfall of journalism in the economic sense since the advertising as the main source of income pursues anything that people most spend time online and pushes that forward (McChesney, 2014, p. 20). So, journalism is not seen profitable by the private companies and this harsh dilemma puts the news industry at stake. The reason why the news industry has been going through this dilemma on a global scale is that as an entity that seeks public benefit and public good its roots are tied to the free market and its profit-seeking private companies (McChesney, 2014). In an earlier work, Herman and McChesney (1999) draws attention to the supporting actor function of media in the globalized world structure. They argue that on two levels global media work to sustain the capitalist system. On the first layer, through digitalization in communications and advancements in the telecommunications infrastructure global media ease the corporate growth which attributes an important economic role to media, not only global but also local (Herman & McChesney, 1999, p. 10). On the second level, through news and entertainment global media become the ideological instrument to keep the society in this profit-driven system that strips individuals away from their subjectivity and objectifies them (Herman & McChesney, 1999, p. 10). The denial of this fact or yielding to the market forces as if it is the only way to survive would only postpone the annihilation of journalism. McChesney (2014) offers the ultimate solution for the salvation: “non-profit, non-commercial and decentralized, in any number of forms, with public funding but no government control.” (p. 29) This solution obviously needs a strong public support, however it could be a method to release news media from all the contradictions and paradoxes

derived from the efforts to preserve its existence in a system with no interest in public good.

To make an overall evaluation of this section of the theoretical framework the academic acknowledgement of the internet and digital news media as elements both form the superstructure as base and as superstructure are formed by the base itself in terms of relations of production and also distribution. The social existence of the superstructure presumes the social existence of the economic reproduction process and ironically this circle cannot reproduce anything other than itself (Lukacs, 2018, p. 273). For this reason, the internet infrastructure that consists of organizations such as ISPs and digital platforms, and the digital news media contains the inequalities, restrictions and threats to democracy as well as the possibilities of freedom and equality through relations of production.

2.2 From Information Society to Knowledge Society

As the printing press took over the entire globe, an evident distinction emerged between information and knowledge. Information has turned into a neutral and marketable commodity whereas knowledge was used to be something to acquire and be internalized (Traue, 1997, p. 23). This commodification process of information that started in the 20th century was not ensured only through computer technology, but also the integration of telecommunications which enables the global dissemination of information as fast as possible is a crucial factor in this paradigm shift (Traue, 1997, p. 24). However, Schiller (2007) warns us against falling for the trap of distinguishing information from any other commodities as the information-society theorists most often do. Schiller (2007) points out that information is shaped and influenced by social and historical processes like other commodities, therefore information should not be examined or analyzed as a separate phenomenon (p. 8). As the discussions in the field mostly focus on the senders, receivers and channels, which are measured with a postpositivist approach, the neglected aspect must be reminded from a critical perspective. That other significant aspect of information theory is that its construction on the base of the mass media's persuasion effect in terms of modern propaganda which is facilitated in conjunction with interpersonal networks (Schiller, 2007, p. 18). In this context, a certain distinction similar to the one between universality and

globalization also should be discussed between knowledge and information in order to establish a critical analysis of the information society for the purposes to open a path for the knowledge society.

Even though the academia is quite fragmented on the notion about how information is the source of power and development and what it refers to, almost all of the scholars agree on that information is the new source of wealth in every aspect including social, political, economic, and even military (Schiller, 2007; Bell, 1999; Hamelink, 2002; Castells, 2010; Mansell & Steinmuller, 2002). On the other hand, the perspective that puts the technology in its focus tends to ignore the social and economic relations of information. Schiller (2007) criticizes the post-industrial theorists for their neglect of socio-economic aspect of information when attributing it the quality of being the resource-commodity in the information society as they'd like to name the current form of society in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Particular to information, a crucial distinction of resource and commodity cannot be overlooked, according to Schiller (2007).

A resource is something of actual or potential use. That is all. The soil, the sea and the spectrum are resources. But all resources are not commodities. Only under particular conditions can they be transformed into commodities. A resource is anything of use, anytime, anywhere, to anyone; but a commodity bears the stamp of society and of history in its very core. (Schiller, 2007, p. 8)

For this reason, it is misleading to treat information as an ordinary resource and neglect the political economic perspective, which puts the emphasis on the public-good characteristic of information. Information's formulation within the institutions and social relations it is embedded into causes its appropriation by capitalism (Schiller, 2007, p. 15). Therefore, when describing and analyzing today's society through information it is crucial to consider the commodification and privatization processes.

Herbert I. Schiller (1996) follows a similar approach without going further into the distinction of information and knowledge, though. After stating the fact that information is not an independent or autonomous concept and process, Schiller (1996) argues two different understanding of information; one is information as a social good which is essential for development and democracy, and the other is information as a commodity that is private and produced for sale (pp. 81-82). This privatization efforts of information have quite become successful throughout the years. The transfer of authority from state to corporate power as a result of privatization and deregulation in communication achieved to establish a distorted understanding of freedom of expression. The digital giants of the information sphere have convinced the global society that the activities regarding to the producing, sharing and consuming messages on their platform means the practice of freedom of expression (Schiller, 1996, p. 97). Rightly so, Van Audenhove (2003) draws attention to the pitfalls of addressing the form of the current society as information society that is to put forth the advancement of technology and treats education as a “facilitator”, however the essence of information society lies in knowledge, and technology is its facilitator (p. 65). On the other hand, instead of information or knowledge society, Castells (2010) identifies the society in the 21st century as the network society, which has a perspective closer to the information society theories. Even though Castells (2010) often criticizes the capitalist structure, he leaves the socio-economic classes out of context as he paints a landscape of networks connecting humans worldwide. His argument states that this new order of networks created a highly connected global capitalist class, yet, leaving the class relations out of the equation would cause a loose ground if we'd like to reach a knowledge society based on the ideals of freedom, equality and justice. Castells (2010) has a point, though, in his sentence stating that “... there is a faceless collective capitalist, made up of financial flows” (p. 505), however that faceless collective capitalist is not free from the social classes in spite of its ability to adapt to local and change its faceless face.

As Castells (2010) do, Bell (1999) also places technology in a descriptive position of the current society form, but names it post-industrial society from a more critical perspective. Bell (1999) explains the reason why he prefers to define the current society as post-industrial society rather than information society as that

technology is the determining factor, not from a techno-determinist position, but from a more nuanced perspective that acknowledges technology being one of the driving forces that transforms the society (p. 31). When comparing Castell's preference towards the concept of information society, Bell (1999) argues that Castells melts the knowledge and information, and invention, innovation and diffusion in the same pot without acknowledging their distinctions and social, political and economic impacts (p. 41). However, there are significant nuances that distinguish data, information and knowledge from each other in which class struggles reveal themselves within (Bell, 1999; Traue, 1997). Bell (1999) defines data "as sequences of events or statistics in an ordered fashion" whereas information "has meaning – news, events, and data – when we can establish a context that shows relationships among these items and presents them as organized topics." (Bell, 1999, p. 119) Out of putting into context and building relations from information derived from data arise knowledge. Knowledge also has a subjective character particular to its ontology on the contrary of information that has an objective and more solid character. How one comprehends and interprets information builds the knowledge which gives it a non-absolute affirmation (Traue, 1997, p. 24). By establishing a difference between "knowing about" and "knowing of" Bell (1999) clarifies the path for knowledge. "Information is knowing about news, events, and happenings. Knowing of the significance of events comes from the knowledge verified by context or theory." (Bell, 1999, p. 122) At this point class struggles come into our attention again. Whoever have the means to put data and information into context will eventually reach the knowledge and whoever reaches the knowledge will most probably have the higher hand to have control, which directly attaches the superstructure to the substructure. Therefore, the claims of defeating the scarcity and inaccessibility barrier through information's inexhaustible characteristic due to the emergence of the globalization and decentralization fall short in the face of the capitalist structure of the communication technologies regarding the fact that computers and telecommunications are vital for the circulation of information and knowledge in the post-industrial society (Bell, 1999, pp. 148-173). Consequently, Bell (1999) instrumentalizes the information and signifies the distinction of knowledge by conceptualizing the post-industrial society through underlining the class issue whereas Castells (2010) presents information as the end that neglects the inequality among classes. Most probably these two sociologists can reach a consensus on Bell's (1999)

analysis stating that information and knowledge became the capital and labor of the industrial society in the post-industrial society (p. 174).

Bell's restricted definition of knowledge leads to commodification of knowledge and positions information as a raw material for the commodified knowledge underhandedly. The arguments on the research and development being the source of innovation and prosperity (Bell, 1999; Traue, 1997; Lor & Britz, 2007) and thus, embracing the know-how doctrine does not create a knowledge society in the sense of a fair, free and equal society. The know-how through research and development only serves to the needs and desires of capitalism. In that order knowledge belongs only to certain groups of people who have the means. Another aspect of this issue is the pay-per grasp of information (Mosco, 1989). The diffusion of the understanding and habit of pay-per view, pay-per read, pay-per use transforms all sorts of information activity into a financial transaction in which the determinant power is the market forces that causes information to position under the umbrella of corporatization and privatization of what needs to be a common good (Mosco, 1989). This also leads to the problems of the access to and free flow of information and knowledge. The censorship, which used to indicate an undemocratic practice of a government, now, has become a controlling instrument of the concentrated corporate power of media and communication that most of the time is insidious and go unnoticed (Schiller, 1996, p. 98). Consequently, this situation strips news industry away from its informative and knowledge-driven *raison d'être*.

Without getting caught up in a technological-determinist approach, a careful discussion around how technology has become a key factor in the transformation of information and communication as well as of society must be made in order to demonstrate its influence. Bell (1999) argues that there are four innovations behind the technological revolution which are the electronization, miniaturization, digitalization and software. These innovations also put information technologies in the center of the post-industrial society (Bell, 1999, p. 86). Lor and Britz (2007) also identifies information and communication technology infrastructure as one of the four pillars in today's society along with the other three pillars being content, human capacity and physical delivery infrastructure (p. 390). From a historical point of view, Bell (1999)

places communication systems as the connection point of societies. Three types of infrastructure attach societies within and to each other: the transportation, the energy systems, and communications, which “replace[s] transportation as the major mode of connection and ... transaction” in addition to that its affordable characteristic also encourages decentralization on a global scale (Bell, 1999, pp. 86-89). The internet and its infrastructure not only change the way businesses are conducted, but also take ordinary people in and turn them into users, producers, distributors and consumers (Bell, 1999, p. 111). The dependency on information as a result of improvements in the internet and also in processing of information caused a paradigm shift that is a shift from information as a social good to information as a commodity to be sold and made profit (Schiller, 1996, p. 101). This paradigm shift in information uncovers the alienation of the information producers, including the journalists. As Marx (2018) points out that the social existence is determined by monetary value and the market forces, the shift in information has consequently caused alienation of the information producers. Whether call this a domino effect or a cause-and-effect relationship, as a consequence of the internet’s ability to convert media and communications systems into interactive media leads to a structural transformation of journalism (Bell, 1999, p. 113). The commodification, economic inequality between the have’s and have not’s, and the market-driven information ecosystem render the information producers, rather the journalists, more vulnerable to fatalism and hopelessness that are derived from alienation (Øversveen, 2022, p. 454). In relation to that, Seeman’s (1959) five aspects of alineation help us understand in what ways alienation divulges itself in journalists. Mainly deriving from the sense of loss of control in the face of political and economic power, the sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement define the characteristics of alienation in a commodified communication market (Seeman, 1959). In this respect, the consequences of commodification of information and news become the subject of media freedom in the digital environment.

The intrinsic relationship between information and news media becomes more clear when the political economy and ethics intersect. Overall, access to information is a priori for a knowledge society (Lor & Britz, 2007, p. 391). Therefore, the failure in equal access to information and free flow of information basically correlates with the exclusion of people who do not have the means (Lor & Britz, 2007, p. 392). A

privatized corporatist electronic information system will further accelerate the inequality in society due to profit-seeking motives of the market forces, therefore “the information industry” will pursue ‘have’s of the society and serve their interests and needs (Schiller, 1996, p. 187). A unique approach of bringing together the ethics and political economy of the information distribution proposed by Lor and Britz (2007) highlights the importance of what has been discussed so far. This is not only a political or an economic problem, but also an ethical problem for a democratic society. Their proposal urges that the equity and equality of information in terms of its access, free flow and distribution is *sine qua non* in order to overcome censorship and economic restrictions alongside with establishing a fair monetary value to those who contribute to create, appropriate and distribute information, which the affordability and diversity can be reached through following this ethical approach (Lor & Britz, 2007, p. 393). This approach presents another method to reach the decommercialized, decentralized and deprofitized media system.

In this network system where information is treated as commodity, Schiller (2007) draws attention to the need to focus on the commodification process itself as well. The reason why is that the commodification emerged as one of the fundamental processes of the capitalist development and thus becomes a formative pillar of today’s political economy. Under these circumstances commodification of information has two layers. One layer is where information is the end product and the other where information is an instrument during the production process, yet both those layers facilitate the entrance of the capitalist social relations into forms that had been noncapitalist before such as labor, culture and knowledge (Schiller, 2007, p. 21). Salvaging the information from commodification and constructing a knowledge society, right to access to information appears again to be a prerequisite (Lor & Britz, 2007, p. 388). UNESCO also defines “universal access to information” as one of the four pillars of the knowledge society, the other three pillars would be freedom of expression, respect for cultural and linguistic diversity and quality education for all (UNESCO, 2015). Thus, the ethical duty falls on the shoulders of the governments that is to provide a safe environment for an independent and diverse media and information sphere (Lor & Britz, 2007, p. 394). However, this is the public’s duty as much as governments’ since the real power is in the hands of people if noticed and taken action.

In order to sustain democracy the need for the existence of non-commercial, non-commodified ecosystem of free speech stands still.

2.3 Internet Governance and Media Freedom from a Political Economic Perspective

Article 19 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Article 10 of European Convention on Human Rights (1950) aim to protect the freedom of expression and the dissemination of any sorts of ideas without any authoritative interference. In spite that both principles encompass the news media, they were published before the internet was available to public. With the public availability of the internet since the mid-1990s, the discussions around the freedom and speech have been handled in terms of the opportunities offered by the technological developments, especially, in the web design. Yet, as the structure of the internet evolved to a hierarchical fragments, the relationship between the internet infrastructure and its impact on human rights have mostly been overlooked. This international paradigm shift in the political and economic arena penetrated into the immaterial aspects of life such as information, freedom of speech and freedom of expression. Mattelart (2000) argued that the lobbying efforts of the free market advocates from different sectors such as companies, advertising agencies and media created a sphere where freedom of commercial expression became the rival of the freedom of expression and was presented as a human right which created an illusion that free market provides free space where individuals make their free decisions (pp. 90-91). The freedom of commercial expression disseminated through television broadcasting preserves its validity in a lot more accelerated way through the so-called free flow of information on the internet. As a result, the freedom of commercial expression and free flow of information are interconnected in the new order of the world (Mattelart, 2000, pp. 90-91). For this reason, in addition to the interference of the political power into the internet environment, the digital market structure will be problematized in this section of the theoretical framework in order to underline the significance of the market forces for the exercise of media freedom. The baseline is also to reiterate how this capitalist structure commodifies information and builds barriers in front of the knowledge society.

Since the internet is a medium for expression and enabler of free speech, the use and access to it are suggested to be considered as a human right (Centre for Law and Democracy & International Media Support, 2014). Yet, Heinze (2022) argues that the human rights documents published by the international institutions function to define and “monitor the delivery of various goods” such as equal treatment before law and equality in acquiring property, which he calls “systems of human management” (p. 6). Within this context, free speech is offered as a primary base in order to transform human rights as systems of human management to a “citizen-directed” system since free speech is a fundamental requirement for a democratic public sphere (Heinze, 2022, p. 7). In the 21st century, though, the determinants of the free speech are dominantly technology, capital and the medium – the political power being an intrinsic actor for each determinant. The technology-capital-medium universal, as conceptualized by Trawny (2017), is the only ecosystem in which information, goods and humans can move freely (Trawny, 2017, p. 17). Medium in this universal is the centre of the movement enabled by technology and capital, therefore it becomes a sphere of production not only for technology and capital, but also for social interaction (Trawny, 2017, p. 44). The internet is the ultimate incarnation of this technology-capital-medium universal. These relations embedded in the internet shelters various power struggles and inequalities in oppose to the internet’s foundational promises. In addition to the acknowledgement of the political interference with the internet, the organizations that build up the internet infrastructure such as the ISPs and the digital platforms pose a threat against the free speech (Hamelink, 2000, p. 146). Even from a liberal perspective, the current market structure creates risks for its beloved free market notion and the encouragement of competition. The unregulated free market opens an endless path for concentration which creates an environment where a keen edged division between winners and losers becomes dominant (Hamelink, 2000, p. 151). This system commodifies the knowledge through the dominance of the market forces on its production and distribution.

Basic to all these considerations is obviously the realization that the right to knowledge is too important to be left to commercial forces only. The much heralded ‘knowledge societies’ are not likely to be more than paper tigers if

their governance is delegated to the marketplace. The market will produce and distribute knowledge according to people's purchasing capacities. A human rights-inspired system of governance will favour the availability of knowledge according to people's needs and aspirations. (Hamelink, 2000, p. 163)

Consequently, a public benefit and freedom based approach should be taken into consideration when governing the internet. The Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) defines the internet governance as "the development and application by [g]overnments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the [i]nternet." (WGIG, 2005, p. 4). The current practice of internet governance is partly in line with this definition. Along with the governments and the private sector, the non-governmental organizations such as International Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and International Telecommunications Union (ITU) are actively involved in the process. Yet, the people of the civil society still lack representation in the decision-making processes of the internet governance.

As a rising concept the multistakeholderism is proposed as a more democratic solution. This approach projects the replacement of the governmental power with the different stakeholders of the society as a representative of those communities to improve the governance issues, however who gets to decide the representatives and how the process is handled is quite problematic which arguably creates an illusion of democracy (Gleckman, 2018). Furthermore, the multistakeholder approach for the definition of internet governance contains an upper hand for those actors that hold political and economic power over the civil society component of the definition as mentioned above in the NWICO and the Non-Aligned Movement cases. Thus, the technologies used by the political and economic entities for internet governance transform into speech control mechanisms that allow censorship and surveillance over the information flow (Denardis, 2014, p. 222). Under these circumstances internet governance inevitably comes with the internet unfreedom (Denardis, 2014, p. 243).

Therefore, in addition to the law and regulations, the decisions on the infrastructure and the financial models as well as the collective attitude of the internet users will influence the future of freedom of expression and media freedom (Balkin, 2009, p. 427). Issues such as net neutrality, digital divide, privatization of the telecommunications infrastructure, the cooperation of the profit-oriented organizations, ISPs and the digital platforms, with the governments, advertising as the main business model, the instrumentalization of algorithms as a censorship tool are intrinsically linked to the political economy and human rights. The paradigm shift within the internet is also the story of the current communication sphere:

... the shift from a horizontal model to a vertical model, from a *bazar* model to a *cathedral* model, the “*minitelization*” or “broadcastization” of the internet, the fast track to a “civilized internet”, balkanization, and the transformation of *Netville* into conglomerations of sanitized suburbs. (Musiani, 2015, p. 176).

Therefore, it must be acknowledged that the great promise of the internet turned out to be a beautiful packaged present to amplify the power of the capitalist world. The commodification and alienation of masses increasingly continued only to enter another phase in the world history.

At this point, it is of significance to mention the consequences of the press under oppression that set forth by Marx himself. Marx (1842) revealed the “demoralizing effect” of the “censored press”, which resulted in the illusion that the voice that is heard is the people’s whereas it belonged to the political power. Through this illusion people are de-politicized and reduced to be “a *rabble of private individuals*” (Marx, 1842). In his Marxist analysis of freedom of communication, Splichal (2020) draws attention to the intrinsic relationship between mental production, which includes media, and material production, which includes social relations and historical mode of production. From this perspective, media freedom cannot be analyzed in the context of ensuring free communication among isolated individuals. Since the capitalist mode of production prioritizes the surplus value

instead of use value, the decisive factor of use value of media production is the profit and gain of the capitalist class (Splichal, 2020, p. 345). Therefore, the censorship constitutes of a two-fold structure that consists of state justifications such as licensing, copyrights, the protection of personal privacy and national security, and economic arguments of the communication networks such as news worthiness and audience reach (Hanson, 1981, pp. 370-371). This situation creates a paradox since the objective of news media is to present diverse views and offer the ways for a free society, instead it becomes an instrument to create consent (Hardt, 2000, p. 89). For this reason, what we assume of media freedom as a democratic right becomes a paradox that reinforces the control of the ruling class, which consists of the political and economic elite (Hanson, 1981, p. 371). Hanson (1981) argues that the reason why speech is constantly defended to be free is because there is “no prior restraint” (p. 372). Yet, the restraint often comes after the practice of the free speech as seen in cases of access blockings through the ISP practices ordered by the courts and the disappearance of content by the digital platforms. In relation to that, Hanson (1981) underlines the affordability of the free speech due to the implicit consequences of the liberal approach to marketplace of ideas and also the economic burden of a legal battle to fight for it (p. 372). These are among the fundamental struggles in front of free speech since they have a determinant power of who gets to earn the right to freedom of expression and media freedom.

As a result of this theoretical analysis, it is inevitable to write a few sentences about Marx’s concept of “people’s press”. In order to emancipate the information flow and thus, news media from its tight political and economic ties journalism needs to re-discover its role as “an extension of the public sphere in the process of public communication” that encourages active involvement of people (Hardt, 2000, p. 91). The establishment of freedom of expression will bring the media freedom that requires the disengagement of the news media from being a commercial entity (Hardt, 2000, p. 92). It is not an immediate solution to a years-long struggle, but a steady and permanent reconstruction of news media as an actor in the path of democracy.

Chapter 3

Methodology of the Research

In this dissertation thesis, the relations of production between the independent digital news media and the infrastructure of the internet from the perspective of critical political economy have been investigated from 2007 until the current time period that this work has been completed. The reason why the year 2007 was chosen as the starting point is that the first law specific to the internet, which is the Law No. 5651 on the Regulation of Publications on the Internet and Fighting the Crimes Committed Through These Publications, was enacted in 2007 in Türkiye. In order to understand the dynamics in the digital news environment, the independent digital native news media is chosen as the sample of this research since being independent from all sorts of official or known affiliations to any political or private entity and emerging as an only-digital organization will provide a comprehensive judgement about the relations of production on the internet. In respect to that, the infrastructure of the internet in this research refers to the distributors of information and the digital news product, which are the ISPs and the digital platforms that provide services to distribute content such as Google, Facebook, Twitter/X, Spotify and YouTube. Within this context, the answers to the following subjects have been examined; the governance of the internet, the perception of the internet as means of production for the journalists, how the censorship mechanisms – not only by the government, but also by the distributors – affect the news production process as well as the distribution process, and in what ways the distribution process has a controlling power over the news production process.

In order to reveal the relations of production in the independent digital native news media the semi-structured in-depth interview was decided as the primary source of data collection. The analysis of the research is structured in an argumentative form that is built on the statements of the interviewees. In total 61 people were contacted who are journalists, management-level employees of an ISP or a digital platform and various experts on media and communication law, technology, telecommunications and digital platforms. 29 people responded positively and remaining 32 people either did not respond at all or responded that they accept the interview request but stopped answering to the scheduling request. None of the management-level employees of an

ISP or a digital platform responded positively to the interview request. Therefore, the sampling group of interviews consists of 24 journalists and five experts. The identity of the interviewees and the organization they work at are anonymized to preserve their privacy, and they are randomly numbered from one to 29, i.e. Interviewee 1, Interviewee 12 or Interviewee 23. The categories of the journalists interviewees according to their titles at the time of the interviews is as the following; three journalist interviewees are either owner or CEO of their independent digital native news organization, 11 of them hold the title of either editor-in-chief or coordinator, four of them are news coordinators, three are editors and the remaining three interviewees are either self-employed or freelancer. The expertise area of the five experts are as the following; two of the expert interviewees are experts on the telecommunications industry and the internet infrastructure, one is an expert on internet governance and free speech, one is an expert on media law, one is an expert on technology and digital platforms. The table 1 below presents the categories of the interviewees in order the reader to contextualize the statements of the interviewees within the subject matter.

Table 1
The Categories of the Interviewees

Owner / CEO	Interviewee 12
	Interviewee 19
	Interviewee 20
Editor-In-Chief / Coordinator	Interviewee 1
	Interviewee 3
	Interviewee 6
	Interviewee 7
	Interviewee 8
	Interviewee 15
	Interviewee 22
	Interviewee 25
	Interviewee 27
	Interviewee 28
	Interviewee 29

Table 1 (cont.d)

News Coordinator	Interviewee 14
	Interviewee 16
	Interviewee 17
	Interviewee 21
Editor	Interviewee 2
	Interviewee 5
	Interviewee 11
Self Employed / Freelancer	Interviewee 4
	Interviewee 13
	Interviewee 23
Expert	Interviewee 9 (Expert on the telecommunications industry and the internet infrastructure)
	Interviewee 10 (Expert on technology and digital platforms)
	Interviewee 18 (Expert on the telecommunications industry and the internet infrastructure)
	Interviewee 24 (Expert on media law)
	Interviewee 26 (Expert on internet governance and free speech)

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online via the videoconference applications between July 2024 and October 2024. The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 103 minutes. The set of questions for the semi-structured interviews consisted of 17 out of which eight of them are the main questions and the rest are in a complimentary or explanatory manner that help the interviewee give more detail on the subject. The main questions were focused on the ISPs, their practices on the continuation or interruption of information flow such as access blockings and the access to the internet, the digital platforms' power on the distribution of the news product, their algorithmic structure, the censorship policies of those international corporations, the revenue opportunities provided by the digital platforms and the effects of the internet governance over the news production process.

In the very first interviews, the questions started with matters related to the infrastructure of the internet. However due to the lack of knowledge of, especially, the journalist interviewees about the internet access, the difference between an ISP and hosting services, and also regulations on the internet caused a change in the

arrangement of questions. I realized that the journalist interviewees were more keen to discuss the digital platforms and the recent regulation on the dissemination of disinformation. By benefitting from the flexibility of the semi-structured interview method I decided to start with how they started journalism and how their current organization was founded to make them open up about their occupation. Then I continued with the digital platforms and the problems they face as a journalist, followed with the laws and regulations, moved onto the ISPs and then ended with what this whole process meant for media freedom. Through this change in the question arrangement I managed to collect more in-depth insights about the field.

In addition to the predetermined themes and subthemes related to the questions, the theme and subthemes such as self-censorship, cyber attacks, internet exchange points, ethical journalism, the comparison between the technical capabilities and political manipulation regarding to the algorithmic structure, the division between news and content, and the effect and integration of AI into the digital news ecosystem appeared as emerging subjects during the research. Some of the emerging subjects such as self-censorship and ethical journalism were not unexpected, however their revealing without asking directly or a follow-up question made them to be considered as emerging. For instance, when the questions related to their coping mechanisms against the state and/or market censorship I expected to hear answers such as receiving legal advice or communicating with the digital platform. Rather the answers were mostly given as the declaration of self-censorship. On the other hand, the subjects such as the internet exchange points and AI completely emerged during the early interviews, which resulted in the inclusion to the research.

The secondary source of data collection consists of laws and regulations on the internet and news media in Türkiye, online government documents such as national development plans and the reports published by the public institutions, international official reports and documents released by the supranational organizations such as European Union, the United Nations and the Council of Europe, national and international reports published by the non-profit organizations like Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House and Net Blocks, articles from various news organizations, academic books and articles.

Through the semi-structured in-depth interviews, this research tries to answer how the relations of production has been established between the independent digital native news media and the distributors of information and the digital news product, and in relation to that, why the independent digital news media struggles to maintain its freedom. In addition to the definitive role that the political power plays in shaping the information and media ecosystem, the objective of this research is to demonstrate the structural role that the information and communication market plays in the news media and thus, information ecosystem. On the other hand, the weakness of this research is the lack of the perception of interviewees who work at an ISP and a digital platform. However, the expert interviewees are some of the most prominent professionals in their own respective field and made unique contributions to the research. Besides, the most journalist interviewees' lack of knowledge about the law and regulations as well as about the infrastructural technicalities – i.e. confusing the hosting services with ISPs – constituted some of the challenging factors of this research. For this reason, any software program for the interview transcriptions, coding, and qualitative analysis were not used in the analysis. Since the distributors of information are limited to the ISPs, digital platforms and AI, the hosting companies and hosting services could be a further question for future research.

Tables below represent what themes are included in this work, their subthemes and definitions with the referrals to their relevant chapter. Table 2 demonstrates the theme of internet governance with the subthemes of the journalists's perception of the internet governance and regulations, self-censorship, access blockings and cyber attacks. Table 3 presents the theme of the ISPs as the actor of commodification of the internet and media freedom with the subthemes of the internet infrastructure and economic growth, privatization of the infrastructure, net neutrality, internet exchange points and splinternet. Table 4 is the continuation of the same theme, however it focuses on the journalists's perspective with the subthemes of the internet as means of production, productivity between internet access and news, and digital divide. Table 5 and Table 6 display the theme of the digital platforms as the actor of commodification. The subthemes of Table 5 consists of the dependence of the journalists on the digital platforms, algorithms as new boss, ethical journalism, the debate on the technical capabilities or political manipulation and the economic inequality and news format.

Table 6 shows the subthemes of decentralization of censorship, copyright and generating revenue, regulation on the digital platforms, and digital platforms' contribution to the independent digital news media. The last table, Table 7, belongs to AI as the new controller of the internet, news and information with the subthemes of AI and its integration to the news media, its regulation and information control, the AI policy of Türkiye and the journalists' views on AI.

Table 2

The Theme of Internet Governance and Its Subthemes

Subtheme	Definition	Example
The Journalists' Perception on the Effects of the Internet Governance	The interviewees were asked how the law, regulations and government policies affect the news production, distribution and consumption practices in order to understand their perception of the internet governance.	See Chapter 3.4.1.
Self-Censorship	Self-censorship has been emerged as an outcome of the question on how they cope with censorship. During their answers in relation to their perception about the regulations, the interviewees declared that they practice self-censorship and provided their justification for practicing it.	See Chapter 3.4.2.
Access Blockings	The interviewees were asked how they cope with access blockings and if the restrictions cause a revenue loss for them.	See Chapter 3.4.2.
Cyber Attacks	The subtheme of cyber attacks emerged as another method of censorship during the interviewees' elaboration on the access blockings.	See Chapter 3.4.3.1.

Table 3

The Subthemes Related to the Internet Infrastructure of the Internet Service Providers as the Actors of Commodification Theme

Subtheme	Definition	Examples
The Infrastructure of the Internet and the Economic Growth	The expert interviewees were asked about the relation between the internet access and the growth of a country in relation to the information flow. Internet access as a human right, its affordability and the uninterrupted communication in times of national crises were among the definitive points of this subtheme.	See Chapter 4.1.1.
Privatization of the Infrastructure	The privatization of the telecommunications in Türkiye was asked to the expert interviewees. The interviewees discussed the consequences of privatization and the possible advantages of a competitive market in a liberal economy. The interviewees also explained how the mishandling of the privatization, the right of way issue, the lack of government subsidies and investments to improve the infrastructure.	See Chapter 4.1.1.2.
Net Neutrality	In the context of free flow of information, the expert interviewees were asked the state of net neutrality in Türkiye. The restriction of the internet access, throttling, blockings and surveillance are included within this subtheme.	See Chapter 4.1.1.3.
Internet Exchange Points (IXPs)	The expert interviewees brought up the significance of IXPs in increasing the speed and reducing the cost of information flow. The incomplete attempts of the government to build an IXP in the country, the transfer of data abroad in relation to that and the control over the traffic are definitive elements of this subtheme.	See Chapter 4.1.1.4.
Splinternet	The expert interviewees were asked if splinternet poses a threat in the country. The required technical capabilities, the fragmentation efforts of the government and its inevitability were among the most prominent subjects.	See Chapter 4.1.1.5.

Table 4

The Subthemes Related to the News Production Process of the Internet Service Providers as the Actors of Commodification Theme

Subtheme	Definition	Example
Internet as Means of Production for the Journalists	In order to assess if the interviewees perceive the internet as means of production, questions such as if it is listed as an expenditure item in their budget and whether the organization they work at covers their monthly internet bill are asked.	See Chapter 4.1.2.
Productivity Between the Internet Access and News	The interviewees were asked how the internet access affects the news production and distribution processes in terms of productivity. The infrastructural problems, low speed of uploads and downloads, the connection interruptions and the comparison with the media conglomerates are discussed in this subtheme.	See Chapter 4.1.2.1.
Digital Divide	The interviewees were asked if they experience any interruptions due to the inadequate infrastructure and/or the practices of the ISP they are subscribed to. The interviewees pointed out the regional inequality, lack of investment and access problems. Additionally, the digital divide has been dealt with in comparison to the media conglomerates. The effect of the digital divide in the production and distribution processes are the definitive factor in this subtheme.	See Chapter 4.1.2.2.

Table 5

The Subthemes Related to the News Production and Distribution Processes of the Digital Platforms as the Actors of Commodification Theme

Subtheme	Definition	Example
Dependence on the Digital Platforms	The explanation of the interviewees about their relationship to the digital platforms in terms of production and distribution relations were dealt with in this subtheme. Their statements revealed a relationship based on dependency. Therefore, to what extent this dependency proceeds is investigated.	See Chapter 4.2.1.
Algorithms as New Boss	The interviewees were asked how the algorithmic structure of the digital platforms affect the news production process. The interviewees explain how they manage to work with algorithms, how they shape their practices and decision-making processes.	See Chapter 4.2.2.
Ethical Journalism	In this subtheme the interviewees discuss the contradictions created by the algorithmic structure of the digital platforms that forces journalists to sacrifice the ethics of journalism. The interviewees also explain how they maintain the balance between preserving the ethical standards and taking advantage of the digital platforms.	See Chapter 4.2.2.1.
Technical Capabilities or Political Manipulation	The interviewees were asked if the visibility of their news and social media accounts have been influenced by algorithms. The interviewees share their experiences and arguments on how their revenues, visibility and reach are affected.	See Chapter 4.2.2.2.

Table 5 (cont.d)

Subtheme	Definition	Example
Economic Inequality and News Format	The relationship between the economic power of a news organization and their capability to produce news in diverse format are discussed in this subtheme. Modification of the news format in accordance with each digital platform's demands and the need for labour are the main subjects here.	See Chapter 4.2.2.3.

Table 6

The Subthemes Related to The Public Good Aspect of the Digital Platforms as the Actors of Commodification Theme

Subtheme	Definition	Example
Decentralization of Censorship	In this subtheme the interviewees discuss the changing censorship policies and practices in different digital platforms. The automatization of censorship, inconsistent decision-making processes and the loss of revenue in relation to those processes were the main focus areas.	See Chapter 4.2.3.
Copyright and Generating Revenue	The interviewees were asked if they have ever been a part of a funding program supported by a digital platform or if they ever receive copyright from the digital platforms. The variety of revenues that the digital platforms offer such as funding, subscription, copyright and advertising were discussed in the context of dependency and the exploitation.	See Chapter 4.2.4.

Table 6 (cont.d)

Subtheme	Definition	Example
Regulation of the Digital Platforms	The interviewees were asked if they expect these companies to do public good in order to assess their expectations, suggestions for solutions and thoughts on the market regulations. The need for effective regulations, the need to end the oligopolistic structure, questionable relations of the digital platforms with the government are the main topic of this subtheme.	See Chapter 4.2.5.
Digital Platforms' Contribution to the Independent Digital News Media	The interviewees were asked to discuss if the digital platforms help flourish the independent news media in order to assess the needs and wants on why they would still like to be a part of the system in spite of the negative aspects mentioned earlier. Pragmatic approach, gaining more than they lose, the belief in inevitability are the main subjects.	See Chapter 4.2.6.

Table 7

The Subthemes of the Artificial Intelligence Theme as the New Controller of the Internet, News and Information

Subtheme	Definition	Example
AI and Its Integration to the News Media	Through secondary sources such as academic articles and reports of the non-profit organizations, an overview is presented in order to comprehend in what areas AI could be integrated into the digital news media ecosystem.	See Chapter 4.3.1.
Regulation of AI and Information Control	Through secondary sources such as law and regulations and civic society reports, the implications of AI in terms of freedom of expression, surveillance and censorship are discussed in this subtheme.	See Chapter 4.3.2.
The AI Policy of Türkiye	The national strategic and action plans specific to AI, the draft law proposed to the Parliament and the works in the AI industry in Türkiye were presented through the secondary sources.	See Chapter 4.3.3.
Journalists' Views on AI	AI is an emergent subtheme that the journalist interviewees discussed during their answers on the various questions about the digital platforms. The interviewees share their opinions and limited experiences with AI in this subtheme. The opportunities AI has to offer in audio-visual production, the fear of unemployment, the automatization of news production and the impact of technology on the quality of the news industry are the main discussion subjects.	See Chapter 4.3.4.

