

## Alternative Media in Turkey: A Categorical Mapping

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### Abstract

Alternative media which is seen fundamental to social change is increasing in numbers in opposition to mainstream media. Along with the practice, the theoretical debates are also overspread. This paper focuses on Turkey's alternative media organizations and their classification. It reveals the traits of Turkey's net-native alternative media and spots them into a category. For that specific purpose, different alternative media definitions are discussed and comparatively proposed. Then, eight alternative media from Turkey are analyzed and classified according to the theoretical alternative media approach.

**Keywords:** alternative media, Turkey

### Türkiye'de Alternatif Medya: Kategorisel Bir Haritalama

#### Özet

Ana akım medyaya karşıt olarak, sosyal değişim için temel teşkil ettiği düşünülen alternatif medya günümüzde sayıca hızla yayılmıştır. Alternatif medyanın yayılmasıyla birlikte konuya teorik çerçeveden yaklaşım da önem kazanmaktadır. Bu makale, Türkiye'deki alternatif medya organizasyonlarına odaklanmakta ve sınıflandırmasını yapmaktadır. Türkiye'deki internet çıkışlı alternatif medyaların özelliklerini ortaya çıkararak, bu medyalar için bir kategorilendirme yapılmış, bu amaç doğrultusunda, makalede, farklı alternatif medya tanımları tartışılmış ve karşılaştırılmıştır. Daha sonra, Türkiye'den sekiz alternatif medya seçilmiş ve alternatif medya teorik çerçevesine göre analiz edilmiş ve gruplanmıştır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** alternatif medya, Türkiye

### Introduction

Along with the developments in communication research, studies in alternative media and its social effects also gained speed. Various theoretical approaches are generated on this concept. The studies are mostly focused on the political and social dimensions of alternative media and the effect of alternative media on social movements. Recent research on alternative media try to reveal the relationship between alternative and mainstream media by examining how they differ in their practices and how alternative media offer new ways of challenging the power.

Here, their social context, their economic issues and their organizational structure are at the center of the debates. The content of these media and how it is created is also a hot topic confronted with heavy discussions. In practice, the features that differentiate them from mainstream media are ambiguous. This ambiguity in the alternativeness of the media organizations raises questions about their self-definitions (are they really alternative because they call themselves alternative?) but more importantly also raises the question of how alternative media theory can deal with this type of organizations.

At this point, this article focuses on Turkey's alternative media organizations and their characterization. The purpose of the study is to reveal the traits of these media and to spot them into an alternative media category. In accordance with this purpose, first, the notion of alternative media is discussed and different alternative media definitions are comparatively proposed. Then, eight alternative media organization are studied relatively according to the different theoretical approaches. BIANet, GZone, Yeşil Gazete, 5Harfliler, Sendika.org, Marksist.org, T24 and Pir News Agency are discussed on the basis of social movements, political dissident, cultural minority and gender-specific issues.

For this purpose, each organization is classified according to their categorical attributes. Considering the significance of their history, purpose, social place, organizational structure, economic relations and their self-identification, each media is classed empirically based on the theoretical approaches on alternative media. This research is exploratory but does rely upon the previous work and definitions of alternative media done by scholars like Atton, Rodriguez, Couldry, Fuchs and Downing.

This paper attempts to build a map, a conceptual chart that might classify Turkey's alternative media. For that specific purpose, a categorical mapping method is used. A list of Turkey's net-native alternative media is prepared and eight of these alternative media which are significant fit to existing definitions were chosen to be classified according to the theoretical basis studied by leading scholars in the alternative media research area.

### **How Can We Define Alternative Media?**

Broadly defined, alternative media stands in contrast to mainstream media in ownership structure, operation model, production norms, content, and relationships with audience (see Atton 2002, 2004; Atton and Hamilton 2008; Bailey et al. 2008). They are sometimes labeled as "critical media" (Fuchs 2010) or "radical media" (Downing 2001) for their overt antagonism toward the political-economic establishment.

