Doctors versus Unmasked Individuals:
The Representation of Pandemic Rules on Turkish Television

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Abstract

People have a strange pull towards the unknown, somewhere between skepticism, curiosity, and fear. Contemporary concepts such as post-truth, moral panic, and "folk devil" align with that perspective almost perfectly. Based on 456 news items collected from the evening news program of the FOX TV and CNN Turk in Turkey, this article delves into these concepts in order to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic was presented to the Turkish people at its outset in the spring of 2020. Critical discourse analysis along with two-step flow theory is applied to the data collected in order to determine how the overarching narrative is constructed at three separate time periods. The analysis shows that the information given – or held back - had purposes beyond supporting a side of the political aisle at least at the start; rather, TV news items were produced to guide people in this dire situation in a certain way.

Keywords: Post-Truth, Two-Step Flow, Moral Panic, Critical Discourse Analysis, COVID-19 Pandemic

Doktorlar Maskesizlere Karşı:
Pandemi Kurallarının Türk Televizyonlarında Temsili

Özet

İnsanların içinde şüphecilik, merak ve korkunun karışımından oluşan, bilinmeyene doğru gizemli bir çekim vardır. Gerçek ötesi, ahlaki panik ve halkın suçlu tabakası benzeri güncel kavramlar bu çekim ile mükemmele yakın bir paralellik göstermektedir. Bu çalışmada 2020 yılı baharından başlayarak Türk halkına COVID-19 salgınının nasıl sunulduğu, FOX TV ve CNN Turk kanallarının akşam haber başlıkları arasından seçilen 456 haber incelenerek bu kavramlar bağlamında açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. Eleştirel söylem analizi ve iki aşamalı akış teorisi kullanılarak üç farklı zaman diliminde toplanan veriler incelenmiş ve bu aralıkta kapsayıcı bir anlatının nasıl kurulduğu araştırılmıştır. Bu analiz sonucunda verilen - ya da gizlenen - bilgilerin özellikle salgının başlangıcında belirli bir politik tarafı desteklemenin dışında amaçlar taşıdığı, insanları belirli bir biçimde yönlendirmeyi amaçladığı saptanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gerçekötesi, İki Aşamalı Akış, Ahlaki Panik, Eleştirel Söylem Analizi, COVID-19 Salgını

Introduction

Humankind has suffered numerous catastrophes throughout its relatively brief existence. While many are lost to history, the influence of others can be felt even today. Those catastrophes include earthquakes, famines, volcano eruptions, wars, and many more; but, amongst them, diseases could be considered one of the most significant in terms of impact. One of the oldest illnesses spread through the whole known world that was also documented by historians rather than religious figures would be the Justinian Plague of the 6th Century (Floor, 2018, p. 3), and it is conveyed to us and other generations by Procopius who is considered the main eyewitness and reporter of major events that took place within this period (Cameron, 2005, pp. ix-2). Besides that, Procopius is known for his contradictory accounts of many events he wrote about, arguably caused by his political position beside Justinian (Evans, 1970) and his accounts of the plague was no exception.

Procopius (1915, pp. 451-453) first mentioned the plague in The Wars stating that some "daring men" - which are also incomprehensible - try to conjure some form of outrageous and deceitful explanation to the grave situation at hand. It is later revealed that one of those daring men was Procopius himself since in The Secret History (Procopius, 2010, pp. 73-76) he demonstrates thoroughly that a disaster of this magnitude could only be caused by either the actions caused by the evil genius of Justinian or divine forces turning their back to the people because of that evil. He stated in the second book that he was not feeling safe enough to convey his true feelings at the time due to him working under the authority of Justinian (Evans, 1970). Considering how, the line between truth and lies is often blurred in our post-truth world; it can be argued that little has changed since Procopius' time. In other words, the devastating COVID-19 pandemic that reportedly started in late 2019 (WHO, 2020) can be expected to conjure a similar outcome regarding how information is shared in the society.

This study delves into how the COVID-19 pandemic is presented to the general public in Turkey. The theoretical background to this study is comprised of concepts post-truth and misinformation, two-step flow theory, and moral panic. The recent pandemic has brought forward the issues of mass communication when faced with a daunting and largely unidentified situation, which makes two-step flow theory, with its influential opinion leaders, and management process of moral panic within an agenda setting mind-set, a fitting theoretical framework for this study. Prime time television news programmes, which have public's trust to provide them with news and developments about important issues, are analyzed through critical discourse analysis method. The channels picked for the study are FOX TV and CNN Turk,

which are fairly established ones within the country with visible ties to global media corporations; furthermore, both media corporations are considered to be competitors in Turkey. The study focuses on three time periods to examine the pandemic media coverage: the starting period (11-13 March 2020), the middle (11-13 April 2020), and the period of normalization (31 May-2 June 2020). All three periods were selected considering the COVID-19 pandemic related events in the country. The overall narrative that is constructed by FOX TV and CNN Turk evening news programmes are examined within the given time period in order to unveil how the post-truth politics and panic management processes were practiced within a crisis situation concerning health issues, and what role medical experts as opinion leaders had in that practice.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Any form of functioning democracy – or functioning society – relies heavily on an informed public (Kuklinski et al., 2000), but the shadow of modern political affairs has corrupted and disintegrated any form of information gathering such as journalism by distancing those practices from "complete transparency" of the liberal ideal (Habermas, 2006, pp. 76-78). The growing distrust and the information gap between masses and mass media entities required to convey knowledge are known to generate unlikely reactions and behavioral patterns that can easily harm people and the society they live in. The myth of vaccines causing autism can be seen as a relevant example of that as people "choosing" not to vaccinate their children could easily cause otherwise easily preventable outbreaks that can devastate their communities (Larson et al., 2011). People could also stop believing facts as a response to that information gap when they are faced with contradictory data from different sources, as they did when faced with facts about anthropogenic climate change and ways to prevent it (McCright et al., 2015). In both instances, it can be deduced that any false information has a tendency to replace, or at least cancel out its true counterpart.