Chapter 4

Internet Governance and Media Freedom

4.1 An Overview of the Digital Media Structure in Türkiye

The small-scale digital news initiatives such as bianet and Sendika.org have been around more than 20 years, built a certain audience base and experimenting different methods to sustain their journalism. Yet, the major breakthrough that causes the rise of the digital news media landscape started after the steady concentration of the traditional mainstream media in the hands of a few business groups that have close ties with the government and their turning a blind eye to the Gezi Park protests in 2013. According to the most up-to-date comprehensive research on media ownership, eight out of ten most-read dailies and nine out of ten most-watched television channels are owned by those business groups (Media Ownership Monitor Turkey, 2021). Consequently, the society started to seek information on the digital environment and the journalists who worked at traditional mainstream media became journalists in the digital arena. The need for independent media continued to increase after the coup attempt in July 15, 2016. Reportedly 140 media organizations were shut down by December 2016 after the coup attempt (Human Rights Watch, 2016), which resulted in an unprecedented acceleration in the number of the news websites. The statements of the interviewees confirm those reports as well. 16 of the journalist interviewees work at a digital native news organization that was founded after the coup attempt. As found out in my master's dissertation thesis (Çenberli, 2019), the demand for the independent digital news has been increased as a result of the political situation in Türkiye. Yet, the ownership structure and business models are not all that different than the mainstream media. The most majority of the news organizations that the interviewees work at are privately owned and advertising is the main source of income. In addition to that, the unionization within the organizations is quite limited.

Despite the structural similarities with the mainstream media, the independent digital news media provide a window for journalism. In regards to the happenings over a ten-year period, it is not unexpected that the digital reach of the independent news media (33.5 million users) is in competition with the pro-governmental media (47.8 million users) (Kızılkaya & Ütücü, 2021). These numbers position the independent

digital native news media as an actor that challenges the heavily-controlled information sphere.

4.2 An Overview of the Law and Regulations of the Internet in Türkiye

From 1993 the year that Türkiye was connected to the internet until 2001 the digital environment was an unregulated space (İçel, 2021, p. 505). From 2001 to 2007 the state tried to regulate the internet and online publications through either the already existing articles or through new amendments in the existing law and regulations (Sarmaşık, 2022, p. 213). In 2001, a new article was added to the Press Law No. 5680, which was repealed in 2004. The amendment stated that the provisions of this law would apply to the material or immaterial harms generated out of fake news, insult and similar actions as a result of publishing any writing, image, sign, audio or non-audio visual and the like that is published via information and communication technologies and opening a web page or electronic newspaper, electronic bulletin etc. Sarmaşık (2022) argues that this amendment could not function since the legislation could not have understood what publishing and broadcasting online is in a correct manner, which resulted in the omission of this article in the new Press Law (p. 215). Another attempt for regulation of the internet that assigns the Radio and Television Supreme Council as the responsible authority was rejected by the President in 2001 on the grounds of freedom of expression and the right to impart (Sarmaşık, 2022, p. 216). Efforts to regulate a medium that differs with its every aspect through amendments in the existing law that oversees the traditional, one-way communication technologies were bound to dysfunction and thus, fail. İlkiz (2014) identified the internet as a phenomenon that does not comply with the current understanding of time and space, that is neither newspaper, nor radio, nor television, but is all of them at the same time. Nonetheless, the Parliament voted for the amendment rejected by the President, however, the Radio and Television Supreme Council did not interfere with the online publications until the law was repealed in 2011 (Sarmaşık, 2022, p. 218). Yet, the need for a special legislation for the internet remained that preserves the universal norms of journalism.

After 24 years living with the internet, for the first time in Türkiye, a specific law was enacted in 2007: The Law No. 5651 on the Regulation of the Internet

Publications and Fighting the Crimes Committed Through These Publications. The aim and scope of the Law No. 5651 is to regulate the principles and procedures in regards to the obligations and responsibilities of content provider, hosting services, access provider and public use provider and the fight against the online crimes committed through content, host and access providers. This law has been highly criticized by scholars, journalists and the civil society. In the National Broadband Strategy Action Plan 2017-2020, it is stated that studies are planned to enhance the consciousness for the information and communication technologies and to encourage the safe usage of the internet within the scope of the law (Ulusal Geniřbant Stratejisi Eylem Planı, 2017, p. 74). However, a recent survey research conducted with random 620 people in Ankara demonstrated that 88 percent of the participants either heard of the law but does not have any knowledge about its content or never heard of it/have no idea (Güz & Tekeli, 2022). The situation is quite similar among journalists as well. Only one out of 24 journalist interviewees were able to make an extensive comment on the Law No. 5651. On the other hand, the Electronic Communication Law No. 5809 was enacted in 2008 in order to regulate the competition in the electronic communication industry, to protect the consumer rights, to improve the communication infrastructure and encourage the investments. Regulating the online publications before the communication infrastructure and the telecommunication market exposes the fundamental approach of the government in relation to the freedom of expression and media freedom.

In 2011 Information and Communication Technologies Authority (Bilgi Teknolojileri ve İletişim Kurumu - BTK) prepared a draft for the “safe usage of the internet” caused an uproar in the society and started the “Don’t Touch My Internet!” [İnternetime Dokunma!] movement (Ntv, 2011). The draft presents four filters to use the internet as standart, child, family and domestic. According to the National Broadband Strategy Action Plan 2017-2020, BTK practices various precautions to prevent access to illegal content within the scope of Law No. 5651 (p. 74). In addition to that, it is stated that the ISPs provide free-of-charge services for the child and family filters, which restrict access to the websites that publish content related to malware, gambling, suicidal thoughts, child abuse, drugs, any substances that harm the human well-being, sex trafficking, racism, terrorism and violence (Ulusal Geniřbant Stratejisi

Eylem Planı, 2017, p. 74). Also, BTK and the Presidency of Telecommunication and Communication sent a list of words to be blocked in the domain names to the hosting companies that provide services in Türkiye. After the heavy criticisms, BTK declared that the list was prepared with the intentions of informing the companies (NtvMsnbc, 2011). Yet, the control over the online content have increasingly tightened throughout the years.

In 2020 new amendment that consists of nine articles in the Law No. 5651 was legislated to regulate the social networking sites and the right to be forgotten. According to the new amendment, social networking sites that reach more than one million users on a daily basis must assign a representative who is a citizen of the Republic of Türkiye and resides in Türkiye. Also, these sites must pay taxes as well as obey the access blocking and content removal decisions of the court. In case of disobedience against any court decision on access blocking and/or content removal gradual throttling is executed through the Association of the Access Providers. For instance, before the general elections held in May 14, 2023 Twitter/X blocked access to 409 tweets and four user accounts. Elon Musk posted a tweet stating that the Turkish government informed them that Twitter/X was the only social media platform that did not fully obey the court decisions and therefore, in order to prevent any throttling during the election weekend they decided to block certain tweets and user accounts (Gazete Oksijen, 2023a).

Two years after the social media regulation, by legislating the Law No. 7418 on the Amendments to the Press Law and Certain Laws, the dissemination of the information that misleads the public in order to create chaos, panic and anxiety, to distort the domestic and international security, public order, public health and the public peace became a criminal act within the scope of the Turkish Penal Code (Official Gazette, 2022), which is known as the disinformation law in the society. Also, the same amendment brings some additional changes to the Law No. 5651 such as the clause stating that

the access providers are responsible for establishing the required infrastructure to notify the court decisions. The Association [of the Access Providers] can notify the court decisions on the content removal and access blocking to the content or hosting service provider to their electronic e-mail addresses published on their websites. (Official Gazette, 2022)

According to Engelli Web, as of March 2024 more than one million websites and domain names were blocked in Türkiye (İFÖD, 2024). Yet, the Law No. 7418 came with a carrot as well. Until these amendments, the digital native news websites were not categorized as news organizations which deprived them from rights such as obtaining press cards and receiving public ads. With the amendment the “internet news websites” phrase has been added to the Press Law No. 5187 and the digital native news media organizations were given the right to receive public ads from the Press Advertisement Agency, which is the public institution that distributes state ads to media organizations. The state ads are an important revenue item in particular for the small-scale news organizations, but the Agency created a set of criteria for digital media organizations in order them to be eligible to receive public ads. These criteria divide the news media into six categories according to the region they are founded in and in each category a certain number of employees, page visits and news production are required (BİK, 2023). However, the required numbers are difficult to achieve for the independent digital news media. For instance, the conditions of the general category are 32 employees, minimum 240 news stories per day, 250,000 singular visitors and 750,000 page visits. By specifically referring to the previous advertisement suspension punishments of the Press Advertisement Agency, which have mostly been practiced against the oppositional newspapers and therefore interpreted as a censorship attempt, three interviewees stated that the regulation is another control mechanism to shape the information ecosystem and for this reason they will not make any applications to receive public ads. Interviewee 20 draws attention to the economic motives of the regulations. According to the interviewee, those regulations aim to go after the revenues above a certain threshold. This motive

works to end the life of the small publishers. Therefore, the carrot becomes another stick in disguise for the independent digital news media.

All in all, the information and communication policies of Türkiye do not only serve as a control mechanism of the free speech, but also reinforce the commodification of journalism by attempting to force them to produce certain amount of news stories and to reach certain number of audience. Consequently, this regulation policy encourages the production of clickbait or copy-paste stories in order to increase the revenue channels and discourages the production of quality news stories such as investigative journalism. European Commission Türkiye 2023 Report and the recommendations by the Venice Commission on the new regulations, also, address the negative regulatory impact on the freedom of expression and the media. As the European Commission report draws attention to the continuation in the democratic backsliding and the justification of the restrictions on the pretext of the criminal charges such as threat to national security, the Venice Commission (2022) points out the ambiguity in the definitions such as “false or misleading information” and “overtly disseminating”. Considering the legal practices and the studies of the various organizations, the state policy of Türkiye demonstrates a strong tendency towards the control of information flow and free speech rather than regulating the internet and communication industry in order to ensure the freedom of expression and media freedom, and to improve the telecommunications infrastructure.

4.3 Internet Governance in the Context of Human Rights

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that

[e]veryone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and

impart information* and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

(United Nations)

* Bolding the “impart information” is the preference of the author to attract the attention to the focus of this work.

The second part of the article is crucial not only to have opinions but also to disseminate those opinions through different channels. Since this dissertation thesis problematizes the processes of production and distribution in the independent digital native news media, we will deal with the the bold part of the Declaration that gives the universal legitimacy to the freedom of media and the internet. In regards to the governance of the internet Goldsmith and Wu (2006) highlights a very basic characteristic of the internet that it is a “medium of communication” that consists of speech and thus, the governance of this medium signifies the governance of speech, which brings us the question of if the speech should be regulated (p. 150). This creates a tension within governments about the preservation of the balance between the protection of freedom of expression and control in media and communication, which is conceptualized as expression governance and disciplinary capacity by Wagner (2016).

Until Web 2.0 the internet was considered to be a space where nations and borders do not matter. It was as if the universal dream come true that no government, state or their regulations can interfere with this new world (Barlow, 1996). Although there has been a huge gap that the utopians immensely overlooked: the internet was the invention of a capitalist state and created as a U.S. government project (Kurbalija, 2016, p. 7). Therefore, projecting the demise of the nation-state is bound to be unrealistic. However, this does not mean the possibilities and opportunities that the internet has to offer cannot be used to create a change.

Internet governance is a matter of technique and a matter of authority which fuses various aspects of different disciplines. The infrastructure of the internet is not only a technical structure. It is a social, political and economical matter that requires governance as a consequence of existing in a world whose order is formed of nation-states. During an interview the former director of Freedom of Expression and Media Development at UNESCO Guy Berger (2017) argues that this current world system leads to a fragmented and bordered internet that consists of many national intranets that are connected to each other with networks (p. 76). The carriers of this fragmentation through governance are not governments or state bureaucracy but are mostly private entities. In that sense, ISPs also function as a direct guardians of the

protection of national borders since the core of their job is directly linked with the physical infrastructure within the national borders. Besides, they are one of the most important controllers to decide whose voice to be heard in the online global community. The network gatekeeping theory is proposed by Barzilai-Nahon (2008) with the claim that on the internet gatekeeping activities are performed such ways that had not happened before. This new concept of network gatekeeping refers to the processes of “information-control lenses” that aims to keep the gated within the gatekeeper’s network, to exclude any outsider and to sustain the daily ordinary activities with no interruptions in the network system (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1496). Consequently, a technical actor that is responsible to provide access becomes the subject of the decision-making on the determination of who gets through the barriers. Although, gatekeeping theories are not included in this dissertation thesis due to the fact that their proposal is limited to the current structure, the network gatekeeping approach (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) could be useful to understand the functions of the profit-oriented corporations on the internet.

In this context, in the end of the interviews each interviewee was asked if they think whether the ISPs and the digital platforms could play a role in the protection of media freedom. The reason why the last question is discussed in the first pages of the analysis is the aim to unfold the thought processes of the interviewees. Except few, the most majority of them stated that the companies should stay out of the news media so that the journalism can take a breath. Another argument of the interviewees is that those companies are not autonomous, in particular the ISPs, and are under the government control in Türkiye, which renders them incapable of taking action apart from the government policies. According to Interviewee 12, this is a matter of digital economy and economic relations. Therefore, the interviewee states that these companies always side with the capital since the ISPs and the digital platforms are profit-oriented corporations. Interviewee 12 is not the only one who shares this point of view.

These matters are handled as a whole in Türkiye. You cannot deal with a platform by itself. Even if an internet service provider wants to, they cannot

disregard a decision taken by a provincial governorship. Unless the country is democratized, this situation will not change. (Interviewee 21, personal communication, October 2, 2024)

The society sees social media as a space to breathe and get oxygen. The political atmosphere in Türkiye influences this situation. But, in the end, they are commercial organizations. You never know what they do and when they do it. The state holds their plug, and when the state unplugs it you encounter a totally different situation. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, August 14, 2024)

As these interviewees place the ISPs and the digital platforms in the same position in front of the government policies and the protection of media freedom, Interviewee 13 distinguishes these corporations according to their ownership structure and what they could do or do not accordingly.

These companies [ISPs] are under the government control. Whether they can comply with a court decision for access blocking is out of question in Türkiye, because they are entities directly linked to the government. But, the digital platforms could take more responsibility in terms of supporting journalism and the prevention of disinformation. (Interviewee 13, personal communication, October 9, 2024)

Yet, Interviewee 15 explains why Interviewee 13's expectation from the digital platforms would not be realistic. Interviewee 15 argues that the hypocrisy of the Western liberalism reveals itself in the digital platforms in terms of protection of media freedom and the advocacy of human rights. The double standards and the government policies embraced to protect the monopolies prevent such violation of human rights on

the digital sphere according to Interviewee 15. As a response to the interviewees's statements above, Interviewee 20 argues for the need to break up the monopolies, in particular the digital platforms that could be an obstacle in front of free speech, and suggest that the telecommunications infrastructure should be owned by municipalities along with a certain portion of the ISPs. Mattelart's (2000) argument on the illusion created by the policies regarding to the freedom of expression under the guise of the commercial motivations finds the base of the interviewees's viewpoints. As understood from the statements of the interviewees on media freedom and the role of the private corporations, the internet governance is central to the function of ISPs and the digital platforms as well as to the governments.

In the age of Web 2.0, the governments establish a control mechanism that works through intermediaries which bares the responsibility of information control (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 68). On the contrary of Castell's network society theory, networks have not connected the entire globe and cast out intermediaries. Instead the intermediaries consisted of ISPs and digital platforms created an internet ecosystem where we are connected to intranets that are shaped by features such as geo-location and filtering. Due to its dependence on the physical cables, wires and routers ISPs are "the obvious first target for a strategy of intermediary control". (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 73) In that sense, the ISPs and digital platforms are two conflicting forces under one umbrella. While the ISPs are heavily dependent on the structure of the nation-state, the digital platforms are transnational corporations and thus they almost always seek ways to erode the national borders. However, on the contrary of the utopian belief that the internet will diminish the strength of the state, especially for the past 15 years the states have proved themselves to be a competing power against the global capitalist corporations. Wagner (2016) claims that the controlling actor must be relevant in addition to its technical ability to control online content, which he terms as 'disciplinary capacity'. "Disciplinary capacity is the capacity to discipline or exert direct control over information flowing through the [i]nternet. Disciplinary capacity also creates gates of information control, which in turn are the locus of expression governance regimes." (Wagner, 2016, p. 37) In this process, ISPs carry the role of the executioner of the state regulations, which results in compromise on the end of the content distributors and as a consequence slowly builds the cyberwalls. Even though

the internet harbours the opportunities for universality and the assumption that the free flow of information would follow was anticipated to be true, Goldsmith and Wu (2006) argues that in order to find information first it must be “labelled, organized, and filtered” (p. 51). In a space where anyone can contribute to the information ecosystem, the subject matter of regulation and governance had to be involved.

Three main approaches suggested for the internet governance aim to create and sustain a digital information ecosystem based on freedom, equality and fairness. The first approach is the internationalist approach. If a set of international standards and a UN-like institution are established, then the nation-state territories would lose its effectivity on the internet (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 27). The second approach is multistakeholderism that advocates for bringing together different aspects of society such as civil society organizations, private sector, scholars and government representatives (Pigatto, Datysgeld & Pereira da Silva, 2021). Considering their suggestions, the multistakeholderism and the international approach are intertwined and often support each other. The third theoretical approach is the decentralized perspective that proposes for a horizontal governance through decentralized networks and autonomous organizations (Zwitter & Hazenberg, 2020). On a global scale the multistakeholderism is the approach that shapes the governance of the internet so far, however multistakeholderism and the other two approaches harbor the relations of dominance and control within themselves. In the first approach, establishing a transnational institution and attributing the responsibility of governing the world speech would create an incompatible ruling power. Since the multistakeholderism includes the government and business actors, who are the holders of the political and economic power, eventually those two parties will obtain the decisive weight in the control of information. The third approach, even though it seems to be the more equalitarian option, due to its decentralized basis it reserves the threat of fragmentation insidiously. Therefore, in this dissertation thesis through the independent digital native news media we are looking for a more comprehensive and equalitarian system of information and media freedom that ensures the freedom permanently.

4.4 The Effects of the Internet Governance on Journalists

Most of the interviewees either are not informed or do not have enough knowledge about the Law No. 5651 which is the base of all the amendments and regulations that have been executed since 2007. All of the regulations regarding to the internet and digital news media have been built on this law. Since the disinformation law was the most recent and one of the harshest amendments, the interviewees mostly preferred to make comments on this particular case and gave their examples accordingly. This actually indicates a significant lack of knowledge on the environment that they do business. The question of the possibility to run a sustainable digital news media organization with the lack of knowledge on the regulatory elements that shape and form the news media hangs in the air.

4.4.1 How journalists perceive. Interviewee 2, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 8 and Interviewee 15 state similar views that the law and regulations, especially the disinformation law, aims to create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Additionally, three interviewees referred to the regulations as the sword of Damocles. As the Interviewee 2 claims that the government enacted the law (the Disinformation Law) to corner the ones that they want to go after, another interviewee points out the establishment of self-censorship. “[The law] will hang above the journalists’ heads all the time like the sword of Damocles. Even if they do not do anything, they do not arrest or threaten, [the journalists] will silence themselves.” (Interviewee 16, personal communication, July 18, 2024) While referring to the Law No. 5651 as born dead, Interviewee 23 are among the interviewees who use the phrase of the sword of Damocles for the Disinformation Law. Interviewee 13 and Interviewee 8 share the opinion that the ambiguity in the description of disinformation in the amendment is the indication of the efforts to create this atmosphere. Since every regulation, law and amendments are in the government’s power to implement in case of violation of the “distorting the public order” rule, interviewee 4 assesses that in fact there was no need to pass the Law No. 7418, in other words Disinformation Law or the Censorship Law depending on where you stand. Interviewee 7 draws a parallel between the right to assembly and the right to impart. According to Interviewee 7, de facto the people are disenfranchised from their right to protest in the streets and the journalism in Türkiye comes to a similar position as well. The interviewee argues that doing journalism or

informing the society is not forbidden, but it comes with a price just like drinking alcohol is not forbidden but the taxation on alcoholic beverages makes it difficult to drink. This vagueness of the disinformation definition would only discourage journalists to do investigative journalism, because as Interviewee 26 points out, the Law No. 7418 categorizes the disinformation as a crime in the Turkish Penal Code. As an example for silencing the investigative journalism, Tolga Şardan and Cengiz Erdiñ were two journalists mentioned about in two different interviews in relation to their arrestments due to the accusation of public dissemination of false information. The information and documents those journalists published were neither false nor denied by the authorities in question. Interviewee 24 interprets these regulatory practices as the government's aim to construct itself as the only source of information.

Interviewee 9 emphasizes the working mechanism of the state institutions when it comes to the implementation of the law and regulations. The interviewee states that the objective in establishing BTK was to supervise the competition in the telecommunications market, the quality and the pricing on the internet and its infrastructure in order to provide the optimum internet services to the Turkish society. Instead BTK is mostly associated with access blockings, throttling and mass surveillance. The EngelliWeb report (2022) published by the Freedom of Expression Association found out that more than 712, 558 domain names, 150,000 URLs and 55,500 tweets were blocked to access by December 2022. According to Free Web Turkey, only in February 2024 866 URL were banned by the court decisions out of which three are domain names, 183 are social media posts and 680 are news articles (Korkut, 2024a). 383 of those news articles were on the corruption and the subjects of 430 blocked news were the public officers such as deputy ministers, parliament members, academicians and judges (Korkut, 2024a).

On a more international level, the countries take up to each other when it comes to information control. Interviewee 22 thinks that the government of Türkiye takes Russia as its model. The same interviewee argues that the intention is not to create a solution for disinformation or irregularities in the digital environment, it is to obtain a stick to use when needed that serves to lower the alternative voices. Additionally, the interviewee claims that the recent amendments and regulations were followed by some

systemic campaigns that label news organizations as foreign agents, servants of the EU or the U.S.A., etc. Another view that considers the international implications of the regulations in Türkiye is stated by Interviewee 16. The interviewee points out the negative effects of this type of legal acts on Türkiye's integration to the European Union and on the fair access to information. European Commission Türkiye 2023 Report affirms the interviewees' points of view. The decline in the fundamental rights and the democratic standards were presented as the factors of the country's disintegration from the accession to the EU process. On the other hand, Venice Commission (2022) advises the EU member and candidate countries on the significance of protecting the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights while implementing measures to fight disinformation.

Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 17 approached the subject from an historical point of view. According to the Interviewee 3, in spite of the relative relief in the oppression of freedom of expression and the press freedom at times, today the media environment is under a lot more pressure than the period of the coup in September 12, 1980. Interviewee 17 also underlies that the current state of the news environment is not specific to the current regime. The press has always gone through all sorts of oppression, has always been exposed to ambiguity, and has never been perceived as acceptable by the authority. In his comprehensive book on the history of Turkish media starting from the late Ottoman period Hıfzı Topuz (2003) makes his conclusion remarks with these questions; "How did the press evolve from the early 19th century to today? Where are we today? Was the 1940s' and 1950s' press free?" and he answers; "Never." (p. 12) The size, the shape and form of the fight the press has been molded constantly evolves, but never disappears. In the 21st century it is the Internet Law or Disinformation Law, in the 19th century it was "Matbuat Nizamnamesi" [the Press Regulations]. The means and the instruments will always change and be shaped in the hands of the current authority, however media and journalists have to find the strength and solidarity to repulse and resist.

On the contrary to common opinion among the journalist interviewees, along with Interviewee 3, Interviewee 14 think that the recent amendments came with a positive outcome for the digital news media. Their argument refers to the inclusion of

the digital news media as “internet news websites” in the laws and regulations through the enactment of the Law No. 7418, which provides them the same rights of the traditional press workers as mentioned previously. Interviewee 3 describes this ambivalence as a double-edged sword. Before the amendments legislated by Law No. 7418, the journalists who work at the digital news organizations were mostly registered as office workers, deprived of their rights as a journalist and thus subjected to precarity. “We are trying to benefit from the carrot more than the stick,” says Interviewee 14 (personal communication, August 21, 2024) and acknowledges that the media organization that they work at has been registered as a news organization and there will be no employee registered as office worker. Their journalists will be subjected to the Law No. 5953 that regulates the relationship between the media employers and workers, which would shield them from unfair practices. This positivity reflected itself in the increase of the journalist employment in 2023. According to the 2022-2023 Press Freedom Report of the Journalists’ Union of Türkiye, the number of the full-time employed journalists is 27.241, which indicates an approximately 14 percent increase from the previous reported period (Şahin & Coşkun, 2023, p. 51). This increase is most probably the result of the change in the registration status in the social security system due to the amendments implemented by Law No. 7418 in the Press Law No. 5187 that categorizes the digital news media within the definition of the press. Admitting the legal gains on the one hand, Interviewee 3 also acknowledges the risks of imposing a certain type of journalism defined by the state on the other. Interviewee 3 interprets the reason why that risk area occurred is the lack of solidarity among the journalists in Türkiye. “Professional organizations of journalists such as unions need to raise their voice together. We did not do this during the process of the preparing and passing the law in the Parliament,” the interviewee says (Interviewee 3, personal communication, July 23, 2024).

The journalists in the east and southeastern regions of Türkiye stated the added hardships and inequalities between the East and the West. Interviewee 16 sees the motivation of these types of regulations as bringing the end of the local journalism since the laws give an upper hand to the mainstream media indirectly through the regulations on receiving ads from the Press Advertisement Agency (BİK), cutting the subsidies and making generating income harder for the local news websites.

Interviewee 27 mentions the censorship mechanism applied through BİK. If a news website employs a journalist who are going through a trial under the Turkish Penal Code, BİK imposes a preventive measure that suspends receiving public ad, which could be a significant income for an independent digital news media in terms of generating revenue to sustain their business. Interviewee 21, on the other hand, draws attention to the close relations between the journalists in the region and the government officials and the lack of the international NGOs. Since the number of journalists are a lot less in comparison to the West and the lack of the civil support, the pressure is felt a lot harder than usual. The arguments of Interviewee 25 and Interviewee 24 confirm the difference in the implementation of the laws in Türkiye. “A journalist in the East is seen as a threat to the national security while a journalist in the West is evaluated from a more civil politics perspective. Both journalists use the same technology, though,” Interviewee 24 asserts. In an interview, JinNews news director states that the state does not see them as journalists since they identify themselves as Kurdish journalists, therefore they are first Kurdish before anything in the eyes of the state (Deniz, 9. Köy, 2023)

On the other hand, digitalization has also facilitated and accelerated the speed in practicing of such regulations. Interviewee 21 brought a new perspective on the regulation of news media and the internet. The interviewee states that digitalization speeds up the process, especially for access blockings. Before the acceleration of digitalization in the state it would take at least one week for the court decision on the access blocking to be issued, however with digitalization the notification of the court decision can reach in one or two hours and the news media organizations are required to take down the content in two hours. The total practice of access blocking takes three hours. Interviewee 21 also claims that many of their news articles would be taken down after 12 hours they have published. Another interviewee that draws attention to the technical mishaps of the legislations is Interviewee 23. The interviewee asserts that another part of the problem is that regulators are confused with how the internet works. “Considering the amount of podcasts published in a day in Türkiye, how many of them could be scanned and filtered by public officers?”, Interviewee 23 asks (Interviewee 23, personal communication, August 5, 2024). According to the interviewee, monitoring the digital speech is not the goal, instead the government aims to motivate

the citizen informant. As the only interviewee who is knowledgeable about Law No. 5651, the interviewee concludes that this law has no function besides intimidation and the disinformation law, in addition to this, aims to create an environment of self-censorship:

Because, the legislation also knows that no restriction or blocking is possible in the online space. Through VPN anyone can publish anything anywhere. Therefore, the climate of fear is the ultimate goal. The first regulation [indicating Law No. 5651] was born dead and the second one [indicating the disinformation law] is the sword of Damocles. (Interviewee 23, personal communication, August 5, 2024)

Interviewee 17 believes that journalists remain vulnerable and it does not have to be political all the time. A journalist might criticize a restaurant owner and maybe reveal a story about that person, there is a chance that the owner might be related to a political figure which can cause trouble for the journalist. The arbitrary and ambiguous regulations pave the way for a distrustful and precarious news media environment. The self-censorship aspect brought up by many of the interviewees during the talks on the impacts of the law and regulation in the practical life, which is dealt with in the following section.

4.4.2 Self-censorship is the ultimate price. To the question of how they fight against the censorship the majority of the interviewees responded with the word self-censorship without directly asking if they self-censor themselves. 15 out of 24 journalist interviewees either openly stated or indicated that they practice self-censorship on a daily basis. Interviewee 7, Interviewee 13 and Interviewee 16 underline the rise of self-censorship as a result of the recent regulations. The draft prepared by the Venice Commission (2022) also underlies the chilling effect that could cause by the regulations enforced. Interviewee 5 also is one of the interviewees that openly state that they practice self-censorship. “I think ten times before writing anything,” Interviewee 5 says and adds that the interviewee spends more time that they

used to on a story and is being more cautious (Interviewee 5, personal communication, July 19, 2024). Interviewee 25 also states that they spend more time on thinking on whether to publish or how to publish the story than on writing the story itself. “I am anxious in spite that there is no wrongdoing. My stories are based on evidence but if they want to do something, they do not need any documents or the truth,” Interviewee 25 shares, but immediately assures that they always find a solution to release the story in a way that minimizes the risks of censorship (Interviewee 25, personal communication, September 17, 2024).

Four journalists justified self-censorship due to the need to sustain the business as a news media organization. Two of the interviewees, Interviewee 15 and Interviewee 17, also mentioned the need to assure the safety of their reporters and writers among the reasons why self-censorship has to be practiced. Interviewee 17 states that they feel the burden of the colleagues so that the coordinators and the editors need to act conscientious manner as the decision-maker and the person-in-charge. Even though Interviewee 22 does not openly make a statement on if they practice self-censorship at their organization, the interviewee assumes that their colleagues would probably discuss the ways in which they can frame a story in order not to cause any trouble. Additionally, Interviewee 15 and Interviewee 21 state that they cannot afford to be bold and courageous. Since it took a huge labour and capital to start their organizations, it is almost impossible to take the risk of being shut down completely and there is no way to handle such a risk financially. So, they always try to maintain a balance without losing the essence of journalism.

The self-censorship mechanism even works harsher for local journalists. Interviewee 16 claims that local journalists usually have closer connections and relationships with the local authorities, which leads to self-censorship in case of pursuing and publishing news stories such as corruptions. Another reason to practice self-censorship for local journalists is to ensure their safety and to protect their livelihood. Interviewee 21 voices the similar concerns and explains the working process of self-censorship. They refrain from using certain words, omit images they deem to be problematic and reframe a story if necessary. From the same perspective as Interviewee 15's, Interviewee 21 says that their organization is the labour of many

years that they cannot risk it to be blocked or shut down completely. Along with the other interviewees Interviewee 11 draws attention to the loneliness of local journalists. Most of the time local news are only covered by the local journalists in the region and that's how the stories over there make the news. But, once you silence those journalists in the region it is likely that the rest of the country will not hear any of it, because there are not many alternatives in the region in case one falls into silence. Interviewee 11's remarks on the loneliness of the local journalists are worth to elaborate on. According to a report prepared by Yüksel Mansur Kılıç, former journalist and a parliament member from the main oppositional party, between 2002-2022 almost 90 percent of the local television and 70 percent of radio stations were shut down due to both political and economic reasons (Cumhuriyet, 2023). Yet, sometimes silence in local occurs for pure economic reasons. In a study done by journalist Emrah Bakır found out that nearly half of the local news produced in Izmir covers the national stories and state official's press releases (Independent Türkçe, 2022). Due to the dependence on the advertising income derived from the ad space sold to the municipalities, the local media outlets refrain from highlighting the local problems such as infrastructure problems of the city in order not to jeopardize their livelihood and thus, applies self-censorship.

Interviewee 3 preserves the historical perspective in this matter as well. According to the interviewee, there is not much difference between the traditional media and the digital media in terms of the press freedom. The interviewee states that even at times the news media witnessed regression during and after the July-15 coup d'attempt. The real trouble is that the press freedom and right to impart is never guaranteed properly. Interviewee 4 points out the disinformation bulletin released by the Directorate of Communications. This disinformation bulletin is prepared by the government officials who decide what disinformation is and what it is not. The government itself defines the framework of disinformation and labels/categorizes information produced and disseminated by the public, journalists and other sources. Interviewee 24 once again explains this situation as the efforts of the government to build itself as the only source of information. According to Interviewee 24, this demonstrates the government's perspective regarding to the internet. "Instead of dealing with how to improve the internet infrastructure and create more opportunities,

the government works on the ways in which it could construct itself as the only source of information. This is how they relate themselves to the internet and regulations regarding to the internet,” the interviewee says and considers this as fruitless efforts due to the unhindered nature of the internet (Interviewee 24, personal communication, September 17, 2024).

Against the practices of disinformation law, some interviewees highlight the importance of following the ethical rules which underhandedly signifies that the legislation and government would only go after journalists or organizations that have a loose end in their journalism. Interviewee 6 and Interviewee 23 underline the importance of sticking to the universal ethical rules of journalism in order not to be accused of any acts of disinformation. For example, Interviewee 6 states that they are not affected by the law and regulation on a large scale in comparison to a regular news website since their organization is distributed to a closer circle that each member needs to subscribe first in order to reach the content. Interviewee 6 points out that since their organization presents a collection of news from different sources and opinion pieces, they have not had to deal with any blockings or restrictions so far. Therefore, they do not feel any extra pressure on themselves when they create and produce their news content. Nonetheless, the interviewee assures that they are very careful about giving credits and fact-checking. Interviewee 23 states similar opinions as Interviewee 6’s on following professional ethics. Although Interviewee 23 underlines that the real killer of journalism is self-censorship which is not a specific issue to Türkiye, but is a global problem in journalism, the interviewee claims that those sorts of regulations and amendments have no impact on how the interviewee does journalism since they strictly follow the ethical rules. However, there are many cases that contrasts these implications. As Interviewee 5 mentions many times during the interview, the case of Tolga Şardan proves otherwise. Regardless of the reasons stated by the interviewees, the self-censorship as the indirect consequence of the regulations are the most significant factor that shapes the digital news ecosystem.

The tendency towards the wish to stay minimal as much as possible has been observed as a subtext during the interviews. Most of the independent digital native news media organizations seem to be content with their current state in order not to be

detected by the authorities and not to deal with any legal investigation, access blockings or heavy amounts of fines. Seven media organizations among the interviewees receive legal advice before publishing a news story and the process after in case of any legal action. Interviewee 7 shares that they consult with lawyers before publishing certain news stories. Also, being known by a small community is a relief for them so that attracting the government's attention would be less of a risk.

We consult with the lawyers before publishing the story to find out if anything happens to us. For example, any sorts of news were blocked regarding to the explosion [in the İstiklal Street last year]. It needed to be out. So we did anyhow. I do not know if anything happens to us, but we rely on this [assumption that] 'who is going to notice us?' There is this sense of comfort. Yet, this has led to self-censorship. (Interviewee 7, personal communication, August 7, 2024)

Besides the political aspects, the interviewees' perspective of a limited growth through the preservation of a small-size independent media in order not to take the government's attention voluntarily locks them in the financial sustainability crisis. Throughout the interviews the need to generate advertising revenue came up as one of the most important goals of the smaller news organizations, however considering being a small size organization as a perk to stay under the radar and wishing to increase revenues that heavily depend on reaching to a bigger crowd create a paradox. In order to test the validity of their assumption I compared the number of access blockings in 2022 published by the Engelli Web project of Freedom of Expression Association and the number of followers for the most popular independent digital native news organizations on the Twitter/X digital platform on March 25, 2024. The justification of the choice behind relatively outdated report is that Engelli Web is a project that compiled a reliable data about the total number of access blockings. The justification behind the choice of Twitter/X is the platform where the digital native news media are the most active. According to Engelli Web's report (2022), out of 25 most blocked

news websites, T24 enters the list in the 9th rank, Gazete Duvar as the 19th, Gerçek Gündem as the 21st and Diken as the 24th. By 22 December 2024, T24 has 1,9 million followers, Gazete Duvar has more than 857,000, Gerçek Gündem has 366,000 and Diken has more than 1,5 million followers. Therefore, concluding such an assumption that less audience brings less blocking is estimated to be incorrect when taking these numbers into consideration. However, there might be an unofficial threshold to be taken seriously enough to be blocked by the political figures. If the numbers are considered to be inadequate to influence the society, then there is a chance that those news organizations are not worth to be censored. Outlets such as e-mail bulletins and thematic news websites might be evaluated as more comfortable spaces since they reach to a close membership circle that partly provides them an invisibility cloak. In particular, e-mail bulletins are in advantage in terms of dealing with legal actions. First, their news content is not public and out of reach unless one subscribes. Second, they usually share a curation of news rather than pursuing investigative journalism or original stories. In such an oppressed information environment, journalism can benefit from these technicalities. And also it is not public or “overtly dissemination” since e-mail has a close-circle structure. Therefore, the question hangs in the air whether they can hide behind the justification of e-mail being the private communication that could be considered as a breach in the regulation. Nonetheless, the outcome of the comparison between the statements of the interviewees and the estimated numbers derived as a result of a quick online research demonstrate a partial legitimacy of the interviewees. In spite of the irrelation between the size and the access blocking, there seems to be an unspoken threshold to be blocked by the authorities.

Adoption of self-censorship for the reasons such as sustaining the news business and avoiding from attracting the attention of the political power appears to be the indication of alienation of the journalists. As revealed in the following parts, self-censorship becomes an instrument to bargain with the power groups in order to preserve the continuation of the independent media. Despite that the self-censorship prevails journalism and the legal and regulatory attempts to restrict the internet and the critical voices, the journalists still try to do what is available online to cover their stories. The resistance to protect the right to information has not failed yet. Oppressing

the traditional mainstream media might have more practical options, but the internet is a battleground for both government and journalists.