The term of "alternative media" covers a variety of models such as "community media," "citizen media," "rhizomatic media," "tactical media" and "radical media," among others. Each

of them has more specific emphases and goals: “Community media” emphasizes the integration and networking potential in a community (Lewis and Jones 2006); “citizen media” highlights citizen participation in production (Rodriguez 2001), whereas “radical media” points to their counter-hegemony potential and mobilizing power (Downing 1984, 2001). The common feature is underlying their opposition to mainstream media. They are carriers of non-dominant, possibly counter-hegemonic discourse. In this sense they represent an alternative to the mainstream media (Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2008).

Instead discussing the binary thinking of alternative versus mainstream, leading alternative media scholar John D.H. Downing (2001) refers to “radical media”, arguing that “alternative” tells us nothing since “everything, at some point, is alternative to something else” (p. ix). Downing (2001) proposes a new term: radical alternative media. Radical media is the media of social movements: non-mainstream and counterhegemonic, offering counter-information and aimed at social change.

Couldry and Curran (2003) are not as concerned as Downing with whether media are “politically radical or socially empowering” but rather focus on media production processes that challenge mainstream media power. Their definition of alternative media suggests that it “challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power” (Curran & Couldry, 2003, p. 7) Here, a similar approach is critical political economy, which focuses on the economic organization of media industries and ownership relations. Critical political economy examines the effects of media practices and media content, mostly focusing on the processes of ownership, diversity, commercialization, internationalization, and advertising. In communication sense, critical political economy is a study of the production, distribution and consumption of resources. So according to this approach, the alternative is the one with alternative media ownership and production processes.

Regardless of this definition, Rodriguez (2001) gives importance to citizen participation and builds on Downing’s definition the concept of “citizens’ media.” This definition suggests that we should focus on the citizens’ role in producing alternative media. The term “citizens’ media” helps us to put the importance on the actors and the consequences of their actions. It means that a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape (Rodriguez, 2001).

In addition to citizen participation, another important area is social order and social change among alternative media definitions. Hamilton (2000, p.361) considers communication as “the creative making of a social order” then the importance of alternative media is clear. Social relations are created, confirmed and exercised within communication processes.

Relationships are created and societal boundaries are laid. So according to Hamilton, alternative media is a way of creating social connections and communicating.

As connection and communication are vital in alternative media, wider bonds that these media can make are also discussed in theoretical debates. Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008) propose to use Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical concept of rhizomatic thinking as elaborated in *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (1987), arguing that it can help us to understand the activity of alternative media as an interaction with state, market and civil society. According to Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008) like a rhizome, alternative media displays versatility and the capacity to reproduce and interconnect with it and with other forms of alternative media. It can be said that rhizomatic media within alternative media is a catalyst for people from various social movements who meet and collaborate (Viviani, 2014).

Furthermore, Fuchs (2010) suggests that alternative media needs a definition to distinguish different dimensions of the notion and he offers the notion of alternative media as critical media. According to Fuchs the central aspects of alternative media are journalists and their practices, recipients and their practices (actor-oriented), media products structures, media organizational structures, and media distribution structures (structure-oriented) (p.178). Fuchs's (2010, p.179) critical media is characterized by critical form and content. Fuchs propose five qualities for critical media: negation of negation at the content level, negation of negation at the form level, dialectical realism at the content level, dialectical realism at the form level and materialistic expression of the interests of the dominated at the content level (Fuchs, 2010). In addition to these qualities, alternative media should stimulate public debate and create the counter public sphere.

Apart from these, Atton's (2002) definition of alternative media is probably the most inclusive one, emphasizing process over content, and seeing the conversion of consumers into producers. Atton (2004) offers the following definition of alternative media: it is a "range of media projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of 'doing' media" (p. ix). He also argues that alternative media should be fundamentally grounded in the cultural forms of an independent media outlet and also possess some, if not all, of the following attributes: rely upon modern, evolving technology; de-professionalized organizational norms and roles; horizontal communication patterns; cultural or political radical content; compelling aesthetic form; innovative and independent distribution practices (Atton, 2002).

However, the term used is consistently changing but what the definitions have in common and what it really matters is "the desire to foster substantially different structures and

processes of communication that make possible egalitarian, interactive, and emancipatory discourse” (Harlow, 2013). It is essential not to separate these definitions with sharp limits. These are not fixed terms and one should keep in mind that media outlets can possess some of the features outlined but also have features that better define them as mainstream. While, as Rodriguez (2001) noted, “alternative” is more than just “non-mainstream” and should be defined more by what it is than what it is not.