In other words, misinformation is not just someone being misinformed; it is an effect that causes distrust and irrational behavior on a societal scale (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Adding to those circumstances, it is pointed out that the impact of misinformation could not be erased by a simple correction, due to the continued-influence effect, meaning that the false information at the start still has a partial or even full influence after it is corrected (Johnson & Seifert, 1994; Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Considering people's lack of adequate education to understand complex problems, shortcomings in media infrastructures, and technological advancements in the communication related fields; misinformation cases are inevitable on a scale mass media is expected to reach (Scheufele, 2013). Moreover, false information,

especially on controversial issues, could be put into circulation not by an accident, but with a singular, biased benefit in mind (Mejia et al., 2018), adding another guiding force to the rise in misinformation.

Another term that is used to explain the political and societal situation that we are living through is post-truth. It is defined as people's tendency to lean on emotion and personal beliefs rather than concrete facts (McIntyre, 2018, p. 5), which can be understood as the aftermath of a continuous mass misinformation. Although the term itself has become widely known since 2016 when named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries (McIntyre, 2018, pp. 1-3), the notion it represents is argued to have been present for centuries, especially when analyzed as a manifestation of a particular ideology (Mejia et al., 2018; Sismondo, 2017). Since the where and how any message reach the audience cannot be truly controlled, meaning that the *encoded* and *decoded* messages on a linear line can drastically differ from one another (Hall, 1980, pp. 128-138), a constant grip upon meaning is needed in order to maintain the status quo.

As Hall (2003, p. 228) underlines, "*meaning 'floats', it cannot be finally fixed.*" This is especially true with regards to representation in today's context of digital communication. In accordance with this, the term post-truth in this study is simply seen as an outcome of a constant effort to maintain control in order to reach a conventional meaning and sustain the hegemony upon the masses. What is being communicated in that regard - whether truthful or otherwise - can only hold as much power as how it is communicated allows. In fact, McLuhan (1994, pp. 7-11) argues that the medium shapes how that message is perceived rather - or at least more - than the message itself. How people seek information varies by the type of the crisis and media consumer demographics (Park & Avery, 2016). Regardless of any variable, people have shown the tendency to seek potential dialogue options allowed especially by the social media channels in order to make sure they receive the right information at the right time (Eriksson, 2018), to the point that the message senders – companies, governments, and so on - are made to play by these new rules of the uncharted territory (Derani & Naidu 2016). When analyzing any media text, an emphasis should be placed on how exactly people receive the messages from media or - better still - how people are interpellated (Gauntlett, 2008, pp. 30-31) through the way the media text is structured.

First introduced in Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) work on the 1940 US presidential elections, the two-step flow theory stresses opinion leaders' capability to shape people's behavior towards societal scale issue, such as an election. From those leaders' own perspective; arguing that the overall attitude of a large group of people is not influenced only by mass media,

but rather, that the guiding force behind opinion formation are some chosen influencers amongst the group (Baran, 2019, p. 555). Since opinion leaders are much more engaged to the subject they lead people's opinions, they are more connected to higher forms of media and ideas conveyed to the less active opinion followers through them (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, pp. 151-152). Earlier studies present the tenets of the theory (Katz, 1957), yet there have been some suggestions for its update due to problems such as its ambiguity on how exactly these opinion leaders' influence expands throughout the public (Weimann, 1982; Liu, 2007), the need to find the exact point where the media's influence ends and opinion leaders' influence begins (Robinson, 1976), and the change in information seeking behavior as a result of the advent of the internet and its aftermath (Case et al., 2004; Hilbert et al., 2016). In short, two-step flow theory can be seen as a simplified method to examine a mass communication process, one of several to be exact (Hilbert et al., 2016), since it yields a generalized understanding around how that process moves forward in a given space in time.

Going more into what is communicated rather than who communicates it; Hall (1980, p. 133) states that *"Iconic signs are, however, particularly vulnerable to being read as natural because visual codes of perception are very widely distributed and because this type of sign is less arbitrary than a linguistic sign…"* Considering the opinion leaders invoke the feeling of trustworthiness upon people by look, sound, or any other verbal and non-verbal way (Bergstrom, 2020), their statement on a certain topic can be said to hold an iconic link to being truthful regardless of the statement itself. So, the influence that those people hold on how masses perceive the world can be significant and powerful.

People become more open to outside suggestions, especially ones coming from experts when their society's way of living is threatened by some outside source (Cohen, 2011, p. 1). It is suggested that mass media entities' influence on this phenomenon is heightened as the technology evolves (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Heightened and not necessarily linked to reality, concern that most people are made to have, often against their better judgment, is defined as moral panic (Goode, 2017). In other words, it is the people's response in the form of belief in an exaggeration propelled by the media. After a given time that people behave as they should, i.e., as they are told by the experts, the situation seems remedied. Its only deviants, or 'folk devils' such as youth groups, hooligans, scary bedtime stories, and so on (the type varies depending on the exact nature of the threat) which are "not arbitrarily selected as scapegoats" (Young, 2009) remain as constant reminders of what exactly people should not think, do, or

become (Cohen, 2011, pp. 1-2). As deviants stay visible to the public by the hands of media, the pull created by the moral panic carries on as well.

First mentioned in deviancy studies in the 1960s, moral panic has been conceptualized along the following key characteristics: *moral disturbance* rather than being simple panic events, *disproportionality in the reaction*, *displacement of the target* of that reaction, and *volatility* of the reaction on a continuous basis (Young, 2009). In other words, a large number of people experience an immense concern in an exaggerated fashion within a considerably limited amount of time. This fear is mostly generated by some societal group, and it can be by the hands of the lower class, elites, or others (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Regardless of whether the panic is about a certain race (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002), age group (Parnaby, 2003; Dixon & Azocar, 2006; Cohen, 2011, pp. vii-xiv), gender (Herdt 2009), or any other identity category there is (Cerulo, 1997), the alienation of a certain group can be explained as beneficial to the hegemonic agenda shaping society.