4.4.3 Access blocking and its cost. Out of 24 journalist interviewees 14 of them went through access blockings more than once, 4 of them only once and six of them has never gone through an access blocking. Interviewee 25 draws attention to the fact that the access blockings of news stories cause that story to be heard more than it could otherwise. Since their organization is a website focused on censorship and access blockings, they benefit from the publicity caused by access blockings. Interviewee 8 underlines the same popularizing effect of the access blockings as well. Interviewee 8 mentions that only once one of their news story was blocked to access, but they paraphrased the story and re-published it again, which gained more attraction after the blocking compared to the original story. Interviewee 25 also points out the unjust decision making processes among news media organizations. The interviewee states that if the news story belongs to a Kurdish news website, an ordinary violation of personal data decision may turn out to be a threat to national security and public order, which might lead to the blocking of the whole website instead of that particular URL.

Regarding to the privacy matter, Interviewee 3 attracts the attention to the impossibility of forgetting and being forgotten on the internet. In the traditional media it was harder to trace back a story unless you have taped it on television or kept that day's newspaper. But in the online environment, once your name is out there it could be found anytime anywhere unless it is removed from the source. Two of the interviewees stated that they consider the right to be forgotten in the news production process and understand the measure taken for it. However, Interviewee 27 states that the right to be forgotten is abused most of the time;

For example, there is a lawsuit and we published a story about it. The defendant's lawyer sent a note from the notary demanding the removal of the content on the basis of privacy. How could this happen? They are capable of

getting a decision from the court to remove the content. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, August 14, 2024)

The same interviewee also states that they remove the content in order to prevent any further legal action even though the court decision is only for the access blocking. The Right to Not to Forget report reveals that 10.441 news and other content were demanded to be removed or blocked to access between 2020 and 2021 (Akdeniz, 2021). 8.865 of those were blocked to access and 1.048 of those were removed from the website (Akdeniz, 2021). The most surprising outcome of the report is that it is found out that the most of the news media remove the content voluntarily even though the court decision is only made for the access blocking which bears no obligation to remove the content either from the website or from the internet archives (Akdeniz, 2021). Without asking the question some of the interviewees admit this practice while talking about the ways to deal with access blockings and content removals. Their justification for the voluntary act of content removal was described as “just in case”. Sometimes timidity overrides the authoritarian practices, which is another sign of alienation among journalists.

Interviewee 26 draws attention to the archival value of those news stories and their impact on the collective memory. The interviewee says that their first objection was made in 2014 which indicates a ten-year political history and the efforts to erase it from the memory. Those news content have a significant archival value in particular for the election times. For instance, in times such elections, people would like to do research about the candidates’s backgrounds or they might want to contextualize the day’s happenings through a quick research in the archives of the news media organizations. In relation to that, the right to be informed is also violated as well as the deletion of memory by removing the content. Additionally, Interviewee 26 claims that some media outlets refrain from re-publishing the removed stories or re-activating their links in order not to cause troubles, which is also considered as implicit self-censorship.

Two journalist interviewees stated that they pursue the legal battle until the Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights at their own organizations. The Constitutional Court of Türkiye decided to remove the access blockings for 503 content and cancelled the Article 9 of the Law No. 5651 that allowed access blockings on the ground of the violation of privacy based on the Law on the Protection of Personal Data (İFÖD, 2024). Besides, in the same decision the Constitutional Court removed the authority of the President of BTK to make decisions to either block or remove content (bianet, 2024). Interviewee 26 states that around 70 percent objection out of those 503 content were made by themselves which includes more than 300 objections made for three digital native news outlets. The pilot decision of the Constitutional Court made for Diken in 2021, one of the most popular independent digital native news organizations, has become the reference decision to implement on the objections for 503 content. The background of this decision dates back to 2017 when the Article 9 of the Law No. 5651 came into force aiming to prevent the violation of personal rights via online content (Diken, 2024a). Yet, this article has been abused to censor the news content. In 2018 Diken and the Freedom of Expression Association made individual applications to the Constitutional Court on the grounds that the Article 9 violates the freedom of expression and the press. The Constitutional Court ruled to impose the pilot decision process and inform the Parliament to amend the arbitrariness caused by the structural problem in the regulation (Diken, 2024a). Shortly before this pilot decision, another article in the Law No. 5651, Article 8/A that permits the content removal or the access blockings due to the protection of the safety of life and property, national security and public order, public health and the prevention of crime, was evaluated as the violation of freedom of expression by the Constitutional Court as a result of 62 applicants on the matter (Diken, 2024b). Yet, these are only the efforts of very few journalist, lawyers and individuals. Most of the interviewees admitted that they do not pursue any legal battle to reverse the decision for many reasons which derive from reservations about not to pick a stronger fight that jeopardizes their safety and sustainability to considering the time spent on such a thing as fruitless. In this view, they consider the continuation of the news production and distribution is more efficient. Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 17 assume that most of the manager's time is spent in the hallways of the courts. On the other hand, Interviewee 26 reminds that the regulation ensures that the telecommunication

operators are able to oppose to implementing the decisions of access blockings and none of them have did so for years since they all know that such opposition comes with a price. In relation to Interviewee 26's argument, Interviewee 18 states that the measures taken by the government have a negative effect on the internet infrastructure investments. Interviewee 18 gives the example of the investments of the data centers. The interviewee claims that due to the uncertainty of the state intervention to obtain the users' data the international firms hold back to invest in Türkiye. The private sector would like to be sure of the certainty regarding to the market they consider to enter. At this point the trust of both the national and international society positions in a crucial place.

When asked about the revenue loss caused by the access blockings, six of the interviewees stated that it might cause a certain loss of revenue even though they did not talk in numbers due to the lack of significance given by the journalists for the financial data tracking and analysis. Six of them think that the access blockings do not cause any loss of revenue since the news story is consumed in the very first minutes of its publishing and the blockings come only after a few hours. The rest of the interviewees either have never gone through an access blocking and/or do not have knowledge in the area. Interviewee 24 and Interviewee 26 both are lawyers at the same time who deal with the legal issues regarding to the access blockings, stated that they requested non-pecuniary damages for their clients. Neither the journalists and the media outlets nor the lawyers have never considered to request pecuniary damages caused by the duration of the access blockings. According to those interviewees the Constitutional Court settled for a 18,000 Turkish Lira as the compensation regardless of the duration and time of the access blocking. The number requested by the outlets is also random since they do not keep track of data and therefore cannot calculate the financial damage caused by the blockings. On a global scale there are initiatives who report on the economic cost of the internet shutdowns. Netblocks, a global internet observatory initiative, generated a program that calculates the economic consequences of an estimated internet outage. According to the program, a total shutdown for one day costs 3,156,142,852 ₺ (\$161,357,912) to Türkiye. The nine-hour throttling of Twitter/X is estimated to cost 84,539,541 ₺ (\$4,322,087) during the February 6 earthquakes (Netblocks, 2024). The nine-day throttling of Instagram in August 2024

is estimated to cost 2,028,948,976 ₺ (\$103,730,086) (Netblocks, 2024). However, the Netblocks program calculates only total shutdown, restricted services or throttling of the internet and the digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, Youtube and Whatsapp. On the other hand by using the Netblocks program in their annual report Top10VPN, a website focused on the VPN industry, published that the internet shutdowns around the world cost \$9.13 billion in 2023 (Woodhams & Migliano, 2024). Türkiye was placed as 19th among 25 countries that restricted access to the internet in 2023 and the internet was restricted for 12 hours in total affecting 70 million internet users, which its estimated cost is \$5.8 million (Woodhams & Migliano, 2024). Even though these calculations do not reflect the economic impact on the news production and distribution, these sorts of calculations are deemed to be useful in order to make an emphasis on the economic impact of the access blockings as well as their political outcomes.

4.4.3.1 Cyber attacks: alternative to access blocking. Eleven interviewees stated that they have been the subject of a cyber attack at least once. Denial-of-service (DoS) attacks, which exhausts the targeted website with false traffic (Fortinet, n.d.), distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, which more than one computer are involved to exhaust the target with false traffic (Fortinet, n.d.), hijacking social media accounts and webpages, phishing and attacks to routers are the types of cyber attacks that those interviewees were subjected to. According to the Freedom on the Net 2024 report during the elections in 2023 and 2024 the oppositional media outlets including Cumhuriyet, Sözcü and Anka News Agency were subjected to cyber attacks. The increasing cyber threats are not specific to the journalists in Türkiye. Council of Europe (2024) points out the increasing online and offline threats against journalism in the last six years. Cyber attacks against the 40 Hungarian independent media outlets (IPI, 2023), the website of the International Press Institute (CPI, 2024) and the oppositional Russian news outlet Meduza (CPI, 2024) raised alarms around the world as well. In this regard, the statements of the interviewees set out the severity of the cyber threats for the independent digital news media in Türkiye.

I am being attacked all the time. I send my piece at night, it gets published in the morning. Once I told them that there was going to be an attack in the morning. The next day they told me ‘how did you know?’. (Interviewee 9, personal communication, July 31, 2024)

During live streaming [we were cyberattacked]. We were live streaming with a parliament member and 1900 people participated. All of a sudden, the website was attacked and down. Half an hour later we were back. These things happen all the time. I don’t know who are behind this. There is no need to guess. (Interviewee 16, personal communication, July 18, 2024)

In the beginning I was attacked quite often by those who were unhappy with my content. They directly attacked to the router many times. These attacks happened in the first few years, then they gave up. Because I can always reach people through some other method. DNS spoofing happened a lot to me. I filed a complaint but nothing happened. But these are not important. If you want to continue to do your job, you always find a way. (Interviewee 23, personal communication, August 5, 2024)

These are some of the statements that demonstrate the vulnerability of media freedom on the digital environment, even when there is no legal interference. Another interviewee stated that they get attacked all time that the software company they worked with stopped working with them since the company’s servers could not handle the attacks anymore. Interviewee 11, on the other hand, said that because of the cyber attacks they had to carry their server outside of Türkiye for a while. However, they brought it back to Türkiye in order to receive public ads from BİK. Besides, Interviewee 5 stresses the importance of solidarity among journalists during a cyber

attack. When the Twitter/X account of the news outlet the interviewee works at was hijacked, the other media outlets disseminated the news and directed the audience to their spare Twitter/X account. Until they took back the original account, they managed to reach their audience from the spare account with the help of the other journalists.

On the other hand, cyber attacks do not always aim to disrupt the access to the content. Interviewee 21 stated that sometimes the Google ads on their website are targeted and for this reason, they have to stop displaying ads for a certain period of time, which causes a significant amount of revenue loss. “We do not have any alternatives [other than removing the ads], because they crash our website through attacking the advertisements.” (Interviewee 21, personal communication, October 2, 2024) Even though, the attack does not specifically target the advertisements on the website, financial loss is always one of the harms done by those attacks the minute the webpage or the whole site becomes inaccessible. According to the Cloudflare’s report of the third quarter of 2024 the most attacked industry, which is banking and financial services, is followed by the industries of information technology and services, and telecommunications, service providers and carriers. This data alone proves the importance of access to information and news since the most blocked ones are usually the ones that can disrupt the order.

Chapter 5

The Actors of Commodification on the Internet

Based on the governmental practices and its political economic impact on the relations of production, the internet governance and media freedom in the independent digital news media are dealt with in the previous chapter. In this chapter, by delving into the relations of production and distribution the control over the information through the independent digital native news media will be analyzed. Starting from the transformation of the news as a consequence of the influence by the relations of distribution over the production, the role of the ISPs and the digital platforms as the actors of commodification of the information flow will be established.

In order to assess the influence of the distribution processes over the production the journalists interviewees were asked the questions of whether what is described as news in terms of quality, format, scope and substance has shifted as a consequence of digitalization and if there is any distinction between the definition of news and content. Except three, all journalists interviewees think that what is described as news in terms of quality, scope and substance has not changed but the form has immensely changed due to the adaptation into the digital ecosystem, which is ruled by the international corporations. Although, as it has been observed throughout the interviews, what is described as news is open to certain flexibility in practice based on the statements of the interviewees. 17 of the journalist interviewees made an absolute distinction between what news refers to and what content refers to. The rest of the journalists do not put too much significance on this distinction. According to them, these sorts of descriptions or distinctions do not make much difference in the digital environment. For instance, Interviewee 2 is one of those journalists who outright stated that labels are irrelevant: “It does not matter. Call it tomato if you’d like. What do we do [as journalists]? We re-create the truth. May it be news or content.” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, July 16, 2024) As Interviewee 2, the other interviewees who think the difference does not matter stated that as long as the product is informative, fact-checked, in accordance with the 5W1H method and the main objective is the public benefit, then the purpose of journalism would be accomplished whether it be called content, news or something else.

Of course, [the word] content is ugly. In fact we produce news, but the word content became popular. There is nothing to do. ... The way to tell stories has changed. So, as it changes the format is evolved and engagement has become very important. More touching, directly appealing to people... It does not bother me. You keep up. In the end your purpose is to tell stories. If people want to hear in that way, then we broadcast that way. What is important is that we publish that story. (Interviewee 14, personal communication, August 21, 2024)

However, along with this perspective, Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 16 consider the content as a supporting element of journalism. The background information of a story or an explainer, for example writing an explainer on leaching when reporting about a mining disaster, has a strengthening factor for news reporting. In addition to that, the interviewee 3 claims that the audience prefer media organizations where they can find both news and content, therefore at their website they try to cover both. Interviewee 15 also agrees that the digitalization has broadened the framework of what news is and has brought a variety to news production process.

The reason why the lines between content and news are blurred is the advertising, according to three journalist interviewees. Advertising is the main reason why journalists started to behave like a content producer and the main perpetrator of this mentality is the digital platforms, says Interviewee 4. Since the dominant revenue model is advertising many journalists, in particular the popular ones on YouTube, blur the boundaries between journalism and advertising with the justification that in the new media age they are the platform itself (Gazete Duvar, 2022). Interviewee 22 identifies this as a trap that the self-employed journalists fall into. Besides, Interviewee 19 thinks that the advertising revenue seems appealing to many journalists in the traditional media and for this reason, without comprehending exactly what digital means they start producing in the way they used to in the traditional media, which consequently leads to low quality journalism concentrated on clicks and advertising.

At this point, Interviewee 4 draws the line by stating that the SEO-oriented pieces are content, not news due to their main purpose is to generate income out of click numbers instead of informing the public. Nonetheless, as an interviewee who agrees on the flexibility Interviewee 4 says that on social media the journalists are compelled to become content producers due to the profit-driven market structure and points out that the unions and other professional organizations fail to communicate with the journalists as labour of the media industry.

Those 14 journalists interviewees who opposed the flexibility between content and news emphasizes the timeliness, dynamism and journalistic professionalism of news stories. Interviewee 20 explains that “news is something dynamic and living. Content is dead and marketable. This was the biggest harm social media has done. It divides everything into small content packages and then sell them in the market.” (Interviewee 20, personal communication, August 22, 2024) Interviewee 20 is the only interviewee who assessed the digitalization and the news production process from a labour perspective. In the interviewee’s view, the lack of the printing press as a physical mean of production and thus the lack of its workers caused an elimination of the understanding of labour in the media industry. Considering that the journalists and editors do not acknowledge themselves as workers and the lack of unionization facilitate the weakening of the workers’ resistance for the corporations. In addition to that, this chain of events also pave the way for local media and the local offices of the traditional media to dissappear since the digital news organizations prefer to make deals with the news agencies that dominate the information sphere and thus damage media pluralism. The digitalization process has also shifted the understanding of the methods to earn revenue. The vagueness of numbers in the traditional media used to benefit the traditional mainstream organizations to sell reputation to the advertisers. For this reason, the journalists who moved to the digital environment embraced a page-visit-and-click-number focused news production to increase revenue since not the reputation based on vague data but the verified numbers and graphics were the definitive factor of pricing in advertising. Therefore, the quantity have overruled the quality in the digital news production and thus the commodification of the news accelerated exponentially.

Another consequence of this accelerated commodification is the rise of concepts such as post-truth and subsequently people started to accept whatever receives the most likes as the truth, according to Interviewee 6. Yet, the interviewee argues that this chaotic information sphere would lead the audience to seek true journalism, which would indirectly motivate them to pay for the news. However, the same interviewee also thinks that the change of the news format is inevitable. Editors used to decide how many pages a story worths depending on the value of the subject, but in today's environment algorithms and SEO are the decision-makers. Though, many interviewees ignored the practices of the government and the ISPs as the other decision-makers of journalism on a national level when they talk about the news production process in the digital ecosystem. Interviewee 27 is one of the few interviewees who build this connection. Interviewee 27 merges the political oppression and the professional problems together in order to understand the news production and distribution relations. According to the interviewee, the origin of the problem relies on the intimidation, censorship and self-censorship.

Of course, what we call as news is changing in time. Thirty years ago I know that for what sorts of things we call news. If you make the same news today, your door will be knocked at five in the morning by the police. Thirty years ago the military was more dominant, but the journalism was more brave and had better quality. Courage is needed in every period in Türkiye. But, nowadays under the influence of the political atmosphere, questioning and challenging journalism style has diminished. It is only practiced through editing and transmitting. The question why does not follow along. Therefore, the lack of quality journalism and the lack of meritorious work force demonstrate itself when it comes to digitalization. The need for capable and devoted journalists is decreased as well. Paying salaries to those people in the independent digital news media is almost impossible, too. Then what happens? Mediocrity rules. The copy-and-paste journalism dominates. In order to drive

traffic from Google you need to publish 200, 300 news pieces in a day and then, you can generate traffic that could turn out to be the advertising revenue.

(Interviewee 27, personal communication, August 14, 2024)

In a similar context but from a different vantage point, Interviewee 1 draws the distinction between news and content from an historical point of view in the context of political economy and commodification of news. Interviewee 1 states that newspapers are built on the news, but the lack of secondary content such as commentary or opinion pieces poses a problematic formation. The structure of newspapers not only influenced the transmission of news, but also influenced the cultural sphere of life which was the consequence of the reorganization of the regime of knowledge after the invention of the printing press. The interviewee points out why Anton Chekhov started to write short stories and states that the emergence of modern short stories and novels cannot be understood without the existence of newspapers since publishing writings other than news was a significant source of income for the media organization itself and for the writers as well. In spite that the news and content strictly differ from each other, at some point news organizations need non-news content to attract the audience's attention, Interviewee 1 argues. Within this context, the interviewee highlights the difference between knowledge and information. The interviewee claims that the bifurcation of transportation and communication led by the railway and the printing press caused information positioned in the journalism's field and knowledge in the academic field. However, with the digitalization and the speed of the information dissemination created an environment where the ordinary people as well as the institutions could easily reach the target audience directly with a simple website, which paves the way for knowledge to become a part of the field of journalism. In order to prove their argument, Interviewee 1 gives example of the practices they implemented in the previous news organization where the interviewee worked as the founding editor-in-chief. The interviewee explains that they made contracts with some academics for regular opinion pieces in exchange of a fee that was only enough for a cup of coffee or a book. The reason why they included those academics as regular writers was to put the news into context through a comprehensive analysis. In other words, they built a publication strategy in which information could

transform into knowledge. Interviewee 1's understanding of content relies on its necessity for a news organization without exposing the knowledge to the commodification process.

Taking the changes in the news production process as a starting point, this research dives deep into the actors of commodification on the internet. In the subchapter 4.1., the role of the ISPs on the digital news production and media freedom will be dealt with. First, the issues regarding to the infrastructure of the internet, the erosion of social policies and privatization of the infrastructure, net neutrality, the internet exchange points, and fragmentation of the internet will be examined and established its impact on the media freedom and information flow. The second subchapter 4.2. problematizes the digital platforms and their distribution power over information. Dependence on the digital platforms of the digital news media, algorithms, journalism as the persona non-grata, the de-centralization of censorship, the effect of economic inequality in news production, generating revenue through copyright and funding programs, regulating the digital platforms and their possible contributions to the independent digital news media will be questioned within the scope of the second subchapter. Last but not least, the artificial intelligence as an emergent controller of information will be analyzed in the end of the chapter.

5.1 Establishing the Impact of the Internet Service Providers on Media Freedom

In order to reach knowledge society free, fair and equal access to the internet is an obligation in the digital age. Informed citizen is one of the basic requirements of democracy and journalism is the most significant medium to realize that. As a consequence free flow of information and the internet infrastructure, in spite of lack of academic and journalistic attention, need to be studied and analyzed as means of production for the digital news media. For this reason, in this study a special attention to this subject has been given and this separate sub-chapter is devoted to the relationship between journalism and the internet infrastructure within the scope of its impact on the economic growth, privatization, net neutrality, fragmentation, the journalists' perception of the internet as means of production, productivity in news production and the digital divide in journalism.

The governmental and non-governmental international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Commission (EC), Global Network Initiative (GNI) and the Human Rights Watch (HRW) point out the responsibility of the communications companies to take human rights into account, in particular the ISPs and digital platforms. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights prepared by the UN (2011), ICT Sector Guide on Implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights prepared by EC (Institute for Human Rights and Business & Shift, 2013) and GNI Principles on Freedom of Expression and Privacy prepared by GNI (2017) are some of those guides that encourage the companies in the information and communications technology industry to adapt their policies and practices in line with the human rights and that reminds their role in the protection of the freedom of expression and media freedom. The HRW (2023) declares that “[i]ntentionally shutting down or restricting access to the internet violates multiple human rights” and urges the ISPs and the digital platforms to consider if the restriction requests are lawful and try to practice the minimum measures as much as possible. In addition, the organization states that those companies bear the responsibility to inform their customers about the measures to be taken beforehand. A research by World Bank concluded that broadband internet access is one of the major factors for the development and growth of a country (Zhen-Wie Qiang et al., 2009, p. 35). According to the findings of the same research, the impact factor of the broadband internet access on the growth is similar when compared between developed and developing countries. When there are 10 broadband subscribers per 100 people, a developed country benefits 1.21 percent GDP growth increase per capita and a developing country benefits approximately 1.38 percent GDP growth increase in case of 10 percent increase in the broadband internet penetration (Zhen-Wei Qiang et al., 2009, p. 45). The UN Special Rapporteur David Kaye, on the other hand, prepared a report on the freedom of expression and the actors who play a part in practicing the right such as the private sector and the states. In his report Kaye (2016) underlined the positive liabilities of the states in addition to the negative liabilities in order to encourage to take the necessary actions to protect freedom of expression against the private companies. Transparency, development and implementation of a set of terms of services and community standards that are based on human rights, taking human rights at the centre when preparing designs and products, planning a fair pricing strategy and considering the

human rights aspect of the telecommunications when improving the infrastructure are some of the recommendations put out by the Special Rapporteur.

Within the framework of the international studies mentioned above I have examined the development plans of Türkiye since 2007, which is also the same year that the Law No. 5651 was enacted, the national broadband strategies and the reports published by BTK regarding to the relationship between the internet infrastructure and the digital news media environment. According to the Reuters Institute 2024 report, the internet penetration in Türkiye is 85 percent, which approximately equals to 73 million users in a population of 86 million people (Newman, 2023). The number of broadband internet users reached 94,2 million in the first quarter of 2024 and the prevalence rate of fixed broadband internet by population is 23,2 percent (BTK, 2024a). The country vision in the ninth development plan that covers the four-year period of 2007 and 2013 was stated as creating a Türkiye that grows in stability, shares its income in a more fair way, reaches a global competitiveness, transforms into an information society and completes the harmonization process to the EU for the full membership (Dokuzuncu Kalkınma Planı, 2006, p. 4). In the same plan the target for the internet users is to reach 60 percent and 20 percent for the broadband subscriber by the end of the plan period (Dokuzuncu Kalkınma Planı, 2006, p. 60). In the tenth development plan for the 2014-2018 period, the estimated numbers for the internet users were below the target of the previous period whereas the estimated broadband access was claimed to be 45 percent and reached to 70 percent by 2018 (Onuncu Kalkınma Planı, 2013, p. 96).

The emphasis was on the economic growth and competition through information and communication technologies in the eleventh development plan that was created for the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Republic of Türkiye, rather than the mission of transforming into an information society and the EU harmonization process stated in the ninth development plan (On Birinci Kalkınma Planı, 2019). The change in the strategy and policies had started to reveal themselves in the practical life in the same period in terms of freedoms and new legal measures. In this same plan, the data such as total number of the internet users and broadband percentage as well as the target numbers to reach by the end of the period were not

provided. Instead, the government shared their estimation on the mobile broadband subscription which is 100 percent by 2023, fiber broadband subscription which is 11,5 percent and the internet usage percentage of women which is estimated as 90 percent (On Birinci Kalkınma Planı, 2019, p. 111). In order to reach the aim of the productivity and competition through ICT the government promised to enable the right of way permission processes, to provide high speed and high quality broadband infrastructure all around the country and to implement new regulations on the fiber optics, base stations, right of way and share of property as well as to provide state subsidies to build broadband infrastructure in the regions where the private companies are not capable of doing so (On Birinci Kalkınma Planı, 2019, p. 107).

The vision of the Twelfth Development Plan for the 2024-2028 period was stated as creating a stable, strong and prosperous Türkiye that is responsive to the ecology, resistant to the disasters, produces high added value based on advanced technology, shares income fairly with these following three missions which are the superiority of the law, democracy and strengthening the basic rights and freedoms; the reinforcement and institutionalization of good governance; strengthening of family, people and social structure (On İkinci Kalkınma Planı, 2023, p. 51). Within this strategic perspective, the government aims to increase the investment for the infrastructure that will facilitate the access to the information and communication technologies as well as ensuring their pro-active and safe usage in the second hundred year period what they call “Türkiye Century”. To meet this aim, it is planned to increase fixed and mobile broadband internet access that will offer high speed, quality and safe internet access. The nationalization of the infrastructure and the competition in the market structure are two prominent objectives in the plan, however a program on the concrete steps about how their implementation would take place is missing. Although it is promised to prepare and execute a specific plan for the internet infrastructure under the title of the National Broadband Strategy and Action Plan, the last specific plan on the broadband strategy was published for the 2017-2020 period, which started with a quotation of the President Erdoğan declaring the motto “Broadband to Everyone from Everywhere” for the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Republic of Türkiye. A draft plan for the new broadband strategy that covers the same period of the Twelfth Development Plan was published by BTK

in the beginning of 2024. The Authority announced five strategic goals which two of them is to increase the broadband infrastructure and the other is to increase the usage in order to accelerate the process of the information society transformation by improving the fiber optics infrastructure (p. 91). The final version of the plan was published in July 2024 and does not include any more detail than the draft version. Another report released for the last quarter of 2023, BTK (2024b) stated that Türkiye is among the OECD countries that managed to increase the fixed internet access the most between 2021 and 2022 (p. 51).

In the SWOT analysis done by BTK within the draft plan for the broadband strategy, strong communication infrastructure and the increase in broadband internet access is considered as strength; lack of capital, competition and inadequacy in the production of the Turkish content are some of the weaknesses; the geopolitical location of the country and the high public interest in the ICT and fiber optics are evaluated as opportunities; and the global inflation, February-6 earthquakes and the regional imbalance in the infrastructure investments are posed as threats for Türkiye's electronic communication industry (BTK, 2024c, pp. 86-88). Ensuring the safety of the communication systems, the infrastructure and the national cyber security, the increase in the safe usage of the internet within the scope of organizing educational events to raise awareness on the digital skills, and the safe and conscious usage of technology and the internet for the children and young people, the fight against the illegal and harmful content on the internet and the preparation of the works to develop local and positive content were enlisted among seven goals in the broadband strategy (p. 102). As understood from the analysis of BTK, the concepts of security and safety are underlined, which indicates the objectives to build a controlled information system rather encouraging the free flow of information.

Considering the international reports above and the strategic plans of Türkiye since 2007, this section delves into the subjects such as the infrastructure in the country and its economic impact, the privatization process of the telecommunications industry and its impact on the country's information sphere, net neutrality, the internet exchange points, the concept of splinternet and then, assesses how the structure of the internet infrastructure shapes the digital news media environment by examining the

journalist interviewees' perception of the internet as means of production, the relationship between the internet access and news production and the regional digital divide among journalists within the context of plurality.

5.1.1 The infrastructure of the internet and the economic growth. Türkiye is globally ranked 111th in the fixed broadband internet speed, 69th in mobile internet speed and the cost of the internet is measured as affordable according to the affordability target of ITU (RIPE NCC, 2023). In spite of the high user and penetration numbers, and the mostly reliable access speed, Türkiye is listed as not free many years in a row in the Freedom on the Net Reports and in the 2023 report it is stated that “the [i]nfrastructural damage caused by natural disasters, unauthorized service interruptions, and theft of infrastructure ... [p]oor telecommunications infrastructure and frequent power shortages negatively impact connectivity.” (Freedom House, 2023a) The assessment of Freedom House demonstrates that the infrastructure of the internet and how it is managed play a critical role in democracy and freedom. For this reason, it is important to examine the internet infrastructure in terms of its impact on the growth and its importance in considering it as a social right for a healthy democracy.

Since gaining and sharing information largely is carried out on the internet, access to the internet must be acknowledged as a social right both by the state and the private sector as well as the need to acknowledge the internet as a human right. Within this context, the internet access should be for free or at least kept within an affordable price range in order to encourage the development of the knowledge society. The vitality of the internet and online resources should be recognized in practice towards the path to the digital transformation that has been consistently promised in the development and strategy plans of the country. In order to achieve that the critical function of journalism in democracy must be considered within the context of the news production and distribution in terms of media freedom. In this regard, Interviewee 9 agrees that the internet should be seen among the human rights and should be provided for free as in exchange of tax payments just like education, communication and health services. Since the internet enables communication, it should be considered as one of the fundamental needs of a society. Interviewee 9 continues their words emphasizing

the significance of the internet for the economic growth of a country. According to the interviewee, if Türkiye aims to become one of the top ten countries in the world, then the government must ensure that the internet is a prevalent resource that is accessible, reachable and affordable if not free across the country.

Interviewee 18 agrees with Interviewee 9 on the economic impact of the internet. Interviewee 18 asserts that in order to produce one must talk, meet and communicate, which are fundamental needs for the cycle of production. The interviewee separates the national income generated through the internet into two: one is the telecommunications industry and the second one is the digital communication which leads to generating income from other industries. However, in spite that the communication is protected by the Constitution and the infrastructure belongs to the state, Interviewee 18 disagrees with the idea that the internet should be provided for free. The interviewee thinks that there should be a certain fee for the internet, but the rate could be regulated within the framework of the preservation of the basic rights and freedom. On the other hand, Interviewee 26 thinks that not the internet itself but to access to it could be defined as a human right. However, the interviewee points out that even though the increase in reach and the acceleration of the speed, the internet has not become cheaper as the classic capitalism and liberal values suggest. On the contrary, the internet has become much more expensive and the infrastructure has not improved as much as it should have been. Considering the access to the internet is to access to information and practicing the freedom of expression as well as the media freedom, it definitely should be categorized as a right. Thus, Interviewee 26 agrees with Interviewee 9 on the issue that the internet must be provided for free by the government and the ISPs could be subsidized by the state.

Considering the statements above, it is clear that the telecommunication industry is beyond a simple and ordinary commercial activity. It bears the responsibility of ensuring a smooth and fast communication in a society in order to preserve and enhance how the daily life continues. Therefore, this responsibility positions the ISPs in a distinct place. For instance, the continuation of the uninterrupted communication in critical times such as a natural disaster is regulated by law and expected from the ISPs. According to the Law No. 5809 Electronic Communications

Law, the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure is liable to coordinate and take precautions in order to guarantee uninterrupted electronic communication in times of natural disaster and states of emergency. In the same law, it is also stated that the operators are obliged to take necessary precautions to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of communication during disasters. However, the journalists in the earthquake region mentioned the urgent need for the internet in order to report and livestream from the region. In an interview in the first days of the earthquake, the journalists stated that they had difficulties in communicating with each other and their organization, and since the internet was not accessible in the city centres where the earthquake hit the most, they had to record their stories and share them in only area where the internet was available which took one hour to reach (Suat, 2023). Interviewee 24 stated that the GSM operators must be prepared for the times of crisis such as earthquake and added;

We have lawsuits with Turkcell, Vodafone and BTK due to the network and connection problems during the earthquake period on the grounds that the telecom operators were not prepared against such an earthquake even though the earthquake had been long expected. In the first three days, the connection was available only in the centre square of Antakya. In the legislation the telecom operators are liable to be prepared against the earthquake and in extraordinary times. We realized that none of them were prepared, so we filed a criminal complaint on behalf of our organization. However, nolle prosequi was ruled. Now, we have carried the case to a higher court. (Interviewee 24, personal communication, September 17, 2024)

Article 19 (2023) also presented their expert opinion to the case. In their opinion, the organization stated that the disruption of the internet and the interruption of the access to the internet cannot be perceived as a legitimate action and for this reason Türkiye violated its liabilities framed by the international human rights law (Article 19, 2023).

In this context, differentiating the ISPs from any other profit-oriented entities and positioning them within the sphere of public service emerges as a dire need to emphasize that the internet access should be considered among human rights. Therefore, these companies are liable to prioritize the human rights in their policies and actions in which the disruption of media freedom through the means of access blocking and throttling becomes a central issue. Thus, establishing the link and understanding the relations between the state and the ISPs as the actors in the internet infrastructure, and the digital news media as the subject delivering information will contribute to the strengthening the democracy and freedom.

5.1.1.1 On the effect of privatization of the infrastructure over the information flow. In the ninth development plan that covers the four-year period of 2007 and 2013 it is stated that the liberalization process of the telecommunication market, which had been a state monopoly, started in 2000 with the foundation of the Telecommunications Institution (currently Information and Communication Technologies Authority [BTK]) and the market was open to competition since the beginning of 2004 (Dokuzuncu Kalkınma Planı, 2006, p. 30). While underlining the completion of the secondary regulations that were in line with the regulations of the European Union, it was reported that the draft of the Electronic Communications Law was sent to the Parliament and the law on providing the universal service in electronic communication was enacted in 2005 (p. 30). However, the privatization of Türk Telekom resulted in buying the debts of the company by the state. In 2005, 55 percent of Türk Telekom was sold to Oger Telecom owned by a Lebanese business family for \$6,550,000,000, which happened to be the greatest public tender of privatization in the history of Türkiye (BBC, 2022). The company failed to make the payments of the loans it took to finance this sell and left the country. In 2018 its shares were transferred to a new company that was specifically founded to take over the management of Türk Telekom and financed by the Turkish banks whom Oger Telecom took the loans from (BBC, 2022). Four years later, the Türkiye Wealth Fund bought the shares from this company (BBC, 2022). Return of Türk Telekom to the state ownership brought important advantages to the state in terms of controlling the information such as channeling the communication, arbitrary interruption and control of communication, and surveillance (Sarp Nebil, 2022a). Currently, the shares of Türk Telekom are

divided as the following; the Türkiye Wealth Funds owns 60 percent, the Ministry of Treasury and Finance owns 25 percent and 15 percent is offered to the public (Türk Telekom, 2024). In the end, the privatization of Türk Telekom resulted in its return to the state ownership and the liberalization process remains incomplete.

Even more, for the last couple of years the telecommunications market is indirectly controlled by the state mostly through the Türkiye Wealth Fund. The biggest stakeholder of Turkcell, which was the biggest private telecommunication operator and the second biggest operator after Türk Telekom, is also the Türkiye Wealth Fund (Türkiye Varlık Fonu, 2020). The Fund also owns 100 percent of Türksat which is a state-owned satellite communication company. On top of the regulations, the public institutions such as BTK and RTÜK (Radio and Television Supreme Council) and the indirect control over the most majority of the mainstream media (Media Ownership Monitor Turkey, 2020), the Turkish government has also managed to indirectly control the telecommunications infrastructure, in particular the internet, through Türkiye Wealth Fund. Consequently, as through the indirect control of the mainstream media the government is able to manipulate the news production process and through the Türkiye Wealth Fund ownership the government also controls the information distribution process, which created a tremendous country-wide information control system by the state. Interestingly, the twelfth development plan that covers between 2024 and 2028 is a manifest that neither competition nor liberalization were accomplished in the past 11 years as projected. The plan promises to reconsider the status of the telecommunication companies that are owned by the state in order to reinstate the competition in the market and the efficient management of the infrastructure (On İkinci Kalkınma Planı, 2023, p. 128-129). In order to strengthen the competition the government also commits to provide the permit and right of way to invest in new infrastructure and to improve the processes for common use and facility sharing (On İkinci Kalkınma Planı, 2023, p. 129). In a way, the government admits the failures in the information and communication technologies due to the short-term problematic policies in the telecommunications market.

When asked about the privatization process of the telecommunications market to the expert interviewees, both telecommunication experts, Interviewee 9 and

Interviewee 18, agree on the necessity of the privatization of the telecommunications industry in order to create a competitive market with better quality of service. In addition to that, those experts argue that the government should have prioritized the public good aspect of the privatization of such a strategic asset of a country. In terms of regulating the communication market Interviewee 9 puts the emphasis on the structure of the biggest three telecommunications companies in the country and the function of BTK. The interviewee argues that two of those three telecommunications companies are under the control of the government which disrupts the free market policy. In relation to that, the interviewee reminds the initial objective of the government to establish BTK. The Authority, as stated in their official webpage, aims to regulate and monitor the telecommunications market to ensure the competition in the internet infrastructure, the quality of the service and its affordability. The National Broadband Strategy Action Plan 2017-2020 and the 2024-2028 Strategic Action Plan of the institution reiterate this objective as well. The regulation of the pricing and internet access where the competition has not been established properly and the decrease of the regulations where the competition has already been established was the goal of the action plan of 2017-2020. However, the most up-to-date plan published for the 2024-2028 period lacked a comprehensive program to implement the goals promised for many years.

