

Questioning the Compass of the Western Media: Early Perceptions of the July 15 Coup Attempt in Turkey

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ABSTRACT *This study investigates how the western media reacted immediately after the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. To this end, 91 news reports and articles in ten newspapers from the U.S., the UK, Germany, and France, dating from July 15 to July 18, 2016, were analyzed. Based on content analysis, the early perceptions of the western media were categorized by sentiment as positive, neutral, or negative in terms of their tone, feeling, and emotion regarding the coup attempt. The findings show that only 42 publications were neutral only reporting the news, while 44 publications were positive about the coup attempt favoring the junta and failing to support the democratically elected government. On the other hand, only five publications expressed negative opinions about the coup attempt by showing strong support for democracy and expressing anti-coup views. Overall, the analysis shows that journalists are not free of bias; most of them missed or neglected the damaging consequences of the coup attempt on Turkish democracy and society due to their negative perceptions about the incumbent government.*

Keywords: Coup Attempt, Democracy, Perception, Media, Code of Ethics for Journalism

Insight Turkey 2021

Vol. 23 / No. 3 / pp. 157-180

Received Date: 24.11.2020 • Accepted Date: 27/02/2021 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2021233.9

Introduction

July 15, 2016, witnessed the uprising of the Turkish people against an unexpected coup attempt by a junta (group of military officers in the army) loyal to FETÖ.¹ The incident can be described as a deep social trauma in Turkey that created “a profound lack of confidence towards public institutions and religious communities,” because this organization was mainly known as a religious sect having activities in education; however, it was realized that they created a “shadow state structure by penetrating into the military, the security sector, the judiciary, the national intelligence organization, and the state bureaucracy...”² The coup attempt resulted in 248 civilian deaths, more than 2,000 injuries, widespread property damage, and financial catastrophe. Across the world, news broadcasts and media outlets announced this sudden event in their headlines for several days. While it was undoubtedly a trauma, the coup attempt was also a milestone for Turkish democracy; unarmed people ran out onto the streets to rise up against the military, and many sacrificed their lives for the maintenance of their country, their democracy, and their democratically elected government. For the first time in Turkish and world history, millions of people, whether they supported the incumbent political party or not, took to the streets to personally defend their country and their system of government against the coup plotters.

Turkey has experienced many coups in the past,³ but thanks to the many citizens who supported the government in the most recent crisis, the events of July 15, will be known only as an attempt. Other attempts have been successful. Indeed, center-right, single-party governments in Turkey have always faced military intervention, although the economic performance of the country is higher under such leadership than under coalition governments.⁴ These parties include the Democrat Party (1950-1960), the Justice Party (1965-1971), the Motherland Party (1983-1991), and the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) (2002-present).⁵ The July 15 coup attempt in Turkey provides a very useful laboratory and a unique data source for researchers and scholars to observe and analyze, and it differs from previous coups for three main reasons. First, it was the first time that Turkish civilians stood up against the coup plotters and came out into the streets all over Turkey. They did so even though the armed forces attacked them with firearms, killing and injuring many. Second, the members of the army's air forces who joined the coup attempt hit strategic and critical institutions, such as the parliament (the Turkish Grand National Assembly), the Ankara Police Headquarters, and another police department known as a special operations group in the town of Gölbaşı, in Ankara province. Thirdly, it is important to note that the AK Party, under Erdoğan's leadership and with the support of Turkey's citizens is the only party to have defied and overcome a coup attempt, in contrast to the previous center-right parties that were toppled by military coups in the past.

Coups categorically mean lack of democracy, ignorance of and disrespectfulness toward the preferences of the public, and a dictatorship of juntas.⁶ A military intervention directly targets the incumbent government; when this government is a democracy, as in the case of Turkey, a coup violates the fundamental democratic rights of citizens. Moreover, a coup not only disrupts political life but also economic and social life by jeopardizing a country's established constitutional rights, rules, and institutions. Every coup d'état has its own characteristics related to the country's political culture, structure, and domestic policies; the factors motivating coups are typically a mixture of historical, political, economic, personal, military, social, ethnic, and cultural factors.⁷ Although the specific causes and effects of coups differ from case to case, they all have long-lasting, damaging effects on social, political, and economic life.

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Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the evolution of Turkish democracy has been interrupted by recurring coups.⁸ The problematic nature of Turkish democracy was mainly caused by these recurring military interventions, which directly or indirectly weakened the effectiveness and participation of the public in Turkish political life.⁹ Aware of this historical pattern, many countries and officials expressed their rejection of the recent coup attempt and declared their support for the continuation of democracy in Turkey.¹⁰ Some, however, claimed to support the government, but also tried to portray Erdoğan, the elected President of the Turkish Republic, as individually responsible for the coup. Moreover, instead of supporting the Turkish democratic system and opposing the coup, some media agents also tried to venerate cleric F. Gülen, the leader of FETÖ and the main planner of the attempt.