This relatively unusual kind of fear within the moral domain is employed as the means for conjuring a systematic commitment to society (Critcher, 2011). On this front, Hier (2002; 2008) argues that, while focused on the *volatile* nature of the subject, moral panic episodes are just side effects of a long-term moral regulation attempts. On the other hand, Rohloff (2008; 2011) repeatedly states that moral panic episodes are generated from the lack of ability to convey information in a desired manner within a short amount of time. The knowledge-ignorance paradox states that the increase in specialized knowledge also increases ignorance (Ungar, 2000), so the communication problem here is also said to heighten the panic status. Those three approaches partly address *normativity*, *temporality*, and *(un)intentionality* problems within moral panic research (Rohloff & Wright, 2010); in other words, questions such as why people come up with those normative reactions to such temporal or volatile problems, and by whom these episodes are constructed are yet to be fully explained.

Regardless of how we approach moral panic theory, the generated fear and its aftermath are constructed within the domain of meaning, and language is the most fundamental meaning system there is (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2016). Saussure (1959, pp. 65-70) when analyzing languages as a number of knots between certain sounds and concepts – signifier and signified – states that any language at its core and therefore system of meanings is arbitrary and linear. Barthes (1983a) argues that there is another, higher level of meaning, namely the myth. Those three layers (signified, signifier, and myth) dictate a set of meaning for each person individually and

on the collective level (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2016), so any filter through which people understand and react to the world around is created by employing this linguistic function.

While any historical period has its own set of myths on a societal level, modern "bourgeois society" is argued to conjure its myths by admitting some of its parts are broken in order to ease people's acceptance of the devil they know (Barthes, 1983b), paralleling the folk devil's point. This can be seen most vividly in the form of advertisement, which also explains the repetitive nature of modern mass communication (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Since the modern political formations are created and sustained by means of mass communication and its capability of mediating masses (Siapera, 2010, pp. 6-8), those statements about the relationship between mass media and the modern myths still hold merit today. In short, the acceptance created with a methodological fear mongering can be comprehensively examined when the communication effort is reduced to meaning, by analyzing discourse and its indirect effects on the masses.

Methodology

Critical discourse analysis is regarded as a theoretical approach employing linguistics and semiotics upon a "text" created within a specific cultural context (Van Dijk, 2000, pp. 193-194; Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352; Fairclough, 2001, pp. 121-124). On a more specific note, Van Dijk (1988, pp. 52-54) states while analyzing news discourse that any news article is constructed with a two-phased "conventional schema", which is comprised of a summary and a story. This two-fold approach in examination can similarly be applied on the television news items as well; as Montgomery (2007, p. 40) argues, every news item on television consists of a news kernel stage, which serves as an introduction and a news subsidiary stage, where details about that story are conveyed. News subsidiary stage is analyzed within four main sub-parts: opening visuals, news headlines, news items and closing visuals (Montgomery, 2007, p. 39). Broken apart in this sense, any television news article arguably can be examined extensively and tied to the bigger narrative, whatever that narrative may be.

Elements related to the summary stage such as headlines and leads are most influential within any stage of a news comprehension process since they serve as a kind of cognitive heuristic, as Van Dijk (1988, pp. 140-148) further argues. The two-fold method of Montgomery (2007, p. 52) differs on this point though, since the news kernel stage is done in order to introduce people to the news item that will follow, whereas in the newspaper article format there is no need for introduction; rather, certain page numbers contain certain kinds of articles (first page for headlines, third one for the "unchanging human nature", for example). Cognitive

7

heuristic function is seemingly carried out by visual elements in any shape or form (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; Turner, 2007; Zhou, 2005) while headlines used in television become almost redundant (Montgomery & Feng, 2016). Any of the four TV news item elements carry a piece of the puzzle though, and an examination in this domain should be made regarding the news item as the determining factor and its relations to other elements on a discursive plane since they serve as a form of summary to the main attraction. In the case studies section that follows, data collected from the evening news programme of FOX TV and CNN Turk in three selected time intervals are examined within Montgomery's (2007) critical discourse analysis perspective as it is an operational approach for examining news items on television.

The examination phase of this study is done in three steps. First, political state and influential events before and during the pandemic are analyzed. That step provides an explanation for the selected time periods and also structures the context in order to better understand why the news items examined are communicated in that exact way. Then, the reasons for selecting FOX TV and CNN Turk for the study, and how they provide a unique perspective for examining post-truth situations and moral panic to some degree, are explained. Finally, the critical discourse analysis results of evening news articles for each day at the chosen period are given, along with comparisons and links to the overall narrative.

Pandemic Timeline in Turkey

Kejanlıoğlu (2004, p. 454) argues that in order to examine any form of media activity in Turkey, or any other country for that matter, the political state that the country is in needs to be analyzed first. It was not long before the pandemic that the country scrapped its parliamentary system and moved forward with a presidential one (Kurubas, 2018). Amongst many changes that the new system brought, the Ministerial Board of the country has been altered to be managed only by the president and none of its members would be an elected member of the Congress (BBC, 2018). This change in the structure arguably made any minister simply an expert in a given field that is linked to the president in the Turkish people's eyes.
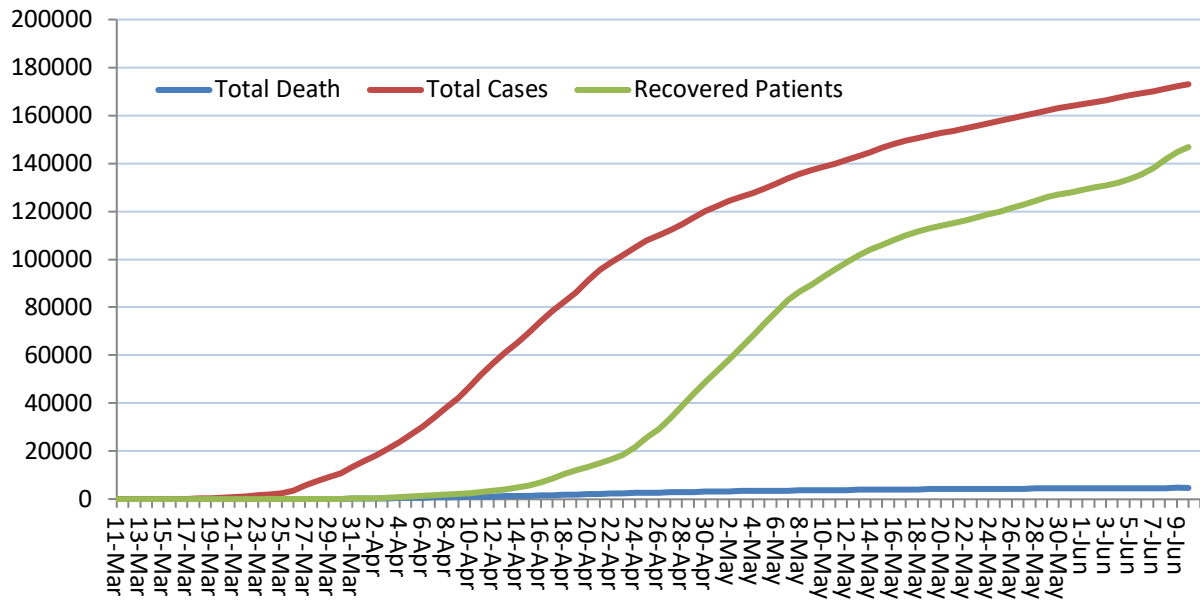
Figure 1: COVID-19 Pandemic's Contagion Rate in Turkey between 11th of March 2020 and 10th of June 2020 (TÜBİTAK, 2020)