Another crucial point that was emphasized in the National Broadband Strategy Action Plan was to provide support for the alternative operators that are vulnerable in the competition against the monopol operator, Türk Telekom, in order to create and support an efficient and sustainable competitive market. Instead, due to the inadequacy of the infrastructure of the internet and the false regulation policies, the users in Türkiye use shared internet with slower speeds than promised by the ISPs. Besides, Interviewee 9 states that for a country the infrastructure cannot be treated as an ordinary private property that could be sold and bought. As Schiller (2007) pointed out that the public-good aspect of information distinguishes it from other resources such as water and soil, therefore its appropriation and commodification by capitalism harm the essence of information. In this respect, the privatization of the telecommunications is directly linked to this controversy around information. During the privatization process of the Türk Telekom Oger Telecom bought all of the asset

belonged to Türk Telekom including the infrastructure for 6,5 billion ₺ (Sarp Nebil, 2022a). The expert points out that communication is a strategic asset for a country and thus should be considered as public service by reminding the need to communicate in times of crisis such as wars and earthquakes. This mishandling of the infrastructure and its improvement caused further decline in the communication industry.

Due to the lack of state subsidies and investment for further infrastructural improvement, the ISPs came up with a solution that aims to improve the infrastructure with investments collected from the companies under one collective entity named Ortak Altyapı A.Ş. [Common Infrastructure Stock Joint Company], which tried to emulate the European functional separation in telecommunications. Since general tendency of the telecommunications companies is not to share the infrastructure with others, the European countries found the solution in either leasing or nationalization of the infrastructure, as Interviewee 9 and Interviewee 26 pointed out. By taking this model as example in 2016 Turkcell, Vodafone Türkiye, Türksat and the member companies of the Turkish Competitive Telco Operators' Association (Telkoder) came together to establish the Ortak Altyapı A.Ş. in order to improve and find solutions for the internet infrastructure in the country (Bloomberg HT, 2016). Türk Telekom, on the other hand, opposes the need for such a company due to its perception that considers the infrastructure investments of these companies as double investment (Yağcı, 2022). Therefore, the lack of participation of such a big player of the market in Ortak Altyapı A.Ş. and the financial shortcomings of the other companies turned the project into a futile initiative.

At this point, the fine distinction between liberalization and privatization reveals itself. Interviewee 18 underlines this difference and warns against the confusion between these two concepts. The interviewee describes the privatization as an act of transfer the public assets to a private entity under certain conditions to increase the efficiency and the earnings of the state, whereas the liberalization means creating a competitive marketplace in which each actor competes in equal circumstances. The founding purpose of their professional organization in the telecommunications market, the interviewee says, is to contribute to the liberalization of the market and to bring together the small players in the market that struggle to

protect their sustainability against the big three (Türk Telekom, Turkcell, Vodafone). Even though Turkcell has made some investments in the fiber optics infrastructure, it is very limited. Therefore, Interviewee 18 calls Türk Telekom to share its infrastructure with the other companies for the development of the industry. The interviewee claims to hear from many managers in Türk Telekom that they believe that sharing the infrastructure with the other telecom operators would be equal to financial loss. However, according to the interviewee, they are bound to lose anyhow in this disordered market structure. For this reason, at least they could take steps to improve the telecommunications market. The interviewee claims that one of the reasons why Ortak Altyapı A.Ş. did not work is that the government did not encourage those efforts and continued to prioritize Türk Telekom. At the moment each company tries to manage their business on their own. Therefore, one does not necessarily carry the other along as seen in the Türk Telekom case. The interviewee states that in the end of the privatization story, Türkiye went back to the starting point and the industry has turned into a state-owned business with many companies and become less liberal than the previous monopoly structure.

As Interviewee 9 did, Interviewee 18 also stated that the government mishandled the privatization due to the government's perspective based on the prioritization of the financial benefits rather than the public good and service quality. This mindset has led to the winning of the company that bids the highest amount and offers the least quality service with expensive fees. Nevertheless, privatization with healthy policies are always beneficial according to the interviewee. They stated that winning and benefitting from the privatization may not bring the desired profits immediately but if a government seeks to privatize the telecommunications asset to a company that offers the best quality service with the cheapest bid, then all parties in this system could win. Along with that, Interviewee 18 highlights the importance of communication once again; "Moving forward, creativity, artificial intelligence, commerce, entertainment, ... they all take place on the internet. The more the communication is accessible the more the economic growth would follow." (Interviewee 18, personal communication, July 22, 2024) Another expert interviewee also agrees on the idea that Türk Telekom has to share their infrastructure in order to advance the internet infrastructure at the level of the OECD countries. However, as the

monopoly of the telecommunications infrastructure the rejection of Türk Telekom to share and work together with the other operators to improve the internet infrastructure is one of the major factors that prevent the development of the information ecosystem.

An information and communication system based on the state control along with the shortsighted policies have caused digital divide among regions. Interviewee 9 points out the fact that once the communication system is categorized as any other material and stripped away from its public benefit quality, then the digital divide is inevitable. The companies would not invest in regions where they think it is unprofitable. Therefore, rural areas left to their destiny. The commodification of information as a resource is a consequence of this digital divide as Schiller (2007) suggested. Universal Service Law No. 5369 is established exactly for this reason in 2005. Universal service is defined as the electronic communication services including the internet that are in pre-determined quality and accessible with a reasonable price by anyone within the borders of the Republic of Türkiye (Law No. 5639). The telecommunication operators are liable to pay one percent of their annual net sales revenue to BTK in order to provide the necessary funding for the universal service.

Yet, in an outdated text in the website of the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure it is explained that there are three projects that aim to invest in the internet infrastructure in the rural areas whose population is less than 500 within the scope of the universal service (T.C. Ulaştırma ve Altyapı Bakanlığı, 2024). In a 2021 report on the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure prepared by the Turkish Court of Accounts (T.C. Sayıştay Başkanlığı), it was found out that the contribution payments for the universal service were not spent effectively. The auditors examined the 15-year period from 2005, the enactment date of the Universal Service Law, to 2020 and determined that throughout these 15 years the Ministry collected a little more than ₺13 billion from the operators and spent only half of the contribution payment for the universal service which includes digital broadcasting of the public service media, mobile communication, information and communication technologies projects for the public education system and some social support projects (T.C. Sayıştay Başkanlığı, 2021). Only 19 percent of the collected amount was spent for the internet access points (T.C. Sayıştay Başkanlığı, 2021). The court (2021) also reached the conclusion that

the other half of the revenue has been used for the financing of the general budget expenses. European Commission Türkiye Report 2023 points out to the mishandling state investments for the internet infrastructure as well. The number of fixed broadband subscribers fell short of the OECD average by 12 points as a consequence of that Türkiye has not demonstrated any improvement in universal service and the telecommunications market (European Commission Türkiye Report, 2023). As it seems so far, the government and the telecommunications market fell behind all of the four-year plans in terms of digital transformation and transformation to information society.

The lack of comprehensive planning and programming has diffused all aspects of the information ecosystem. As a result, an information and communication system has emerged that is neither liberal nor compatible with social state policies. An hybrid system is tried to be maintained that manipulates the information flow for the benefit of the ruling class.

5.1.1.2 On net neutrality. Electronic Frontier Foundation defines net neutrality as the concept that obliges the ISPs to treat all data fairly and equally. Additionally, the EU legislation addresses the concept of net neutrality along with the idea of open internet and underlines the separation between the access providers and the content providers. Regulation (EU) 2015/2120 as a part of the digital strategy of EU aims to regulate the open internet access and establish net neutrality through the non-discriminatory traffic management (Official Journal of the European Union, 2015). On the other hand, net neutrality has long been a battle field in the U.S. Since 2007 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the ISPs in the U.S. challenge each other back and forth either to establish net neutrality or to eliminate it in favour of the ISPs. In 2015 the Obama government established the rules for net neutrality, however only two years later the Trump administration reversed the regulations (Mozilla, 2023). After several years of lacking a non-discriminatory and fair internet access, the FCC reinstated the net neutrality rules that allow internet users to control what and how they use the internet (EFF, 2024). The reason why the U.S. case is important is that as a birthplace of the internet and home to the Silicon Valley the practices in the U.S. set an example for the rest of the world. For this reason, the current victory over the fight

for net neutrality has the ability to prevent or at least weaken the movements against net neutrality in other countries.

Despite that there is no definite and clear legislation or regulation on net neutrality, the debate in the U.S. started similar discussions in Türkiye as well. Only, the Law No. 5809 on Electronic Communication indirectly prevents the violation of net neutrality by the ISPs in the country. According to the article 4 of the Law, affordable electronic communication through network and services shall be encouraged and there shall be no discrimination among subscribers, users and businesses along with providing equal access to the services. Through the protection of competition Article 7 of the same Law also states that BTK is authorized to take necessary precautions in terms of establishing the competition and prevention of the anti-competitive practices. Since the enactment of the Law No. 5809 in 2008, BTK published one report on net neutrality, which was in 2011. However, this report only gives information about the description of net neutrality and the international legal practices, and does not contain any information about Türkiye. The only sanction imposed regarding to the violation of net neutrality was a ₺250,000 (approx. \$450,000 at the time) worth of fine against TTNET (Aru, 2012). The Telecommunication Presidency (currently BTK) found out that the ISP failed to keep the necessary hardware and software maintainance and also blocked access to several websites such as youtube.com, vimeo.com and izlesene.com, without a court order (Aru, 2012). In a report published by the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) it is stated that in spite of this one-time sanction, throttling and access blocking also raise controversy concerning net neutrality (2018, p. 15). Starting with the Suruç massacre in 2015 throttling has become an ordinary censorship practice after terrorist attacks such as 2015 Ankara bombings, 2016 and 2022 İstanbul bombings (CHP, 2018, p. 16). A similar throttling practice for Facebook, Instagram and X was implemented without any official announcement in the recent terrorist attack against TUSAŞ (Euronews, 2024). In addition to that, the country experiences occasional throttling other than terrorist attacks. For instance, during the February 6 earthquakes Twitter/X was throttled for several hours due to the government's claims on the dissemination of disinformation, false reports and fake accounts, which obstructed the victims' attempts to call for help (Dünya, 2023). After the assassination of a Russian ambassador in

Türkiye and the military crisis in Syria, one of the first reactions of the government happened to throttle the internet access, in particular social media platforms (Netblocks, 2016; Netblocks, 2020). The violation of net neutrality and the right to information of the public is excused as a necessary practice to protect the benefits of the state and the society. However, these practices have become a control mechanism over the information flow.

On the other hand, the implementation of these practices through legal breaches by the ISPs pose a great risk to information and media freedom. The breaches in the amendments to the Law No. 5651 on social media and disinformation allow BTK to send notifications to the Access Providers Association for throttling of social media platforms up to 90 percent for a short period of time without a court order. The recent blocking of Instagram for more than a week without neither a statement from BTK nor a court order is an example of how those breaches are benefitted by the government and implemented by the ISPs (DW, 2024). Interviewee 4 notes that based on their experiences Türk Telekom is the first and fastest telecom operator to implement the throttling decision. Considering the ownership structure of Türk Telekom, this should not come as a surprise. On the other hand, several experts and lawyers specialized in media and information communication technologies made different statements arguing that the throttling practices might be legal, but are not legitimate and jeopardizes media freedom (Karakas, 2022; BBC, 2022). Therefore, the lack of a clear regulation on net neutrality and the breaches in the articles of Law No. 5651 benefit the ISPs to comply with the controversial decisions of the authorities and lift the burden of accountability from their shoulders.

When asked about net neutrality, the expert interviewees believe that in spite of lack of the regulatory measures net neutrality exists in Türkiye regarding to treating the internet traffic fair and equal since any violation implemented by the ISPs has been neither proven nor explained officially. Yet, the experts perceive state intervention through throttling and blocking as a violation. Thus, net neutrality exists only in theory and not in practice. The immediate reaction of the government towards the internet during the February 6 earthquakes or the arbitrary blocking of Instagram in August 2024 are the recent clear examples of in what circumstances net neutrality exists.

Besides, these cases indicate the unlawful obedience of the ISPs to the decisions made by BTK. On the other hand, one practice of the telecom operators are often ignored. Mobile telecommunication services of the ISPs generally include social media deals that provide unlimited access to the Big Tech platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. However, these special agreements are not considered as violation of net neutrality or as anti-competition. In terms of broadband access there is no data about the discrimination of traffic, which causes difficulties to make a healthy assessment.

Another interesting point was brought up during the interview with Interviewee 18. In the net neutrality part of the interview the interviewee points out to the subscriber pattern issue revealed by the main oppositional party, which is a surveillance practice of BTK, which the institution sent an order to the ISPs to report the internet users' personal data and traffic logs on a daily basis (Adıgüzel, 2022). The reason why Interviewee 18 includes the surveillance issue during the net neutrality talk is the recent developments in the net neutrality debate in the U.S. In April 2024 FCC reinstated the net neutrality rules even though a few months later the appeal courts suspended the decision due to the objections made by the ISPs (Shepardson, 2024). According to the FCC rules, the ISPs in the U.S. have been categorized as telecommunications services, which positions the ISPs as companies that provide essential service. This categorization allows the public authority to regulate the telecom companies, ensure net neutrality and protect the consumer data (FCC, 2024). Therefore, the violation of user privacy and unlawful surveillance has entered within the scope of net neutrality. In an interview request from a journalist about the subscriber pattern issue, Akdeniz who is a scholar specialized on cyber law underlined the legal liability of the ISPs in terms of protection of user data and their lack of initiative to object the illegal requests (Sarp Nebil, 2022b). As the UNHR Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011) puts the emphasis on the need to respect for human rights on the business side and the need to refrain from practices that could directly or potentially violate human rights, it also urges companies to embrace policies in accordance with the human rights and abstain from any act that breaches them (p. 13). Thus, Interviewee 18 says that they carried the issue to the Constitutional Court since such surveillance attempt is the violation of the fundamental

rights and freedoms. Interviewee 26 stated that only one telecommunication operator refused to hand the data of their users and filed a lawsuit, which the company won. However, the case has been carried to the State Council and the final decision has yet to be made.

On the corporate aspect of the issue, Interviewee 18 points out the dilemma and the contradiction between the ISPs and the digital platforms. According to the interviewee, there is a struggle between these two parties since each party claims superiority over the need for the other and at the moment, the digital platform companies are more worthy than the ISPs. “However, the balance is yet to be established”, the interviewee adds and continues;

If you ask me among all these chaos if Türk Telekom and Google have a special agreement, the answer is I do not know. But if you ask me if such a thing is possible, well, they have the means. As for many issues in Türkiye, net neutrality exists and does not exist at the same time. (Interviewee 18, personal communication, July 22, 2024)

Interviewee 24, on the other hand, thinks that the debate on net neutrality in Türkiye is too soon to be discussed.

When asked about if they have ever encountered any sort of filtering or throttling, most of the journalist interviewees stated that they have never encountered filtering or throttling caused solely by an ISP. However, the statement of Interviewee 4 about Türk Telekom’s faster reaction to implement the connection restriction orders remains as big question over the interference with the internet traffic. Besides, many of the interviewees are confused when asked such technical questions. They are not able to differentiate between an ISP, a hosting service provider and a digital platform. Therefore, most of their answers in this subject are not adequate to provide clear numbers on the issue. Only one interviewee stated that they observe some serious falls in clicks that they cannot understand the reason why. Also, Interviewee 23 attracts the

attention to the difficulty of building such a detailed surveillance system and argues that the censorship practices relies on the intimidation, therefore a mechanism based on complaints and reporting is more embraced in Türkiye. Even though, they have never gone through a filtering or throttling process specifically towards their organization, Interviewee 7 states that they are careful in their choice of words in a news story. “We use a plain news language. For example, it is always the President Erdoğan. Maybe, that is why. I do not know how we could find that out.” (Interviewee 7, personal communication, August 7, 2024)

Interviewee 29 was the only interviewee who stated that their readers who work at public institutions such as schools experienced either throttling or access blocking to their website. Despite that Interviewee 29 does not exactly remember the time period, they claimed that for a while they received many e-mails informing that they could no longer access their website. When asked if Interviewee 29 or any other colleague contacted the ISP that they are the subscriber of, the interviewee said that they were not sure but even if they did, it is very likely that they did not receive a proper response. Due to the ambiguity in the statement of the interviewee, it is difficult to conclude that this was a practice of a filtering mechanism within a workplace or the violation of net neutrality by the ISP, especially in terms of media freedom. However, regardless of the source these kinds of disruptions are deemed as the violation of human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2023). All in all, as understood from the regulations and practices of the public institutions, and the statements of the interviewees net neutrality is often a poorly grasped and neglected subject and mostly violated by the ISPs in accordance with the decisions taken by the government for the censorship purposes, which demonstrates that it is not only a technical or economic interference, but also a political interference with the information flow. Additionally, the lack of knowledge or rather the indifference of the journalist interviewees to the subject and the other matters related to the internet infrastructure are one of the first signs of alienation to the means of production in the independent digital news media. Along with being the cause of alination, the loss of control and hopelessness also further aggravate alienation among journalists.

5.1.1.3 On internet exchange points. Euro-IX defines internet exchange point (IXP) as “a physical infrastructure allowing many ISPs to exchange internet traffic”. The internet exchange points serve as an intersection point that accelerate the local access speed and minimize the cost of local traffic among different networks (Jensen, 2012, p. 4). Therefore, investing in internet exchange points not only strengthens the internet infrastructure, but also increases the speed for digital content production and distribution. On that account, two of the most prominent expert interviewees on the telecommunication industry put the emphasis on the internet exchange points and the lack of perception in Türkiye regarding to their importance in terms of controlling and directing the information flow.

Interviewee 9 defines the internet exchange points as indispensable. According to the interviewee, Türkiye could have been the intersection of the region between Europe and the Middle East along with Africa. The interviewee exemplifies Israel’s efforts to build a system in the Mediterranean Sea that excludes Türkiye and points out the political power that could come with through obtaining the international data. However, the lack of investment and long-term planning cause the country to be excluded on an investment instrument that could contribute to the economic growth and well-being of the country. In the past Türkiye had some fruitless efforts to build an access point within the Turkish Network Alliance Platform (TNAP) project, which was founded by seven leading ISPs in the country, excluding Türk Telekom, Kablonet and Vodafone, and aimed to increase the access speed and build a new infrastructure that provides safe and additional internet traffic route among themselves (TNAP, 2011). Nonetheless, the project died out without taking a step further.

Interviewee 18 is also another expert interviewee who agrees on the need to invest in the internet exchange points and claims that Türk Telekom is the actor who prevents this investment. Also, Interviewee 18 draws attention to the Türk Telekom’s lack of participation as an incumbent that obtains 50 to 60 percent of the whole data produced in the country in the German firm DE-CIX Istanbul, which is “a neutral interconnection and peering point for the internet service providers from Türkiye, Iran, the Caucasus region and the Middle East” (DE-CIX, 2024). The lack of action and the resistance towards the investment on the Türk Telekom side is questionable and needs

to be examined. One of the reasons, according to the interviewee, is the argument of Türk Telekom on the basis of the economic inefficiency of such an investment. However, the transition of data from Türkiye to another country only to reach another region within the borders is not very cost-efficient as well. Building IXPs in different regions in a country where the internet infrastructure is poor and monopoly is the only determinant subject in pricing would enhance the quality of the internet access and reduce the cost by keeping the traffic local (Jensen, 2012, p. 5). The lack of the state subsidies, inconsistent plannings and the political interference in the infrastructural investment on top of everything are also another factor in the decline of the improvement of the internet infrastructure in Türkiye.

In the National Broadband Strategy Action Plan 2017-2020 BTK draws attention to the inefficiency of TNAP due to the fact that the founding companies comprise only 25 percent of the internet market at the time and points out the need to take necessary precautions to strengthen such initiatives through state subsidies such as tax allowance, space allocation and support for energy to encourage the establishment of the regional internet exchange points (p. 89). In a conclusive manner, BTK (2017) states the need for the IXPs in terms of improving the internet market in the middle and long term, making Türkiye an appealing market for the over-the-top media services such as Google, Facebook and Youtube and benefitting the development of the local content (p. 89). In accordance with these recommendations, it is promised to define the necessary principles and procedures and to build an IXP in the Twelfth Development Plan (2023, p. 129). However, the new four-year strategic plan published in July 2024 by BTK does not contain any word about the IXPs. Rather the plan is mostly focused on local and national content production, building data centers and the importance of the national cyber security, which indicates the intention of the ruling power to tighten the control over the data and information flow. In relation to the encouragement of the positive local content production mentioned several times in the report, RIPE NCC 2024 Middle East report points out the cost of producing local but hosting abroad. The report states that due to the high prices in local hosting in the Middle East, the content producers preferred to buy hosting services abroad where it is cheaper for the producers but costly for the ISPs since they have to redirect the traffic from the international zone back to the local area where the content is

originally produced (RIPE NCC, 2024, p. 8). This has not only caused the latency in access, but also caused the potential investment budget for the infrastructure development through IXPs to be spent in redirecting traffic (RIPE NCC, 2024, p. 9). In Türkiye, the situation is not very different. Through the mastheads published in their own websites, it could easily be observed that most majority of the digital news media buy hosting services abroad. Number of reasons might be added next to the local prices such as having another layer of safeguard to evade the government control.

The reason why IXPs are considered as a significant factor for the digital news production is that their capability to accelerate the access speed and the quality of the internet as a source of production. Thereby, IXPs are able to benefit the independence of the digital news media organizations from the digital platforms by enabling them to host their own servers in a cheaper and faster way. This sort of infrastructural improvements would also increase the speed and quality of the access to news and facilitate the creation of their own platforms. Moreover, due to the reduced costs it would put the worries of the journalists such as Interviewee 28 on having to host their own streaming services in case of a withdrawal of the digital platforms from the Turkish market.

5.1.1.4 Splinternet: will the internet fragment?. Splinternet is defined as fragmenting the open internet structure into divided and isolated networks that are under the control of governments and/or corporations (York, 2022). China's Great Firewall that strictly monitors what can or cannot be accessed within the boundaries of China and the Sovereign Internet Law of Russia that controls the internet traffic through blockings and throttling are two infamous cases in the world. Despite that there is not enough evidence for Türkiye about the policy works to create a closed internet infrastructure like Russia and China, the practices for the splinternet are mostly in the form of regulations, access blockings and throttling with a purpose to censor the media freedom and the freedom of expression in the country. The frequent emphasis on the concepts of being local and national in the last development plan could be perceived as an indicator of moving towards fragmentation. Within this context the Access Providers Association functions as the executor of these decisions and regulations. In 2022 an amendatory sentence added to the Law No. 5651, states

that the access providers are liable to establish the necessary technical infrastructure system to notify the court decisions to the content producers or providers, which resembles some articles in Russia's Sovereign Internet Law enacted in 2019.

Moreover, the government has been supporting initiatives such as ULAK and MİLAT that focus on producing "local and national" internet infrastructure products. ULAK Haberleşme (ULAK Communications), which is a sub-company of Türk Telekom that produces base stations, provides almost three thousand base stations around the country and develop plans to build infrastructure for 5G (Ünal, 2024). MİLAT, short for "National Network Technologies" [Milli Ağ Teknolojileri], was funded by the Defense Industry Agency of Türkiye and was a software defined network project to build local cyber security infrastructure for certain public institutions and emergency communication networks (Argela, 2015). Argela, which is another sub-company of Türk Telekom, not only is the contractor company of MİLAT, but also is the producer of a software-based base station called ProgRAN, short for programmable radio access networks. In an interview the founding CEO of Argela states that ProgRAN is able to personalize and slice the networks according to the usage area (ICT Media, 2018). As stated in the official statements and many interviews from the managerial positions of these sub-companies, these projects only aim to preserve the data and the internet traffic within the national boundaries and ensure the cyber security of the country. However, considering the emphasis on the nationalism and the traffic control through local base stations as well as the personalization of the network traffic, it is possible to assess that these efforts also project to create a "local and national" internet.

The debate over the fragmentation of the internet and splinternet is not very popular yet and the unsuccessful attempts to build local infrastructure may cause a perception that the splinternet is not a serious issue in Türkiye at the moment. Regarding to how the technical structure functions, Interviewee 9 argues that the internet is relatively free in spite of the censorship attempts such as throttling and access blockings. "It [fragmentation] happens anywhere that the dictatorship rules. [Efforts to fragment the internet] makes dictatorship more dictatorial", the interviewee continues and compares the practices of the Chinese government to achieve the

internet fragmentation (Interviewee 9, personal communication, July 31, 2024). When asked if the Turkish government has such plans, the interviewee mentions the MİLAT project that remains incomplete due to the incompetence and the political interference. In addition to building new infrastructural elements, restrictions to information flow contribute to fragmentation as well. For Interviewee 10, access blockings to certain VPNs and the politicization of the nationalism might pose some risks towards the balkanization of the internet. However, the fragmentation is a project that requires significant technological and infrastructural investment, and currently the control mechanisms in Türkiye are not that problematic.

On the other hand, Interviewee 26 thinks that fragmentation is inevitable in the long run for all the countries in the world due to the availability provided by technology. To Interviewee 26, in addition to the splinternet practices of Russia and China, the censorship of the Russian news media by the West is also a practice of fragmentation. Thus, positioning fragmentation as a policy that is embraced only by the authoritarian regimes would mislead us. As long as the interference to the information flow is possible through technology, any country regardless of its ruling regime or any company would have the means to manipulate the dissemination of information. Creating alternative platforms or websites, in particular for social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter/X eases the fragmentation in a country. The lack of local alternative platforms to the international social media companies and search engines such as China's WeChat and Russia's Yandex is also one of the reasons why the splinternet is not experienced as harsh as in those countries. From a different but a related perspective, Interviewee 24 argues that the decision-makers in Türkiye have neither the necessary skills nor the interest to fragment the internet. The only motivation of the ruling power is to control the internet and thus the information flow. For this reason, instead of creating new ideas or a new internet infrastructure, the government copies the similar regulatory practices in different countries in order to oppress media freedom.

5.1.2 Journalists' perception of the internet as means of production. The rate of individual internet usage is 88.8 percent in Türkiye (TÜİK, 2024) and with 73.5 percentage finding information is the main reason why the internet users go online and

following the latest news and happenings is the second reason with 70.8 percent (Datareportal, 2024). This numbers indicate the vital position of the internet access not only for the news consumption, but also for the news production due to the constant demand for news online. Since the broadband infrastructure allows rapid access to content, the internet transformed the news product from being a daily product that would be available certain periods of the day to a continual product that is available on demand any hour of the day (Sagan, 2010, p. 120). Therefore, from a journalistic perspective it is important to handle the internet and access to it as means of production. Yet, the most majority of the journalists perceive the internet as an instrument to reach the news audience and fail to consider it as means of production. For instance, a study in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrated that the lack of connectivity cause significant happenings stay unreported and the voices unheard in addition to the failures in the news production process such as communication between reporters and editors, uploading materials for the stories or losing income as a result of the increase in time needed to finish a story due to the poor internet connection (Jagani, 2022). For this reason, the acknowledgement of the internet as means of production is one of the fundamental factors for the digital news media in Türkiye.

One of the indicators that the journalists do not see the internet as means of production is that they consider the internet as given and do not include it as an expenditure item in the budget. Only four of them stated that their internet expenditure is provided by the media organization when they work from home. 18 of them said they pay for the internet expenses by themselves, two are self-employed so they are excluded from this dataset and one responded that they do not know. Most of the journalists consider the internet as given, therefore they do not perceive it as an expense such as lunch and transportation. Interviewee 2 justifies this view by assuming that everyone in Türkiye has unlimited access to the internet at their houses, therefore there is no need to count the internet as an expense item. “If any of our journalists has gone to somewhere for a story, then just like the other media organizations we, too, pay for transportation. Paying for the internet has never occurred to us”, the interviewee adds (Interviewee 2, personal communication, July 16, 2024). Interviewee 15 also shares the same perspective. The interviewee states that they do not cover any expenses for their employees including lunch and transportation since most of them

prefer to stay home considering the expenses that could emerge during the commute to the office such as transportation and lunch.

It appears that paying the benefits would have a bargaining value in the hands of the employers. If an employee wants to come to the office, then they have to pay for their daily spendings during the work hours. Instead they could work from home and would not have to face extra spendings. Interviewee 19 stated that since their initial financial strategy has relied on funding they never considered the internet as an item in their budget. “It was something we ignored”, the interviewee admitted (Interviewee 19, personal communication, August 22, 2024). Interviewee 5 who is among the non-receivers, on the other hand, believes that if they ever asked for it the organization would not refuse them. However due to the tough economic conditions and the goal of their organization on maintaining their sustainability with minimum reliance on advertising revenue, the interviewee would not demand such an extra benefit. The situation for the local digital media resembles Interviewee 5’s sacrifice. Their source of revenue is so limited that paying salaries without any delay is a sign of stability for them, therefore considering the inclusion of benefits would be a far-fetched plan. On the other hand, two interviewees stated that the internet expenditure is one of the bargaining items in the collective labour agreement especially for the remote journalists. One of them explained their reasoning behind as that they cover the transportation expenses for the employees who come to the office on a regular basis, so covering the internet along with the electricity and water bills, would only be fair for the ones who work from home considering the high prices. Another CEO interviewee also stated that they include the internet bills in the subsistence as well.

As a result of the interviews with the journalists, it is understood that the indifference to the significance of the internet infrastructure in the news production process leads to the disregarding the internet as means of production. Yet, ignoring the internet as means of production by the journalists themselves causes media freedom to be threatened from within in terms of the internet’s impact on the representation. In a different context but highly relatable to this subject, World Development Report (2016) revealed that by surmounting information difficulties the internet promotes inclusion (p. 45). On this account, underlining the relationship of productivity and of

digital divide with the internet access helps us settle the argument of this chapter on establishing the internet as means of production in the digital news media ecosystem.

5.1.2.1 Productivity between access to the internet and news. While most of the interviewees do not consider the internet as means of production, majority of them agrees that the internet has an impact on productivity. 21 out of 24 journalist interviewees think that there is a correlation between access to the internet and the news production in terms of efficiency and productivity. This contradiction demonstrates another core reason of alienation in the independent digital news media since they are not able to relate the questions regarding to the infrastructural issues within the context of production relations.

Despite the contradiction, throughout the years different studies also confirm the consensus on the productivity among the interviewees. Hjort and Sacchetto (2022) state that the information and communication technologies play a role in the increase of productivity while Barrero et al. (2021) point out the significance of the universal access for better social and economic resilience. One of the interviewees who disagrees on the correlation between the internet access and news production bases their reasoning on the personal experiences 15 years ago in the conflict zones such as Lebanon and Gaza.

If you asked me this question 15 years ago, I would say yes but both the world and Türkiye passed beyond that. In 2006 when Israel attacked Lebanon, I was reporting from the region and because of the throttling, sending the text, let alone the photographs I took, was almost impossible. (Interviewee 2, personal communication, July 16, 2024)

Interviewee 2 continued their argument adding that unless you are in North Korea or in Gaza, the internet access is not a big deal anymore in terms of news production. However, Interviewee 4 argues that the internet access is one of the most significant factors for the breaking news in the digital media. The interviewee says that most of

the time people forget the time spent in the web panel to enter the story and the visuals, which has a direct impact on the speed to publish the breaking news especially in times of throttling. Searching for alternatives such as VPN or saving the content on a different platform is inevitable for the journalists. Interviewee 23 points out the fact that every ISP in Türkiye uses the infrastructure of Türk Telekom which leaves the internet users with no alternative. Another point Interviewee 23 draws attention to is the imbalance between the download and upload speeds.

You can accelerate the download speed as much as you would like to, there is no barrier in front of it. However, there is a limit for uploading. The limit is loosed to a certain extent, but still it affects your online broadcasting quality.

(Interviewee 23, personal communication, August 5, 2024)

Interviewee 23 also shares that they use fiber optics from two different ISPs through two routers bridged to each other in order to deal with connection problems. Interviewee 7 states that they have to deal with the access problem occasionally in particular during the critical times such as pandemic, the earthquake and the election period. According to the interviewee, the delay due to the access problem in sending out the daily news caused the loss of reputation if not loss of revenue. When they contacted the ISP, the company's answer was not more than an apologize and a promise to recover soon.

Interviewee 8 points out the slow internet connection with high cost and the difficulty caused by it in the news production process especially for the digital freelancers. Interviewee 14 and Interviewee 28 underline the difference between desktop news production and reporting from the field. Since they are based in the central Istanbul, they do not have access problems. However, if any of their reporters goes out to report from where the event has occurred, then depending on the location and the event, they might face access problems and delays especially in the online live broadcasting. Interviewee 14 states that they had to rent mobile base stations during the earthquake and also in the office they established a network system that has several

back ups. Another effect that was mentioned during the interviews was that the effect of the upload speed on pursuing breaking news. Interviewee 23 also states that once a journalist becomes mobile then news production becomes harder. That was the reason why Interviewee 23 chose to stay in their home office and continued to broadcast in the usual format instead of reporting from the earthquake region where the internet access and infrastructure were a major problem. “Remote working makes it harder to upload a video. Okay, we do not seek breaking news but even publishing a feature story is problematic”, Interviewee 19 states and adds that when everything runs smoothly, unawareness of the existence of the internet access is quite possible, however when the connection is slow, then the internet access becomes a problem (Interviewee 19, personal communication, August 22, 2024). The upload speed is one of the factors that pulls journalists away from reporting from the field.

When asked about the difference of the efficiency in news production between the traditional media conglomerates and digital native news media, the interviewees gave mixed answers. Some think that there is not much difference since everyone uses the same internet infrastructure and a simple smart phone is enough to report. However, some interviewees think that the resources such as satellite and the better quality equipment of the media conglomerates always put those companies in advantage. “This solely depends on your economic resources. Throttling and limited internet access do not affect them as much as it affects us, since they have means such as satellite broadcasting”, Interviewee 21 states (personal communication, October 2, 2024). Interviewee 11 also shares similar thoughts:

They are able to release a story in a minute, it takes us three minutes on Whatsapp for the same story. We do not have the same means as they do. For example, we need to go to a village for an environmental issue. We rely on help from locals and once we reach the region, we see that they arrive before us already giving the microphone to the leader of the movement. (Interviewee 11, personal communication, October 3, 2024)

The economic inequalities causes inequality in the plurality of the media. The perspective of the local or digital media falls short since the traditional media conglomerates are still able to hold economic power and thus hegemony in the representation to some extent.

During the interviews, it has been realized that the type of news production also has an effect on the perception of efficiency. It is questionable, though, if the economic and technical capabilities are decisive on the production type or if it is an independent choice of the journalists. Nevertheless, it is observed that the format choice is determinant in terms of productivity and efficiency. Distinguishing from the rest of the interviewees regarding to the format Interviewee 23 states the following;

in terms of my format, the internet access does not have an impact since I do not go out and chase news. I do not work like a reporter. I am on my own. Some other people with similar formats have a team or at least an assistant. So, I continue to hold onto the old-fashioned technics to reach out to my resources. I email them, call them or meet them. Therefore, the process of news production has not changed for my end, because mine is dominantly a commentary. (Interviewee 23, personal communication, August 5, 2024)

In this context, two different independent research that the first is on the news deserts (Kızılkaya & Yılmaz, 2021) and the other is about the digital divide and regional inequality (Dağlı, 2022) demonstrate the link between the internet access and productivity. In his study Dağlı (2022) found out that the North Eastern Anatolia and the South Eastern Anatolia are the regions that experience the digital divide most severely as a result of the total evaluation of broadband connection, internet access, regular internet and the internet usage. After scanning over a million news pieces from 973 districts for a two-week period, the News Deserts of Türkiye research (Kızılkaya & Yılmaz, 2021) also concluded that the widest news deserts are located in the North of the Eastern Anatolia where access to the internet is the most problematic.

It is evident that what type of a news product would be produced is highly affected by the internet access. In particular, the local journalists struggle to publish breaking news due to the inadequate infrastructure in their regions. This relationship between access to the internet and productivity also brings up the need to reveal its relationship to digital divide in journalism. As a consequence, access to the internet has a determinant power over whose voice to be heard through news production and distribution processes.

5.1.2.2 The unspoken digital divide among journalists. In regards to the information and communication technologies in the Twelfth Development Plan of 2024-2028, without mentioning the concept of digital divide, it is promised to improve the broadband infrastructure and to subsidy the infrastructure investments in regions where the private corporations lack the required capital (On İkinci Kalkınma Planı, 2023, p. 129). The last time the concept of digital divide was mentioned is the Eleventh Development Plan of 2019-2023. The plan aimed to reduce the differences among regions, levels of income, sexes and age groups in terms of internet access and its usage. In order to overcome the digital divide, the government at the time was committed to increase the internet access through universal service funds, to support regulations that promote the affordable deals for individual users and to organize educational materials as well as to encourage the production of digital content (On Birinci Kalkınma Planı, 2019).

In the National Broadband Strategy Action Plan 2017-2020 it is stated that there is a correlation between the level of development and the access to the broadband internet among different cities. Derived from the data of the Socio-Economic Development Ranking Research of the Ministry of Science, Industry and Technology, 81 cities of Türkiye are divided into three categories in which the big cities such as İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Bursa and Antalya belong to the first group cities that are highly developed cities with the most amount of broadband subscribers. Cities such as Trabzon, Rize, Balıkesir, Mersin, Malatya and Sivas are the second group cities and the vast majority of the Eastern and the Southeastern regions belong to the third group cities in the socio-economic development ranking in relation to the broadband access. The plan evaluates the second and third groups together with the conclusion that the

internet access is not within the range of the desired levels and determines that the country needs widespread internet access with low subscription fees and a more competitive market. The government's plan also demonstrates the digital divide and inequalities between the East and the West. Dağlı's (2022) independent research supports the data of the government as well. In accordance with the evaluation about the second and third groups, Dağlı (2022) found out that the North Eastern Anatolia, Middle Eastern Anatolia, Western Black Sea and the Southeastern Anatolia share the last four ranking where the digital divide is felt more severe than the other regions (p. 379). Again, the works of the government and this independent research help us understand the background of the news deserts of the country. Additionally, in the draft of the Broadband Strategy Plan prepared by BTK (2024) it is stated that the primary goal is to expand the broadband infrastructure in order to accelerate the digital transformation of Türkiye and the people who live in the rural areas face the threat of the digital exclusion due to the inadequate internet access (pp. 91-92). Yet, these fair projections should include the dissemination of information and the news as well as the journalists and the news production process since the digital divide influences what is heard and what is not to be heard.