### **What Alternative Media Is Not?**

The present media landscape which is under the dominance of traditional media is criticized for being controlled by corporate interests (Herman&Chomsky, 1988) and for following the economic, social, and political interests of privileged groups that dominate the society. Consequently, in this direction, mainstream media follows unequal media policies towards the public. A symbiotic relationship between the ruling power and the media means that the media often work to further its own interests, rather than those of society, and the public sphere has been commodified so that “homogeneity rules over diversity in content and cultural forms” (Sandoval, 2008, p.100).

The exclusion of ordinary citizens from the mainstream media has formed new actors and forms of communication (Harlow, 2013). The citizens who cannot reach out to the public created new ways in order to be heard. Here, alternative media is crucial to provide an alternative space for self-expression. It is an alternative sphere for the oppressed, discriminated people and the minorities.

Alternative media, contrary to what is believed in general, existed long before the emergence of the Internet and have taken various forms such as newspapers, magazines, radio, films, and documentaries (Downing 2001). With the emergence of internet, alternative media found a new tool. When the Internet was popularized in the 1990s, some scholars have raised concerns about the political-economic, regulatory, and technological constraints of adopting the Internet for alternative media practices (Atton 2002; Downing 2001).

In the early 20th century, for example, print technologies were appropriated by anarchist movements in the United States and by revolutionary groups in Mexico and Russia. By 1920 Bolivian tin miners were using radio technologies to mobilize their unions in their struggle for social justice against corporate and state oppressive forces (Downing, 2010). Similarly, during the 1968 revolts, workers and students’ movements benefited from technological developments to publish their own newspapers and leaflets. Social movements and media activists learned to use media technologies to mobilize express dissent, empower marginalized voices or propose economic, political, and cultural alternatives (Rodriguez, Ferron, Shamas, 2014). Alternative

media in history was always created for purposes quite different from those of the existing social order.

In this history, alternative media has a constant development until the invention of the Internet. The evolution of new communication technologies led to the growth of alternative media. Several online alternative media organizations appeared in alternative media sphere and many offline alternative media moved to online. As publishers can benefit the convenience of internet technologies, the public and their interests can be more directly represented in internet era. In terms of users, it is seen that citizens can more easily engage in public debate. As a result, the advantages of internet technologies helped alternative media achieve its goals.

### **How About Turkey's Alternative Media History?**

The alternative media history in Turkey goes back to second Constitutional Monarchy period in which publications on workers' problems takes place. Newspapers like Gave, Amele, İştirak, Medeniyet, Sosyalist, İnsaniyet and İdrak can be considered as the first Turkish dissident newspapers (Topuz, 2014, p.94-95). At 1930's, Hizmet, Halkın Sesi and Yeni Asır newspapers appear as opposing publications (Topuz, 2014, p.155-156). In the following years, Yurt ve Dünya, Yeni Ses, Adımlar and Tan newspapers were published with leftist discourses (Topuz, 2014, p. 180).

At that time, there were several opposing media outlets in different concepts. Humor magazines, woman newspapers and socialist media outlets like: "Demet" (1908), "Mehasin" (1908), "Kadın" (1908), "Kadınlar Dünyası (1913- 1921), "Akbaba" (1922-1977), "Markopaşa" (1947-1950), "Devrim" (1969) Ant (1970), "Gırgır" (1972), Feminist Dergi (1987) (Çoban & Ataman, 2015, p. 19). In addition to these, media outlets regarding minority groups' interests are milestones in Turkey's alternative media history: Dicle Kaynağı (1950), Yön (1961), Ogni (1993), Med TV (1995), Agos (1996) (Çoban & Ataman, 2015, p.22-27).