The Turkish media successfully covered the events of July 15 and reported the widespread citizen upheavals against the coup attempt in Turkey; however, the early perceptions of some western media organs seem to have missed or neglected the damaging consequences of the coup attempt on Turkish democracy and society. To illustrate this difference, Turkey's *Hürriyet Daily News* reported on July 16, 2016: "Opposition Parties Reject the Military Coup Attempt,"¹¹ and the *Daily Sabah* published a news report stating: "President Erdoğan Calls on Citizens to Take to the Streets against Attempted Coup."¹² In contrast, retired Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters, an intelligence officer in the U.S. military, made the following comment on *Fox News* television: "If the coup succeeds, Islamists lose and we win."¹³ Bob Baer, a former CIA official interviewed on *CNN*, went further and offered recommendations for the putschists to help them succeed in the coup attempt, encouraging them to capture the *CNN Türk* channel and internet broadcasts, and arrest Erdoğan.¹⁴ Given the conflicting

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the democratically elected government by asking the following question: “How did the western media initially react in its coverage of the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, in Turkey right after the event?” To answer this question, it provides a content analysis of 91 different news reports and articles (not sampled but selected, and all related to the coup attempt) from ten major western media newspapers, between July 15 and 18, 2016. These include 20 publications from July 17-18, 2016, due to the timing of press releases, i.e. time zone differences or weekend editions. The early perceptions of the western media were categorized by sentiment analysis as positive, neutral, or negative in terms of their tone, feelings, and emotions about the coup attempt.

perceptions and attitudes of the western media versus the Turkish media regarding July 15, 2016, many researchers are interested in doing research on this topic.¹⁵

The present study focuses on analyzing early perceptions of the western media regarding the coup, democracy, and

‘Perception’ is a well-known and commonly used concept in many studies related to Sociology, Communication, Public Relations, International Relations, Management, Media, Psychology, Public Administration, and Political Science. The concept is also present in the areas of psychological operations, propagation, journalism, public diplomacy, and perception management.¹⁶ For instance, in journalism studies, journalists’ perception is a key term in understanding truth and objectivity in journalism. Juan Ramon Munoz-Torres provides an overview of the continuing debate on why it is impossible to attain a pure perception of ‘facts’ deprived of values.¹⁷ ‘Truth’ is something that exists independently from personal opinion and constructed things, but it is hard to test actual truth in many cases. People might perceive conditions, events, facts, objects, and behaviors differently under different circumstances due to their interpretation, culture, belief system, bias, and moral evaluation.¹⁸ This might bring us to the epistemology (what is knowledge? how is knowledge acquired? how do we know what we know?); and ontology (a systematic account of existence or the fundamental nature of reality and truth) of knowledge debates,¹⁹ which are beyond the scope of this article. The focus of this study is to show how media organs perceive the same events in different ways and to consider why they do so. Therefore, we use a top-down approach to understand the perception of media organs, because we prefer ‘direct perception’ that is not influenced by individual factors that might result in inadequate interpretation. As the constructivist theory states “perception is the end product of the interaction between stimulus and internal hypotheses, expectations, and knowledge of the observer, while motivation and emotions play an important role

in this process.”²⁰ For instance, we state a direct perception of a military coup that is abstracted from personal motivations and emotions by stating that a military coup against a democratically elected government is wrong whatever the reason is.

Bernhard Poerksen claims that attaining absolute knowledge of truth is impossible²¹ because we as human beings are inescapably biased. In contrast, realists and positivists believe that objective knowledge is possible by comparing external reality and its medial representation.²² There are many examples indicating that different journalists perceive facts in different ways. For example, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen examines subjectivity and storytelling in journalism by conducting a content analysis of Pulitzer Prize-winning articles between 1995 and 2011. The author finds that “despite the continued prominence of the ideal of objectivity in scholarly and journalistic debates, award-winning journalistic stories are in fact pervaded by subjective language in the form of what linguists refer to as ‘appraisals,’ as well as the narrative construction of emotive appeals.”²³ Similarly, as Poerksen notes, communication scholar Siegfried J. Schmidt compares the reporting of the beginning of the intifada in Palestine by the first and second German television stations. “The one German television channel showed police throwing the stones children had thrown at them back at the children. In the newscast of another channel, only stone-throwing children were shown. The different variants of event selection, staging, and presentation may thus be compared.”²⁴ Therefore, it is a common question why different television stations construct different realities out of one single fact. Depending on this question, many studies argue that mass media, in particular, is very influential in managing peoples’ perceptions.²⁵ Therefore, the ongoing perception management perpetuated by mass media can be considered an important, external factor that causes misperception and thus prevents people from attaining actual truth. The term perception management is also known as manipulation, psychological operation, public relations, or marketing, and it refers to bringing the masses to the desired point “by influencing their emotions, motives, and goals”²⁶ with communication tools.

It is important to note that a misperception, as a first reaction, might change over time after individuals receive new information. However, it is still essential to examine different people’s first reactions to the same thing (events, objects, or cases, etc.) in order to show how their perceptions might be different from reality. As W. Lawrence Neuman states, “initial impressions are in fact more likely to reflect the real tendencies before and without external influences.”²⁷ In other words, later changes in the perception will not change the fact of early real opinion. On the other hand, if events are misperceived by opinion leaders (e.g., politicians, journalists, and scholars), i.e. if their perception differs from the actual truth, this issue becomes more important, because such figures have significant influence in forming and managing the percep-

There are many studies focusing on perception management on the part of the media; they tend to criticize the media for causing misperceptions and damaging objectivity in journalism

tions of the ordinary citizens who make up the majority of society.