The statements of the interviewees confirm the remarks above. Interviewee 3 states that they have offices in different cities and encounter connection problems occasionally, in particular with the Ankara and Diyarbakır offices during the live broadcasting. According to the interviewee, Ankara has surprisingly weak connection which they could not figure out why and presumes that it might be because of the political figures and their vehicles with jammers. However, the Diyarbakır office has the most problematic connection in particular for online broadcasting, which Interviewee 3 associates the inadequacy of the internet infrastructure in the Eastern regions where the Kurdish population has the highest density. When asked its impact on the efficiency in production, the interviewee responds;

It affects on a large scale in particular when a journalist goes to a tough region.

We experienced this occasionally in the cities such as Hakkari and Şırnak during the elections or the earthquake. During the [February 6] earthquake

period it was hard in Hatay because the whole internet infrastructure of the region collapsed. It is not a constant problem, though. (Interviewee 3, personal communication, July 23, 2024)

Interviewee 16 says that the infrastructure in the eastern region is really bad and it might take six to seven hours to upload a file which could be uploaded in a few minutes in a different city.

In the first days [of the earthquake] there was no internet. After three or four days, a restricted connection was provided. The media outlets that have satellites were more comfortable, however the organizations like us had to go somewhere else to upload their files and send them to the main office. (Interviewee 16, personal communication, July 18, 2024)

Interviewee 21 shares similar experiences;

Sometimes the bandwidth is so restricted that we had to connect our computers to the internet through mobile internet from our own cell phones. We have to rely on our personal financial means, but in the end of the month none of us has data left in the mobile phones. This is a serious burden on the shoulders of our friends. (Interviewee 21, personal communication, October 2, 2024)

The prioritization of profit instead of catering to the communication and information needs of the society results in the telecommunications companies to refrain from investing in areas where they deem as unprofitable. As Lor and Britz (2007) explicitly stated from a perspective of ethical political economy, the lack of equality in the access to information causes the social, political and economic exclusion of those who do not have the necessary resources to represent themselves.

One of the interviewees points out that the reluctance of the ISPs to invest is a common attitude in the Eastern areas of the country.

[When we get in touch with the telecom operator] They check the infrastructure and say that there is no fiber optics infrastructure. Even though they decide to invest, it is not enough of an investment to reach the connection speed we need. Also, if your building is far from the main street, they want you to lay the cables between the street and your door. This is impractical. (Interviewee 16, personal communication, July 18, 2024)

Besides, Interviewee 21 states that despite that they buy the most expensive deal, they can only use 30 to 40 percent of what is offered due to the inadequate infrastructure and fiber optics cable.

The interruption in connection happens two or three times a week. They invest in the fiber optics but in one condition, the citizens have to prepare their buildings according to the needs of the fiber optics infrastructure. The economic situation of the region is obvious. Therefore, many residents do not want to pay such money. We are still trying to connect with an infrastructure of 1990s. We pay the highest prices, but the service we get is very low. (Interviewee 21, personal communication, October 2, 2024)

Inadequate policies and the profit-oriented market structure put the responsibility on the citizens' shoulders to provide the necessary internet access, which could be positioned among social rights such as health and education in the 21st century.

The journalists also underlined the vicious cycle of digital divide that deepens with the constant disadvantage to reach good quality equipment, which increases the

inequality further and renders difficult to close the gap. For instance, Interviewee 16 argues that the digital divide is more apparent when they cover a story from the field at the same time with the media conglomerates. The interviewee states that those media organizations have the financial and technological means to live broadcast, transmit the image and publish their content on social media on an instant, which make them to be the first ones to reach masses. Since they do have neither quality infrastructure in the region nor the similar capabilities, most of the time they are obliged to pursue original feature stories instead of chasing breaking news.

5.2 The Spiral of Digital Platforms

5.2.1 Dependence on the digital platforms. An interesting essay that compares the data presented in Ahmet Emin Yalman's doctoral dissertation thesis written in 1914 and the data presented in Journo News Consumer Research in 2022 demonstrate that the news distribution has always relied on public spheres and social spaces (Cihanşümül, 2023). In Yalman's study (1914) 38 percent of 120 survey participants stated that they went to coffeehouses to read newspaper or borrow it from friends. 110 years later Journo's News Consumer Research reflects a similar tendency. 92 percent of news readers follow news through social media and 73 percent follow news through the news websites (Cihanşümül, 2023). The recent data by SimilarWeb published on July 1st, 2024 also supports the current tendency and demonstrates that Google, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter/X are among the top ten most visited websites in Türkiye. Including the freelancer and self-employed interviewees 21 news media organizations were interviewed for this research and only one of them does not have any accounts on the social media platforms since that interviewee is self-employed and promotes their work through their personal accounts. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024, reaching news online appears to be the first method as sources of news. 18 journalist interviewees agree that the digital native news media organizations are dependent on the digital platforms. Not denying the current circumstances of the news ecosystem the rest of the journalist interviewees (six out of 24) consider the digital platforms as an instrument to distribute news and underline the importance of building the organization itself as a platform.

Interviewee 2 thinks that digital platforms are only an instrument to transmit your message and for that they are indispensable:

In the first age people communicate through smoke. As long as communication stays as a need and if today this need is met through the digital platforms, then of course [they are essential]. Tomorrow technology might change and some other methods may become the way, then that way will be indispensable.

(Interviewee 2, personal communication, July 16, 2024)

Interviewee 3 shares this perspective as well and compares the digital platforms to the printing press, ink and paper. Due to the distributor role of the digital platforms, Interviewee 7 states that the digital news media is dependent on them at the core.

Lets think that you are a journalist at a television channel. Then, you are dependent on the ad buyers. Unless the audience starts paying for news, this relationship of dependency will continue. [Those platforms] they are big monopolies and they are everywhere. (Interviewee 7, personal communication, August 7, 2024)

Interviewee 15 is on this camp but from a more techno-opportunist perspective unlike Interviewee 7's perspective relied on the inevitability. Interviewee 15 sees the platforms as spaces where the initial cost of starting a news business is reduced and thus the independent journalists have an opportunity to exist. Also, referring to the political pressures on media freedom in Türkiye, Interviewee 15 stresses the fact that many digital media outlets would not have existed if it were not for these digital platforms. Yet, they acknowledge the limitations that have emerged as a result of monopolization of the big tech in the digital market and the continuation of the same inequalities of the traditional media in the digital environment. Interviewee 10 also points out the concentration and centralization. The interviewee emphasizes that most

people visit Google to find out the happenings of the day, which makes online traffic generated through Google quite valuable. More traffic means more visibility and more advertising revenue for the digital news media.

The less concentrated world without platforms were a reality of ten years ago. There were alternatives to Google such as Yahoo. Monopolization did not exist this much and this monopolization is not only in terms of economics, but also in terms of access to information. There has always been a gatekeeper in access to information. It used to be the news coordinator. Now algorithms are gatekeepers. (Interviewee 10, personal communication, July 30, 2024)

Interviewee 4 shares a similar perspective with Interviewee 10 and attracts the attention to the algorithmic structure of the digital platforms that is designed to make users dependent on their platform.

The rest of the journalist interviewees stresses the necessity of building their news website as the platform itself instead of relying their sustainability on the profit-oriented transnational corporations. To the question on the necessity of the platforms five interviewees replied that they consider the digital platforms as an instrument to drive the audience to their own website. Interviewee 29 stated that in their first seven or eight years they would generate most majority of their traffic through social media platforms, especially from Twitter and some from Facebook. However, approximately for two years the audience has started to visit their own website directly without being directed by the social media platforms. As one of the few independent digital news organizations that has achieved to break the dependency to the digital platforms, Interviewee 29 shares their success in the following statement:

The rate of the organic audience or loyal audience who directly visits the website has reached to 80 percent and the traffic generated through social media decreased to 20 percent. This used to be the other way around. If Twitter

were to be shut down today, this would affect two readers out of ten since eight out of ten directly land our website. This is very pleasing and valuable for us, because this is what we have always wanted. It shows us that for whatever reason, be it technical, political or financial, if the social media platforms were disabled in Türkiye, we would not be affected negatively. People would still read our content which is very important to us in terms of capturing the loyal audience. (Interviewee 29, personal communication, August 1, 2024)

Interviewee 19 states that for their media outlet it is not affordable to build a strategy based on a social media company since that company always bears the risk to disappear with the original work. Therefore, in order to maintain sustainability creating and strengthening the website of the media outlet is the most steady strategy. Interviewee 22, even though states that lack of existence in the digital platforms is equal to being dead, acknowledges that the significance of building a strategy that the media outlet's webpage sits in the center and highlights the importance of being flexible as a journalist in order to keep up with the constantly changing algorithms and emerging trendy platforms.

You need to be flexible in all your strategies. This is how you reach masses. If people are in a certain platform, then you have to be there as well. The right strategy is to be on Instagram, Facebook, Youtube and to be able to direct the audience to your own platform which should work with subscription or advertising revenues. (Interviewee 22, personal communication, July 24, 2024)

This fear of missing out, as Nielsen and Ganter (2018) frames, motivates in particular the newcomers to be beguiled by the possibility to grow fast and reach masses in an ecosystem where the workings of it are not transparent. One of the interviewees drew attention to this latent trap. Pointing out the nature of virality in the digital platforms, Interviewee 12 warns against being drawn into it. Since the possibility of virality is

high on those platforms, the new-generation news organizations plan their business strategy and news production according to the requirement of those platforms, which results in insufficient revenue models and heavy dependence on the third parties. However, as a counter-argument to Interviewee 12, Interviewee 27 considers the size of the organization as a determinant factor in terms of how much dependent a news organization could be. According to Interviewee 27, those media outlets cannot sustain their business without Google or other digital platforms. Since they are still a small initiative, the platforms are a must for them. Once a news media organization builds its reputation, then they could be free from corporations according to the interviewee.

We are dependent on Twitter since most of our traffic is directed from there to the webpages of our news stories. If we are not active on Twitter, we would have difficulty in reaching our audience. Once one steps up to another level, then people would go to their website directly. This would provide some comfort. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, August 14, 2024)

Interviewee 20 states that the problem with the digital platforms is their structure as profit-oriented entities. The interviewee states that they would support a digital media platform that works as a cooperative to champion digital journalism. While admitting the power of the digital platforms and considering the alternatives as a possible solution, Interviewee 20 underlines the importance of building one's own website as their base for all the infrastructural needs such as the payment system, the application store and the hosting service as well to gain independence from the tech giants. "Therefore, our media outlet starts with xxx.org and even if everywhere shuts down, it will continue." (Interviewee 20, personal communication, August 22, 2024)

Interviewee 16 sees the solution to remain independent from the tech giants in insisting and holding onto the ethical principles and the public good function of journalism. According to the interviewee, the digital platforms will seek journalists as long as the journalists remember why they practice their profession. Interviewee 6 also shares a similar perspective and argues that the dependency to the digital platforms

renders journalists vulnerable in front of the decisions of those companies. Interviewee 6 believes that each digital media outlet should work to create their own community in order to protect the right to produce news independently and to protect the audience's right to receive news.

[Being independent] is imperative. Where have we gone so far? A press that was indirectly established by the government. It did not work out. Then the businessmen came into, it did not work out. Then we have entered into a decentralized system in which anyone can publish via social media. This time it is more uncontrollable. Now we are at the mercy of a handful of social media bosses whom we are not sure of their mental health. So, it has not worked out this time as well. (Interviewee 6, personal communication, October 1, 2024)

In a way Interviewee 14 stands in the middle of this debate and tries to find an equilibrium in between by referring to the ambivalent nature of this structure. The interviewee states that the digital platforms both create opportunities for digital journalism and also restricts it at the same time. Because of this, time to time they consider to start new Youtube channels in addition to their main news account such as a channel focused on food due to Youtube's structure that is built on fields of expertise. Interviewee 14 justifies this on-and-off thinking as a result of deprioritization of news by the digital platforms.

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024 revealed that only 22 percent of respondents from 46 countries directly visit the news websites or their applications. The digital platforms are the main sources to access news online for the rest of the respondents. By exemplifying the homepage strategy of organizations such as BuzzFeed, NowThis News and ProPublica a study done by Tow Center for Digital Journalism exhibits that the digital news media has been seizing the publishing and distribution workload to the digital platforms and starting to produce for these transnational corporations (Bell & Owen, 2017). However, the journalists of the

independent digital news media in Türkiye are aware of the importance of publishing and aim to establish themselves as the platform itself. Thus, the international tendency in journalism does not fit to the situation in Türkiye.

5.2.2 New boss of journalists: algorithms. 20 out of 24 journalist interviewees agree that the algorithms are the determinant factor in terms of reach and visibility in the digital sphere. Only four journalists state that they do not take algorithms into account in the process of news production and distribution. One of the main subjects that have stood out during the interviewees was that the confidence of the interviewees on the political bias of the digital platforms favouring pro-governmental and economically powerful news organizations, and the deliberate suppression of their visibility. In order to cope with this alleged injustice, they make efforts to play by the rule of the digital platforms as much as they are able to afford and place advertising on their website. This also brings the concern of the preservation of journalistic ethics without giving in too much to sustain their business. The independent digital news media work to exist in an environment where the journalists feel unwanted.

The interviewees underlined dominantly two factors related to the algorithms: the arbitrary changes in the algorithms and journalists' loss of control over their audience. The apprehension of the distribution process consequently affects the news production and consumption processes. According to Interviewee 23, the digital platforms such as Youtube behave arbitrarily and do not feel the responsibility of accountability. "Think of someone named Mehmet Ali Youtube, son of Youtube's owner. The executives of Youtube manage the platform just like the son of the boss." (Interviewee 23, personal communication, August 5, 2024) Centre for News, Technology & Innovation (2024) states that the transparency in the structure of algorithms is vital for accountability in the digital platforms and also for the prevention of political and commercial manipulation.

In addition to the arbitrariness of the algorithmic structure and the consequential accountability issue, the editorial selection and the control over the audience emerged as an added problem that the journalists have to deal with.

Interviewee 22 raises the question of whose followers those are, if a follower of their organization belongs to their organization or to that digital platform; “Actually, you have no control on your audience. In the long run it indicates that you have no control on your organization’s future as well. Algorithms control.” (Interviewee 22, personal communication, July 24, 2024) The research prepared by Similarweb (2023) illustrates the loss of control of the news media through the decrease in social media referrals. The decision of Facebook and Twitter/X on the reduction of news display caused the loss of audience and traffic for the digital news media. According to the Similarweb data, the legacy media such as The New York Times, The Guardian and Le Monde received their 11.5 percent traffic from social media referrals and the numbers fell down to 6.5 percent (Carr, 2023). The social media referral numbers dropped by almost four percent, from 9.3 to five percent worldwide (Carr, 2023). Figure 1 below shows the impact of the social media referrals on the news consumption.

Social Media Referrals to Top 100 News Sites

Share of Traffic, Desktop & Mobile Web

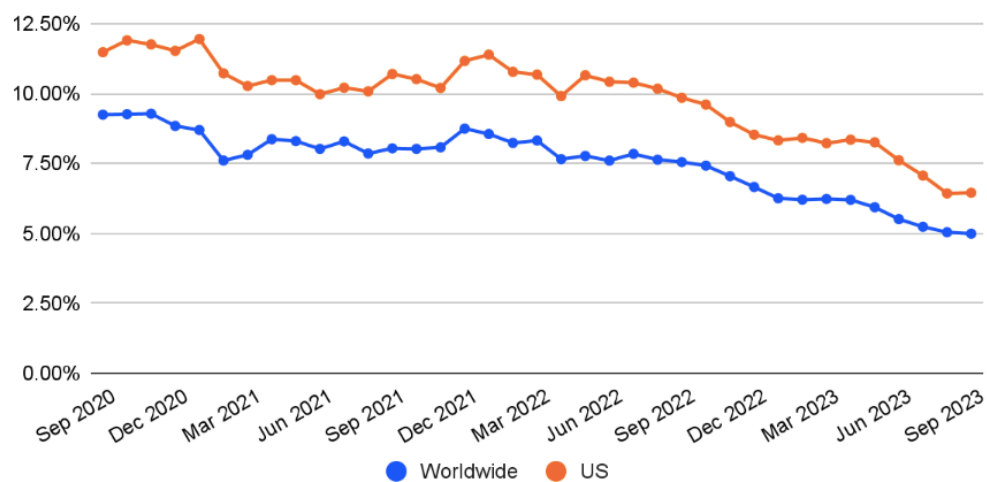


Figure 1. Social media referrals to top 100 news sites (Similarweb, 2023).

One of the recent updates of Google in August 2024 indicates a parallel trend. The independent digital news media claim that the referrals from Google Search and Google Discovery decreased by almost 80 percent and downsizing is among the solution options unless Google makes modifications in its algorithmic updates (Korkut, 2024b). This demonstrates that even though the news websites were to be

independent, owned by journalists and free from any governmental or commercial attachments, if that news organization relies on the digital platforms to distribute their news product, reach their audience and generate revenue, they are far from owning their work and audience.

Yet, the problem of the dominance over the distribution process is not specific to the digital news media ecosystem. One of the journalist interviewees brought up this issue and compared the digital structure of news media to the traditional media structure.

There used to be 28,000 vendors of Yaysat's [nationwide newspaper and magazine distribution company]. We had been working to publish the paper, adapt it to that region's format such as the İstanbul edition, Ankara edition, Erzurum edition and catch the regional vendor's deadline. Right now, Google has millions of vendors and we deal with how to exist and keep up within the Google environment. (Interviewee 3, personal communication, July 23, 2024)

What Interviewee 3 refers to with the comparison of YaySat is that the formerly oligopolistic structure and currently monopoly structure in the newspaper distribution process. In 1990s the distribution companies acted against the Competition Law denying the distribution of some publications and in 2018 after the selling of YaySat (the biggest distribution company of the publishing industry) to the pro-governmental business group, the Demiroren Holding shut down the company and the Turkuvaz Group whose CEO is a family member of the President Erdoğan became the sole distributor in the country (Gazi, 2018). Yet, the state regulation on the distribution process is clearly defined by the Press Law and implemented effectively in the traditional media, which prevents the unfair competition in the industry. However, the unregulated and flexible structure of the internet increases the risk of the unfair competition and undermining the visibility and reach of news media. On the other hand, Interviewee 3 tries to find a balance between injustice done by corporations and the inadequacies of the independent digital native news media. The interviewee

acknowledges the unfair practices of Google towards the independent digital news media, but to the interviewee, in spite of their fast and accurate news production Google's barriers do not cause a loss of audience. "For now, it has not reached to that point," the interviewee says (Interviewee 3, personal communication, July 23, 2024). However, the same interviewee is also among the interviewees who experienced algorithmic bias in particular for the news content related to Gaza, which will be examined in the corporate censorship section of this sub-chapter. As Sabuncu (2018) reminds an old saying, "the best newspaper is the one that is on newsstands", the best news is the one that is on screens. Yet, this reality emerges as one of the major indicators of that the distribution process becomes a dominant factor for the relations of production. Since the distribution plays a determinant role in the news production, the commodification of news and consequently, alienation become inevitable in the digital news media ecosystem.

5.2.2.1 Ethical journalism in the digital sphere: persona non-grata. A survey done with 76 editors-in-chief, 65 CEOs or managing editors and 53 heads of digital or innovation from 56 countries for the Reuters Institute Digital News Project Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2024 found out that 63 percent of the respondents are concerned with the traffic decline driven from the social media platforms. According to the data collected from the respondents, digital news media lost 48 percent traffic from Facebook and 27 percent from Twitter/X throughout the year of 2023 (Newman, 2024, p. 6). Towards the end of 2023 Facebook announced that it would withdraw the news hashtag in UK, France and Germany from its platform (Kobie, 2023). The platform had already suppressed, removed revenue-sharing or banned news links in Australia, Canada and the USA (Kobie, 2023). An article published in The Conversation focuses on the suppression of news on the digital platforms by explaining how de-prioritization and decline in visibility of news on the platforms jeopardizes the journalism and the healthy information environment on those platforms (Myllylahti, 2023). A news article written on Financial Times in 2023 is also dedicated to the response to Elon Musk's remarks on how the legacy media is not needed and news should just get from Twitter/X. This short article explains why the news organizations, whether legacy or independent, are needed on the social media platforms as the original source of news (Kelly, 2023). Among all the chaos created

by the blue-checked provocative accounts, ethical journalism is one of the few actors that could sustain a healthy information environment.

The majority of the interviewees underlined the negative impact of the algorithms on the information sphere and journalism. Interviewee 14 is among the interviewees who have experienced the practical outcome of playing by the algorithmic rule. The interviewee expresses that they are affected by algorithms and indicates the risk of compromising the ethical journalism in order to generate revenue since algorithms are not designed to put forward the news content rather designed for categories such as leisure, game, fashion, music, etc. The interviewee states that they made experiments on Youtube videos with sensational titles such as “Check out what happened” and realized that their click-through-rates have increased. However, after a short while they stopped chasing algorithms in that way. “It is against our profession. We do not want to be a part of that garbage,” Interviewee 14 says (personal communication, August 21, 2024). Interviewee 16 also draws attention to the encouragement of unethical practices by the algorithmic structure and that the digital platforms foster empty and unqualified news ecosystem where quantity overrules quality. According to Interviewee 16, the digital platforms do not care about neither democracy nor the development of the local press and repeats as others that they are not listed in the first pages even though it is their original piece or they are the first to report. The interviewee also says that because of the algorithms many news media organizations work as a social media account in order to sustain their business. Interviewee 13 shares a similar point of view with Interviewee 16. Interviewee 13 thinks that algorithms affect the news production process and the quality of the news content. “It has come to a point where you care more about how to impress those algorithms to appear before others rather than the quality of your content,” Interviewee 13 claims (personal communication, October 9, 2024).

Interviewee 6 and Interviewee 7 associate this situation with the perspective of the digital platforms towards the news media organizations. Both interviewees agree on the opinion that these corporations do not want the news organizations in their platforms. Interviewee 6 claims that the algorithmic policies and revenue models of those platforms openly state this fact. “They create an ambiguous, unknown, hostile

world where traditional journalistic practices vanish, echo chambers and fake news increase, people become more polarized,” the interviewee argues (Interviewee 6, personal communication, October 1, 2024). Interviewee 22 draws attention to how Google promotes unqualified SEO-oriented news content of the mainstream media and the indifference of the news audience and the professional organizations towards that abuse of the information ecosystem. The interviewee reminds the punishment of those news organizations by Google in 2014 for a short period. What happened in 2014 was a reaction of Google against the mainstream media’s deception of SEO with irrelevant keywords, click bots and sensational images. With the update called *Hummingbird* in its algorithms at the time, Google changed its page rank calculations and suppressed the search results of the websites that deceived the algorithms with poor quality content in order to be ranked in the first pages of the Google search results (Sarp Nebil, 2014). The websites of the most popular dailies such as Milliyet, Hürriyet and Habertürk were among those suppressed websites. The suppression was for a brief period of time, but it was one of the rare instances that a transnational corporation attempted to motivate news media organizations to produce more quality and meaningful work. However, this temporary tactic did not cause a permanent solution. The mainstream media went back to their former search result strategy and Google withdrew the suppression policy on those websites.

By pointing out the deliberate suppression of the visibility of the news media, Interviewee 7 alleges that in particular the changing algorithms after the Elon Musk ownership of Twitter/X, they observed a serious discrepancy between the number of followers and the rate of engagement. Interviewee 15 states that the recent algorithmic changes applied by the digital platforms have not worked to news media’s advantage. The interviewee points out the vicious circle intensified by the Google Discover feature that reciprocally feed the Google search results since the algorithm behind the suggestions on Google Discover influences what is to be seen in the first page in the search results and vice versa. Interviewee 15 claims that Google’s response to some professional organizations that contacted Google regarding to the algorithmic bias against the news media is that they are not able to interfere with algorithms since they are managed by an artificial intelligence and therefore, the criticisms on that the pro-

governmental media is favoured are baseless. “In other words, they leave the matter to God”, Interviewee 15 says and continues;

We know that those algorithms are created by a company, a monopoly. Even if their justification were true, it is obvious that those algorithms work against the true information and journalism. Since there is no societal pressure to fix their system, they completely build and maintain a system to maximize their profits. (Interviewee 15, personal communication, August 12, 2024)

A recent study (Bevendorff et al., 2024) found out that “higher-ranked pages are on average more optimized, more monetized with affiliate marketing, and they show signs of lower text quality.” (p. 13) The conclusive remarks of the study also underlines how information is commercialized and distributed. According to Interviewee 15, this is the consequence of the domination of the monopolies since the establishment of the digital order which makes corporations like Google determinant actors.

As a solution to the suppression, different interviewees found different methods. Interviewee 7 stated that as an alternative they decided to concentrate on Instagram and visuality since Meta’s platform offers a better advertising revenue which appeared to be an added reason not to spend more effort on Twitter/X. Interviewee 14, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of having a loyal community and stated that they decided to give priority to increase the number of Youtube subscribers in order to generate more revenue. In addition to that, the interviewees are convinced that the negative perception of people towards news such as finding it dreary and boring encourages corporations to embrace their current policies. Additionally, Twitter/X also changed its algorithms in a way that encourages the accounts and tweets that keep users in the platform. This resulted in the decreasing visibility of news media and increase in the accounts that copy and paste the stories of the news media, according to Interviewee 15. “Whether you are a good journalist or not, independent journalists and independent news media are heavily influenced by this structure.” (Interviewee 15, personal communication, August 12, 2024) When

asked if paid membership of Twitter/X had an influence on their visibility and reach, interviewees gave a mixture of yes and no answers. However, they all share the same opinion that Twitter/X algorithms and revenue model work in their advantage as long as they post highly engaging tweets that make people comment under the post, which drives advertising through interaction. Thus, this mechanism encourages provocative accounts that manipulate people to interact with their tweets. This not only damages the value of journalism but also hurts the healthy information sphere. A research done by ProPublica in 2022 on the disinformation promoted by Google ads demonstrated that Google funds non-English false articles and websites through its ad business. According to the research,

Google placed ads on 41% of roughly 800 active online articles rated by members of the Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network as publishing false claims about COVID-19. The company also served ads on 20% of articles about climate change that Science Feedback, an IFCN-accredited fact-checking organization, has rated false. (Silverman et al., 2022).

Besides, Türkiye is listed as the number one country that has the highest rate of publishers which disseminate disinformation and earn revenue through Google ads (Özgür, 2022). Interviewee 4, Interviewee 8 and Interviewee 10 mentioned the lack of importance of the digital platforms towards non-English speaking countries. Even though Turkish is the 9th language that has the most share of websites (DataReportal, 2024, p. 107), the algorithmic preventive measures taken to discourage copy-paste journalism or disinformation are not effective in Türkiye due to the country's market being small, which consequently causes rewarding the unethical practices with more engagement and revenue. This further increases the inequalities already caused by financial capabilities.

One of the most recent examples was experienced during the controversial legislation procedure about the assault against the stray dogs in the country. The ruling party and its ally the Nationalist Movement Party backed the solution that legalizes

putting the dogs in shelters and put them to sleep if necessary to control the stray dog population. Meanwhile, in order to set the agenda for the legislation to pass in the Parliament the supporters of the law posted 28,456 tweets and received 319,563,392 views between 22 July, 2023 and 26 July, 2023 by using #MilletYasayaEvetDiyor [#NationSaysYestotheLaw] and #yasayaEVETdiyoruz [#WeSayYestotheLaw] hashtags (Erkoç, 2024). Most of these tweets include violence against the stray dogs which only 14 per thousand of them are labelled as sensitive by Twitter/X (Erkoç, 2024). This exposes the political and economic bias of the digital platforms such as Twitter/X in terms of the capability of the profit-oriented mechanisms to ignore their community standards when it jeopardizes their earnings in a market and selective implementation of the same community standards towards the independent digital native news media organizations, which will be dealt with in the following pages of this sub-chapter.

This situation, on the other hand, not only suppresses the visibility of the ethical independent journalism, but also threatens their survival by paving the way to an unhealthy information ecosystem, which harms democracy at the core eventually.

5.2.2.2 Technical capabilities vs. political manipulation. Two clashing arguments emerged during the interviews on the reasons of the decrease in visibility of news in the digital platforms. One is that the transnational corporations, in other words the digital platforms, make objective decisions based on their technical infrastructure and the digital market, and the second argument is that the first argument is baseless since the news media is deliberately pushed back in the digital platforms for various political reasons and the algorithmic structure is often used by those companies as an excuse to justify this situation. The first claim was brought forward by an expert interviewee, which is in line with the explanations of the digital platforms, and the second claim was predominantly brought forward by the journalist interviewees.

Interviewee 10 states that technology giants such as Google or Meta do not spend time on manipulating the algorithms or playing with the search result mechanisms for political reasons in a specific country. The interviewee claims that the

lack of technical capabilities and knowledge results in falling behind in the search results or the appearance in the social media feeds. According to the interviewee, journalists must realize that they need to be business people at the same time. Yet, the interviewee claims that the journalists who transferred to the digital sphere from the traditional news media consider getting involved with the business side of the journalism as unethical. The reason why, for the interviewee, is that they do not want to associate themselves with the traditional mainstream media in which the ethical boundaries eroded due to the ownership structure and the advertising as the primary source of income. However, some basic technicalities should not be ignored such as the choice of font, web design and simple, attractive headlines. The interviewee suggests that before putting the blame on algorithms, the digital independent media should be more attentive about these factors.

Another reason why these basic technical elements are overlooked is that the rate of engagement is not measured within the revenue models such as funding or sponsorships, according to Interviewee 10. Also, the interviewee is the only interviewee who thinks that algorithms are more democratic gatekeepers than editors when compared to the traditional news media environment. The interviewee argues that the decision-making process is used to be based on the personal relationships with the editor whereas in the digital age technology prioritizes the powerful one. The same interviewee acknowledges the disadvantages that come with it, however the most outstanding content are favoured by algorithms.

Technology is not unbiased and algorithms put forth the powerful one. Thus, the older and well-known newspaper is in advantage. Whoever is outstanding gets the clicks, holds the audience, transmits the advertisement which brings money to the platform. Therefore it is not political, but attracting the attention is political, which leads to populism. The tech firms are okay with whoever receives the engagement. But receiving engagement means populism. I mean

there is no politics in the technical infrastructure. (Interviewee 10, personal communication, July 30, 2024)

From this perspective, the wishes and wants of the users determine what stands out the most and thus, these corporations are less political-oriented and more profit-oriented. Therefore, the ones who play by the rule earn the right to be shown first, which reproduces the economic inequalities of the physical world in the digital world.

Yet, journalist interviewees strongly disagree with Interviewee 10's point of view. One of the journalists claim that the experts who are competent in technology often overlook the political implications. While acknowledging the difficulties in keeping up with the constantly changing algorithms and the lack of capital to obtain the required knowledge to comprehend and analyze them, according to this interviewee the technical mishaps do not rule out the political manipulation applied through algorithms. Interviewee 8 gives an example from their news monitor project and states that the same ten news websites take over half of the Google search results. Therefore, Interviewee 8 believes that there will be no improvement in algorithms in favour of media pluralism. Although acknowledging their lack of technical knowledge and hardships in keeping pace with algorithms beforehand, Interviewee 5 is also another interviewee who believes that algorithms, in particular Google, favour pro-governmental news media. In spite that the news organization the interviewee works at highly cares about the speed and SEO, they are not listed in the first page in the search results unless it is a special original story produced by their columnists or writers. Instead, the pro-governmental news organizations overrun the top rankings of the results, the interviewee claims. Interviewee 29 is also on the same page as Interviewee 5. Interviewee 29 states that they make effort to apply what SEO requires, however they are stuck in similar rankings in the search results.

We do not think that we are in a place where we deserve in the Google world.

For example, we follow the Osman Kavala case closely. Our reporter goes to the trials, therefore we are the first one to report and publish the news about the

court decisions. We make sure the story is compliant with the SEO rules. However, some other news sites publish the news half an hour or an hour later with a headline such as ‘Osman Kavala got what he deserved’ or ‘Kavala cannot get out of prison’ and they are on the first page. Our story does not even come up on the second or third page. I really do not know what kind of mechanisms work there. (Interviewee 29, personal communication, August 1, 2024)

Interviewee 15 shares the same perspective as Interviewee 5 and Interviewee 29. Interviewee 15 argues that the updates in algorithms of Google in September 2023 only benefitted the pro-governmental and/or economically powerful news organizations in spite of Google’s reasoning regarding to the favouring original and quality content behind the update. The interviewee claims that before the update monthly number of sessions for their media outlet was 5 million and view per page was around 12 to 13 million which is very good for a one-year old news website, but after the update in September 2023 the reach has decreased significantly. Their organization is not alone. In spite of Google’s claim that the search engine giant aims to reduce the unoriginal, low quality content by 45 percent, the platforms with the user-generated content such as Reddit, LinkedIn, Wikipedia and Instagram experienced a significant growth in traffic whereas the publishers with original content such as New York Magazine, GQ and independent bloggers experienced a severe drop (Germain, 2024). Several website owners and experts whom BBC spoke to argued that Google’s algorithm update benefits the major recognized brands and disregards the small independent publishers, which pushes the original and quality content to the periphery (Germain, 2024). Thus, the independent news media were left to Google’s arbitrary will according to Interviewee 15. Google even suppresses their original journalistic pieces and puts forward the organizations that copy and paste their story which are big and/or pro-governmental websites. Thus, the interviewee strongly believes that Google serves to the benefits of monopolies and political figures, which contradicts with its own standards and policies.

2021 Digital Media Report prepared by the International Press Institute Türkiye supports the claims of the interviewees. According to the report, Google takes up 84 percent of Türkiye's search engine market and directs 90,6 percent of the Google users to the three pro-governmental news organizations which are Hürriyet, Sabah and Milliyet (IPI Türkiye, 2021). Journo News Monitor demonstrates very similar results. After data gathering for a year in 2023, Journo News Monitor determined that Google favours the pro-governmental news organizations by 74,8 percent in the search results related to news (Kızılkaya, 2024). The same report found out that the independent news media can break this wall only when they cover a topic that the pro-governmental media miss. When there is an information vacuum, Google carries the independent news media to the top of the search results, i.e. the news about the excessive increase in prices, which the pro-governmental media refrains from covering anything related to the economic crisis (Kızılkaya, 2024).

Yet, the importance of obtaining the technical skills to keep up with the information structure and being aware of the reasons of unfair practices to combat effectively is mostly ignored or overlooked due to the lack of resources. Interviewee 3 is among the interviewees that emphasize the need for the technical capabilities to keep up with the algorithmic changes.

Google never announces the changes they are about to apply in algorithms. If you research you can find and figure out. This is one of the most challenging factors [as a journalist]. I have to follow the Google parameters at the same time as a journalist. (Interviewee 3, personal communication, July 23, 2024)

While acknowledging the technical challenges, the same interviewee also points out the trust in audience's capability to seek true information. The interviewee believes that whatever the corporations do in terms of algorithms, the audience eventually finds the accurate information and as a proof the interviewee gives the February 6 earthquakes time period as an example. Interviewee 3 claims that they reached the all time high in clicks and audience reach during the earthquake. In times of crisis the

need for news increases and this reflects itself in numbers. The interviewee's claim might have been a meaningful analysis if that increase turns into a stable and sustainable increase in audience reach and revenues.

However, Interviewee 28's remarks on how corporations like Google favours profit such as enlisting the pages with the most advertising revenue could shed a light on the statements of the journalist interviewees. Interviewee 28 is the only interviewee who explains the technical reasons in detail about the allegations regarding to Google. The interviewee states that the domain score given by Google is the determinant factor on who to be listed in the first pages of the search results. If a news media outlet that copies and pastes another organization's story has a higher domain score than the copyholder organization, that media outlet would be seen before the original one due to the algorithmic system of Google or other platforms. Interviewee 28 likens those news organizations to supermarkets: "Some news websites behave like a supermarket. They do not produce anything. They take your product, put it in the shells and sell it. They earn money from advertising. You are not the one who benefits from this." (Interviewee 28, personal communication, August 8, 2024) The interviewee also states that they have been cleaning the toxic backlinks since those backlinks decrease the domain score. After this process, they have realized a significant increase in their domain score and the interviewee adds that it is impossible to ignore the algorithms of Google when doing digital journalism. Regarding to the allegations on Google, the interviewee says that they have not realized any negative algorithmic impact in terms of their visibility, however during the election time their traffic increased and after the election period immediately dropped. They also have renewed the design of their website along with the URL structure in order to make their website Google- and SEO-compatible. In addition to that, the interviewee points out the importance of having Google ads on the webpage. According to Interviewee 28, any webpage that has Google ads are in advantage to be ahead of the ones that do not have any. Therefore in order to widen their revenue models and stand out in the search results they have started to place Google ads in a way that does not interrupt the audience experience.

All in all, both parties are right in their own ways. Most of the journalist interviewees agree that they lack the necessary technical skills and financial resources

to meet the standards set by the digital platforms. Yet, in a country like Türkiye where political interference is on the verge of jeopardizing democracy, there are occasions that these digital platforms that happen to be the profit-oriented transnational corporations are in negotiations with the political entities in regards to their decision-making processes of what sorts of information can flow within the country.