The presidential system and especially the mayoral election that came after it created much turmoil, since a strictly two-sided and aggressive campaign period that is not unusual for a presidential system has come to pass. Controversial issues such as Anti-Islamism (New York Times, 2019; Qin, 2019) and terrorism (Gall, 2019b; Whiteside, 2019) which had no relations to the mayoral elections whatsoever have been used as campaign slogans. Even those harsh campaign moves would not be enough for the ruling party, since they suffered a marginal defeat in several important cities in Turkey including Ankara (the nation's capital) and İstanbul (the biggest city in the country), and this was also the first notable defeat for Erdoğan and his party (Gall, 2019a). This campaign process and the "*two sides*" perspective arguably opened deep wounds on a societal level, since each group started to see the other as their enemy, and it can be seen in even the most neutral, bipartisan events (Üçer & Şolpan, 2019). Episodes like that also clearly show the partisan state that the media assumed one way or another.

In more recent events, the first case of COVID-19 found in the country was declared to the public with a late-night press briefing by the minister of health Fahrettin Koca, and that declaration was widely publicized within hours on the 11th of March 2020 (Cupolo, 2020). The Health Ministry of Turkey had taken the first step to combat the disease months before that date though, with the founding of the Scientific Board comprised of 31 renowned scientists from the country in mid-January (Yener, 2020) and there were also flight restrictions and evacuation efforts issued within the same time period (Aksut, 2020). Travel restrictions were heightened

during the next month (Wintour, 2020). Restrictions on everyday life of Turkish citizens came shortly after the first case as the government issued the closing order to all schools on 12th of March (Altaş & Yıldızalp Özmen, 2020). Starting 21st of March, those aged over 65 and the chronically ill citizens were not allowed to go out (Kandemir, 2020). Restrictions became more severe as the virus spread across the country.

The panic situation within the country rose considerably and arguably peaked with the "last minute" curfew on the 10th of April (Sözcü, 2020), which even led to the (later denied) resignation of the Minister of Internal Affairs (Sayın, 2020). The situation seemed dire, considering the curve that the disease followed seemingly could not be flattened up to that point (Figure 1). The progression of the pandemic at that point and other worries such as hunger and not being able to provide for one's family, led people to arguably the highest point of panic and disorder within the country in the COVID-19 timeline.

The "normalization" of social life in the country started in the middle of May (Hürriyet, 2020), but a concrete step towards normalizing the entire social life was taken at the end of the Ramadan Feast, the 1st of June (TRT Haber, 2020). The country had not wiped out the virus completely (Figure 1), but the extreme measures taken within the period prior to that day were deemed not necessary by the government.

Those time periods are chosen in order to provide a start, a high point, and a point of resolution for the country's well justified panic regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. A close examination of TV coverage of the pandemic in those three periods should arguably yield a comprehensive understanding of the discourse employed during a time of heightened moral panic, caused in the early months of the pandemic.

Fox TV and CNN Turk Channels

FOX Channel in Turkey got this name when Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, along with well-known music producer Ahmet Ertegün, bought most of its shares back in 2006. The channel was formerly known as TGRT (Hürriyet, 2006). Despite its relatively short lifetime under this name, FOX TV in many studies is recognized as a competition for more established channels such as ATV (Barış, 2019) and Star TV (Dağtaş & Yıldız, 2015). Some events that FOX covered, like opposition candidates; private messages being shared on live television (Baykal, 2018), only go to underline the channel's popular, yet controversial nature. The evening news programme was hosted by Fatih Portakal on the channel at the time interval chosen to examine the COVID coverage within this study, whose resignation in the late summer

of 2020 was received with shock by the public and extensively speculated on (Turan, 2020). The programme is known to be quite popular especially amongst opposition party supporters and even seen as one-sided on many occasions in favor of that side of the political spectrum (Oğuz, 2019). This also makes the channel differ from the one with the same name in the US, which is known to be a staunch supporter of the conservative side.

CNN Turk, which began broadcasting at 1999, is also tied to a larger media corporation, and it is the second international branch that they made after CNN Plus in Spain (Hürriyet, 1999). Despite its initial promise of staying independent and truthful, CNN Turk frame is known to intentionally leave out the voice of opposition in the country from time to time, whether it is the infamous "Occupy Gezi" protests (Batuman, 2013) or Kurdish protests regarding ISIS attacks on Kobani region (Cockburn, 2014; Eken, 2016), instead of which the channel chose to air documentaries about penguins and honeybees. This tendency to silence the opposition could be linked to the ownership status of the channel, since it is owned by the Demirören Corporation (CNN Türk, 2020), which has ties to government contracts in energy, tourism, real estate, education, and other sectors (Demirören Holding, 2019). This fact underlines that, just like FOX, CNN Turk differs from its American counterpart from a political perspective too by taking on a conservative approach (at least under this ownership), whereas it differs from the FOX TV ownership situation since there is more of an indirect link to CNN International.