However, objectivity in journalism has been recently debated due to subjectivity in journalistic storytelling, because bias and partiality have a great influence on storytelling.²⁸ Moreover, journalism historians assume that journalists reorder and reshape events, facts, and information in storytelling.²⁹ Last, ideological thinking, known as ‘media framing’ in the literature, is another

factor causing subjectivity in storytelling. Robert M. Entman states that journalists frame the event they describe by selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and make[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.”³⁰

There are many studies focusing on perception management on the part of the media; they tend to criticize the media for causing misperceptions and damaging objectivity in journalism.³¹ In this sense, journalists need to try to publish the actual truth, which is independent of personal evaluations, bias, partiality, ideology, religion, personality, and other factors. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) works to promote and ensure ethical journalism and has developed some principles to encourage media professionals to practice them. “Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair, and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting, and interpreting information.”³² Therefore, the public has the right to receive unbiased information from the media. This is a vital ethical principle for journalism in democratic countries.

Research Design

This study investigates the initial reactions of the western media to the coup attempt by asking the following research question: “How did the western media first react to the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, in Turkey immediately following the event?” In order to answer this question, we first evaluated newspapers in the following major and influential western countries, which are used as model countries in most comparative research:³³ the U.S., the UK, Germany, and France. We then selected ten different newspapers in these countries according to their rankings and circulation, which indicate their influence on public opinion: *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* from the U.S.;

The Guardian and *The Independent* from the UK; *Bild*, *Die Welt*, and *Der Tagesspiegel* from Germany and *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, and *Libération* from France. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are ranked in the top ten U.S. newspapers in terms of circulation;³⁴ similarly, *Bild*, *Die Welt*, and *Der Tagesspiegel* are among the top ten newspapers in Germany.³⁵ In total, 91 articles and news reports in these newspapers, published between July 15-18, 2016, on the subject of the coup attempt, were analyzed. These articles were not sampled, but were rather selected; all were specifically about the coup attempt.

The most important reason for choosing the first three days immediately following the coup attempt is to see the early perceptions of these media organs, because first reactions in journalistic storytelling show the writers' tone, emotions, and feelings about the 'facts,' although they might change their attitude over time as more evidence is put forward. Moreover, marginal or extreme views have a tendency to move toward median/average views over time, in a trend known as the statistical regression of ideas, in which "a problem of extreme values or a tendency for random errors move group results toward the average" over time.³⁶ In the case of the western media, it can be observed that the perceptions and attitudes toward the coup attempt changed over time.³⁷

We employed content analysis to analyze the perceptions expressed in ten different western newspapers. Content analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from a text, i.e., a "technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages."³⁸ These inferences are about the sender(s) of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message.³⁹ The meaning can be derived from various components, such as visual images, symbols, recorded speech, and documents; words, phrases, theories, and other units of text are classified in the same category. "Every content analysis requires a context within which the available texts are examined. The analyst must, in effect, construct a world in which the texts make sense and can answer the analyst's research questions."⁴⁰ In this study, during the content analysis, the codification was done within categorizations based on sentiment analysis, a process known as opinion mining. Therefore, the opinions of 91 news reports and articles were categorized into *positive* (Focusing on critiques of the incumbent government's actions and justifying the coup attempt, with no clear support for democracy), *neutral* (reporting the news "as is," or presenting contradictory positive and negative views together so that viewers can evaluate them in a balanced way) or *negative* (expressing anti-coup views and strong support for democracy) in order to explore patterns and trends in the tone, feelings, and emotions of the publications about the coup attempt in western media. The importance of sentiment analysis has recently been increasing in Political Science⁴¹ and in journalism.⁴² For instance, Rogers *et al.* use sentiment analysis to analyze a dataset of public posts on the largest Russian social network,

VKontakte, on a three-point scale: positive, neutral, or negative.⁴³ Zhang *et al.* use a sentiment lexicon and apply a Support Vector Machine to classify blog posts into three categories of opinion: positive, mixed, or negative.⁴⁴

Table 1: Categories for the Opinions of News Reports and Articles in the Newspapers on the Coup Attempt

Categories	Example Headlines
Positive (No support for democracy): Focusing on critiques of the incumbent government's actions; justifying the coup attempt; no clear support for democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turkey was already undergoing a slow-motion coup – by Erdoğan, not the army – <i>The Guardian</i> Turkish Crisis: The real coup starts now – <i>Die Welt</i>
Neutral: Reporting the news as it is	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turkey Coup: Parliament hit by bomb, reports say – <i>The Independent</i> Erdoğan says his government is in control after bloody coup attempt – <i>The Washington Post</i>
Negative: Expressing anti-coup views; strong support for democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turkey Coup: Barack Obama backs President Erdoğan as world leaders express concern – <i>The Independent</i> The embarrassed support of Westerners to their ally Turkey – <i>Le Figaro</i>

Source: Compiled by the authors

It is important to note that three, independent coders worked to categorize the opinions of the news reports and opinion articles in the newspapers while making the content analysis. The coders are fluent in advanced, academic English; only the publications in German and French were translated into Turkish by certified interpreters. The coders include two research assistants, one Ph.D. candidate and the other a Ph.D. graduate, and a professor in the area of Political Science. The coders were blind to the journals and writers, aware of the importance of academic objectivity in scientific studies, and trained in codification procedures. Each conducted his/her coding independently, without knowing what the others coded for a particular publication. Table 2 shows an example of the coding procedures used in categorizing the 91 news reports and articles; a detailed explanation continues below.