5.2.2.3 Economic inequality and the news format. Throughout the interviews a correlation emerged between the flexibility in the news format and the economic power of an independent digital news organization. The more monetary resources an organization has the more they are capable of producing a variety of news pieces and adapting them to different platforms to reach more audience and eventually lead them to their own website.

Except three, all of the journalist interviewees agree on the need to make modification in the news format according to the platform they publish in. The exceptional three interviewees argue that the journalistic standards come as the first and foremost concern, therefore creating or adapting the news accordingly cannot be a determinant factor in the news production process. For instance, Interviewee 23 argues that the interviewee's only aim is to do pure journalism and uses the digital platforms only to announce the daily program even though what is logical is to tailor the content according to platform in order to sustain the business. In addition to that, the interviewee approaches the issue from a more philosophical point of view by indicating the ephemerality on the digital platforms. For this reason the interviewee does not spend much time on building a strategy specific to a digital platform:

I make fun of this a lot. How could such a thing be taken seriously? When you block [someone or something], you can take that out of your life forever or on the contrary that person comes back with a different name and profile when you think you get rid of them. (Interviewee 23, personal communication, August 5, 2024)

However, the rest of the interviewees put the emphasis on the equilibrium that needs to be maintained in order to establish a sustainable digital news organization. In order to increase the reach to a wider audience, to drive traffic to their website, to build a reputation and to enrich their revenue models the most majority of the interviewees seek ways in which tailor their content in accordance with the requirements of the digital platforms without giving away the journalistic standards and ethics. Four interviewees explain how they manage to preserve the balance in their practices. Interviewee 29 states that they do not base their decision of what to produce or not to produce on the platform's policies, however they consider the technical aspects of what should be done to increase the visibility of the news content. Considering the different consumption tendencies of different platforms, they curate their news accordingly such as posting more political content on Twitter/X and lighter content on Instagram. Since the digital platforms put barriers to prevent users to leave for other websites by means such as suppressing the links, Interviewee 6 states that they use the digital platforms as an instrument to build and strengthen their reputation by following the trends in the types of formats like reels or carousels in order to make the audience curious about what they can find more at their organization. One interviewee speaks about the conflict with their CEO in regards to what to share especially on the social media platforms.

Our CEO questions whether or not to publish news content about Palestine since it is a gloomy subject. But this is how the world is. 'Let's not cover the emigration of physicians. Let's cover more positive, colourful subjects. I want to see plum.' Okay, then you are a content producer. We must cover the war, the emigration of the doctors, the inflation. That is why we are trying to preserve the balance. We publish one piece on plum and we cover Palestine as well. (Interviewee 7, personal communication, August 7, 2024)

Another problem is the need to create a specific department and hire a number of employees to benefit from the opportunities that the social media platforms might

offer. Five of the interviewees stated that the tailoring the format of their news for each platform is one of the most challenging tasks for them due to the lack of economic resources and number of employees and only seven of them stated that they have either have a different team or a specific person to work for their social media platforms. Diversifying the number of platforms to actively be a part of requires allocating a portion of their limited budget and affording to hire social media experts, which is quite compelling for the independent organizations. Most of them can only afford to be active on two platforms, mostly Twitter/X and Instagram. On the other hand, being active on platforms such as Youtube or TikTok requires a different set of technical capabilities and more budget to produce high-quality audio-visual content. Interviewee 28 states that they activated the monetization feature of Twitter/X, however it mandates to post tweets throughout the day that do not have redirecting links outside of the platform, which requires intense labour and new employees. They only have two people responsible of the social media platforms, the third one had been recently laid off, and the financial situation of their organization does not allow growth in employment. Therefore, they cannot adapt their news format as much as they would like to. Streaming live press conferences and the weekly meetings of the political parties are all they can do in addition to their work on their website. At present their earnings from Twitter/X do not afford to pay the bill for the Blue account.

Eight journalist interviewees also pointed out the lack of financial resources to allocate for an effective social media strategy. Thus, they try to make the best of what they already have. Interviewee 21 finds the solution to make investment in advertising to tackle with this inequality. In order to reach more people on the social media platforms, they invest in advertising as much as they can, which provides more audience on social media without allocating a serious amount of budget to create a new department and to improve the infrastructure of their website. Still, they struggle to compete with those organizations that have economic means to allocate a higher amount to advertising; “so, the platforms favour them. Economy, in fact, causes unfair competition.” (Interviewee 21, personal communication, October 2, 2024). Some of the journalist interviewees underlined the lack of labour needed for a steady SEO and social media strategy due to the serious financial struggles. In particular the goal of the social media platforms to keep their users in their ecosystem as long as possible create

an ecosystem where powerful gains more power. They achieve their goal by re-shaping algorithms in a way that suits their strategies such as the requirement to share engaging posts constantly and suppressing any content from the unpaid accounts and with directing links. This reflects the ultimate contradiction between the private owners of the digital platforms that are profit-oriented entities and their usage for public interests by the news media producers. The journalists describe this inequality as the unfair competition and the encouragement of an unhealthy information system since the transnational corporation do not give priority to such a small market as Türkiye is.

Interviewee 1, Interviewee 15, Interviewee 16 and Interviewee 27 are among those interviewees who state that their efforts are inadequate and they are aware of the need to put more work for the digital platforms, however they do not have either the economic or human resources. When asked if they consider to adapt their news stories for the digital platforms, they gave similar answers with each other: “Those platforms want you to share content in every three to four minutes which is challenging for us. You need to hire a person specific for that job.” (Interviewee 16, personal communication, July 18, 2024) “We do not have the power. We know how the rest of the world does. I know separate teams come together for each platform. I wish we could do that, too.” (Interviewee 27, personal communication, August 14, 2024) “We should create a team of experts. However, we can only deal with Facebook and Twitter.” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, July 17, 2024) Due to the lack of economic resources, a few of the interviewees who are news editors are also responsible of handling the social media accounts. Interviewee 7’s organization is among those digital media outlets that drew a line between the journalist as a news producer and the social media expert as a person who is responsible of announcing the news pieces to the outside world. Interviewee 7 states that as a journalist and editor-in-chief the interviewee refrains from getting involved with managing the social media accounts. They hired an employee specifically handle those accounts. Besides, they have started to produce more lifestyle subjects such as food and travel since that type of content brings more interaction and thus, more advertising revenue.

Interviewee 14 also mentioned a similar concern about focusing on lifestyle content in particular for Youtube since Youtube favours content about gaming, food,

sports, music and cinema rather than journalism and news. Interviewee 14 stated that time to time they play with the idea to create one or two different Youtube channels specific to such as food or other non-news content in order to diversify their revenue models. The distinction efforts between journalism and social media content in Interviewee 7's organization and the considerations towards content production in addition to being a news media organization in Interviewee 14's organization raise the question if these concerns indicate an upcoming trend in digital journalism. Interviewee 12 anticipates that the news ecosystem will create its own influencers emerged among amateurs and virality-focused individuals in the next few years. A term has already been found on the internet for these people: jinfluencer.

A jinfluencer, at first glance, is what some might consider a blend of the journalist and the influencer, representing a dynamic individual with fresh perspectives and digital prowess. These content creators are now redefining and reshaping the marketing and social media platforms where the boundary between news and promotional content is already blurred. (Gopalakrishnan, 2024)

One of the biggest UK publishers Reach, which owns media organizations such as Daily Mirror and Daily Express, laid off its 450 employees to replace some of them with influencers (McEntee, 2024). A piece published in the Guardian a few years ago argues that writers and journalists should also become influencers if they aim to have an impact with what they write (Hobbs, 2019). Yet, blurring the boundaries between journalism and the profit-oriented work of being an influencer raises many questions. A while ago, two popular journalists, Nevşin Mengü and Cüneyt Özdemir who are happenend to be driven away from the traditional mainstream media and made a transition to digital journalism, got in an argument with Faruk Bildirici – an independent ombudsman – over Mengü's decision to post an image with a #isbirliği [#collaboration] tag that promotes a daily vitamin product. Bildirici stated that being a subject of any sorts of advertising is against the international journalistic standards (Duvar, 2022). Mengü and Özdemir responded that this is the new media order with

the justification that since they do journalism in an environment where there is no boss and no reliable income, they have to find their own way to make a living and sustain their business (Duvar, 2022). Financial sustainability and public good are two prominent factors that define the news-business boundary (Coddington, 2015, p. 68). This wall started to shatter in the 20th century with the emergence of native advertising and entrepreneurial journalism, which should be interpreted as the need to find a solution against the changing mechanisms of the news media. Coddington (2015) highlights that in an environment where the intermediaries vanish such as the editors or the owners that bear the responsibility of handling the business, the loss of the news-business boundary should be a leverage to create a more democratic and autonomous journalistic ecosystem (p. 79).

On the other hand, what the independent digital news media has been going through is not an unprecedented occurrence. Interviewee 3 reminds the traditional way of formatting news. Just like in a newspaper where an editor and a journalist must consider the *mis-en-page* that prioritizes the attraction of the reader when writing a story, in the digital environment they are aware that they play by the rules of the digital platforms which basically reflects the same motivation. Yet, they do not embrace this approach for their original production in the website. However, when it comes to social media platforms such as Youtube, they consider the ways in which their news production can align with Youtube's algorithms without transforming their media outlet into a tabloid.

There is no other way. If a media organization aims to establish a reputation and is driven in journalism, then you have to work in those platforms. While doing that, you need to set yourself apart from the others similar to you by revealing the background story and stressing the importance of the subject without spoiling the language. Is it difficult? Of course, but do we have to do it? We have to. Otherwise we would deny what we call alternative, independent media. (Interviewee 3, personal communication, July 23, 2024)

The organization that Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 22 work at is one of the rare independent digital native news outlets that started with a main strategy around a digital platform to build a reputation and audience, and recently has been moving forward to establish their own website as the main platform through subscriptions. Interviewee 22 explains that before starting the news production they analyzed the needs of the news market as well as the social media market and after that they decided to start with the audio-visual content production due to the fact that the most majority of the digital news media have been heavily text-oriented. Since they had a small team, they decided to concentrate on only one platform.

First of all you need to be aware of what platform promotes what type of content format and trends. This affects all aspects of journalistic practices from the choice of subject to the news format. You determine your strategy accordingly. (Interviewee 22, personal communication, July 24, 2024)

Interviewee 21 and Interviewee 25 also point out the encouragement of shorter content. Interviewee 25 states that in spite of them having no word limit on Twitter/X due to the Blue membership, they still try to limit their tweets within the 280-word threshold since the attention span of the audience is low. Also, shorter tweets gain more attraction which brings more profit to Twitter/X and thus results in more visibility. Due to the similar concerns in their mind and the decline in written text, Interviewee 21 expresses that the tendency towards short content leads people to pay more attention to the audio-visual stories. Therefore, they have made daily video production a priority in their agenda. In fact, the rising focus on video production seems to be an international phenomenon. The trend for 2024 shows that two thirds of journalists intend to produce more videos since the audio-visual materials are consumed a lot more than text-based materials (Newman, 2024, p. 21).

In terms of technicality of the news format, Interviewee 28 was the only interviewee who explained how Google structures the news production and format.

The interviewee states that they have been trying to shorten the titles and the length of the pieces.

For example, when an X person talked about something, we used to write the whole speech. But we need to include only the part that has the news value. The duration of the page visits is limited and it is not possible for a reader to read the whole speech in that limited period of time. Thus, we must be careful in including what needs to be known. (Interviewee 28, personal communication, August 8, 2024)

More importantly, another reason why they shorten the length of the story and make it a more compact piece is that Google's aim to display advertising as much as possible: "What does Google want?", asks Interviewee 28 and continues;

It wants to display advertising. It does not care about your news. If your news is lengthy and the advertisements start to appear towards the end of the page, then those advertisements will not be seen by the reader. Then what you are going to do is to keep your story short and have as many advertisement as you can in a single page. It is a win-win situation. (Interviewee 28, personal communication, August 8, 2024)

Other significant changes they have made to become more compatible with the Google algorithms is to separate the background stories and reduce the amount of hyperlinks since Google treats hyperlinks as toxic backlinks and punishes the news outlets by de-indexing them. Therefore, they create another page with a different URL for the background stories and place it as a preview box in the end of the original story.

A research about the dependency relationship between the news media organizations and the most popular search engine platform of South Korea, Naver, found out that the established news media organizations are more dependent to the platform since they increase the audience reach and receive the most majority of their traffic through Naver (Pyo, 2024). Yet, the competition and the financial incapacabilities of individual journalists indirectly provide more autonomy and independence from the platform (Pyo, 2024, p. 4580). This correlation between the size and power of a news organization and the dependency to the digital platforms demonstrates a contradictory relationship between two parties (Pyo, 2024, p. 4585), which could be applied to the case of the independent digital native news media organizations in Türkiye as well.

Where the inequality is felt the most is Twitter/X for the journalist interviewees. Being the platform of the one who pays the piper calls the tune, payment for ₺56,25 – around \$1,60 by December 2024 – (X, 2024) is enough to get ahead. One of the interviewees states that they realize the prioritization of the Blue members through the numbers of visibility and engagement, therefore they cannot make healthy evaluation of how the algorithms affect their visibility. Another interviewee expresses that their visibility and reach significantly increased after starting the paid membership on Twitter/X. Especially the difference is apparent when the interviewee compares their account to similar unpaid ones. In addition to the paid account, the interviewee points out the importance of keeping up with the subjects discussed on the platform and being able to create content on that instant. The interviewee is able to observe the monthly fluctuation in the reach and engagement of their posts between when the interviewee could tweet more often on the interesting subjects and when they could not due to the busy schedule. On the other hand, having to be constantly online creates a disadvantage for journalists since they could not allocate that amount of time which causes users with different motivations to take over the digital sphere. According to NewsGuard's Misinformation Monitor (2023), the blue check-accounts of Twitter/X are responsible for 73 percent of misinformation and disinformation about the Israel-Hamas War between October 7, 2023 and October 14, 2023 in the platform. These posts were viewed more than 100 million times and received 1,349,979 engagements (Brewster, et al., 2023). RSF (2023) describes X as “the sanctuary of disinformation.” Therefore, lacking the labour force and the time required by the structure of the profit-

oriented corporations are the contributing factors to the dominance of the unethical practices.

The dominance of distribution over the production reveals itself in this subject, which leads to the adaptation of pragmatism by the journalists in order to maintain the independence and the survival of the news business. As understood from the interviews, in order to sustain the financial viability and to increase the audience reach without sacrificing from the journalistic ethics and standards, the journalists are open to adapt their news production process according to the requirements set by the digital platforms.

5.2.3 On the decentralization of censorship. During their response about the impact of algorithms on the news visibility seven of the journalist interviewees associated their answers to the censorship applied by the digital platforms. According to those interviewees, the censorship mechanisms of the digital platforms are politically-oriented regardless of being compliant with the local administrations or the international politics. Only Interviewee 10 upholds their position on the argument that those decisions were not taken with political concerns, but are taken with profit concerns as well as being the results of technical inadequacies of the independent digital news media. Yet, this is the point where the political economy of censorship comes in. In order to stay in the market and grow their business, these corporations do not hesitate to apply censorship. After all, one should not kill the goose that lays the golden egg. The arguments of Schiller (1996) and Mattelart (2000) on the illusion of freedom of commercial expression being promoted as freedom of expression are confirmed by the practices of the digital platforms.

Interviewee 2's and Interviewee 22's experiences could be considered as the proof of the claims above. Interviewee 2 states that their posts related to Gaza were immediately removed by Instagram. "Even though we are being very careful about what image we post, once the algorithm picks up a word or image related to Gaza or Hamas, Instagram removes the post in an instant," Interviewee 2 says (personal communication, July 16, 2024). Interviewee 22 confirms Interviewee 2's statement and points out that Instagram and Youtube repress or remove the content related to

Gaza and Hamas intentionally in order to prevent praise to terrorism, Hamas propaganda and anti-Israel discourse.

Our first post about Gaza was removed and it was in an explainer format to inform the audience about what happened there. Probably it was due to the Palestine's or Hamas's flag [in the image]. You have to show that flag, because you are explaining the Hamas attack. By the way, it removes automatically. It does not check the content and then decide. When the filter catches, it removes.

(Interviewee 22, personal communication, July 24, 2024)

Unlike Instagram, Youtube represses the content instead of total removal from the platform. Interviewee 22 alleges that they realized a significant decrease in engagement in the posts related to Gaza in comparison to other content they posted on the platform. When I asked if they have ever contacted Instagram or Youtube, Interviewee 22 said that they did not, because those corporations are not responsive unless it is a big media outlet such as BBC or Al-Jazeera. Human Rights Watch (2023) warned that Meta systemically censors content related to Palestine for many years and this censorship heavily increased after October 7, 2023. The NGO reviewed the 1,050 cases that were censored, suppressed or removed between October and November 2023. The posts were from more than 60 countries, dominantly in English and peaceful content in support of Palestine (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This is not a new policy. During the 2021 conflict between Israel and Palestine, Meta was accused of violating the human right of Palestinians through censorship on the related content (Paul, 2023). Moreover, Meta (2024) has recently announced that within their policy of hate speech they have started to remove content that contains the word "Zionist" as a proxy word that targets the Jewish community and the Israelis unless the content refers to the political movement itself.

Additionally, Interviewee 8 underlines the automatization of censorship and gives the example of how the social media companies censored any content that

includes the word “Covid-19” without taking its context into consideration, which consequently facilitated the dissemination of disinformation.

The lack of semantic analysis and a false belief in algorithms result in spreading the false information. For example, we made a research on the news consumption habits in Türkiye and we wanted to promote it on Instagram. Instagram did not allow us alleging that it is a political content, which was not true. But Facebook earned more than 100,000₺ out of a fake video about Kılıçdaroğlu. (Interviewee 8, personal communication, August 2, 2024)

Again I asked if they have gotten in touch with Meta. The interviewee replied that they are familiar with Meta’s management style on the subject matter which always leads to deadlock. According to the interviewee, when these sorts of matters are to be left in the hands of corporates, they only come up with solutions that can generate profit for them. As Interviewee 8, Interviewee 28 points out the economic consequences of the corporate censorship as well. Interviewee 28 claims that Youtube refrains from placing advertising onto the political content and since most of their content is political it is another struggle to deal with for them. Their news organization is also among those whose content have been removed on the grounds of the violation of the community standards. Interviewee 28 states that two of their videos related to the Israel-Palestine conflict were removed on Youtube with the claim of containing violence, therefore they have not been able to upload videos about Palestine. The interviewee believes that it is a politically-oriented strategy of Youtube. As an alternative they uploaded videos onto another streaming platform, Daily Motion, however the situation was not quite different there as well. The interviewee also mentioned the claims about Instagram’s intentions to completely remove the political content from their platform.

I do not know what we are going to do, if that is true. Youtube is the only streaming platform for many publishers. Daily Motion cannot replace [Youtube] and on the other hand, they are about to leave the Turkish market.

If it comes to an environment where everyone would have to host their own video, it means a huge cost and besides, we will need to deal with advertising and marketing all by ourselves. This is not something we can handle economically. (Interviewee 28, personal communication, August 8, 2024)

Being another victim of the automatic censorship, Interviewee 27 is the only interviewee who stated that they contacted Facebook and received no response after removal of a video displaying verbal assault to a LGBTQI+ couple on the grounds of violating the community standards. Even though the video was shared to raise awareness and demonstrate support to LGBTQI+ community, the non-human assessment process of Facebook perceived the post as the promotion of violence. Facebook not only removed the post, but also stopped their advertising and monetization instruments on the platform.

You are dealing with a mechanic thing. There is no human to communicate. This has been going on for a few months and we are still blocked. There is a section to make money and that section has been closed for us. We think that it is not indefinite. We can post news stories, but cannot upload video. When I speak to their employees in Türkiye, they told us to send different things to different departments. So we did. We are still waiting. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, August 14, 2024)

A similar false censorship was applied by TikTok as well. Interviewee 27 stated that it was due to the usage of the word “war” in the short video, which was perceived as the inclusion of violence by the Chinese company. However, the interviewee thinks that journalists should not dwell on these sorts of practices since they are commercial enterprises that currently dominate the news ecosystem.

Handling the issue from an historical point of view, Interviewee 3 argues that censorship used to be more centralized whereas in the digital age the censorship is decentralized since each corporate has their own censorship mechanisms independent from each other, which results in that each media organization has to go along with if they want to reach their audience in those platforms. In their reference to centralized censorship Interviewee 3 indicates that the states used to be the sole operator of censorship and that power had to be delegated to the private corporations in the digital environment. Yet again, Interviewee 1 argues that the Turkish government is an influential political figure for the operational management teams of the Facebook Middle East and Türkiye. This is a reciprocal relationship since the member of those teams are tend to share similar ideologies as the Turkish government, the interviewee claims. In order to prove their point, the interviewee reminds Facebook's censorship practices on the pages belonged to the Kurdish media and political figures in 2013 and claims that a representative of the social media platform at the time admitted that they blocked the content where they see a legal threat. "It is not their job to assess any sorts of legal threat," Interviewee 1 asserts (personal communication, July 17, 2024) and opposes the perspectives such as Interviewee 10's that claim the global intermediaries would not make political decisions based on the local politics. A few articles were also published in 2013 about the removal or suspension of certain accounts in Facebook and Twitter based on false grounds or even without any justification (Adanır, 2013; Akgül, 2013). Before the general elections held in May 2023 Musk justified Twitter/X's decision to block access to some accounts by announcing that the Turkish government sent warning notices about a possible throttling in case Twitter fails to obey the court orders (Gazete Oksijen, 2023a). Musk's announcement of such a decision, which is usually proceeded behind the closed doors, confirms Interviewee 1's statements. Interviewee 1 also adds that their Youtube videos are blocked on singular complaints such as from TRT. "For example, we create a video about a news story in TRT with referring to TRT in the story. Still, TRT files a complaint and Youtube blocks our video", the interviewee says and states that they believe that these are the attempts to slow down the engagement on their pages, however it is impossible to prove it (Interviewee 1, personal communication, July 17, 2024).

The statements regarding to the corporate censorship were not made as a direct response to a direct interview question, but rather the interviewees started to explain what they have to deal with during their responses regarding to the algorithms and the audience reach. Already struggling with generating revenue out of what they produce, which will be dealt with in the following section, the various practices of censorship applied by the digital platforms further jeopardize the viability of the independent digital news media as well as pose a threat to media pluralism.

5.2.4 Sacrificing copyright: generating revenue through digital platforms.

A toxic relationship is defined as a relationship in which one party disrespects and devalues the other as well as where there is lack of support (Glass, 1995). Just like between two people, the relationship between the digital news media and the digital platforms resembles a toxic relationship. Although the journalists complain about various unfair practices from how the news media is unwanted to how the algorithms are biased, they still would like to evaluate the funding opportunities provided by the digital platforms. Besides, the digital platforms boast how much they invest in journalism in order to preserve a healthy information ecosystem. In the latest report published by Google News Initiative it is stated that since 2018 they collaborated with more than 7000 news partners from more than 120 countries by providing funds for more than \$300 million (Google, 2021). Facebook is also another major platform that funds news media for the very similar purposes stated by Google. Facebook made its biggest investment to news media during the Covid-19 pandemic period. The company announced that they allocate a budget of \$100 million at a time when the need for true information reaches its peak, in particular local journalism needs financial support since the demand for information increases to keep the loved ones safe (Meta, 2020). Yet, it has been heavily claimed that these initiatives are public relations strategies to influence the public opinion and to lobby against the bills such as News Media Bargaining Code of Australia and Online News Act of Canada, both of which oversees the copyright payment to news media by the digital platforms on the grounds of profitting from the distribution of the news media products (Miller, 2023). In Türkiye, the works on the Digital Copyright Law have been accelerated and expected to come into force as soon as possible. The Deputy Minister of Transport and Infrastructure stated that the law aims to prevent the exploitation of labour and ensure the copyright

protection of the content producers (Topçu, 2024). In addition to the legislative works, the Competition Authority has been investigating the online advertising industry for a while. The findings of the Competition Authority demonstrated that Google and Meta dominated the advertising industry in Türkiye and have a disrupting role in the market (Sümer Özdemir, et al., 2023). Furthermore, in their preliminary report the Competition Authority (2023) stated their concerns on this concentrated market structure and claimed that it causes a harmful information environment through encouraging clickbait journalism.

In such a digital news ecosystem, the majority of the journalist interviewees embrace a pragmatic approach towards their relationship with the digital platforms. Since they try to preserve their independence and to sustain their business at the same time, they are mostly alone in finding their own path. Six of the journalist interviewees declared that they are open to the idea of applying for a funding program of a digital platform such as Google News Initiative. Among the interviewees and their organizations, only two digital independent news organizations and one journalist interviewee received funding from the digital platforms. The ones who participated in the funding programs see them as an alternative to diversify their revenue models and to increase their income. The funding program was at the core for only one of the interviewees since it provided the seed capital. However, that interviewee stated that they could not benefit from funding as much as they would like to and thus, could not manage to sustain their business. The failure of the project could be due to a variety of factors such as the algorithmic bias, the lack of audience interest to the international news, the interviewee's lack of technical skills and knowledge on editing and use of effects, according to the interviewee. On the algorithmic bias reason, the interviewee argues that the digital platform is open to anyone's work and anyone's consumption, which means that algorithms are not designed around the news media. For this reason, the interviewee suggests that the journalists should adapt themselves to those algorithms.

At this point, a critical assessment was made by four interviewees on that the news media do not take place among their priorities and thus, those platforms create a dependency through their revenue models. Interviewee 8 claims that in order to evade

the political pressure from the European Union and the USA against the encouraging atmosphere for disinformation, the digital platforms use funding as a public relations strategy in order to create an image that pretends to support journalism. In spite of this view, from a pragmatic point of view, the interviewee also thinks that the independent digital news media organizations should apply and receive funding from the digital platforms since the news industry is desperate to survive and sustain the business. The more the independent news media receive those funding the better, according to Interviewee 8. On the other hand, along with Interviewee 8, Interviewee 22 also puts the emphasis on the indifference of the public indirectly allows those platforms to implement arbitrary policies and to dominate the information market. Interviewee 11 illustrates this attempt of dominating the information market by pointing out how the commodification of women and clickbait journalism are patted on the back. Even though the rest of the interviewees are distant to either apply for or receive funding from the digital platforms, they all seek ways to earn money from their activities on the digital platforms such as advertising and engagement.

The relationship based on dependency does not solely rely on the funding programs. Activating the monetization model through engagement and advertising are also two determinant factors to gain control over the digital news media industry. According to Interviewee 12, generating revenue through platforms is set on the balance of price and performance and since these platforms are profit-oriented corporations, they will prioritize profit which eventually jeopardizes the existence of journalism in this ecosystem. Interviewee 4 is also on the same page with these interviewees and states that the revenue opportunities provided on these platforms render the independent digital news media more dependent on those corporations. Interviewee 22 reminds the failure in the optimistic perspective regarding to the first years of the rise of social media and the possibility of the independent and sustainable journalism provided by the digital platforms. Therefore, the interviewee suggests that a digital newsroom strategy must take into account that everything can change unexpectedly which requires a versatile strategic plan that must be prepared in order not to leave the sustainability of journalism in the hands of the corporations. In addition to that, the de-prioritization of news causes journalists to surrender to algorithms, a space where they lack control over their product and its distribution.

Yet, one interviewee actively makes efforts to preserve their control not only in the news production process, but also in the distribution process. Interviewee 23 is the only interviewee who states that in addition to the donations, the “Join” button and advertising on Youtube, the interviewee’s revenue model includes the word of mouth. Therefore, the interviewee does not allocate any budget on an advertising strategy on those platforms. Interviewee 23 is also one of the prominent figures to fight for copyright and royalty issues on the digital platforms. As a result the interviewee stopped publishing their podcasts on Spotify. Even though the episodes were among the top ten lists, the interviewee thinks that the platform has an unfair system that exploits small publishers. Moreover, according the interviewee, not only the digital platforms sit at the root of the copyright problem, but also the lack of solidarity among journalists in terms of standing up to against them and their exploitation plays a significant role in the foundation and continuation of the current system.

They do not pay royalties to the content producers on purpose, because the content producers do not ask for it or think to ask. The reason why is that most of the content producers has contracts with a digital production company and earns money through that agreement. Therefore, they make money and think that they do not need advertising or royalty fees. However, I cannot earn money and those platforms use my content as they would like. This is not only against the copyright law, it is against the human rights. (Interviewee 23, personal communication, August 5, 2024)

The interviewee expresses that they made open calls on this subject many times to their colleagues, however big content producers did not support their call. Therefore, the interviewee’s attempts were unsuccessful which led them to leave Spotify. The interviewee continues to broadcast their program on Youtube due to its variety of revenue sources. However, Youtube is not a dreamland as well. The interviewee claims that in spite of its various revenue models, Youtube is not transparent about how those models really work and what factors and algorithms determine, increase or

decrease the revenue of a content producer. In regards to demanding royalty from the digital platforms, Interviewee 25 believes that the fight for it in the West has not been won yet, so it is almost impossible to win that fight in Türkiye.

Insisting on establishing their own website as the platform itself, Interviewee 19 and Interviewee 20 prefer to be active on journalistic platforms such as Kivvon that works based on copyright agreement rather than generating revenue through the transnational digital giants in order to remain independent and preserve the control over their production and distribution processes regardless of what policies those corporations embrace. Most of the journalist interviewees are also on the same page with Interviewee 19 and Interviewee 20. However, establishing the news website as the platform itself that the audience directly types the URL of the website on the browser takes quite a long time and is difficult to afford. Therefore, the short-term solution is to make the most out of the digital platform in spite that the transnational corporations are the sole winners of this system.

5.2.5 Regulating the digital platforms: should we expect them to care about public good?. All of the interviewees agree that the digital platforms should be regulated and the regulations should be implemented effectively. When asked if public good could be expected from them, the interviewees argued that since they are driven by profit, only through law and regulations public good could be ensured. The only regulation regarding to the social media platforms is the Additional Article 4 within the Law No. 5651 that entails the assignment of a representative of the foreign companies whose daily reach exceeds one million and requires them to obey the court orders for the access blocking or content removal, and cooperate with the authorities. Yet, the effectiveness of the regulation is quite controversial. On the other hand, Twitter/X has been accused of being the only platform that does not abide by the law and regulations in Türkiye, particularly in terms of the court decisions regarding to the access blocking and content removal. As previously mentioned, in order to prevent the throttling of the digital platform before the general elections in May 2023, Twitter/X announced that they blocked access to some accounts and removed a number of tweets (Euronews, 2023). The company's Global Government Affairs (2023) shared a tweet stating that they were negotiating with the Turkish government to protect the freedom

of expression and took some government requests to the court to object the decisions. A similar struggle happened before the local elections in 2024. While the other digital platforms obey the court order regarding to the access blocking decision of 210 content about the corruption allegations against the certain politicians, Twitter/X objected to the court order on the grounds of freedom of expression for 47 content on Twitter/X listed among those 210 content (Korkut, 2024c). Aside from the regulatory controversies, The Digital Publications Commission under the Turkish Grand National Assembly has recently been working on a digital copyright act that would require the digital distributors to pay royalty to the content producers. However, the works of the commission are not finalized yet and there is no certain schedule about when the law is expected to come to the Assembly.

As understood from the cases above, the legislation in Türkiye is mostly effective in regulating the speech rather than the market structure or the guaranteeing a healthy information ecosystem. The statements of the interviewees confirm this distinctive feature of the regulatory policies and also some of them pointed out the need to regulate the market structure itself that currently poses a threat against democracy. In comparison to the international struggle for the attempts to regulate the digital platforms and the continuing debates regarding to those companies causing the collapse of the business models and viability of the news media, many interviewees state that it is harder to legislate a regulation in Türkiye since the market is relatively small even though they think that the digital platforms must be regulated. Interviewee 15 states that it is very difficult to regulate the transnational monopolies such as Google and Twitter/X. Despite that some countries have attempts to regulate those companies on a national level, it would not be effective since those monopolies know how to use their economic power in their advantage.

Monopolies, at anytime and anywhere, empower and serve the established order. Therefore, the ruling power does not fundamentally have a problem with them. More so, the power could obtain better means of control and surveillance mechanisms through technology, which leads to a strong cooperation between

two parties. A struggle needs to be waged in the digital world as well. Just like the social and political struggle for the inequalities and injustice is a whole, the same should be done in the digital media as well. (Interviewee 15, personal communication, August 12, 2024)

Due to the risks and dangers they pose against the information ecosystem, Interviewee 1 agrees that the states have a right to intervene and regulate the digital platforms. However, the interviewee claims that the Turkish government use these fair reasons to legitimize the negotiations and threats against the content producers as well as the platforms. A similar perspective is stated also by Interviewee 22. In terms of the legislation process of regulating the digital platforms in Türkiye, Interviewee 22 points out that the government sits down with the representatives of those companies and they make decisions as a result of the negotiations between themselves. Additionally, no entity whether governmental or non-governmental cares about what the actors in the media industry think about the changes in the regulations or the structure of how the industry works since their primary goal is to diminish the influence area of journalism, according to the interviewee. Although, Interviewee 15 believes that if the states and non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations want to come together and aim to prevent the injustice and break the monopolistic structure, they can manage to legislate and implement effective regulations. However, most of the practices regarding to the protection of competition and advertising regulations remain ineffective in terms of providing equal opportunities. The reason why is that the monopolies serve the continuation of the established order and the reproduction of capitalism through the developments in the digital world.

Therefore, it would not be right to position the monopolies in an oppositional place against the power. What should be positioned in the oppositional places are the monopolies and the public. In a classical way of saying, it is the power problem or the pressure you put on that power. (Interviewee 15, personal communication, August 12, 2024)

According to Interviewee 15, the disadvantage of the digital media in terms of pursuing this struggle is the lack of knowledge of ordinary people in front of the ever-improving technology. The knowledge of the public on the reproduction of social inequalities becomes more inadequate each day and those big monopolies are able to manage how much the society should know via the digital world, which prevents the social pressure and strengthening of the struggle, the interviewee adds. As a response to the power and the pressure problem, Interviewee 8 suggests that there should be a carrot and stick policy. However, in Türkiye there is a carrot and the stick is an instrument that the government can only use which results in the arbitrary usage of power such as blockings or sanctions imposed by the Competition Authority and also in the preservation of the current unfair system. Besides, Interviewee 26 points out the ineffectiveness of the regulations in Türkiye that have economic and political aims such as blocking, throttling or taxation. The interviewee says that the representatives of the digital platforms are located outside of the country due to one article in the Law No. 5651 stating that if the legal person is a corporation, then the representative could be located outside of the country, therefore the legal forces cannot find any interlocutor in case of the violation of the law. Yet, besides the temporary throttling practices, the concerns in regards to the ability to reach their own voters the government does not make any further sanctions in terms of total blockage of the digital platforms.

Most majority of the interviewees deal with the need for a regulation on the basis of advertising and the conflict of interest between the governments and the digital platforms as the profit-oriented corporations. Interviewee 23 was the only interviewee who handles the regulation issue from a financial and taxation perspective. The interviewee is also one of the first producers who manage to solve the digital income tax problem through their own individual efforts.

It has nothing to do with freedom. This is a space for fraud at the same time.

No one knows on what basis Youtube make payments to the content producers, how they measure the engagement, how they calculate the subscription income.

(Interviewee 23, personal communication, August 5, 2024)

Therefore, the interviewee is an advocate for a regulation that holds the digital platforms liable to be transparent about their income strategies in the country and the algorithmic structure in the monetization process.

In terms of the copyright regulation, Interviewee 24 states that since the intention of the government is towards the economic decline of the independent journalists, matters such as copyright and royalty cannot find space in the government's agenda. The government's agenda, according to the interviewee, is to force Meta and other companies alike to open offices in Türkiye and share their data with the government. What happened during the earthquake with Twitter/X is an apparent example of this understanding. During the February 6 earthquakes, Elon Musk offered to send the Starlink satellites due to the severe internet shortage in the region (Elon Musk, 2023). The Turkish government declined Musk's offer stating that Türkiye has enough satellite capacity to provide the internet access (Gazete Oksijen, 2023b). However, some experts suggest that since Starlink is not approved in the country yet, in case of acceptance of the offer its satellites would have been exempted from the Law No. 5651 that provides control of data flow through the internet access providers (Korkut, 2023). Therefore, in Interviewee 24's view, improving the means of journalism or the human rights cannot find a place in the government's policies. At this point, Interviewee 26's emphasis on the boundary between the private sphere and public sphere brings a different perspective to the debate. "The private and public are intertwined in the digital platforms," Interviewee 26 states and argues that those digital platforms, especially Twitter/X, are owned by a person which may cause that platform to be evaluated as a private sphere (Interviewee 26, personal communication, July 25, 2024). Yet, that private sphere disseminate the products of news organizations and benefit from those contents, which consequently sides Interviewee 26 to agree that the digital platforms should pay royalty fees to the content producers. The interviewee gives an example from the U.S. and explains that within the scope of the First Amendment protests would not be allowed in front of the malls since they are privately owned places. Nonetheless, the actions and policies of the digital platforms implicate that they are aware of the impact they have on societies which overrides the argument about the private ownership and their existence as a private sphere.

At this point, Interviewee 10's arguments about the scale of harm those corporations cause underline the importance of regulating the digital platforms. Interviewee 10 puts the emphasis on the prevention of harm rather than expecting public good and states that the question should be how much harm they do cause when they make profit. Therefore, the interviewee suggests that since everything is regulated with the purpose of the protecting the public from harm, they should not do any good specifically, but the avoidance from the harm must be the case. On the other hand, the interviewee underlines the age problem of the legislators who are expected to regulate such a young space. Another interesting point the interviewee made was the freedom of not being manipulated. Interviewee 10 argues that the civic society, experts and advocates of human rights mostly deal with manipulation, fact-checking and disinformation, however right to not being manipulated should be discussed as well in terms of attention economy, mental health and social relations. Even though the interviewee approaches the subject from a negative liberty perspective, their views meet with the other interviewees in relation to taking necessary steps to create a healthy information system.