To sum up, both of the channels selected for this study have much in common; they established themselves for a high percentage of viewers in Turkey, got their names from larger media companies based in the US and are popular as news brands internationally. The fact that they both stand on the opposite political spectrum of their American counterparts can also be considered another common ground between the two channels.

Evening News Discourse Data

The news items analyzed in this study are collected from the FOX TV and CNN Turk evening news programmes, which are influential amongst the opposition supporters (FOX TV) and ruling party supporters (CNN Turk), respectively. Data are gathered from three different periods: 11-13 March 2020 (pandemic starting period), 11-13 April 2020 (the high point), and 31 March - 2 June 2020 (normalization point). Episodes in the first period include 31 news items for FOX TV (26 pandemic related) and 76 news items for CNN Turk (63 pandemic related). Episodes in the second period include 42 news items for FOX TV (41 pandemic related) and 122 news items for CNN Turk (119 pandemic related). Episodes in the third period

include 47 news items for FOX TV (29 pandemic related) and 138 news items for CNN Turk (86 pandemic related). All items are examined in Montgomery's two-fold framework, first on news kernel level, and then on the subsidiary side that includes opening and closing visuals, actual news items, and headlines, on a less important note. The following section consists of a detailed examination of all those components considering the overarching narrative they provide.

Findings

Starting Period of Pandemic (11-13 March 2020)

Out of the 31 total news items produced within these three days on FOX TV, 26 were about the COVID-19 pandemic, while the remaining five were about other issues. Non-virus-related items generally constitute the last part of the FOX TV evening news programme. The only exception for that is the martyr funeral piece done on the third day. Eight items out of 11 on the first day, 8 items out of 9 at the second, and 10 items out of 11 on the third day were about coronavirus in various contexts (Figure 2). Each programme lasts a little more than 45 minutes.

On these three days, on FOX TV, we perceive that the news regarding the virus attempts to show a unified front. What that means is there is almost no criticism of the ruling party officials regarding the pandemic process, which was unlikely for the style of the programme. To paint a picture about how their expertise in the matter is highly valued; President Erdoğan himself - who constructed his political power upon constant communication (Göksu, 2019) - appeared twice in coronavirus related news within this period, while he is shown 3 times on the five non-pandemic news items. Experts on the pandemic subject are directly shown in the related news items in the following numbers:

- Health Minister Fahrettin Koca / 4 times
- Members of Scientific Advisory Board / 2 times
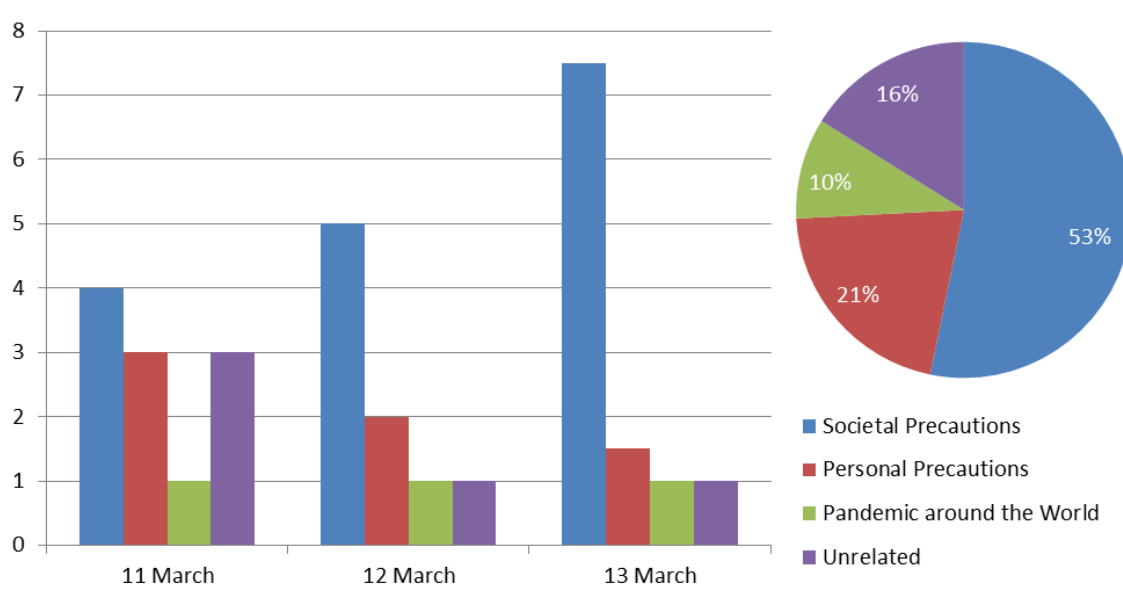- Other experts / 3 times

Figure 2: FOX TV News Items Topic Classifications Related to the Pandemic on 11-13 March 2020