Table 2: Example of Coding Procedure and Inter-rater Reliability

News Reports and Articles	Coder 1	Coder 2	Coder 3	Coder 1 and Coder 2	Coder 1 and Coder 3	Coder 2 and Coder 3	Agreement
1	Positive	Positive	Positive	1	1	1	3/3
2	Negative	Negative	Neutral	1	0	0	1/3
3	Negative	Neutral	Positive	0	0	0	0/3
4	Positive	Negative	Negative	0	0	1	1/3
5	Negative	Positive	Negative	0	1	0	1/3

Source: Compiled by the authors⁴⁵

Conducting an inter-rater reliability check is essential to prove that the categorizing itself is not subjective or biased. Moreover, it is useful to see whether the accuracy of our multiple categorizing is working, or if it requires modifying.⁴⁶ Therefore, we compared and contrasted the coding choices in order to avoid coder subjectivity and to ensure inter-rater reliability. In the coding procedure, there were three coders, which means three possible pairs: Coder 1 and Coder 2, Coder 1 and Coder 3, and Coder 2 and Coder 3. If one of these pairs agrees, we assign '1' (agree); if not, we assign '0' (disagree). After that, we calculate the inter-rater reliability score by taking the mean of the fractions in the agreement column as shown in Table 2. As an example, we can calculate the mean for the five hypothetical news reports and articles in Table 2 by using the following formula: $\text{Mean} = (3/3 + 1/3 + 0/3 + 1/3 + 1/3)/5$. This calculation is equal to 0.399, or we can say 40 percent. Therefore, the inter-rater reliability score in our example is 40 percent. By applying the same formula to our coders' coding for 91 publications, we found the inter-rater reliability score to be 81 percent.

Last, we performed a frequency analysis to discover the frequency distribution of some of the most commonly used keywords and phrases, such as 'Erdoğan's authoritarianism,' 'the polarization of society,' 'Erdoğan's oppression on policy and public,' his 'dividing the country,' 'Erdoğan's dictatorship' and 'the instability of Erdoğan's regime,' as shown in Table 4. This analysis helps us to evaluate which particular aspects of the coup attempt journalists used as a main focus.

Findings: Western Media's Interpretation of the Coup Attempt

Descriptive information about the 91 news reports and articles is presented in Table 3. As stated above, these publications were categorized into *positive* (focusing on critiques of the incumbent government's actions; justifying the coup attempt; no clear support for democracy), *neutral* (reporting the news as it is), or *negative* (expressing anti-coup views; strong support for democracy) in order to discover the tone, feelings, and emotions of the publications regarding the coup attempt in the western media. In the next section, the newspapers in each country are separately evaluated to offer further and more detailed explanations.

The majority of these publications disregarded the millions of people on the streets because they rather focused on particular individual expressions of a few Turkish people who were against Erdoğan and claimed that Erdoğan planned the coup attempt himself

Table 3: News Reports and Articles by Categories Related to the Coup Attempt

	The U.S.		Britain		Germany			France			
Attitudes and Positions	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>Bild</i>	<i>Die Welt (Welt am Sonntag)</i>	<i>Der Tagesspiegel</i>	<i>Le Figaro</i>	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>Libération</i>	TOTAL
Positive	9	8	5	4	3	5	5	2	2	1	44
Neutral	4	6	9	12	2	4	1	1	1	2	42
Negative	-	1	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	5
Country Subtotal	28		33		20			10			91

Source: Compiled by the authors⁴⁷

U.S. Newspapers

The New York Times

The New York Times published three news reports and ten articles regarding the coup attempt; there were nine positive and four neutral publications but no negative publication expressing anti-coup opinions/strong support for democracy. Neutral publications report the event as it is. On the other hand, the positive publications mainly focus on critiques of the government's actions, especially the future characterization of Erdoğan as an authoritarian ruler, justifying the coup attempt and professing no clear support for democracy. For instance, Arango and Yeğinsu note that “stunning scene, televised nationwide, at first seemed an embarrassment for a leader who presents himself as all-powerful and suggested his end.”⁴⁸ In addition, the scene of Erdoğan's *Facetime* call with a journalist on TV was interpreted by Tung subjectively as “a dramatic scene that seemed to suggest a man on the verge of losing power.”⁴⁹ His reports end by declaring the failure of the coup, commenting on President Erdoğan's position in the future as; “Mr. Erdoğan, who had frequently talked of conspiracies afoot to undermine his power, was back in control, seemingly as powerful as ever, and perhaps even more paranoid.” Similarly, the editorial board of the *The New York Times* state, “Mr. Erdoğan will become more vengeful and obsessed with control than ever, exploiting the crisis not just to punish mutinous soldiers but to further quash whatever dissent is left in Turkey.”⁵⁰ Claims of polarization in Turkey were presented as justification for the coup attempt; for example, Eric Cunningham *et al.* write, “the country became deeply polarized in recent years between supporters of Mr. Erdoğan's Islamist government and those loyal to Turkey's secular traditions; many wondered if the military would intervene. Some, quietly, had even hoped it would.”⁵¹