In contrast to the 1980 period's anti-democratic media practices and probably because of that, alternative media has increased in Turkey. Especially feminist media, humor magazines and minority media disseminated. With Gırgır, Firt, Çarşaf, Mikrop, Pişmiş Kelle, Hıbrır, Limon and nowadays Leman, Penguen, Uykusuz magazines appeared (Demir, 2016, p.19-21). Among minority media, Yol TV, Su TV, Cem TV, Mozaik TV, Dem TV, Ekin TV, IMC TV, Halk Gerçeği, Yeni Halk Gerçeği, Yeni Ülke and Özgür Gündem are the most known and popular ones. In addition to these, Mor Çatı, Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi, Pazartesi, Uçan Süpürge, Roza, Juyin and Jiyan are the prominent alternative formations in feminist movement (Çoban & Ataman, 2015, p.29).

Especially, after 1990's period, instead of class based social movements, identity based social movements take place. Feminist movement, environmentalist movement, Kurdish movement, student movement and LGBTI movement has come to the forefront with alternative structures through the emphasis on identity. Thus, it is seen that alternative media has become one of the main means of struggle for these alternative identities and alternative voices.

With the rapid development of information technologies in 2000's, alternative media outlets changed their media tools and switched to internet environment. The features of the internet like low cost, fast diffusion, two-way communication, unlimited and free access facilitate the spread of the alternative voices as non-dominant expressions and identities are welcomed in this new area. Especially, the internet technologies facilitating non-media professionals to create their own content served a concept called "user generated content." With this new concept, alternative media in Turkey witnessed the birth and spread of net-native alternative media.

As mainstream media which is mostly hate-laden is parsing and polarizing the perception of reality of "the other", the presence of these alternative channels becomes more meaningful, even essential in Turkey. The advantages of internet making it easier for alternative voices to control, produce, and quickly and cheaply disseminate their own message. As Downing (2001, p.38) state alternative media becomes "a democratic alternative against media monopolies"

### **Alternative Media in Turkey**

According to a survey conducted in 2015, close to 75 alternative media were found. As of 2019, nearly half of these media is closed for various reasons. As a result of both economic reasons and legal problems, there is a decrease especially in feminist alternative media and Kurdish alternative media. On the other hand, it can be said that alternative media belonging to LGBTI and environmental movements have increased relatively. For this article, eight alternative media which are net-native and have the highest site traffic were selected among the existing alternative media as of 2019.

After revealing their history, purpose, social place, organizational structure, economic relations, content and their self-identification based on analysis of the platforms, each media was then classified empirically with categorical mapping relying upon the previous work and definitions of alternative media done by scholars like Atton, Rodriguez, Couldry, Fuchs and Downing. While selecting these online media, importance was given to the representation of different fields and to being news based online platforms.

#### **Bianet**

BİANet is published since 2001 within the scope of the project BİA “Journalism for Rights, Freedom for Journalists”, which is run by IPS Communications Foundation with the support of Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). It is specifically pointed that the content of the website is solely the responsibility of the IPS Communications Foundation and does not in any way reflect SIDA's position.

BİA project is launched on 5 basics; advertising pool for local newspapers, news production and news pool, legal support and media monitoring and education. Consequently, BİA's overall objectives are; to strengthen local media to increase polyphony and participation in democracy, to break the monogamy of dominant media, to transform current journalistic understanding and practice.

BİANet offers a wide range of news subject, mostly critical on politics, environment and women's/LGBTİ rights. As they are linked to IPS Communications Foundations, they have a management structure. Nadire Mater is the chairwoman of IPS and project consultant of BİANet.

So the newspaper can be classified among “alternative to mainstream media” and “critical media” because of their news' content. Most importantly, it is “rhizomatic media” as they have collaborations and connections with various institutions.

### **GZone**

GZone is a gay life and culture magazine founded in 2014. It's digital magazine and news portal about gay life and gay culture in Turkey.

GZone has about 30 employees who are professionals and work as editors. They claim that the editorial process and working conditions are democratic. Their aim is not only to reveal a publication that transmits LGBTİ content to LGBTİ people, but also create a sphere where LGBTİ people speak for themselves. Besides that, it is important for them to give coverage on the developments in Turkey and worldwide LGBT life, culture and arts. They offer free membership for their readers and accept advertisement in all areas.

The magazine came together in a gender context and became part of a “community media.” As the news discourse is quite different from mainstream media, GZone can be classified as “alternative to mainstream media” too. Also, as they become a part of LGBTİ activist movement, GZone can be also classified as “activist media”.

