

Book Review

by Johan Farkas

Talking back to the West: How Turkey uses counter-hegemony to reshape the global communication order by Bilge Yesil

Digital media technologies were long heralded as tools of global deliberation, free speech, and democracy, marking the end of top-down control over public communication. As Castells wrote in 2012, digital networks could now serve as “spaces of autonomy, largely beyond the control of governments and corporations”, ending their historic monopoly over “channels of communication as the foundation of their power” (Castells, 2012, p. 12). Looking back from the present historical conjuncture, it can be challenging to understand the zeitgeist that produced such off-the-mark analyses. Today, media systems are increasingly defined by geo-political struggles within and between nation states over who gets to control, leverage, and restrict platforms, media, and public discourse. This underlines the importance of critical historical research into how and why media policies and political economies have developed as they have.

In *Talking Back to the West*, Bilge Yesil addresses this important issue, focusing on the national case of Turkey. Drawing on media content, policy documents, and interviews with both employees at state-aligned media outlets and audience members, Yesil (2024) maps with remarkable detail how the Turkish government – since the early-to-mid 2010s – has tightened control over domestic media, while simultaneously expanding its foreign-facing propaganda efforts. Through a combination of legal restrictions, intimidation, and extensive investments in state-aligned media, the ruling party – AKP – and its increasingly authoritarian leader Recep Erdoğan have spearheaded a wide range of media interventions. These have been aimed at both silencing internal and external criticism and mobilizing support through narratives of “civilizational dualities between Turkey and the West, such as just versus unjust, moral versus immoral” (Yesil, 2024, p. 138). As Yesil stresses, these government pursuits “should not be regarded as an exemplar of counter-hegemony or merely as an extension of Turkey’s public diplomacy efforts. Instead, it should be recognized as a venture carried out by an undemocratic and power-driven regime, one that is shaped by long-standing religious and cultural grievances” (Yesil, 2024, p. 143).

The political developments in Turkey mirror, connect, and respond to trajectories in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Russia, and China that have also increasingly restricted domestic

media while expanding foreign-facing propaganda. This makes the Turkish case important, not only in its own right, but as part of wider international developments towards greater government interference and control over media in the 21st century. By tactically appropriating digital technologies and discursively tapping into existing cultural antagonisms towards the West within and beyond Turkey, AKP-aligned media presents the world to a wide audience through a “framework that is aligned with the Erdoğan regime’s preferred narratives while omitting those that do not” (Yesil, 2024, p. 3).

Chapter 1 opens with the Gezi Park protests of 2013, outlining how the Turkish government responded not only with teargas and arrests, but also with rhetorical attacks and unfounded conspiracy theories against the West. Instead of acknowledging the merits of what became nationwide protests in Turkey, the government resorted to blaming foreign media for supporting or perhaps even orchestrating the demonstrations. That same year, evidence of corruption imbricating Erdoğan ended a historic alliance between AKP and the religious Gülen movement. Following these events, the Turkish government began crackdowns on internal criticism while also investing heavily in both domestic and foreign-facing media and communications. These efforts include the English-language newspaper *The Daily Sabah*, the broadcaster *TRT World*, and the Directorate of Communications, established to “empower the Türkiye brand” (Directorate of Communication, 2024).

Chapter 2 maps how Erdoğan and AKP-aligned media have tactically tapped into global fears around fake news and the post-truth era to legitimize crackdowns on independent journalism, while simultaneously portraying Erdoğan as the “only world leader who is ‘crusading for truth’” (Yesil, 2024, p. 48). Yesil shows how Turkish officials tactically adopt liberal rhetoric of combatting disinformation to justify media restrictions.

Chapter 3 examines how the Turkish government and state-aligned media have leveraged legitimate concerns about Islamophobia across the Balkans, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia to present Turkey as a “virtuous actor (indeed, the only one) that can undo the injustices Muslims suffer from” (p. 84). As Yesil shows, *The Daily Sabah* and *TRT World* focus extensively on cases of Islamophobia – particularly across Europe, India, and China – thus leveraging Muslim victimhood abroad as a means of mobilizing support around Turkish foreign policy. As Yesil stresses, this is a highly selective narrative that persistently emphasizes certain forms of suffering while neglecting others, particularly the oppression of Kurds, Alevis, and LGBTQ+ minorities within Turkey.