The majority of these publications disregarded the millions of people on the streets because they rather focused on particular individual expressions of a few Turkish people who were against Erdoğan and claimed that Erdoğan planned



U.S., German, French, and British newspapers' first reaction to the coup attempt of July 15, 2016. Western media's interpretation seems to have missed or neglected the damaging consequences of the coup attempt on Turkish democracy and society.

the coup attempt himself. For instance, film producer Samlı argued that “people around us were saying that it was a staged coup orchestrated by President Erdoğan to help him obtain more power over the country.”⁵² In another article, Arango and Yeğinsu quote taxi driver Cem Yıldız as stating, “the people tried to stand up against President Erdoğan, but they couldn’t, they were crushed, so the military had no choice but to take over.”⁵³ Similarly, Schmitt and Bilefsky quote Dani Rodrik as saying, “it makes Erdoğan’s quest for an authoritarian presidency virtually unstoppable. I fear I will not see a democratic Turkey in my lifetime.”⁵⁴

The Washington Post

The Washington Post published 14 articles and one editorial report about the coup attempt. There were eight positive and six neutral publications but only one negative publication about the coup attempt. Numerous claims about Turkey’s polarized social ground indicate that it is the main issue from the perspective of these publications. Cunningham *et al.* portray divisions among the Turkish populace regarding the coup attempt; even though all segments of society in Turkey were unified in opposing it, the authors depict negative polarization within Turkish society, arguing that “the splits within the secu-

These articles frequently compare the coup attempt in Turkey to the one in Egypt, even though the two were completely different both in terms of process and results

the coup: “In Turkey’s deeply polarized political landscape, conspiracy theories whirled around Twitter that the coup was, in fact, an attempt by Erdoğan to further expand his control.”⁵⁶ Erdoğan’s political character is given wide coverage through harsh expressions. Soner Çagaptay states, “Erdoğan has built a cult of personality as a kind of authoritarian underdog, portraying himself as a victim who is forced to crack down on those conspiring to undermine his authority... He has successfully and politically brutalized opposition groups, which collectively makeup nearly half of the country’s population and are now unified in their hatred of the president.”⁵⁷

These views suggest that Erdoğan’s regime has undemocratically seized control of the country, providing a rationale with which to justify the coup attempt. In another article, Cunningham *et al.* offer a different rightful reason for the coup attempt: “Erdoğan has made many enemies in the 13 years he has run Turkey, first as prime minister and then, since 2014, as president, including within the military. Hundreds of officers have been imprisoned by his government, some of them accused of coup-plotting, and it had been widely believed that his clampdowns on dissent had dispelled the risk of coups in the once coup-prone country.”⁵⁸

Greg Jaffe reports, “A refusal by the United States to send Gülen home to Turkey would probably complicate the White House’s already-tense relationship with the Erdoğan government.”⁵⁹ He talks about the possibility of the coup having been plotted by the followers of cleric Gülen, emphasizing the alliance once made between Erdoğan and Gülen. Introducing Gülen as Erdoğan’s opponent can be evaluated as vague support to the cleric. In another article, Strauss argues, “Turkish President Erdoğan says that the coup attempt on Friday was the work of army officers who are followers of Gülen, who had once been an ally but whose movement has become critical of the increasingly authoritarian regime.”⁶⁰ The same article continues by providing information about the schools of Gülen around the world, with an effort to show their benefits. By praising Gülen’s educational expansion, an exculpation of a suspected group can easily be observed. Other articles focus on concern for the future of democracy from a negative perspective. For instance, one article states that “rather than an opportunity for democracy, the failed coup will only consolidate Turkey’s elected

autocracy,”⁶¹ while other states, “the coup may leave a more unstable and less liberal NATO member on the board of Iraq and Syria, headed by a Putinesque strongman whose paranoia and intolerance have been redoubled.”⁶²

UK Newspapers

The Guardian

The Guardian published 16 articles. There were five positive and nine neutral publications, while there were only two negative publications about the coup attempt. The majority of the publications start by citing the number of officers dismissed from security services and the judiciary. For instance, although the breaking news, at first glance, was about the Turkish coup attempt, Patrick Kingsley begins his report with the following information: “Turkey’s hardline president, Erdoğan, unleashed a purge of his enemies in the army and judiciary on Saturday after heading off an attempted military coup.”⁶³ Harsh portrayals of the democratically elected president and government seem to dominate the news reports. Similarly, Peter Beaumont touts in his article, “The AK Party has itself provoked a number of coups or attempts in Turkish history,”⁶⁴ a statement that in fact has no basis. The messages openly present the image of Turkey as having already been in turmoil before July 15, 2016. Similarly, Andrew Finkel states, “Many would argue that Turkey was already in the throes of a slow-motion coup d’état, not by the military but by Erdoğan himself. For the last three years, he has been moving, and methodically, to take over the nodes of power.”⁶⁵ Drawing attention to Erdoğan and evaluating his presidency itself as a reason for the coup seems to be not only a direct way of ‘not’ supporting the democratically elected civilian government but an indirect way of supporting the coup attempt.