Out of the 76 total news items produced within these three days on CNN Turk, 63 were about the COVID-19 pandemic, while the remaining 13 were about other issues. Almost all of the non-virus-related items are on the first day chosen, suggesting a rapid change in importance. 23 items out of 34 on the first day, all 21 items on the second, and 19 items out of 21 were about coronavirus in various contexts (Figure 3). Each programme takes a little more than 75 minutes. Change in coverage time between two programmes and the repetitive character of CNN Turk coverage resulted in more than double the number of news items compared to FOX TV programme.
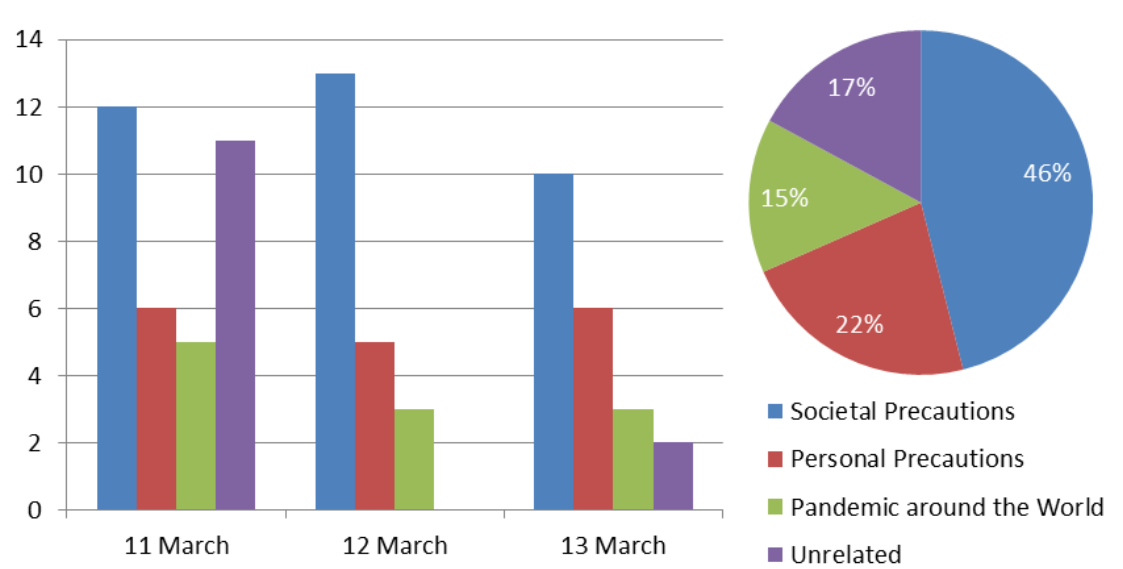
Figure 3: CNN Turk News Items Topic Classifications Related to the Pandemic on 11-13 March 2020

CNN Turk news items generally praise the steps taken by the government, which were early and decisive, while repeatedly assuring people there is no need for panic. In a sense, they took the praise effort up a notch, since only the experts in the field and regulations were celebrated in FOX TV items. Considering the channel's affiliations, this was not an unusual event. Showing experts on pandemic related news was also taken up by CNN Turk, since they interviewed in person or on video call several experts in the news kernel stage. Percentage-wise, Fahrettin Koca and Advisory Board members were shown less while the number of other related experts shown has risen drastically. Experts are directly shown in the related news items in following numbers:

- Health Minister Fahrettin Koca / 5 times
- Members of Scientific Advisory Board / 2 times
- Other experts / 15 times

Following Montgomery's (2007, p. 52) methodology of news subsidiary analysis, while opening and closing visuals vary in the news items analyzed on both FOX TV and CNN Turk, images of experts making a statement and people with hazmat suits disinfecting places were predominantly used. FOX TV added visuals of masked individuals out in the public. Actual visuals of the virus itself were also used as a background at kernel stages for both channels. The news items in detail (Figure 2; Figure 3) are divided into four different categories regarding the issues they cover related to the pandemic:

1. *Societal Precautions* cover 53% on FOX TV (4+5+8) and 46% on CNN Turk (12+13+10) evening news coverage in the given three-day period. They examine the mass precautions designed by government officials involving public places such as education, working life, and any form of gathering. Especially the assembly of the multiple government officials at presidential building and the decisions taken by government were repeatedly examined. One of the news items on FOX TV and several on CNN Turk on the last day are deemed to be both societal and personal since they cover both government actions and how people could specifically act in parallel to those actions. Price opportunists that purposefully raised the prices of much needed cleaning products and face masks are also mentioned.

2. *Personal Precautions* cover 21% on FOX TV (3+2+2) and 22% on CNN Turk (6+5+6). They consisted of what every individual could, should, and should not do to aid this fight against the virus. Issues like hygiene and how the virus infects a person are repeatedly mentioned; one of those evening news items on FOX TV even argued that wearing masks was unnecessary and actually raised the infection risk. Experts were repetitively shown in this kind of news items. People hoarding food, face masks, and cleaning supplies are also mentioned.

3. *Coronavirus around the world* topic comprises 10% of FOX TV (1+1+1) and 15% of CNN Turk (5+3+3) coverage. These news items convey, as the name suggests, the situation around the world. While some hopeful news such as developing medication trials are mentioned, these articles predominantly paint a depressing picture which underlines that the situation within the country could be a lot worse without early and effective precautions mentioned in other news items.

4. *Other news* items are far fewer in number compared to the whole: 16% of FOX TV items (3+1+1) and 17% of CNN Turk items (11+0+2) can be shown as such. Unrelated items on FOX TV generally can be considered less important due to their placement at the end of the programme. Ones from CNN Turk suffered a significant decrease after the first day, suggesting a shift of importance within the timespan.

The High Point (11-13 April 2020)

Out of the 42 total news items produced within these three days on FOX TV; 41 were about the COVID-19 pandemic. It can be seen that almost all issues in the country –and therefore in the FOX TV evening news programme – are related to the virus in one way or another, and they had gained more importance as the events progressed in the previous month. The weekend news programme which covers the first two days of this period is a little different from the others. It is hosted by a different anchor. It can be said that the weekend structure is a little more conventional than others. There is one item at the end point of the third day that cannot be linked to the coronavirus topic, other than that, all news is related to the subject (Figure 4). The first two programmes take a little more than 45 minutes, while the third one on the Monday takes up nearly 75 minutes arguably due to the lack of non-news content (such as series, films) since there were no new productions because of the lockdown.