### **Yeşil Gazete**

Yeşil Gazete was launched on 27 February 2008. It is an ecological, political, participatory and festive internet newspaper. Daily and breaking news are constantly updated throughout the day together with reader's comments. It undertakes to comply with the ethical

rules in its newspaper principles. In addition, Yeşil Gazete states that it uses sustainable and open-source technologies.

Yeşil Gazete criticizes environmental policies and takes part in environmental activist movements. The columns published in the Yeşil Gazete reflect the views of the authors who identify themselves as activists. Also, they accept articles from their readers as guest authors. The news are mostly about environment and environmental policies of the government but they also have columns about daily news from Turkey and worldwide.

With these features, the newspaper is an obvious example of “activist media”. But also as they have an inner community and they accept guest authors, they can be classified as “community media” and “citizen media” As their news are mostly about critics of governmental policies, Yeşil Gazete can also be classified as “critical media”.

### **5 Harfliler**

5Harfliler is an independent website in pursuit of women's agenda. In the days when the word “kadın” was a bogey, the name 5Harfliler came up for all the tired souls who suffered from the distinction of girl, woman and lady. In the summer of 2012, the website is launched against those who reduced the women's agenda into diet, beauty secrets, and relationship advice. The authors only started with the idea that the women's agenda was everything a woman could be interested in.

The site, which is updated frequently, is not after the women's agenda but the feminist agenda. Instead of mainstream news, the team writes on a wide range of topics such as politics, art, cinema, literature, fashion, science and history, women and LGBT rights in a feminist way. 5Harfliler’s aim is to show everything about a woman.

Generally, the average of 50 articles per month is published on the site. All articles are open to comments and authors respond to commentators and create a chat platform under each article.

This type of alternative media in which readers can be directly involved in the content can be categorized as “community media” considering its formation. At the same time, it is an “alternative media to the mainstream” because it deals with the real women's agenda with a feminist approach which is not in the mainstream.

### **Marksist.org**

Revolutionist and anti-capitalist news site Marksist.org draw its way from Marxist ideologies. Beyond giving news about political and cultural issues in Turkey, the writers also comment on these issues in their articles from a Marxist perspective.

They claim that marksist.org is an output of a collaborative work and there is no editorial process.

They can be named as political dissidents and Marksist.org can be cited as a radical media and critical media because of their radical content and anti-capitalist thoughts. They also fits the five quality of Fuchs: negation of negation at the content level, negation of negation at the form level, dialectical realism at the content level, dialectical realism at the form level and materialistic expression of the interests of the dominated at the content level. As they have several online platforms and connections with political parties, as it is a room for different types of struggles and collaborations, they can also be named as rhizomatic media.

### **Sendika.org**

Sendika.org is founded in April 9, 2001 as a voice of proletariat. Sendika.org believes in the importance of unionist resistance in the class struggle and considers itself as a pursuer of worker's resistance.

Sendika.org publishes the problems of working class and broadcast the demonstrations of the proletariat. The site also has special forums and manual texts for laborers. Sendika.org is also a platform which resistances and strikes are organized.

Sendika.org is open to all contributions as news, articles, interpretations, translations, critics or in any other form and they employ volunteers as editors and reporters.

As Sendika.org is raised from a social movement, in the spectrum of alternative media, it can be named as community media and activist media. Also, they have connections with other unions and state, they have several online platforms, so they can be classified as rhizomatic media.

### **T24 Haber**

T24 is founded by writer Aydın Engin, by editors Metin Yener, Belde Bozkurt, Oral and Selin Ongun under the management of Doğan Akın in Semtember 2009. The slogan of T24 is "free internet newspaper." According to the newspaper's claim, the purpose of T24 is to be a trusted media.

It is claimed that T24 has no direct, indirect or coincidental relationship with any person, institution or organization. The aim of the newspaper is to make news that does not depend on some financial imposition or ideological obsession. The content of the news is shifting to a content of an illustrated magazine and they accept advertising from big companies like Garanti, Samsung and Pegasus.

In the spectrum of alternative media, T24 can be seen as "alternative to mainstream media" in consideration of their opposing news to the Turkish governmental policies.