The Independent

The Independent published 17 publications. There were 12 neutral and four positive publications, but there was only one negative publication about the coup attempt. Erdoğan’s character as a leader is presented as more important than the crucial reality of the coup attempt in three of the positive publications. On the grounds that the coup plotters were targeting Erdoğan, Robert Fisk writes in his article, “the real question will be the degree to which his (momentary) success will embolden Erdoğan to undertake more trials, imprison more journalists, close down more newspapers, kill more Kurds and, for that matter, go on denying the 1915 Armenian genocide.”⁶⁶ He prefers to ignore the fact that Erdoğan is a democratically elected leader. Moreover, in his article, Samuel Osborne focuses on Erdoğan’s expressions, claiming that “the coup plotters will pay a heavy price,” honing in on Erdoğan’s authoritarianism rather than the mayhem the plotters caused. He continues, “The chaos capped a period of political turmoil in Turkey – a NATO member and key western ally in the fight against ISIS– that critics blame on President Erdoğan’s increasingly

authoritarian rule. He has shaken up the government, cracked down on dissidents, restricted the news media, and renewed conflict with Kurdish rebels.”⁶⁷

These articles frequently compare the coup attempt in Turkey to the one in Egypt, even though the two were completely different both in terms of process and results. In one article, the situations of Morsi and Erdoğan are compared: “The ‘democracy’ bit was rather hard to swallow; even more painful to recall, however, was the very same government’s reaction to the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi’s ‘democratically elected’ government in Egypt in 2013—when Washington very definitely did not ask Egypt’s people to support Morsi and quickly gave its support to a military coup far more bloody than the attempted putsch in Turkey. Had the Turkish army been successful, be sure Erdoğan would have been treated as dismissively as the unfortunate Morsi.”⁶⁸ In his article, Fisk argues that western countries prefer stability to freedom and democracy in countries facing coup attempts in order to maintain their own national interests.

German Newspapers

Bild

The *Bild* published one editorial report and four articles. There were three positive and two negative publications but no negative publication about the coup attempt. In one article, Blome extrapolates the possible outcomes for Turkey if the coup had succeeded, and reviews the position of the country from many different angles, such as the negotiation process with the EU, Turkey’s membership in NATO, the agreement with the EU on refugees, and regional stability.⁶⁹ While making assumptions about Turkey’s condition regarding the likelihood of a military administration in the country, Blome implicitly blames Erdoğan. “Rather than his foreign policy, Erdoğan’s way of conducting social policy, particularly in terms of internal politics, provoked the army, which styles itself as the only protector of the secular order established by Atatürk.”⁷⁰ Similarly, Tiede also focused on the idea that the coup attempt will pave the way to Turkish authoritarianism by quoting Çopur, an academician at Duisburg University, in his article: “Erdoğan is the only winner of this attempt. Even though he is not, Erdoğan will make himself look like a great democrat. This means that from now on, without any obstacle, Turkey will move toward civilian dictatorship.”⁷¹

Die Welt

Die Welt and its Sunday press, *Welt am Sonntag*, published nine articles about the coup attempt. There were five positive and four neutral publications but no negative publication about the coup attempt. For instance, Tauber quotes the opinions of Brok, the president of the Foreign Affairs Commission at the Eu-

ropean Parliament, because Brok claims that it would be ‘a disaster’ if the country slip into the Islamic camp. Brok also states that “when the country faces the threat of a political crisis, the intervention of the Turkish army has become a tradition, so the coups have a long history,”⁷² which means that he justifies the coup plotters by assuming the recurring military intervention as a tradition in Turkish politics.

In another article, Deniz Yücel claims, “Erdoğan acts as if he is an emperor” because “Erdoğan calls people to revolt.”⁷³ Depicting the president as creating chaos in the country cannot be regarded as objective reporting. In their article, similarly, Kade and Schuster quote from Cem Özdemir, co-chair of the Green Party, regarding Turkey’s possible future: “A democratic Turkey is always welcome in the European Union, but Turkey under Erdoğan’s rule is incapable of joining the EU.”⁷⁴ These articles cover unrelated issues that have no influence and relationship with a coup attempt in Turkey. Erdoğan is not responsible for the coup attempt, but the writer blames his ruling style as a reason for not admitting to EU membership. These statements are some of the examples reflecting biased perceptions of western media.

Der Tagesspiegel

Der Tagesspiegel published six articles. There were five positive and one neutral publications but no negative publication about the coup attempt. The majority of the publications imply that Erdoğan plotted the coup himself. Görlach’s article exemplifies this stance: “There are still too few details about the organization and the course of this coup attempt. Who is behind it? The opposition or even Erdoğan himself, in order to have the best excuse to ‘purge’ the military of contemporaries he dislikes?” Similarly, Casdorff targets Erdoğan in a sarcastic way: “Just as Putin didn’t attack Crimea definitely, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has nothing to do with the coup attempt in his country.”⁷⁵ Providing coverage of Gülen’s perspective, he notes,

In the explanation, Gülen, who is in exile in America, declared that Turkish authorities direct a type of Nazi administration towards his followers. In a statement Gülen made to the press in Pennsylvania, he remarked that Erdoğan probably organized the coup in order to increase the pressure on his opponent.