Two interviewees merge the problems of lack of knowledge and the unregulated structure. According to Interviewee 4, the journalists will be forced to become content producers of those companies as long as those platforms remain unregulated. Aside from this, Interviewee 15's argument on the lack of knowledge of ordinary people in front of the constantly changing technology and this being the disadvantage of the digital news media explains the inadequacy of the society's knowledge on the reproduction of social inequalities. Therefore, those big monopolies are able to manage what and how much information the society should know, which prevents the emergence of any social pressure and struggle, Interviewee 15 notes. If the regulations were to be executed in an environment where the regulators and users fail to obtain the technical skills, then the corporations will have the means to lead the system in accordance with their needs and benefits. If the social and political actors have the required knowledge but the system lacks regulation, then the outcome would be the same as the first scenario. Today we experience an information environment where we have half regulation and half knowledge, which equals to chaos.

5.2.6 Do the digital platforms help the independent digital news media flourish?. Up until now the questions asked and the answers given were based on how this digital news distribution structure founded on the transnational corporations control the news production process and harm the information ecosystem for the profit purposes. Nonetheless, all of the journalist interviewees and their organizations were actively involved with the digital platforms, which leads me to ask the question whether the digital platforms contribute to flourishing of the independent digital news media. Considering the risks the independent media struggle with in terms of media freedom, sustainability and pluralism. Except five of them, the journalist interviewees share a pragmatic point of view and agree on the idea that the independent news media and journalists should benefit from what digital platforms might provide as much as they can.

This is a game of winning and losing, as the journalists put it. According to Interviewee 3, the digital platforms want to dominate the internet and allow certain entities to grow within their system under their control. Therefore, the strategy of the media outlet that Interviewee 3 works at is to benefit from this system in a way that improves their organization without compromising from journalism. Underlining the resistance against the erosion of the ethical journalism, Interviewee 8 and Interviewee 29 are on the same page with Interviewee 3. Interviewee 8's perception is to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the market to improve and nourish the independent ethical news environment, which serves to create and sustain a healthy information system. Although, it may sound an achievable strategy, two of the journalist interviewees point out the oligopolistic structure of the information distribution market and the imperative relationship of the news media with this structure. Even though the interviewees above indicated that the journalists might have winning moments in addition to the times of losing, Interviewee 12 argues that the transnational corporations are always the winners of this system since all the data works in their interest. Therefore, it is hard to claim that the digital platforms improve journalism.

However, as Interviewee 7 put forward, considering the ways in which to increase income, accessibility and popularity the independent news media have to

work within this complex structure. By drawing attention to the changing news consumption habits, Interviewee 17 underlines that in the recent years the news readers stopped buying daily newspapers and did not replace this habit with following the digital news organizations on a daily basis or subscribing to certain news websites as a regular audience. Instead, the interviewee argues, the news audience between the ages of late 20s and early 30s read whatever the digital platforms show them in their feed. Therefore, in addition to the increase in traffic, existing on the digital platforms as a news outlet or a journalist is one of the most significant methods to reach the young urban population. Journo's survey on the news consumption habits supports Interviewee 17's claim. The young population aged between 18 and 34 access news through digital platforms, which 79 percent of the young adults access news through Google, 66,6 percent through Instagram and 47,3 percent through Youtube (Kızılkaya, et al., 2022). For this reason, the digital platforms are a crucial distribution channels to reach a wider and younger audience even if all else fails.

For many years, the space that the digital platforms allow the independent media to flourish has been the praising point of this structure. Seven journalist interviewees perceive that the digital platforms provide an alternative space for journalists who are not paid fairly in the traditional mainstream media and allow journalism possible beyond a handful of media conglomerates. Being a content producer on their own and earning a living through the digital platforms might be another way to continue to do journalism. According to them, digital platforms have provided a more plural media environment. As a former traditional mainstream media journalist and current freelancer Interviewee 13 thinks that the digital platforms have become a significant help for the unemployed journalists in Türkiye. The competent and qualified journalists were pushed out of the established media system due to various reasons, mostly political and economic such as being critical of the current government, the ownership structure with political affiliations that has businesses in other sectors or shutting down of their organizations mainly after the July 15 coup d'attempt.

Giving back to the news producers what they actually own would be the ultimate contribution of the digital platforms to the independent journalism. From

different perspectives three of the interviewees put the emphasis on the obligation of the independent news media to own the product that they create as a fundamental solution for the suppressive distribution process. One suggestion is to earn the copyright and the other solution is to move away from the profit-oriented distribution processes. Interviewee 28 finds the copyright regulation as a key to improve the conditions for the independent digital news media. According to Interviewee 28, if the copyright and royalty would be legislated in Türkiye, then it could be claimed that the digital platforms make a contribution to the independent journalism. However, the interviewee perceives that a quality journalism to demand such rights also lacks in the country which also creates a disadvantage for the sustainability of the independent journalism as well.

As an alternative, Interviewee 19 and Interviewee 20's answers cherish the idea of a journalistic platform in a cooperative style and perceive that this kind of a platform understanding could help flourish the digital news media ecosystem rather than the platforms of the profit-oriented corporations. The platform cooperatives are owned by the workers and users and the decision-making process relies on a democratic participation (Scholz, et al., 2021, p. 12). Platforms such as Fairbnb.coop – an alternative hospitality service, Resonate – a cooperative-style music streaming platform and Green Taxi Cooperative – alternative ride-hailing service are solid working examples that demonstrate such a business model can work. However, there is no cooperative-led business models for the market structure of platforms and digital news media. The challenge against the corporatism in news media is mostly focused on the collaborative journalistic efforts. One of the good examples regarding to the collaborative platforms is Kivvon. Kivvon is a privately-owned digital platform where journalists, content producers and the audience meet. Yet, the platform promotes collaboration among its publishers. In spite of the fact that it does not involve the producers in the decision-making processes as much as a cooperation would, it offers a various revenue models ranging from sharing advertising and sponsorship revenues in a transparent manner to earn royalty fees. Also, it creates opportunities where journalists can collaborate with each other during the production process. Some other initiatives have already established successful collaborative journalism businesses. The Bristol Cable and Co-op News are among two of them. Additionally, the efforts

of the civic society and academics also contribute to the public good oriented journalism efforts, i.e. Center for Cooperative Media of Montclair State University and the European Investigative Collaborations.

The shouts of joy for the digital platforms are no longer heard from the independent journalists. In an environment where the third parties became as much influential as an owner and editor positioning themselves as the new controllers of the information, the journalists mostly feel trapped and try to take the most out of it without sacrificing too much from the professional standards and ethics. Corporate censorship, labour theft and arbitrary practices of power fueled by the greed for more profit ensnare the journalism that has already been challenged by the state institutions and their restrictions. A few of the interviewees state the lack of solidarity within the news media industry and many of them suggested solutions that could be tried individually. Resignation to the current digital media structure that is privately-owned and surrounded by profit is the general attitude to survive and remain relevant. One silverlining is that the journalists are significantly aware of the necessity to build and establish their own news websites as the platform itself where the audience seeks them directly. It is not impossible to achieve.

5.3 A New Controller Has Arrived: Artificial Intelligence

Early on during the field work of this dissertation thesis, the journalist interviewees started to talk about how they use artificial intelligence (AI) technologies during the news production process when asked questions related to the news production and the distribution processes. Therefore, considering the future role that AI will play in content distribution and filtering, the need to include the impact of AI on the independent digital news media in this dissertation thesis emerged as an outcome of the interviews. In spite that most majority of the interviewees are not opposed to the usage of AI technologies in journalism, their experiments with it are quite limited due to several factors such as the financial cost and lacking the required digital skills, which we will look into further in the last section of this chapter. Before moving onto the relationship of the independent digital news media with AI, an overview will be presented followed by the regulation and practices in the international arena as well as the developments in Türkiye.

5.3.1 An overview on the artificial intelligence and journalism. Artificial intelligence is described as

the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings [and] [t]he term is frequently applied to the project of developing systems endowed with the intellectual processes, characteristic of humans, such as the ability to reason, discover meaning, generalize, or learn from past experience. (Copeland, 2024)

However, instead of embracing the term AI alone, OECD countries prefer to refer to it as AI system and defines it as “a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments. Different AI systems vary in their levels of autonomy and adaptiveness after deployment.” (Grobelnik, et al., 2024) This detailed definition of AI system also defines how AI technologies could be benefitted and, reversely, how they could be instrumentalized to tighten the information control. “Explicit or implicit objectives”, “prediction”, “recommendations”, and “decisions” are the keywords that give hints about a structure whose main objective is supposed to reduce the time-consuming tasks and increase the efficiency. In light of these two different dimensions, while AI technologies are more likely to enhance the news production process as long as the journalism ethics will not be sacrificed, the same technological products are more likely to threaten the independence and viability of the independent digital news media in the distribution process. Starting with a stress on the paradigm shift initiated by the recent AI developments in information production and distribution, Paris Charter on AI and Journalism prepared by RSF (2023) draws attention to the need to maintain the ethical and economic grounds of journalism when building a relationship with the AI services, and journalists’ need to get involved with the AI governance. Thus, the positive aspects could easily turn into a violation of creativity and originality. Against the automatization and the future takeover of the news reporting by these the actors of commodification Diakopoulos (2023) calls for unionization. The unions such as The

News Guild-Communications Workers of America, Writers Guild of America West, the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians, and Writers Guild of America East wrote a letter to the U.S. Congress demanding the protection of creative and journalistic work against AI, against the surveillance of the employees via AI technologies and also the right to collective bargain on AI policies in the work environment (Entralgo, 2024). Through the analysis of several cases and practices of the unions it is argued that the union-represented workplaces in media increase the job security and, support and encourage the training of journalists for new technologies (Salamon, 2024). However, Diakopoulos's (2023) call is yet to be achieved.

On the other hand, incorporating AI technologies into the newsrooms could provide independence from the digital platforms and the authoritative figures to a certain extent, which also could motivate the media workers to improve and adapt their skills to the emergent technologies (Diakopoulos, 2023). Although, this seems as a brilliant opportunity, except for certain media conglomerates, small-scale independent news media will struggle to finance to build their own AI system. While acknowledging the benefits that AI might bring to the news production process, two of the interviewees state that the integration of AI into their systems will require additional cost in the expenditure list, which they cannot handle in the current situation. Therefore, the lack of financial resources of the news media will lead to another string attached to the digital platforms since having their own AI software, employing the necessary skilled workers and maintaining the required hardware would create another financial burden, in particular, on the independent digital news media outlets (Simon, 2022, p. 1838). For this reason, the offer made by the digital platforms would be more appealing to those news media organizations and it will add one more reason to maintain the relationship of dependency between two parties. This will jeopardize the independence of news media even further by the opaque decision-making process of the digital platforms' control mechanisms (Simon, 2022, p. 1843). Simon (2024) stated that in order to minimize the cost of exploring the news media organizations tend to mimic each other when going through the early days of an innovation (p. 151). This habit of mimicking will contribute to the diffusion of this new layer of the dependency across the news industry. On the other hand, the emergence of AI as a new and invasive information controller paves the way for third

parties to hold power over the information flow which also might cause the erosion of journalism as an institution (Simon, 2024, p. 166). This concern was raised by one of the expert interviewees. According to the interviewee, AI-based system will replace journalism based on reporting such as breaking news, weather forecast or match score. Most of the journalist interviewees, though, strongly believe that no technology can replace the work of a journalist. Yet, they interpret this paradigm shift as an inevitable change in the form of journalism.

The possible threats posed by the private corporations such as the digital platforms carry significant risks for the exercise of online speech as well. The flexible designation of AI according to the needs and motives of each institution or individual, the secrecy about how its decision processes function to promote or remove content, when it is put into action and what information it can obtain from users without their awareness are some of the main concerns about its impact on media freedom (Haas, 2020, p. 2). When the profit-driven decision processes of the actors of commodification meet with the opaque structure of the AI technologies, the control over the information production and distribution will most likely to reach to an unprecedented levels. Therefore, the public is warned against the AI-based filtering structures that puts forward the content that attracts the attention, increases the engagement and drives profit regardless of its quality due to its potential consequences such as radicalization, polarization and the dissemination of threatening content (Haas, 2020, p. 3). The release of the departments related to the ethics and content as the first teams to let go during the mass layoffs as a result of the alleged economic hardships was highlighted in the Freedom on the Net 2023 report focused on the potential power of AI over information. Twitter/X being at the top of the list, Meta, Google, Microsoft, Twitch and Snap are the platforms that let go of the employees in the departments such as trust and safety, content moderation, human rights and public policy in 2023 (Freedom House, 2023b, pp. 20-21). This prioritization in times of mass layoffs demonstrates the level of importance given to a healthy information ecosystem by the international corporations.

Additionally, the distribution process of the news media will become more complex and complicated in the very near future. The problems such as algorithmic

manipulation or algorithmic bias will be more elaborate and insidious. Starting from what information could be circulated to how it should be serviced to the audience will be under the control of AI systems. Even though the concept of the actors of commodification is preferred in this study, the gatekeeping process explained by Simon (2022) could be helpful to understand the workings of AI technologies within the relations of news production and distribution. The table created by Simon (2022) defines the stages of the gatekeeping process of the digital platforms and how AI is used in each stage. According to the table, in the first stage, “selection of information”, of the gatekeeping process AI is used for “information discovery”, in the second stage called “production of news” AI is used for the creation, editing, formatting and archiving of the news content, in the third stage of “distribution of news” AI is benefitted for the “personalisation of news offerings” and “automation of news offerings”, and in the last stage, which is named as “audience and business analytics”, AI is used for “analysis and prediction of audience behaviour” (Simon, 2022, p. 1834). Yet, since this table is designed specifically for the distribution relations between the journalists and the digital platforms, it only demonstrates one aspect of the AI usage in journalism.

Table 8

The Gatekeeping Process in AI Use Case (Simon, 2022, p. 1834)

Stage of the gatekeeping process	Description of AI use cases
<i>Selection of information</i>	Information discovery (e.g., open-data mining of social media or other accessible data or databases), story detection, verification (e.g., image or video recognition, provenance checks), categorisation (tagging or categorisation of information, e.g., image tagging, creation of metadata), recommendation of information, data cleaning and data wrangling
<i>Production of news</i>	Writing/creation of news content (e.g., automated writing of stories based on structured data), editing and formatting of news content (e.g., automatic editing of short video segments), various production tasks (e.g., automated translation and transcription, bias detection in stories), archiving and archive-mining
<i>Distribution of news</i>	Personalisation of news offerings (e.g., recommendations, automated news feeds and newsletters, personalised translation), automation of news offerings (e.g., website displays, chat bots, read-aloud-functions)
<i>Audience and business analytics</i>	Analysis and prediction of audience behaviour for various purposes (e.g., targeted advertising or content offerings, dynamic paywalls, editorial analytics)

In the regimes where the authoritarian economic organisation of information (Fuchs, 2020) is dominant, AI has the potential to become more than a service presented and used by the digital platforms. It has the potential to be an instrument for censorship and surveillance, not only through the digital platforms, but also through the ISPs and the governmental bodies. Therefore, in addition to the control over the dissemination of information, another use area of AI is to filter content, in particular in the shape of ‘notice and take-down’. The multitude of the content produced in a day pushes the governments, the ISPs and the digital platforms to embrace automation and AI to take action in a short period of time (Marsıf, et al., 2023, p. 100). For instance, the Law No. 5651 requires the content producers, hosting service providers, ISPs and the digital platforms to block or remove the content in only four hours after issuing the court order. Therefore, the automation of the content blocking or removal process might seem efficient in order to implement the court order as quickly as possible. However, the non-human flaws caused by the automation and its consequences must be taken into consideration as well. The flaws as such, in particular false take-down decisions, will have the potential to violate the human rights such as freedom of expression and media freedom (Marsıf, et al., 2023, p. 100).

On the ISP level, AI could become a decision-maker of which information source can go through the gates. Especially, through actions that violate net neutrality will have considerable amount of impact on the information ecosystem (Digwatch, 2024). Zero-rating services, deep packet inspection, blocking, throttling and prioritizing certain traffic over the others could be a few of many to be automated through the AI technologies that damage net neutrality. A few minutes spent on a search engine could demonstrate the capabilities of the AI technologies in terms of the control over the information flow through ISPs. Maintenance of the infrastructure, automated network optimization that allows allocation of bandwidth and resources, tracking and prediction of the network traffic patterns in the name of cyber security are some of the services offered by the AI solution companies to the ISPs. Almost real-time detection and blocking of the illegal and threatening online activity is presented as one of the most appreciated feature of the AI capabilities that ISPs and the government could benefit from. This very much boasted feature is not only able to reduce the time to takedown the content, but also it will facilitate the availability to

reach the source of the activity, which could be quite dangerous for those groups such as oppositional voices, investigative journalists, academics or rights defenders who live under the authoritarian regimes.

5.3.2 The state, AI and information control. The governments and regulators across the world seem to be confused and experimenting with how to adapt the AI system in daily life. In accordance with their own political and economic regimes, the governments try not to stay behind the emerging AI technologies in terms of benefitting from the opportunities, integration into the different aspects of life and legislating regulations. One of the earliest regulation attempt came from the European Union. EU legislated the regulation of AI in July 2024 in order to ensure its development and consumption to be in accordance with the

Union values, [the] promot[ion] [of] the uptake of human centric and trustworthy artificial intelligence (AI) while ensuring a high level of protection of health, safety, fundamental rights as enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (the ‘Charter’), including democracy, the rule of law and environmental protection, [the] protect[ion] against the harmful effects of AI systems in the Union, and to support innovation. (EUR-Lex, 2024)

Although the regulation, which is named as The AI Act, also ensures the free market policy, the free circulation of the AI technology within the EU market and encourage innovation (EUR-Lex, 2024), the Act categorizes the AI systems according to the risk levels they bear such as “unacceptable risk (i.e. social scoring systems and manipulative AI), high risk (i.e. automated processing of personal data and detection of decision-making patterns), limited risk (i.e. chatbots), and minimal risk which is not regulated at all, i.e. AI-enabled video games and spam filters” (EU Artificial Intelligence Act, 2024). In a paper published by OSCE, it is highlighted that AI might be a powerful instrument to enable censorship, manipulate the public speech and

surveillance of the citizens as well as it might be a powerful instrument that contributes to the exercise of freedom of expression and media freedom (Haas, 2020). In the recent report of Freedom House a similar threat against the freedom of expression is emphasized. It is underlined that the improvements in the AI technologies have created an environment where censorship might be practiced underhandedly and with pinpoint accuracy by the governments (Freedom on the Net, 2023b, p. 13). For instance, the subscription pattern scandal in Türkiye about the order of BTK to the ISPs to deliver the identities of the internet subscribers could be considered as a preview of for what types of tasks AI could be utilized by the states and the ISPs.

With the aim to support the ethical and effective use of AI in journalism in accordance with the journalistic ethics and human rights the Council of Europe (2023) published the “Guidelines on the Responsible Implementation of Artificial Intelligence Systems in Journalism”. By referring to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, with the emphasis on the Article 10 stating that “[e]veryone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers” (FRA, 2010), it is stated in the guideline that the Article 10 indirectly encompasses the AI technologies and thus, the AI use in line with the human rights should be ensured not only for citizens but also for the actors in the media industries from journalists as the news producers to the distributors of information such as the digital platforms and ISPs (Council of Europe, 2023). In order to specify the subject matter and define the use area and its importance, the concept of “journalistic artificial intelligence system” is suggested in the guideline. Journalistic artificial intelligence system refers to the AI technologies that are used in the information production practices of journalism such as research, investigation, fact-checking, news writing and audio-visual creation (Council of Europe, 2023, p. 7). This AI system can also be benefitted for the distribution of the news such as customization and personalization to reach the target audience, news recommendation process and the interaction with the audience and pricing methods (Council of Europe, 2023, p. 9). Thus, the guideline calls for actions to take by the AI providers and the states. The AI providers are recommended to embrace transparency, be informative about the changes in the infrastructure and make sure that their products

are affordable for the different sizes of news organizations (Council of Europe, p. 20). The states, on the other hand, are urged to ensure a competitive technology market and to cooperate or support collaborations with journalists, news organizations, digital platforms, NGOs and academics (Council of Europe, 2023, pp. 22-23). The guideline touches on the basic concerns, however more tangible steps must be taken that could push the AI-industry and the actors involved to take these suggestions seriously.

As the European institutions attempt to establish liberal values in AI systems through regulations, the governments in the east part of the world seek ways to tighten the control over information. China is reportedly in preparations to create a large language model that is align with the Chinese socialist values (McMorrow & Hu, 2024). Also, the government of China informs the AI companies in the country about the filtering process based on a set of keywords and approved answers to the questions such as “does China have human rights?” and “is President Xi Jinping a great leader?” (McMorrow & Hu, 2024). Russia is also another country to take advantage of AI in order to control online speech and information flow. RSF (2024) warns against the Roskomnadzor’s (Russian federal information technologies and mass communication supervisory authority) attempts to extend its control over information through AI. According to their confirmation, Roskomnadzor has been experimenting with the neural networks and large language models developed by the West to test to what extent the information could be controlled (RSF, 2024). Different from China and Russia, instead of attempts to regulate or developing their own AI system, Iran is focused on cyber attacks, surveillance of their citizens – in particular women – and disseminating disinformation produced via AI (Tkeshelashvili & Saade, 2024). Considering the works done by the states, currently, AI seems to be a bandwagon that no country wishes to miss to get on.

Either the European way or the Asian way, the freedom of expression and media freedom are under the AI-generated threat posed by governments and the free market. The European attempts will fall short in front of the free market policy as the examples of it have been experienced throughout the years, i.e. General Data Protection Regulation, the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act. As the economic regime in Europe will likely to fail the preservation of the free speech, the

political regimes in Asia will further restrict the freedoms. All in all, this demonstrates that a more comprehensive strategy and systemic change should be embraced to ensure a more democratic and free information ecosystem.

5.3.3 The AI policy of Türkiye. In the third quarter of 2024, the number of the AI initiatives went up to 362, which signifies a 15-fold growth since 2017 the year the first AI initiatives were established in Türkiye (TRAI, 2024). The first three areas where the start-ups prefer the most to offer services are computer vision, prediction and data analytics, and machine learning (TRAI, 2024). Led by the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, the Digital Transformation Office and the Ministry of Industry and Technology started the National Technology Leap as an objection to monopolization in technology in order to strengthen the global competition power and the economic and technologic independence of the country. Within this scope, the Turkish government created a National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2021-2025 as a common mission of the Digital Türkiye vision and the National Technology Leap. The strategy (2021) promises the support and cooperation of the government for the infrastructure of the AI technologies, the regulation of the law and code of conduct and the improvement of the technical skills of the experts and workers (p. 20). In addition to that, the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy Plan (2021) urges the AI technologies to be in line with the human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedom (p. 59). The action plan of the strategy, on the other hand, includes the creation of the national AI models, the Turkish Large Language Model and ethical standards.

There is no law or regulation specific to AI in Türkiye yet. However, a draft law was proposed in June 2024 to the Parliament by an oppositional parliament member. The draft law consists of eight articles that define the concepts and institutions related to the AI industry, determines the fundamental principles such as security, transparency, fairness, accountability and privacy, the responsibilities of the actors involved such as AI developers and service providers (i.e. digital platforms), violations and punishments. The civil society also works on the adaptation of the AI technologies as early as possible. In 2019, the bars of İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir published the first report of the country on AI and its regulation. The report

concentrates on the legal and ethical aspects with a particular focus on the copyright and patent issues (Kızrak, et al., 2019). Even though the political leaders refer to the significance of AI and some private initiatives continue to grow, Türkiye preserves its status as a follower of technological advancements.

5.3.4 The journalists' take on AI. Out of 24 journalist interviewee, only three of them strictly opposes the integration of AI technologies into journalism. They stated that they never used AI during the news production process and they do not feel comfortable in its being used in journalism in general. Two standout statements of those interviewees are as the following; “I do not think it is ethical to let a non-journalist being do the job”, and “I do not wish myself and my colleagues to lose their job.” The rest of the journalist interviewees welcome the idea of the AI integration into the journalistic practices even though they approached the subject with hesitation and intimidation.

Although the interviewees who have positive perception and have some small experiences with AI systems would like to benefit further from the opportunities AI has to offer, just like the opponent interviewees they have concerns regarding to precarity and unemployment. Therefore, it is safe to define the status of the journalists with AI as the acquaintance phase. In spite that the AI technologies have not been entered in the newsrooms on a wide scale, the journalists mostly use AI for the two elements of the digital news production they think are the most pricey, which are the production of visuals and doing voiceovers. The reason why they use AI mostly for the audio-visual production is that they want to pursue an active strategy on the digital platforms such as Instagram, Youtube or TikTok as it is mentioned in the previous sub-chapter. Yet, they have not experienced the censorship aspect of AI and thus, they are not fully aware of its being an upcoming information controller through content filtering and algorithmic bias. They perceive it as a new technology that can facilitate some tasks and can take their jobs away from them at the same time.

The experimentations along with the ethical concerns are the most outstanding approach about AI. Interviewee 1 finds the opportunities provided by AI in terms of automation of regular news such as football match scores and weather forecast are

promising for journalism. While acknowledging its advantages for increasing productivity, the interviewee points out the threats AI might cause in terms of its accuracy. Thus, the interviewee thinks that the AI programs will not contribute to the increase in quality and should be supervised. “In my opinion, it is in an experimental phase for media,” the interviewee says (Interviewee 1, personal communication, July 17, 2024). Arguing for leaving the decision-making process to the humans, Interviewee 29 is another interviewee who thinks that AI could be useful and supportive assistance for journalists as long as the control mechanism still consists of humans.

The news, in the end, is something we write, control and publish. But our friends here sometimes experiment with AI on producing visuals, graphics and animations. As long as a human-based control mechanism works and the humans are the ultimate decision-makers, artificial intelligence will improve journalistic techniques. (Interviewee 29, personal communication, August 1, 2024)

From a similar point of view, Interviewee 3 also puts the emphasis on the importance of human production in journalism. The interviewee states that they have not used AI in news production yet, they are discussing about how they can benefit from this technology in particular for video stories without sacrificing from the employment. The same interviewee also projects that AI will be beneficial for visual content and also for advertising revenue. Yet, the interviewee believes that the pandemic demonstrated the importance of journalism and continues as the following;

Journalism is like this: You go out and trace the story. Then you come back and knock the door. Starting from your friend that opens the door for you, you create your news story. You begin discussing about the story with another reporter, editor or you write as you discuss it with your colleagues. This is what

journalism is. How will I tell AI to go out, trace the news and then come back to discuss? (Interviewee 3, personal communication, July 23, 2024)

On that account, Interviewee 22 opposes to AI-produced news stories from beginning to end even though the interviewee does not deny AI's contribution to increase efficiency in terms of assisting the research process, editing or translating. In addition, the interviewee anticipates that a person who is profit-oriented, abuses SEO and values quantity will eventually take advantage of AI as well. As Interviewee 14, Interviewee 15 and Interviewee 29, Interviewee 22 also thinks that AI cannot replace journalists and stresses that the human touch, a journalist's impressions, writing style and perspective make journalism what it is.

Interviewee 14 is one of the interviewees who likes to use AI as an assistant for tasks such as translation, visual production and writing a generic soft content such as 'what to do during hot days'. However, as Interviewee 3, Interviewee 14 also thinks that AI cannot replace a journalist since a robot is not able to go to a conflict zone and report from the region. The interviewee also disagrees with the unemployment fears. The interviewee claims that it might decrease the need to have four editors, but there will be new areas of work for those three editors. "I certainly think that journalists must benefit from artificial intelligence. Journalism is not a profession that will ever die." (Interviewee 14, personal communication, August 21, 2024) Interviewee 15 approaches the AI matter from a very similar perspective of Interviewee 14's and thinks that a journalist cannot be replaced by AI technologies, but these technologies might have contributions in the news production process. As Interviewee 29, Interviewee 15 also underlines the importance of human control mechanisms and the emergent need for new employment areas. However, in order to meet the demands in this paradigm shift, the journalists must adapt themselves in the early days of innovation. Therefore, upgrading skills, necessary education and willingness to embrace new technologies are also another challenge for the journalists. Interviewee 28 stated that they organized a few training sessions for AI at their organization. Rather than news writing, they want to adapt AI into the audio-visual production process such as creating images for a text and voiceovers. At the time of the interview, Interviewee

28 said that their team was not very prepared for AI technologies and they need to adjust themselves to the idea.

Financial cost of embracing AI technologies is another struggle that the independent digital news media must face. Interviewee 27 is one of the interviewees who puts the emphasis on the economic power. Just like other interviewees, AI is used at Interviewee 27's organization for visual production, subtitles and voiceovers so far, but not yet for the written news production. However, the interviewee states that it is about the financial capabilities, which they do not have, and gives an example of what an acquaintance shared with the interviewee recently:

They said that they built a system based on AI. It scans the most important websites in 48 countries, takes the breaking news from them, translates them to Turkish, tags them and publishes them on their own website. Obviously, this is doable. However, you need a certain capacity for that. That acquaintance works in the finance business and has a software programmer in that organization. When these two things come together in media, a new dimension occurs. But we cannot afford it. (Interviewee 27, personal communication, August 14, 2024)

Besides, the current state of journalism focused on generating revenue through clicks does not paint a very bright picture. Interviewee 4 is another journalist interviewee who approaches AI from a positive perspective and also underlines the importance of quality journalism that will be pushed as a result of replacement threat posed by AI. The interviewee states that they benefit from AI to create visuals for their organization. The interviewee disagrees with the fears of unemployment since simple visual designs and copy-paste news writing do not already fit to quality journalism. According to the interviewee, the damage it might cause in this part could turn out to be an advantageous change.

It will affect my salary through indirect factors. There are so many editors in our field. These editors are hired to copy and paste. So, these people are not

paid enough and pulling the media industry down. I graduated from university, so I neither want to copy-paste, nor work for that salary. Really, some things need to change and it will not change with personal resistance. Then what will happen? We will wait for a technological breakthrough. Therefore, I perceive this automation process of copy-paste and simple visual production in a positive manner. It will turn the journalism back to its former long form style in the digital age. (Interviewee 4, personal communication, September 10, 2024)

Interviewee 4 sees the automation process as a leverage for digital news media. According to the interviewee, the AI technologies will take over the SEO-oriented journalism, which currently is asked from editors to publish 55 news stories per day.

How can a journalist publish 55 news stories in a day? The media boss says ‘isn’t it what we are doing? You copy and paste eventually. I will pay you a little more than minimum wage.’ This is their mindset. They must have forgotten what journalism is. This leads to the industry further down. It will be worse unless automation comes in. (Interviewee 4, personal communication, September 10, 2024)

While acknowledging its positive aspects in terms of assisting some drudgery works such as data visualization, voiceover and translation, Interviewee 6 believes that AI will cause unemployment in journalism. However, similar to Interviewee 4’s perspective, Interviewee 6 thinks that this unemployment threat will be a force for journalists to train themselves as unique professionals who have skills and expertise that cannot be replaced by AI. In the long run, it will contribute to the improvement of quality journalism.

Most journalists overlook the further implications of AI system in terms of its ability to guide the speech in the digital environment. Interviewee 10 is the only interviewee who puts the emphasis on the power relations that will be amplified by AI and underlines the information flow and speech control ability of it. The interviewee states that AI is an instrument that will make the ones who hold the power more powerful and for this reason, the problems behind the attention economy pumped by the digital platforms must be analyzed carefully.

What is the problem of the platforms? It is that they are built on a business model that relies on the attention economy. Everyone will look at them, thus everyone will buy ad space from them. That is how they earn advertising revenue. The business model of AI is to capture the jobs. It creates automation. Thus, the more strategic news organizations will integrate AI technologies in a better way and get ahead of the others. The powerful ones will continue to become more powerful. Journalism will come to a place where the need for human will be decreased immensely since the clickbait journalism has diminished the quality of journalism, which has paved the way for automation.

(Interviewee 10, personal communication, July 30, 2024)

By removing the entry level jobs, which new graduates or unexperienced workers learn how to do the basics of a job such as writing a simple news report, the automation process will not only lead to a decrease in human power, but also will impede the learning process of a profession. When asked if Interviewee 10 agrees with the perspective that AI will enhance the quality of journalism eventually, the interviewee responds that there is no such a thing as the quality of journalism anymore. According to the interviewee, there are good and bad user interfaces, and unless a news organization publishes catchy content it will not be recommended by the technological mechanisms and thus it will not stand out. The interviewee states that the usage areas of AI is not limited to news writing and visual production. Through recommendation

mechanisms, AI technologies will be able to collect data, process it and present a customized, personalized interface for each user. In the interviewee's view, this will end up for each of us to read different New York Times that is tailored to our interest areas, which the interviewee conceptualized as microtargeting news display. Therefore, by automating the news reporting production and distribution process, the need for journalism will melt away and the need for long form journalism or a feature, cultural or art content will in the end leave its place to another form of publication such as magazine, book or some other cultural product.

A new start-up digital news organization where one of the journalist interviewees is CEO of has integrated the AI systems in their production. They have already been practicing microtargeting e-mail news bulletin, which is prepared by AI. Through the AI program they use, they manage to collect individual user's data and create a customized news bulletin. Therefore, Interviewee 12 considers AI as a strong agent for journalism and states that it can be perceived as threat only under certain circumstances. As Interviewee 4, Interviewee 6 and Interviewee 10, Interviewee 12 points out the struggles that the digital journalism suffers in Türkiye and indicates that AI poses threats to those organizations since they have failed to adapt themselves and transform in the right way. In the digital economy there are three factors to consider, according to Interviewee 12. The first factor is to question whether a solid business strategy is underway, the second is to assess if there is any added value for the media industry, and the last factor is to measure the market volume and value. The answers to these three factors determine if AI creates opportunities or poses threats for a news media organization.

Most journalists in Türkiye are robot journalists. They copy and paste the agency news. In this system, of course, AI is a threat. In this system it is not journalism. What is done is something relied on programmatic advertising and quantitative production. This is the consequence of the save-the-day mentality.

(Interviewee 12, personal communication, October 4, 2024)

The statements of Interviewee 4, Interviewee 10 and Interviewee 12 correspond to Bell's (1999) and Traue's (1997) arguments on the difference between information and knowledge. As long as the journalism sides with information and does not fulfill its public-good duty by producing knowledge, then, as the interviewees suggest, the news media is bound to submit to the capitalist market structure. Other than the troubles in the production process, the threats against media freedom and pluralism are brought up by two interviewees. In spite that they use AI for visual production and the interviewee thinks that it should be used more as an assistant, Interviewee 19 cannot project to what extent AI becomes an instrument for censorship.

If this transformation becomes the same sort of transformation that the journalists could not understand what digital meant in the first years of the transition, then nothing will change. It means that an artificial intelligence deal will join among us and things will continue the way they are currently. People would have it write a news bulletin and then copy-paste it. It would not be an efficient transformation. (Interviewee 19, personal communication, August 22, 2024)

The same interviewee also mentioned that it is the artificial intelligence of the hegemony between lines. Interviewee 20 elaborated on that by stating that the current AI systems are the product of a group of privileged white Americans in the Silicon Valley that draws a very limited picture of the world from their perspective. Nonetheless, neither of them opposes the use of AI in journalism. From a similar perspective as Interviewee 10's, Interviewee 20 draws attention to what journalism represents today and highlights the importance of the investigative journalism.

What do we refer to as journalism? If we call sports journalism a journalism, then it is over. In the U.S. AI-like software programs have been writing sports news for a while. It is understandable that there is no need for human in that

area. It is the same for the movie release news. But, the probability of AI doing the research is zero. Above all, it hallucinates and lies. Someone needs to double check it. Then, all what AI can be is to be a good assistant. (Interviewee 20, personal communication, August 22, 2024)

Therefore, according to Interviewee 20, AI can negatively affect photographers and video producers, however an investigative journalist will not be harmed. As Interviewee 4 stated, there is a good chance that this disordered system might increase the value of good writing and investigation. In Interviewee 20's words; "when you devalue something and destroy it, it sometimes causes a purge." (personal communication, August 22, 2024) Considering the hesitancy of the journalists in integrating the new technologies into the daily practices and the threats that are posed by the same new technologies make the projections towards the future difficult, especially when it comes to a technology like AI.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Within the context of media freedom, this dissertation thesis problematizes the relations of production and distribution of the independent digital news media through the analysis of the critical political economy of the internet in Türkiye. In order to exhibit the intrinsic relationship between media freedom and the political economic structure, this study investigates how the mechanisms of the political power as the governing body of the internet and the practices of the ISPs and the digital platforms as the actors of commodification function in the context of the relations of production in the independent digital news media. As a result of the 29 semi-structured in-depth interviews with the journalists who work at the independent digital native news media organizations and the experts on the laws and regulations, telecommunications, and digital platforms, I found out that the relations of production are under the dominance of the distribution relations that are formed by the actors of commodification in addition to the political power. The communication system has been transformed to a system where the mechanisms of censorship and self-censorship are utilized for the continuation of the capitalist information and the news media structure. Through information control, news media have become an instrument to create information societies in a way that prevents the emergence of knowledge society. The restriction of media freedom and freedom of expression by the means of commodification is the ultimate strategy to achieve this goal of the capitalist structure. The political power of this structure consists of the state that objectifies information and news, and the economic power consists of the profit-oriented corporations that commodifies information and news. As it has been observed throughout the field work, the journalists have become alienated from the production and distribution processes. In consequence, it is found out that censorship, self-censorship and resignation to the current circumstances have become the strategic instruments of bargaining for the independent digital news media's continuity. My master's degree dissertation thesis on the political economy of communication and alternative media was about surviving the whirlpool since at the time it was the first years of the digital news media trying to find ways to sustain their existence in the digital environment (Çenberli, 2019). In my doctoral dissertation thesis, it has turned out to be the story of drifting with the current.