Chapter 4 examines AKP discourses around Europe and the West, showcasing how they build on Occidental narratives of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, echoing the antagonism found in Huntington’s (1996) ‘clash of civilization’ hypothesis. Rather than rejecting far-right rhetoric in the West of a civilizational conflict between Muslims and Christians, AKP rhetoric often presents a twin image of this dichotomous worldview. As Yesil describes, “the Erdoğan government consistently reminds Western powers about the atrocities they committed throughout history”, proclaiming that “Turkish history remains untarnished by such stains, thus asserting Turkey's superiority to the West” (p. 104), systematically omitting atrocities in Turkish history such as the Armenian genocide.

Chapter 5 – the final chapter before the conclusion – moves from the overtly political discourse of the AKP government and news media into the subtler cultural influence of AKP-sanctioned historical television dramas. Yesil describes how the Turkish government has increasingly funded historical dramas on state-aligned TV as a form of “memory politics” (p. 120) that glorifies Turkish and Ottoman history and vilify perceived enemies. These TV shows have become increasingly popular not only within Turkey, but also among certain European, Arab, African, and Asian audiences. In addition to idealizing Turkish history, Yesil argues that the historical dramas function as a way of promoting ideas of resurrecting an Islamic golden age under Turkish leadership. These efforts, however, have not been without pushbacks. For example, in 2019 Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) decided to fund a competing historical drama (*Mamalic Al-Nar*), explicitly aimed at challenging the portrayal of Ottoman rule as a golden age for Muslims.

In terms of limitations of the book, it would have been interesting to see further analysis on how both the rhetoric and media policies of the Turkish government align with and diverge from those in nations like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Russia, or China, particularly in their deployment of digital technologies and anti-Western rhetoric. In the specific context of fake news and the notion of a post-truth era, it would also have been interesting to connect further to other geo-political contexts where fears of false information have been used to legitimize censorship and increased state control of media (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021; Farkas & Schou, 2023; Lim, 2020; Neo, 2020). While the book already makes such connections, a final chapter could have more explicitly drawn together how and why the Turkish case is emblematic of global trends of increased state control and restrictions on media and communications in the digital era. That said, the level of detail provided on the Turkish national case will undoubtedly be invaluable to future comparative research.

Farkas, J. (2025). Talking back to the West: How Turkey uses counter-hegemony to reshape the global communication order by Bilge Yesil. *Communication, Culture and Critique*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cc/tcaf004>

All in all, *Talking Back to the West* in my view provides a crucial puzzle piece towards understanding the trend of increased government restrictions of media and communication in times of resurgent authoritarianism. This work lays the groundwork for future studies seeking to connect these developments on a global scale.

References:

- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Polity Press.
- Cunliffe-Jones, P., Diagne, A., Finlay, A., & Schiffrin, A. (2021). Bad Law – Legal And Regulatory Responses To Misinformation In Sub-Saharan Africa 2016–2020. In P. Cunliffe-Jones, A. Diagne, A. Finlay, & A. Schiffrin (Eds.), *Misinformation Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Laws and Regulations to Media Literacy*. University of Westminster Press.
- Directorate of Communication. (2024). *Vision*. Directorate of Communication. <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/vizyon-misyon>
- Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2023). *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003434870>
- Huntington, S. (1996). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Penguin Books.
- Lim, G. (2020). *Securitize / Counter—Securitize: The Life and Death of Malaysia’s Anti-Fake News Act* (pp. 1–60). Data and Society. <https://datasociety.net/library/securitiz-counter-securitize>
- Neo, R. (2020). A cudgel of repression: Analysing state instrumentalisation of the ‘fake news’ label in Southeast Asia. *Journalism*, 23(9), 1919–1938. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920984060>
- Yesil, B. (2024). *Talking Back to the West: How Turkey Uses Counter-Hegemony to Reshape the Global Communication Order*. University of Illinois Press.