He also adds, “Erdoğan describes the coup as ‘a gift from God.’ Can there be anything more crucial? In doing so, he is giving up all suspicions that he knew about an impending coup attempt, just maybe not to the minute.”⁷⁶ Finally, Fabian Leber argues in his article, “Erdoğan plans to take revenge. Nothing will be good. A leader who declares total war against a person reading a poem at ZDF will not act wisely toward those in military services.”⁷⁷

Through the expressions of *Libération*, we see that there are mixed perceptions about the coup attempts in Turkey

French Newspapers

It should be noted that a terror attack causing the death of 84 innocent people and the injury of more than 100 took place in Nice, France, on July 14, 2016, one day prior to the Turkish coup attempt. In French newspapers, the Turkish coup attempt was given a place besides this sorrowful attack, but the French media did not provide extensive coverage due to the national turmoil in the country.

Le Figaro

Le Figaro contained one online report and two articles. There were two positive and one neutral publications but no negative publication about the coup attempt. *Minoui* gives the message that the coup was plotted by Erdoğan:

Increased control of the army and critical administrative bodies in the morning of the coup attempt, made it possible that the things were completely different from the day before. And all these made same thinking that it was a fake coup plotted by Erdoğan, or the coup was aimed with his knowledge solely to be able to arrest those army officers and judges and to make the radicalization process available.⁷⁸

Le Monde

Le Monde published two articles and one editorial report. There were two positive and one neutral publications but no negative publication against the coup attempt. *Par Le Monde* claims that “The repression is likely to spread. Erdoğan could take the opportunity to pose as a unifier, accelerate his plans for a presidential republic, and increasingly lock-in unchallenged power.”⁷⁹ Marc Semo proclaims Turkey to have a politically polarized society, caused by Erdoğan. He quotes the statements of the editor of the *Birikim* journal Ahmet Insel: “The fractures in Turkish society, fueled by Erdoğan, have reverberated within the military.”⁸⁰ On the contrary, it was only during and after the bombs were dropped on the parliament and public that all the political parties in Turkey developed the same attitude; namely, opposition to any military intervention and the conviction that democracy shall always win.

Libération

Libération published four articles dedicated to the events of the coup attempt. There were one positive, two neutral and one negative publications. Through the expressions of *Libération*, we see that there are mixed perceptions about the coup attempts in Turkey. Schwartzbrod issues a very harsh prediction for Turkey’s coming days: “Turkey’s president Erdoğan already had an authoritative tendency, now he will increase this by blaming those who ever attempt to criticize him.”⁸¹ But still, other publications portray a more neutral statement about the coup attempt.

Discussion

Our study finds that western journalists reporting on the coup attempt had a consistent, clear bias against the incumbent government that prevented them from providing coverage on the actual events surrounding the coup, particularly the democratic spirit with which millions of Turkish people took to the streets to defend their government, and stand up against the coup plotters in support of the peaceful transition of power. The objectivity principle in journalism requires that journalists present the facts as they are, avoiding perception management and bias so that readers can make their own judgments and interpret the facts freely. However, our content analysis indicates that although many of the early perceptions of the western media were neutral (42 publications) toward the coup attempt, the number of positive opinions was also high; 44 publications failed in supporting and appraising the democratically elected government, and citizen upheavals against the coup attempt at the beginning, although their perceptions changed over time.⁸² Only five out of ninety-one publications offered a negative opinion, which in this context means expressing strong support for democracy and anti-coup views.

Western journalists reporting on the coup attempt had a consistent, clear bias against the incumbent government that prevented them from providing coverage on the actual events surrounding the coup

Table 4: Frequency Distribution of Key Words

Phrases/Words	Frequency
Erdoğan’s Authoritarianism	58
The Polarization of Society	32
Erdoğan’s Oppression on Policy and Public	28
Erdoğan’s Dividing the Country	16
The Instability of the Regime	15
Erdoğan’s Dictatorship	15
Erdoğan as a Paranoid Actor	9
Restrictions on Freedoms	7

Source: Compiled by the authors⁸³

Robert M. Entman argues that journalists frame the events they describe by selecting some particular aspects they see as a problem, depending on their interpretation and moral evaluation. Created by the conscious or unconscious

Of the ninety-one publications examined in this study, only five expressed a negative opinion, which in this context means expressing strong support for democracy and airing anti-coup views

judgments of journalists with particular belief systems, frames in the news guide readers in their thinking by containing “certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.”⁸⁴ In order to evaluate framing in the news reports and articles of western media agents, we performed a content anal-

ysis to determine the frequency distribution of certain keywords. In the 91 news reports and articles selected for this study, Table 4 shows that certain phrases/words and attributes are continuously repeated: Erdoğan’s authoritarianism (58 times); the polarization of society (32 times); Erdoğan’s oppression of policy and public (28 times); his dividing the country (16 times); his dictatorship and the instability of his regime (15 times); Erdoğan as a paranoid actor (9 times), and restrictions on freedoms (7 times).

By conducting an overall assessment, we found that rather than reporting news about the coup attempt, most of the publications focused on Erdoğan’s extremism and the polarization he has allegedly caused. Furthermore, some publications blamed Erdoğan for organizing the coup attempt himself in order to consolidate his power by providing justification for oppressing his opponents. In addition to full texts of the publications in the newspapers, the headlines did not present the coup attempt in an explanatory way to inform the public objectively but rather manipulated the coup attempt by focusing on biased and negative depictions of Erdoğan, and his government. The majority of these publications circulated the opinions of a few Turkish people who considered Erdoğan solely responsible for the coup, rather than focusing on the millions of people on the streets trying to protect their country and democracy against the coup.