Criticism of how the situation is handled had risen by this point, but respected officials and experts such as the Health Minister or the members of the Scientific Advisory Board were not targets of that criticism. Those were focused on officials who were in office before the

presidential system, in other words targets have concrete political ties with the ruling party. The mandatory curfew and failing economic situation were repeatedly brought out. Experts of the pandemic subject were directly shown in the related news items in following numbers:

- Health Minister Fahrettin Koca / 5 times
- Members of Scientific Advisory Board / 4 times
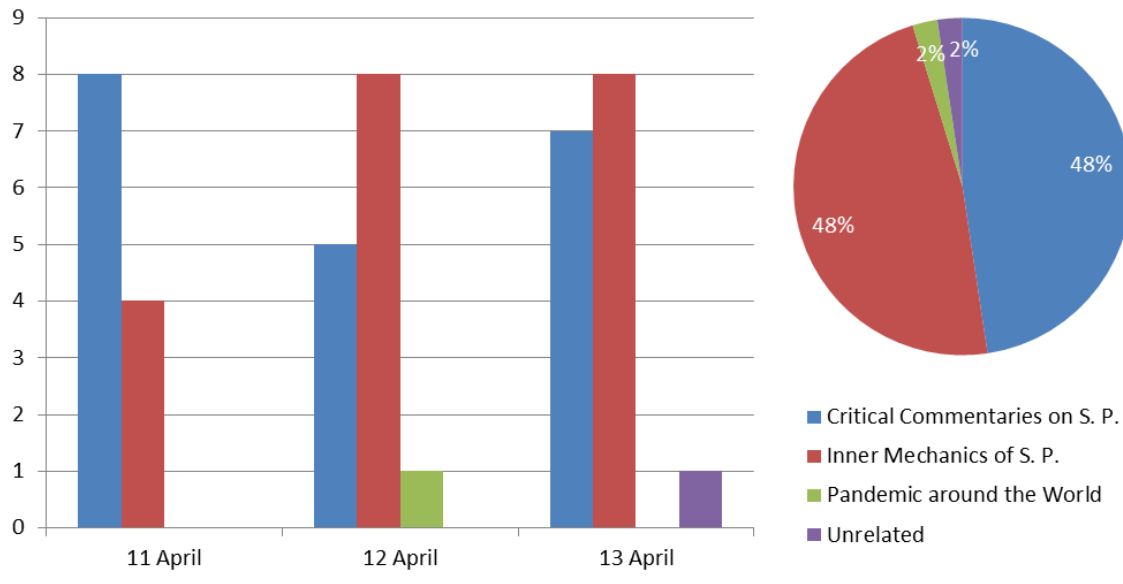- Other experts / 7 times

Figure 4: FOX TV News Items Topic Classifications Related to the Pandemic on 11-13 April 2020

Other actions, however, namely the mandate to wear face masks in public places, even in cars with two or more people, was not criticized at all. This was especially strange due to the fact that face masks had been said to cause more harm than good in the starting period. Lastly, while there were no news items specifically about personal precautions, they are all implied in the details of the news, such as reporters fully protected from the virus with face masks and gloves, also reports of people not taking any precautions against the virus, who should know better.

Out of the 122 total news items produced within these three days on CNN Turk, 119 were about the COVID-19 pandemic, while the remaining three were about other issues. Virus-related content seemingly covers almost all of the news programmes within this period. 50 items out of 53 on the first day, all 41 items on the second, and all 28 items on the third were about coronavirus in various contexts (Figure 5). Each programme took about 90 minutes, experiencing an odd increase in coverage, unlike the FOX TV programme, possibly because

CNN Turk is devoted entirely to news, so there should not be a lack of content. The increase in time adding to the brief and the repetitive nature of the channel resulted in almost three times more news items than FOX TV.
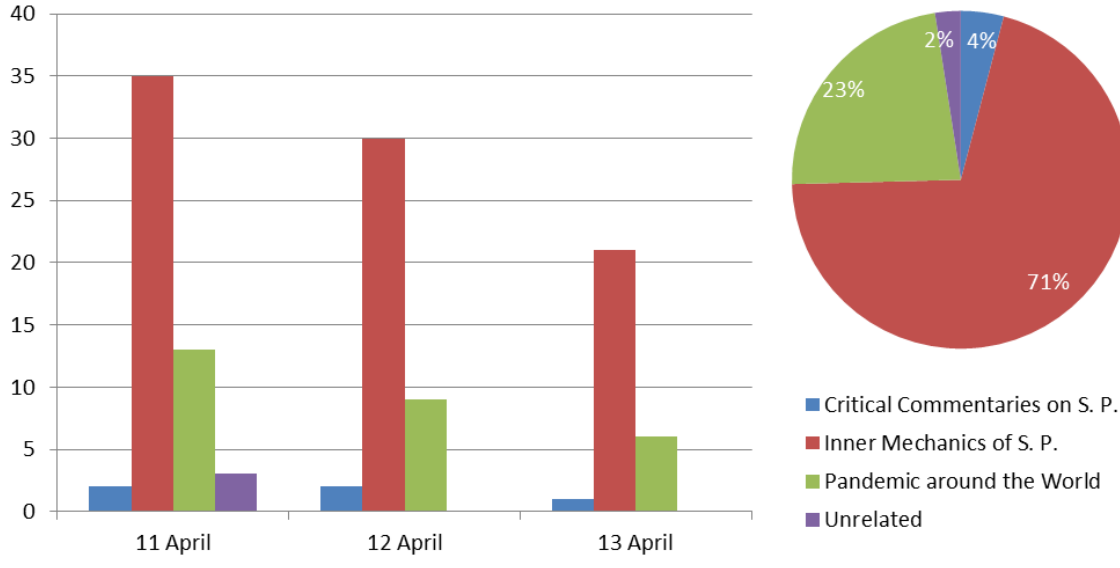

Figure 5: CNN Turk News Items Topic Classifications Related to the Pandemic on 11-13 April 2020

Criticism was almost non-existent within CNN Turk's frame, and the Health Minister and the Advisory Board members were shown far less considering the number of news items. The ruling party briefly admits that the curfew situation could be handled a little better, but mainly focuses on how many obeyed the curfew and how helpful it had become for the fight against the virus regardless of the situation on the 10th of April - when the last-minute curfew call was made. The economic state was not even brought up. Experts on the pandemic subject were directly shown in the related news items in the following numbers:

- Health Minister Fahrettin Koca / 5 times
- Members of Scientific Advisory Board / 1 times
- Other experts / 12 times

Within the terms of Montgomery's (2007, p. 52) methodology of news subsidiary analysis, there is a dramatic difference in the opening and closing visuals between the two channels. FOX TV extensively showed people out on the street, presumably on Friday night, when the mandatory curfew was publicized at the last minute, and statements regarding that situation from experts or opposition officials, while CNN Turk stuck with empty streets, people

on balconies and windows, and police forces maintaining the order. The news items in detail (Figure 4; Figure 5) are divided into four different categories, but categories have changed since Stage I of data collection, since there are no personal precautions to be followed due to the lack of social life:

1. *Critical Commentaries on Societal Precautions* cover 48% on FOX TV (8+5+7) and 4% on CNN Turk (2+2+1) evening news and show criticism of mass precautions, or lack thereof, made by government officials involving especially the "last minute" curfew, denied resignation that followed, and the economic state of the country. Along with the president Erdoğan and his spokesman İbrahim Kalın, the Internal Affairs Minister Süleyman Soylu, and the Treasury Minister Berat Albayrak, who is also the son-in-law of the president, are frequently quoted and criticized in these news items. People out on the streets at night and opposition officials are also shown.