### **Pir Haber Ajansı**

Pir New Agency, which tries to carry the faith world and lives of Alevi people to the public, is launched in December 2016. The main interest of the agency is violations of Alevi right, Alevi culture and art. The aim of the agency is to convey information about these human right violations to the public by news.

The organization claims that Pir News Agency is founded to fill a freedom of speech gap with the initiatives of Alevi journalists long after heavy discussions with Alevi organizations and opinion leaders. The website is mostly about Alevi news but also it is possible to see headlines of daily news from Turkey and worldwide.

Pir News Agency has also a YouTube channel with the same name. It is claimed that the YouTube channel exist to fill a gap in Alevi televisions. All work is done in an editorial process by professionals. But in the website there is a “send news” section which allows readers collaborate in news production.

This type of alternative media is first of all “community media” as their main concern is Alevi people. But also as they have lots of connections with politics and Alevi organizations it can also be classified as “rhizomatic media”. In addition to that, as they let the readers become part of the news production process, Pir News Agency is also “citizen media”.

As a summary, Turkey’s alternative media classification can be found on Table.1

	<b>Social Movements</b>	<b>Political Dissidents</b>	<b>Cultural Minorities</b>	<b>Gender Specific</b>
<b>Community Media</b>	Yeşil Gazete	Sendika.org	Pir Haber Ajansı	5 Harfliler, GZone
<b>Alternative To Mainstream Media</b>	Yeşil Gazete	Bianet, Marksist.org, Sendika.org, T24		5 Harfliler, GZone
<b>Civic/ Citizen Media</b>	Yeşil Gazete		Pir Haber Ajansı	5 Harfliler
<b>Rhizomatic Media</b>		Bianet, Sendika.org, Marksist.org	Pir Haber Ajansı	
<b>Radical Media</b>		Marksist.org		
<b>Activist Media</b>	Yeşil Gazete	Sendika.org		GZone
<b>Critical Media</b>	Yeşil Gazete	Bianet, Marksist.org		5 Harfliler, GZone

**Table 1** Turkey's Alternative Media Classification

## Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the differences in the theoretical approach and the term used by means on alternative media (Rodriguez 2001, Couldry 2001, Atton 2002, Downing 2003,) the concept of alternative media has some points in common. They are non-mainstream, counter-hegemonic and the purpose is to be the voice for those who struggle for equality in the system of hegemonic power. They differentiate themselves from mainstream media by their circulation and distribution channels, internal organizations, financial revenues, contents, editorial processes and participation policies.

When it comes to Turkey, as the political and economic foundation of the mainstream media is biased, there is a substantial need for an alternative media to compensate. However, relatively a big number of alternative media is struggling against traditional media policies in Turkey. In this paper, BIANet, GZone, Yeşil Gazete, 5Harfliler, Sendika.org, Marksist.org, T24 and Pir News Agency are analyzed and classified according to theoretical approaches on alternative media.

Consequently, it is seen that practical approaches give priority to the “lived experience” and “voice” of citizen in alternative sphere. There is a wide range of areas in Turkey’s alternative media: social movements, political dissidents, cultural minorities and gender specific issues... Among eight net-native alternative media, four of them fit the definition of community media, seven of them fit the definition of alternative to mainstream media, three of them fit citizen media, four of them fit rhizomatic media, one of them fits radical media, three of them fit activist media and five of them fit the definition of critical media.

Correspondingly, according to the analysis of their history, purpose, social place, organizational structure, economic relations, content and their self-identification, every alternative media mentioned here does not cover the term alternative in every field. But especially when we look at their content, social positioning and purpose, it is seen that all alternative media studied here fits the definition of alternative media. Besides, every one of them covers at least three aspects of alternativeness varying from rhizomatic, critical, radical, alternative to mainstream, activist, citizen and community media.

As a conclusion, this article reveals the theoretical traits of the alternative media practices in Turkey. A deeper discourse analysis on the content and comparison with mainstream media would be the subject of an advanced study. According to the result of this study, alternative media is understood here in terms of citizens’ involvement in their practice, counter-hegemonic discourse, different channel of circulation and distribution, horizontal internal organization model and non-mainstream content. Rephrasing Atton (2002, p.6), we

believe that in Turkey “these media are crucial because they are media that inform, reflect, and express experience, our experience, on a daily basis.”

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