During the coup attempt, and in the next few days, FETÖ was not criticized for the coup attempt in any of these western newspapers. Instead, some newspapers quoted the well-known, official statement of then-Secretary of State John Kerry: “The U.S. government position has always been that if there is any evidence of Mr. Gülen breaking the laws, they will look into it. So far, the Turkish government has not produced anything. Thank God, this is a country of laws, and we depend on that.”⁸⁵ Although the Turkish government submitted thousands of documents as evidence to show FETÖ as guilty of plotting the coup in the following days, the U.S. and the western media have yet to recognize the actual situation. They were very late to condemn the junta and FETÖ for the coup attempt and to show their support for Turkish democracy. For instance,

McConnel states: “Westerners can have difficulty in perceiving or admitting this, but those people on the streets on July 15 and 16, 2016, were the real powers of democracy; what those Turks did that night can only be understood in such a context.”⁸⁶ What’s more, with the failure of the coup attempt, the mainstream media in some western countries, which had already intended to give Turkey a lesson on democracy, blithely ignored how the Turkish people protected their democracy, and the will of the country.⁸⁷

The approach of the western media and politicians disappointed many Turkish scholars. In such a context, Duran and Altun claim that the American and British media immediately framed news about the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, as a power struggle between the democratically elected government on the one side and a military junta directed by FETÖ on the other side.⁸⁸ Similarly, Özipek and Abayhan emphasize that “many of those western countries that are Turkey’s allies waited for the failure of the coup to respond to the coup plotters and stand with Turkey.” Both the U.S. and EU member countries adopted a discriminatory perspective for the Turkish case, similar to their attitude toward the events in Egypt in 2013. Therefore, there was no need for a discourse analysis or a ‘sympathetic reading’ to determine how the West reacted to the coup attempt in Turkey.⁸⁹ Ufuk Uras similarly writes, “I am sure that some of the media in the West was lying in wait to express their views and, by the way, they had a kind attitude... The Turkish press could pass the democracy test and gave the reaction that Western media could not.”⁹⁰ Western scholar Carl Bildt similarly argues that “it took a long time for the EU to condemn the events in Turkey and the delegates even didn’t show their support for the threat to the constitutional order by visiting the country.”⁹¹

Conclusion

The findings show that the early perceptions of the western media were mainly based on neutral opinions (42 publications) about the coup attempt that reported the news as it is. Although many of the journalists remained uncertain about what was happening in Turkey, there were also a high number of positive publications (44) about the coup attempt that either supported Gülen or blamed Erdoğan for bringing the country under the anti-democratic rule, which cannot be considered as a reason justifying the coup attempt. Therefore, these publications failed in supporting the democratically elected government and citizen upheavals against the coup attempt at the beginning, although their perceptions changed over time. Some publications even implied that Erdoğan himself organized the coup attempt, and circulated assertions that were not based on any objective evidence. Of the ninety-one publications examined in this study, only five expressed a negative opinion, which in this context means

The western media should have taken a pro-democracy view against the coup attempt, which would have been more accurate in the Turkish case

expressing strong support for democracy and airing anti-coup views. Given the extreme bias toward supporting the coup (44 positive publications), the number of negative articles (5 publications) against the coup attempt were not enough to guide readers in understanding what was really happening in Turkey. In contrast, the Turkish media successfully covered the citizen upheavals in support of democracy against the coup attempt.

Our study also found that the most frequently used keywords in the news and articles were Erdoğan's authoritarianism (58 times), the polarization of society (32 times), Erdoğan's oppression (28 times), Erdoğan dividing the country (16 times), and the instability of Erdoğan's regime/dictatorship (15 times). The frequency of these words in these publications show the journalists' bias against Erdoğan and his government, because they focused more on the government's actions, especially Erdoğan's characteristics and ruling style. Therefore, most of the western journalists missed the damaging consequences of the coup attempt on Turkish democracy and society. This, despite the fact that the objectivity principle in journalism requires presenting the facts as they are, and avoiding perception management and bias so that readers can make their own judgments and interpret the facts freely. The western media should have taken a pro-democracy view against the coup attempt, which would have been more accurate in the Turkish case. However, Turkish media and people's opposition to the coup attempt with pro-democracy sentiments were more appropriate and challenging against coup plotters.

This failed coup attempt was a milestone for Turkish democracy, because the people came out onto the streets to risk, and in some cases, sacrifice their lives for the maintenance of their country, their democracy, and their democratically elected government. In the past, Turkey has experienced many coups, but this coup will be remembered only as an attempt. However, it became a first in Turkish and world history, because millions of people –either supporting the current political party in the government or not– became personally involved and rose up to defend their country against the coup plotters. To sum up, this study touches on many critical points in understanding early western media perception toward the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. Although their early perceptions changed after new information became available, some Western media newspapers failed in supporting Turkish democracy and Turkish society against the coup attempt, which could have had damaging effects on Turkey. Their failure to adopt a supportive stance toward Turkey's democratically elected government was disappointing in terms of the Turkish population's perceptions of the West. ■

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