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is based on the critical approach and its construction is built around digital capitalism, information and knowledge society, and internet governance and media freedom. The reason why the concept of digital capitalism is embraced is that capitalism with all its aspects preserves its existence in the digital information sphere and the whole structure is designed and evolved in accordance with the needs of the capitalist system. Taking the lead from Marx's (2018) argument of productive consumption and consumptive production, Fuchs's (2020) two types of information organization, which are the authoritarian economic organization of information and the humanistic economic organization of information, sets the theoretical foundation of this research. The utilization of telecommunications as "the production base and the control structure" of digital capitalism (Schiller, 1999), the degradation of journalism as a consequence of the free market of the profit-oriented digital platforms fuelled by the advertising industry (McChesney, 2014), the commodification of information as a barrier in front of the knowledge society (Lor & Britz, 2007) and the misrepresentation of freedom of commercial expression as a human right (Mattelart, 2000) form the characteristics of "the authoritarian economic organisation of information" (Fuchs, 2020). Therefore, "the humanistic economic organization of information" (Fuchs, 2020) defines the normative benchmark of this dissertation thesis.

How to govern and how to be governed are among the determinant factors of the political economy. In return, the political economic structure also determines how to regulate and how to be regulated. Therefore, the discipline of law and the discipline of political economy along with the discipline of communication need to come together to seek ways for a free media and communication system, in particular in the age of the internet. The control mechanisms of the independent digital news media demonstrated that the state and its institutions are not the sole power of censorship. The ISPs and digital platforms are also separate individual powers of censorship that mostly function to decentralize the censorship for the economic benefits. The current capitalist system of communication blockades the freedom and commodifies the information and news. Thus, this communication system obstructs the progress towards a democratic knowledge society. In this respect, the internet governance and media freedom are dealt with as a separate chapter before delving into the actors of

commodification. In the beginning of the chapter, three approaches for the internet governance is explained. The multistakeholderism approach (Pigatto, Datysgeld & Pereira da Silva, 2021; Denardis, 2014) is stated as the globally accepted approach. However, based on the statements of 27 interviewees regarding that they have never been consulted to by the government representatives when legislating a new law or regulation demonstrate that this approach is not embraced in Türkiye. The internet governance in Türkiye is rather under the control of the one stakeholder, which is the state.

Due to the reason why this dissertation thesis takes the year 2007 as the starting point since the first law specific to the internet was enacted that year in Türkiye, the development plans, the national strategy and action plans were investigated in addition to the law and regulations as the secondary source in order to contextualize the government policies and the production practices of the independent digital native news media. In Türkiye the first law of the internet, Law No. 5651, was enacted to regulate the online content and publications before regulating the telecommunications market and the investments for the internet infrastructure. Throughout the years, the content and speech regulatory policies and regulations have followed each other. Simultaneously, the nationalization of the internet and communication technologies started to emerge as the main theme of the development plans of the government and the strategy and action plans prepared by the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure and BTK. In relation to the government policies and regulatory acts, four of the expert interviewees put the emphasis on the objective of the government and its institutions that aim to regulate speech and information flow rather than regulating the communication market for the public good. One expert interviewee especially points out that the state intervention in the internet ecosystem through law and regulations drives away the investors to invest in the internet infrastructure. Consequently, not only the rights of the freedom of expression and media freedom are violated, but indirectly the infrastructural development of the information sphere is also negatively affected by the form of internet governance in Türkiye. Along with the expert interviewees, a few of the journalist interviewees agree the idea that the main purpose of these regulations is the government's motivation to establish itself as the sole source of information in addition to creating the atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

In such an authoritarian regulatory environment, except one, 23 journalist interviewees were not able to make comments on the Law No. 5651 that regulates their work and forms the base for the access blocking, content removal and throttling decisions. Most of them think that the Law No. 5651 and the amendments legislated through the Law No. 7418 (the Disinformation Law) are the same and since the Disinformation Law is the most recent regulation that ambiguously categorizes the public dissemination of disinformation within the Turkish Penal Code, the journalist interviewees showed more enthusiasm to make comments on the recent practices of the Disinformation Law. The sword of Damocles, as the interviewees named the recent law, seems to be successful to establish an information and media sphere where the intimidation and fear become the dominant perceptions. The expressions of 15 journalists on the practice of self-censorship confirm this atmosphere. This self-censorship is not always in the form of refraining from using some words or producing certain news stories. Some interviewees stated that they also remove the content voluntarily after the access blocking decision was implemented. The 2023 Engelli Web report found out that 8.623 URLs of the news stories were blocked to access with the court orders only in 2023, however more surprisingly, in addition to the access blocking decisions, it is also found out that 7.267 news stories were removed by the digital news organizations themselves (Akdeniz & Güven, 2024, p. 53). When asked if and why they removed content voluntarily during the interviews, their answer was “just in case”. This fear and intimidation is not only due to the legal reasons, though. The economic consequences such as the complete shutdown of the organization or the loss of revenue are stated as the contributing factors of the self-censorship as an instrument of bargaining to preserve the livelihood of the news organization and its journalists.

18 journalists interviewees stated that their news pieces were blocked to access at least once. Two of them stated that access blockings have a popularizing effect. When their stories were blocked, they announced the court decisions and re-published them with some minor changes. In this way, those stories attracted more audience attention than usual and received more traffic. On the other hand, three interviewees underlined the archival value of the news in terms of the implementation of the right to be forgotten. In spite that the interviewees respect to the privacy and personal data,

they stated that the abuse of the right to be forgotten with the access blocking decisions distorts the truth and the collective memory. The voluntary content removal with the intentions of self-protection practiced by the independent digital native news organizations also contributes to the harm on the collective memory and the truth. Therefore, this act of news organizations confirms the claims on the atmosphere of the intimidation and fear created by the law and regulations.

It is observed that the economic cost of access blocking and content removal is not considered as a tangible issue for the independent digital native news media organizations. Only six of the journalist interviewees claimed that the blockings might cause some revenue loss, but it is probably an amount that could be easily ignored. Another six of them claimed that there is no revenue loss caused by the blockings due to the fast-consummed nature of the news. Yet, this point of view disregards the archival value of the news media, which is another reason why they do not see the harm of voluntary content removal mentioned above. The remaining 12 journalists were not able to answer the question due to the lack of knowledge or experience in case of access blocking. Only two interviewees who are experts on media and cyber law demanded non-pecuniary damages for the access blockings on behalf of their clients. Due to the lack of the financial data and statistics, the Constitutional Court settled a figurative compensation for the demanding parties. Yet, this might be a beneficial decision that leads to a realization on the political economic aspect of censorship for the independent digital news media industry in Türkiye. It is quite surprising to find out that the cost of censorship has never been calculated and considered since the revenue generated through online traffic is one of the most vital sources of income for an independent digital native news organization. This could be interpreted as another factor of alienation.

Continuation of the daily news production appears to be the only solution against the “authoritarian economic organization of information” (Fuchs, 2020) for the most of the interviewees. Except four journalists interviewees, the rest of the journalists interviewees do not deem pursuing a legal battle as a sensible strategy. What they think is more efficient as a solution, instead of spending time and resources to an exhausting legal process, is to continue to produce news stories, reach the

audience and thus, earn revenue. Three interviewees presented the ethical journalism as another solution method. According to these interviewees, the professional standards of journalism will prevent the possibility of facing with prosecution. However, this approach implicates that the journalists who face prosecution most probably have done unethical journalism. On the other hand, it does not reflect the reality considering the cases such as Tolga Şardan's or Cengiz Erdiñ's. It is also realized that receiving legal advice and staying under the radar by preserving the current growth size are the third solution. The paradox of increasing revenue and ensuring the sustainability as well as not attracting too much attention of the political power is a limitation that seems to be a difficult dilemma to overcome. A similar attitude of not pursuing any battle reveals itself in their relationships with the ISPs and the digital platforms. In spite that the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNHR, 2011) and the ICT Sector Guide on Implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (Shift & Institute for Human Rights and Business, 2013) underline the duty of the private corporations for the protection of human rights, the independent digital native news media industry in Türkiye misses out the need to hold those companies accountable for the violation of media freedom and the freedom of expression.

Cyber attacks emerged as another tactic to silence the independent digital news media during the interviews. Eleven interviewees stated that they were the victim of a cyber attack at least once in their professional lives. The mutual belief of those interviewees about the reasons of the cyber attacks is that their publication must have been found as disturbing for certain power groups. As one interviewee stated that they had to carry their server abroad, another interviewee stated that the software company they worked with at the time stopped working with them due to the company's incapacity to handle the attacks and the damages done to their servers. In addition to the goal of the cyber attacks to prevent the access to the targeted content, one interviewee's experience reveals that causing financial loss by targeting the advertisements displayed on the news websites appears to be an indirect tactic to silence the news media. Interviewee 5's emphasis on the help of other journalists during a cyber attack highlights the significance of solidarity in the fight for media freedom.

The statements of the expert interviewees and the international reports demonstrate the correlation between the internet infrastructure and the growth of a country that leads to a free and democratic information ecosystem. As special attention given to the internet access in the development and strategy plans of the government, the expert interviewees stated that the internet or access to the internet should be considered among human rights and included within the social rights policies. However, Türkiye's failure to meet with the goals of the strategic plans, the poor infrastructure and lack of investment reflect the government's stance towards the information sphere and media freedom as well. This analysis contextualizes the ISPs as the entities more than being private corporations that offer telecommunications services. The legal liabilities of the ISPs for ensuring the uninterrupted communication and Interviewee 24's legal battle over the failure of the ISPs during the February 6 earthquakes are the demonstrations that the ISPs must be held accountable for the violation of human rights, in particular for the freedom of expression and media freedom within the scope of this research, and must be challenged by the media professionals and civic society. The lack of IXPs as an infrastructural element that strengthens the ability of the uninterrupted communication, reduces cost and accelerates the internet speed appears as one more inadequacy in front of the development of information sphere. The two expert interviewees on telecommunications pointed out this issue and underlined the struggles of the country to keep pace with the rest of the world. This is also a struggle for the digital news media, which the interviewees are not aware of. The developments in the internet infrastructure will eventually accelerate the upload speed that many of them are dissatisfied with and reduce the cost derived from the transfer of traffic to host their own services rather than being dependent on the digital platforms, in particular for video streaming services. In this respect, the interviewees who are experts on telecommunications stressed the consequences of the short-sighted false privatization strategy of Türk Telekom. The de facto state monopoly over the telecommunications infrastructure through the ownership of Türk Telekom, Türksat and Turkcell by the Türkiye Wealth Fund creates the base of a tightly controlled information ecosystem. The government of Türkiye holds an immense power over the information flow within the borders of the country through the regulations and the state institutions such as BTK, RTÜK and BİK, and the telecommunications companies.

In a communication system full of impediments, net neutrality occurs as not a matter of traffic discrimination applied by the ISPs, but a matter of political interference and the restriction of the free speech. The indirect referrals to the net neutrality and the breaches in the regulations such as in the Electronic Communication Law and the Law No. 5651 designate the area of net neutrality as vulnerable against the violation of media freedom and the freedom of expression. In this way, the ISPs find legal space to implement the court orders to restrict the speech or obey unofficial requests for delivering the users' data and to disengage themselves from accountability. Besides, one of the interviewees shared their observation on that Türk Telekom acts faster than the other ISPs in case of access blocking or throttling in spite that except one, the most majority of the interviewees stated that they have not observed any throttling or filtering practices by the ISPs specific to their online activities. The exceptional interviewee, on the other hand, stated that time to time they detect serious falls in clicks that they cannot comprehend the reasons behind and also, they are notified by their readers that their website is not accessible in certain public institutions. However, except the expert interviewees, all of the journalist interviewees were mostly confused about net neutrality and provided ambiguous answers on this subject. In addition to the emergent need to establish and raise awareness of the political interference as one method to violate net neutrality, the confusion among the media professionals facilitates both the compliance of the ISPs with the decisions against the human rights and the reinforcement of the shared idea among the interviewees on that the ISPs are not capable of taking action against the government.

On the contrary of the findings about the restriction of the information flow and the speech, the risk of splinternet does not seem to be as serious as in the countries like Russia or China. The risk remains at the borders of the temporary interruption attempts to disconnect the society from several digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter/X rather than building a whole infrastructure system that requires a long-term permanent planning and investments to create the country's own national digital platforms such as Russia's Yandex or China's WeChat. Despite that one interviewee thinks that the splinternet is inevitable since the current technology allows its possibility, three expert interviewees expressed that implementing a policy towards splinternet necessitates a solid investment plan, skilled technicians and resources,

which none of them is acquired by Türkiye. Besides, diving into a big task such as splinternet would not be effective in the short run due to the government's main motivation to control the information flow and construct itself as the sole source of information does not necessarily require a new communication system as long as the abduction of information and news is possible with the existing regulatory, political and economic structure.

As the findings so far regarding to the internet infrastructure have demonstrated its relation to the news production and distribution, it is found out that the perception of the internet as means of production by the journalist interviewees is not established yet in the digital news media environment. This conclusion is based on the statements of 18 journalist interviewees expressing that they cover their own internet expenses. Most of them consider the internet as given and do not comprehend the context of the question regarding to the subject matter. Being unaware of such a perception of the internet as means of production during the foundation phase of the news organization, offering the option to work from home and lack of economic resources are among the main reasons why the access to the internet is not considered as an expense item. Interviewee 20's remarks on the media professionals not perceiving themselves as a part of the labour force explains this lack of consciousness towards the production relations. Yet, the contradiction arises when the interviewees correlate the productivity with the internet access. 21 interviewees agreed that there is a positive correlation between access to the internet and the efficiency in news production. The efficiency issue is discovered to be one of the determinant factors of the news format. The internet access problem has a definitive power over what type of news the society receives. Due to the lack of technical and economic resources, many interviewees stated that they cannot pursue the production of breaking news in particular during the times of crises such as the natural disasters or protests whereas the media conglomerates have more means to produce stories and dominate the speech. Therefore, the independent digital news media mostly rely on the subscription to the news agencies and the feature stories or commentaries. Consequently, the internet access has an impact on whose voice to be heard in what ways in spite that it is perceived as a problem of the past by some interviewees. This is also one of the indicators of alienation in the independent digital news media.

The digital divide is another consequence of the inadequate investments and false policies. Three expert interviewees argue that the reluctance of Türk Telekom as the state monopoly to share the internet infrastructure with the other ISPs is one of the major factors for the digital divide between the East and the West and also, between the cities and the rural areas. The enactment of Universal Service Law and its ineffective implementation as revealed by the report of Turkish Court of Accounts (2021) support the interviewees' arguments. As the government documents such as development and broadband strategy plans, and the independent researches (Dağlı, 2022; Kızılkaya & Yılmaz, 2021) demonstrated that the digital divide is a tangible problem that influences the media pluralism in terms of news production and distribution. The most affected news organizations by digital divide are located in the eastern regions in the country. Spending several hours to upload a simple file, experiencing occasional access interruptions, using the cellular data of their personal mobile phones to connect the computers to the internet are the daily challenges of the independent digital news media in the region. Additionally, the lack of government subsidies to encourage the telecom operators to invest, the reluctance of the ISPs to improve the infrastructure due to the profit concerns and the ineffective implementation of the universal service pose great risks in terms of media freedom and pluralism. The journalist interviewees who have offices in those areas also stated that they are at disadvantage compared to the capabilities that the media conglomerates have when covering the same story. As the local digital news media struggle to make their voices heard, the media conglomerates are often the voice of the region on a national scale. The deadlock created by digital divide and the insufficient policies puts the local digital media in a never-ending loop.

When the course of the interviews shifted towards the workings of the digital platforms, the interviewees were more eager to discuss and opened up a lot more than the matters related to the internet infrastructure and the ISPs. There are two main reasons for this enthusiasm. First is the lack of technical knowledge along with the lack of consciousness of being a part of the labour force and perception of the internet as means of production. Also, the shadow of the state over the telecommunications industry prevents the development of such consciousness due to the misbelief about the weakness of the ISPs in front of the state. The second reason is that the independent

digital news media deal with the digital platforms on a daily basis, which makes the transnational corporations a direct associate for them to distribute their work to the world outside. Their relationship with the digital platforms is based on a contradictory understanding of 'neither with you nor without you'. There is a strong growing tendency of realizing the need to construct themselves as the platform itself and to build their own community in the independent digital native news media in order to gain independence from the market forces. Yet, 18 journalists interviewees stated that they are dependent on the digital platforms. Despite that remaining six journalist interviewees disagree with the dependence idea and perceive the digital platforms only an instrument to distribute their stories, they embrace a pragmatic approach as well and pursue the ways in which that they can take the most advantage out of those platforms. Interviewee 10 who is an expert on the digital platforms highlights the difficulty of challenging the digital platforms due to the current oligopolistic structure. Only one interviewee stated that they managed to break the dependency for the last two years and 80 percent of their traffic derives from the direct traffic, which was the other way around until two years ago. However, the rest of the interviewees and their organizations are heavily dependent on the digital platforms. In addition to the reasons of dependence such as receiving traffic and the affordable cost of promoting one's work, the fear of missing out (Niselsen & Ganter, 2018), the opportunity of virality and the advertising revenue are also supporting factors to preserve this dependent relationship. The solutions suggested by the interviewees to gain independence from these profit-oriented companies are insisting on the ethical journalism, building a business plan centered around the news website itself and supporting the emergence of the platform cooperatives.

22 journalists interviewees agree on the view that the algorithms are one of the factors that determine the visibility and reach of the independent digital news media and thus, they take the algorithmic mechanisms into consideration during the news production and distribution processes. However, there is a broad consensus that the algorithms of the digital platforms are politically biased. Sometimes this bias is ideologically-oriented and sometimes profit-oriented. The most concerning aspects of algorithms for the interviewees are the arbitrary decisions of the companies regarding to the algorithmic changes and the loss of control over the audience and their original

work. The major changes in the algorithms of the social media companies (Similarweb, 2023) and Google (Koç, 2024) demonstrated that their concerns are justified. The de-prioritization and the suppression of news by the digital platforms through these changes have a harmful effect over the information ecosystem and media freedom. According to the interviewees, due to their profit-oriented structure, provocative and polarizing content is encouraged in these platforms and ethical journalism that aims the public good does not have a place in this environment. Just like the ISPs hide behind the power of the state, the digital platforms hide behind the pseudo power of algorithms that are totally organized by their management staff. Therefore, the interviewees criticized the attitude of many digital news organizations towards waiving from the professional standards of journalism in order to sustain their business through traffic referrals and advertising revenue generated from the digital platforms. As this situation degrades journalism, it also reinforces the news media's position as the uninvited guest whose departure is eagerly awaited. Despite that the news media organizations seem to raise their voice against this injustice, they fail to create a strong network of solidarity with each other as well as with their audience and civic society.

The status of the independent digital news media as the uninvited guest in the digital platforms is another significant finding of the research. The expert interviewee on the digital platforms claimed that the digital platforms base their decisions on technicalities and the attention economy rather than the political reasons. Therefore, according to the interviewee, the reason why the digital news media organizations in Türkiye cannot find space in the digital platforms solely relies on their technical incapacities and their negative perception towards having to be a business person along with being a journalist in the digital ecosystem. The journalist interviewees strongly oppose this point of view. According to them, regardless of their meticulous efforts to adapt their news production process in accordance with the algorithmic requirements, the suppression of their work is inevitable. In addition to that, the journalist interviewees believe that the political bias of the digital platforms favour the pro-governmental mainstream media. They experience this discrimination the most on the Google search results. For instance, they claimed that their original stories are suppressed and not listed in the first few pages whereas the copy-paste news content

of the pro-governmental media takes up the top of the search results. As happens with the amendments and changes in the laws and regulations, in this area also, no one consults with and notifies them about the structural changes that not only affect their production and distribution processes, but also affect their sources of income. As most of the journalist interviewees acknowledges their need to learn more about the technical issues, they also state that copy-paste journalism overrule their labour as a result of the profit-oriented information ecosystem.

Throughout the research it is found out that the independent digital native news media is motivated to modify the news format in accordance to the algorithmic requirements of the digital platforms. This is one of the factors that demonstrates the determinant power of the distribution process over the relations of production. 21 journalist interviewees stated that the adapting the news format for each digital platform is a necessity. According to the type of content each digital platform promotes, they prefer to produce more audio-visual pieces, write shorter texts and publish different type of stories in each platforms, i.e. publishing lifestyle content on Instagram and political content on Twitter/X. However, the ability to pursue this sort of production and distribution strategy is heavily dependent on the financial resources. The economic inequality hinders the adaptation strategy of news format, which creates a domino effect. There are two factors that contribute to this inequality. First factor is the limited economic resources of the independent digital native news media organizations. Since all of them are small-scale organizations, they are not able to put together a separate social media team as many of them stated as a requirement of being a digital news outlet. Therefore, they are not able to pursue a proactive digital strategy, and since most of them do not have expertise on how the digital platforms work they struggle to keep up with the algorithmic changes. The second factor is the non-transparent policies of the digital platforms that allow the powerful to gain more power and encourage the sensational content to increase engagement to generate advertising revenue. In order to reduce this inequality, the news organizations adopt an approach that neither sacrifices the ethical journalism nor makes them irrelevant in the digital platforms.

Decentralization of censorship by the digital platforms emerges as another threat not only against the news media but also against the information flow. The states control the information flow on a national scale, however the transnational corporations have the means to shape the narrative through the information flow on a global scale. Seven journalist interviewees stated that they had to deal with censorship on the digital platforms. The censorship practices differ in each digital platform, i.e. the suppression of the content, removal of the content or blocking the monetization feature. Also, the automated processes do not consider the context of the content which most of the time results in censoring the accurate information. The experiences shared by the interviewees confirm these ill-considered practices. In addition to the harmful effect on media freedom, these censorship mechanisms have a negative impact on the revenue sources of the independent news media. As each of the platforms have the ability to shape the speech according to their needs and ideologies, they are also capable of punishing the independent news media on different scales through decentralization of censorship. One method is to cause the decrease of traffic and engagement through suppression or content removal, the other method is to block the monetization instruments. The digital platforms censor the independent news media on the grounds of violation of community standards such as posting informative content about Covid-19 or about Gaza, however, as one interviewee pointed out, these corporations do not refrain from earning revenue through fake videos. This arbitrariness in the digital world damages the small-scale independent organizations the most.

The pragmatic approach of the independent digital native news organizations continues to reveal itself during the discussions around the revenue models in the digital platforms. In spite that the majority of the interviewees underlined the threats posed by these digital platforms against the independent media, when asked if they have ever received or willing to apply for funding programs of these digital platforms, six journalist interviewees stated that they would be willing to apply and added that the more independent journalists are accepted for these funding programs the better for the development of the independent digital news media. Although the rest of the journalist interviewees do not consider to receive any funds from the digital platforms, they do not hesitate to pursue other income channels on those platforms including

subscription and advertising. Yet, demanding copyright did not occur to any of the interviewees. When asked if they have ever received royalty fees by any chance on the digital platforms or if they have ever demanded copyright, the question took them by surprise and the answer was no. Due to the government's policies on information, the interviewees remain indifferent about the works to legislate the Digital Copyright Law in the Parliament. This is another demonstration of the normalization of alienation and commodification in the independent digital news media. Instead of generating revenue through indirect methods such as advertising and engagement, insisting for copyright and owning their work has never been listed among the strategies or solutions to the many problematic issues that are mentioned up to this point. Based on the international struggles such as in Canada (Heisler, 2024) and Australia (Klamka, et al., 2024), and the authoritarian information regime in Türkiye the copyright issue is perceived as an utopic idea.

As the infrastructure of the internet is strictly regulated and under the control of the political power, regulating the digital platforms is a battleground. One interviewee's remarks on the difference between the public and private sphere partly explains this situation. Since the emergence of the telecommunications industry is mainly the investment of the public resources due to the political and economic needs of the state (Thompson, 2019), the regulation was a priori for the communication infrastructure. However, the digital platforms emerged as a result of private initiatives and entrepreneurialism built on the internet infrastructure. Therefore, the development of the digital platforms is shaped and formed by the free market. The contradiction arises in the product those digital platforms put on the market. Instead of selling the means of communication like the ISPs, these private companies sell the message that they do not produce, but only distribute. This structure of profit-making prioritizes the exchange value of information and news as a marketable product instead of use value and the production process. Considering the efforts of the government to control the information flow through the regulatory mechanisms and censorship practices of access blockings, content removal and regulation of the public advertisements, the siege of the distribution process by the digital platforms turns out to be a valuable bargain for the government. As this beneficial unregulated structure commodifies communication and knowledge, journalists are forced to become content producers in

this information ecosystem. For this reason, in spite that all of the interviewees agree on the need to regulate the digital platforms, they consider that the legal policies are bound to remain crippled due to the mutual beneficial relationship between the state and the digital platforms.

After all of these struggles in their relationship with the digital platforms, I asked if they consider the digital platforms as the contributors to the development of the independent digital news media. The interviewees mostly agree that the digital platforms help the development of the independent news media due to the impossibility of independent journalism in the mainstream media in Türkiye. Yet, in different contexts throughout the interviews the interviewees either implicated or clearly expressed that the quality of the digital news media is quite low which is the indirect reason of the dependency and pragmatism in their relationship with the digital platforms. In order to break this cycle two fundamental solutions are considered by the journalist interviewees. One solution is to realize the urgent need to own the journalism and the second solution is to create the news websites as the platform itself or to create journalistic platforms organized as cooperatives.

The objective of the digital platforms is not to inform the public and work for the public good. Their foundational reason of existence is to make profit. Therefore, the aim of their corporate policies and algorithmic rules is not to target and censor the news media specifically. They embrace algorithmic and policy changes based on profitability, which results in the encouragement of the content type that generates revenue, and most of the time the form of the news does not fit into this system. Apparently, the contradiction between the independent news media and this distribution system mentioned above leads to an existential crisis for the independent digital news media in Türkiye. For this reason, instead of raising voice and seeking hope for the digital platforms to embrace a public-good oriented business strategy, the efforts must be made for a long term and permanent solution. Solidarity in the independent digital news media, dialogue with the audience, the construction of the news websites as the main platforms and establishing a cooperative-style news platform form the requirements of this permanent solution.

Most probably, a more serious threat is at the doors of the digital news media. Through large language models AI has entered into the information ecosystem as an effective technological invention and the debate about it is largely revolved around the production processes in terms of the automation and facilitation of the time-intensive and expensive tasks. In Türkiye, AI is mostly considered for the opportunities it may present in the production processes of different industries. Despite that there is no legislation on AI and its integration into life, except a draft law proposed by a parliament member, National Artificial Intelligence Strategy Plan 2021-2025 within the scope of the Digital Türkiye and the National Technology Leap is the first governmental policy. The focus of the plan is the ethical integration of AI into the production and the creation of a Turkish Large Language Model.

The concerns and remarks of the interviewees also share a similar focus with the government's strategy in terms of its perception in the production. A great majority of the interviewees approaches the AI use in journalism in a timid but positive manner. Only three interviewees find AI as threatening due to the risk it poses for unemployment. Besides, the same interviewees think of its usage in the news production process unethical. However, the majority of the interviewees highlight that a non-human being cannot replace a journalist and its capabilities, in particular for investigative journalism and reporting from the conflict zones. Even though, all of them state that AI is on the verge of causing another paradigm shift in journalism, they welcome this innovation as an assistant in the production of audio-visual content. Along with a shared fear of unemployment and the financial difficulties to afford AI technologies, as long as the journalists are still the decision-makers the integration of AI could increase efficiency in journalism for the interviewees. However, during the interviews it is observed that the journalists are in the acquaintance phase with AI and do not fully comprehend its potential impact on the distribution process yet. Many studies cited in this work (Haas, 2020; Freedom House, 2023b; Simon, 2022; Simon, 2024) warn against the AI's power of decision-making and control over the information flow. As the digital platforms will likely to integrate the AI technologies into their algorithmic structure, the states and the ISPs will also take advantage of AI on the infrastructural level such as the censorship practices and internet traffic control. The violation of freedom of expression and media freedom will likely to further increase

and a more restricted information ecosystem will be constructed. Focusing on the AI's impact on the distribution process of the information and news rather than the production process will help the independent digital news media to come up with the solid defense mechanisms.

By constructing fragmented structures, the actors of commodification build a feudal order. The journalist who has already been alienated becomes a part of the commodification process. Therefore, journalism and communication are objectified in the digital capitalism. As the independent digital news media are not treated as subject, the journalists also do not consider themselves as subject as well and they are not interested in positioning themselves as one in this communication system. They are objectified both by themselves and by the political and economic ruling power. Therefore, the independent digital news media have to live by the others' rules, principles and systems. Since they cannot transition to the state of subject, they cannot stand behind either journalism or media freedom. This is one of the fundamental reasons why the commodification of news and information occurs. They consider the demand for copyright and royalty fee from the digital platforms as almost something impossible. They feel obliged to the digital platforms to reach the masses. They feel obliged to the unfair and unjust interference of the ISPs based on the argument that the ISPs take action by law and the orders of the government institutions. However, the cancellation decision of the Article 9 in the Law No. 5651 was the success of a few people that insist on the freedom of expression and media freedom.

In this objectified and commodified communication system the economic power class becomes a ruler with or without a state. As a result, the independent digital news media lose control over their audience and their work, and the journalists are no longer the owner of the product they produce. Since the digital platforms are able to practice arbitrary censorship without being held accountable, it has come to a point where even the state intervention loses control over the information flow. While journalism struggles to resist against the oppression of the state, the knockout blow was hit by the capital itself. Yet, neither a collective action nor an organized solidarity are in the agenda of the independent digital native news media regardless of their structure of ownership and editorial line. The resistance against the actors of

commodification does not exist. The structure of media ownership and organization, editorial line and unionization are not the determinant factors in the relations of production. The business model and the source of income appear to be the determinant factors for the production relations, which positions the profit-oriented corporations as the distributors of information in an unprecedented status.

As indicated so far, bargain has become an intrinsic part of the news production and distribution processes. In order to survive and sustain their existence as an independent digital news organizations, they constantly in a state of bargaining with the power groups. Yet, this bargain comes in two forms determined according to the addressee. If the addressee is the political power, then the self-censorship is the form of bargain. A tuned self-censorship, which in this case the journalists try to find balance between the fulfillment of the public good and the private good that consists of the personal good (i.e. job security and staying away from any prosecution) and the business good (i.e. refraining from any financial damage that could be caused by the legal fines and the risk of complete shutdown), appears to be the method embraced by most of the journalist interviewees. As a result of this bargaining attitude, two journalist interviewees also expressed that they would like to benefit from the rights that the Law No. 7418 provides since it paves the way for the recognition of the digital news media organizations within the Press Law in spite that it criminalizes the spread of disinformation with an unprecedented ambiguous definition. The addressee of the second form of bargaining is the economic power. In this form, the subject of the bargain appears as the adaptation of the news production process in line with the necessities of the actors of commodification. For instance, modification of the stories about Palestine or the decisions about not posting stories related to Palestine on the digital platforms due to the content suppression or removal is the example of this bargaining form. Yet, as a specific to the situation in Türkiye, the ISPs are positioned in the middle of these two forms of bargain. The reason why is that the journalist interviewees consider the ISPs as the executioner of the state and do not consider the internet as means of production. Regarding to that, two forms of bargain work for this relationship between the ISPs and the independent digital native news media. The ISPs in Türkiye, in fact, function as the executioner of the state censorship which the bargaining of self-censorship is embraced not to encounter with access blocking or

throttling. On the other hand, due to the problems with the internet infrastructure the digital news media have to shape the news production accordingly. For instance, the cost of building a server makes the independent digital news media dependent on the digital platforms to publish a video or they are not able to produce breaking news, especially in times of crisis, due to the internet access problems and the lack of technical equipment. Therefore, the bargain with the ISPs is an implicit process.

This whole bargaining process is the demonstration of the loss of control over the means of production and of alienation. The journalists are alienated from the means and relations of production. Since the journalists themselves are, in fact, not the decision-makers anymore, the third parties such as the governments, the ISPs, the digital platforms have become the decision-makers. Consequently, the news media and the journalists have turned into the practitioners of the actors of commodification. The most majority of the journalist interviewees do not know the difference between the ISPs, digital platforms and hosting services; between the content removal and access blocking; and the Law No. 5651 and Law No. 7418. Their confusion between the ISPs and hosting companies is due to the outsourcing the hosting services to a company that offers webmaster services and handles the internet connection matters, which leads to the indifference for the technical matters related to the internet access and is the outcome of not perceiving the internet as means of production. The majority of the journalist interviewees do not know the ISP that they are subscribed to. During many of the interviews, I had to paraphrase the question two or three times regarding to which company they are a subscriber of. I had to explain what I mean by the ISP as the company they access the internet through or the telecom operator that provides the internet access. In addition to the lack of knowledge about the law and regulations, they lack the technical knowledge and skills as well. Since their knowledge on digital is quite limited, they consider the matters such as web design or building a social media strategy are expensive and unmanageable. The subject of this research is not the web design or the effective use of social media, yet their mindset prevents them to pursue more cost-effective and functional working strategies in the digital environment.

Algorithms, SEO-oriented production and the censorship mechanism of the state are also other reasons for the alienation of the journalists. On one hand they make

respectable efforts for both making profit and preserving the sustainability, on the other they struggle to not encounter with a lawsuit, fine or jail time or not to be shutdown completely, which all of these processes causes alienation. When the lack of solidarity crosses paths with the reluctance to figure out the technical aspect of their work, a state of learned helplessness, or rather a state of acceptance, occurs. The journalist interviewees seem to embrace a principle that this is all they could do best under these circumstances. In the meantime, the rate of unionization is quite limited and there is no attempt for building a solidarity or a network to help each other. Only two journalist interviewees mentioned this need and their willingness to start such a solidarity movement in the news media industry in Türkiye. However, the rest of the interviewees seek ways to sustain their current practice of journalism in their own small circles where they feel safer, which causes the fragmentation in journalism.

The alienation from the means of production goes unnoticed, but how could one defend the freedom without realizing the means and relations of production, let alone owning them? Journalism is practiced on someone else's property and yet, one cannot free something they do not own. The independent digital news media can break this chain by realizing their own strength and power, and by constructing themselves as the platform itself. Some interviewees are aware of this urgent need and stated that they have been working to build themselves as the platform itself where the audience directly lands on their website or application. This again reminds the inevitability of the need for solidarity. Through solidarity they need to show an act of resistance at points where the regulations fail or function as a censorship mechanism. The journalists should confront with the ISPs and the digital platforms and insist that they cannot disregard the human rights and thus, are obliged to act in accordance with the media freedom and freedom of expression. The same attitude should be embraced against the upcoming threat of AI. However, this solidarity must include the audience, which could be achieved through building a dialogue with the audience. After all, preventing communication is to reify the human and this is a job for the oppressors (Freire, 2022, p. 148). A media environment where there is no dialogue is unthinkable.

At this point, the validity of the critique of globalization proved itself. Through the methods of the decentralization of censorship, the digital platforms as the capitalist

transnational corporations have the means to shape the narrative and restrict free speech. They determine the direction of information flow on the contrary to the illusion that they enhance the freedom of expression and media freedom. From a pragmatic perspective, it might be fair to state that the independent digital news media such as in Türkiye benefit from the opportunities of the digital platforms since the oppression of the state is so powerful that the advantages offered by the digital platforms outweigh to challenge the capitalist structure. As Thussu (2007) pointed out, this situation leads to the influence on the media and communication systems by the transnational profit-oriented corporations.

Another interesting aspect is the realization of the non-existence of the dialectic relationship between the independent digital native news media and the actors of commodification. The digital platforms do not need the news media as a master needs the slave to maintain its existence (Potamias, 2024). Similarly, the ISPs and the governments also do not have a dialectic relationship with the news media. The crux in the problem of this research is the absence of this ontological relationship. In fact, what we have discussed so far is the struggle of different parties that are not dependent on each other. Thus, journalism is like an uninvited guest in the digital environment, which requires it to transcend this state of being and abolish this system.

The intention of this dissertation thesis is not the demonstration of the current state of the digital news ecosystem, but rather propose a solution to establish media freedom after a thorough analysis. As emphasized many times throughout the research, the path to freedom could only be reached by adopting a critical political economy perspective. The expected outcome of the research was the information and news ecosystem that is objectified by the state and commodified by the capital, which has been confirmed. Yet, the alienation of the journalists as the producers and consequently, or maybe as a reason, their adoption of some practices as the instruments of bargaining such as censorship, self-censorship and adjustment of the production process according to the distribution process along with the attitude of ‘what else can we do?’ are the unexpected outcome of this research. Instead of attempting to change the structure, they ponder over how to preserve their existence in an environment where journalism is deemed as irrelevant. This pragmatic approach in the independent digital

news media appears as a defense mechanism in this capitalist system. However, this defense mechanism also a mechanism that imprisons them in this false structure, which always makes them vulnerable to political and economic power. In order to transcend this confinement, all the constituents on the side of freedom who are journalists, media organizations, civil society, academics and the audience must be brought together in solidarity. The co-operative-style platforms must be established independent from the market forces, and the social and economic pressure must be applied on the ISPs and the AI systems to comply with the human rights. This could be the only road to free news media and information.



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