2. *Inner Mechanics of Societal Precautions* are shown in 48% of FOX TV (4+8+8) and 71% of CNN Turk (35+30+21) coverage and they involve how the precautions made mandatory by the government have worked in the field. The precautions themselves are not criticized within these items, but citizens who have not complied with them are. Faces masks made mandatory in public and the weekend curfew are frequently mentioned on FOX TV, whereas CNN coverage shows police force handling curfew conditions and empty streets. Sheer numerical data about the daily advancement of the disease within the country is also given in these as "breaking news" content because the health minister moved his daily briefings to coincide with the evening news programme.

3. *Coronavirus around the world* topic is shown in only 2% of FOX TV (0+1+0) and 23% of CNN Turk (13+9+6) coverage, and pretty much covers the same function as that during the first period. The depressing picture (specifically more depressing than in the country) around the world and hopes for a vaccine are stated.

4. *Other news* items are far fewer in number and importance, only 2% on FOX TV (0+0+1) and 2% on CNN Turk (3+0+0) can be deemed as such. Other issues such as political conflicts are carried into the coronavirus discussions and other issues like military movements have seemingly lost its importance; thus, the number of unrelated events, which was low even at the starting point, is lessened.

Normalization Period (31 May - 2 June 2020)

Out of the 47 total news items produced within these three days on FOX TV, 29 were about the COVID-19 pandemic, while the remaining 18 were about other issues. Items not related to the virus were scattered across the news programme on each day, while they are generally placed at the end of the programme, so the pandemic still holds more importance than other issues. A martyr funeral piece opened the May 31st programme, and several "standard" politics-related items were placed near the starting point of the June 2nd programme. There was a significant rise of content unrelated to the coronavirus, suggesting that the topic had lost some of its importance (Figure 6). 11 items out of 16 on the first day, 9 items out of 15 on the second, and 9 items out of 16 on the third were about coronavirus in various contexts. The first programme takes a little more than 45 minutes, while the second and the third one takes up 75 minutes, which had become the norm at the quarantine stage.
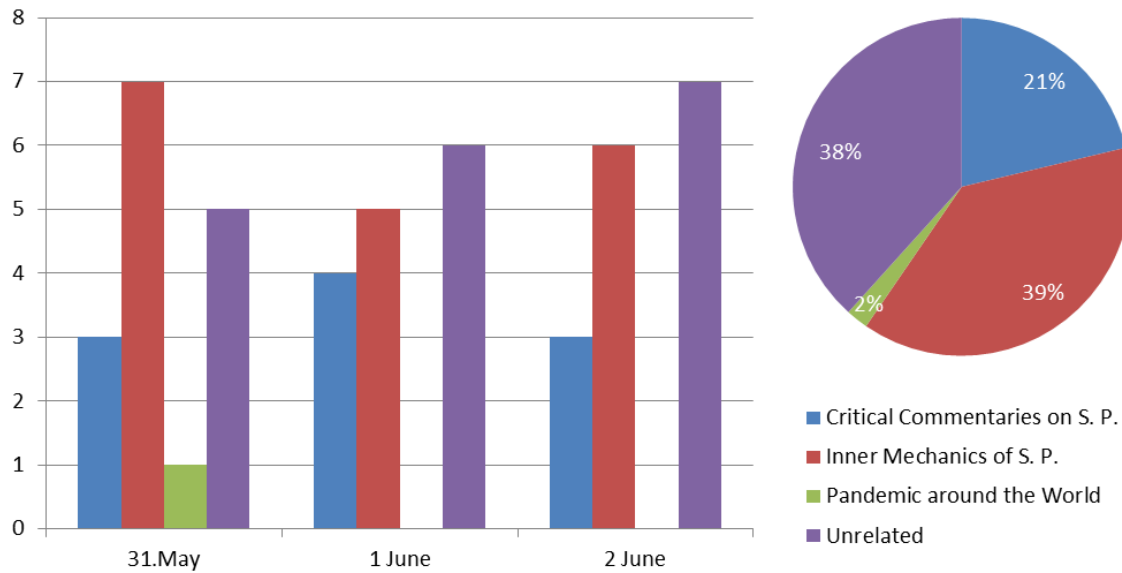

Figure 6: FOX TV News Items Topic Classifications Related to the Pandemic on 31 May-2 June 2020

In the critical content the *Treasury Minister Berat Albayrak* was quoted twice, and *president Erdoğan* was quoted 3 times in total, underlining the shortcomings of their actions on certain subjects, mostly on the economic depression caused, or at least hastened, by the virus and the quarantine. Experts on the pandemic subject are directly shown in the related news items more than the first period as follows:

- Health Minister Fahrettin Koca / 4 times

19

- Members of Scientific Advisory Board / 7 times
- Other experts / 4 times

Out of the 138 total news items produced within these three days on CNN Turk, 86 of them were about the COVID-19 pandemic, while the remaining 52 were about other issues. The drop in virus-related content suggests a significant decrease of importance of the topic, and this trend was observed on both channels. 10 items out of 20 on the first day, 31 items out of 50 on the second, and 45 items out of 68 on the third were about coronavirus in various contexts (Figure 7). Each programme takes about 90 minutes, similar to the high point period of the pandemic. Extensive and repetitive coverage resulted in almost three times more news items than FOX TV again.
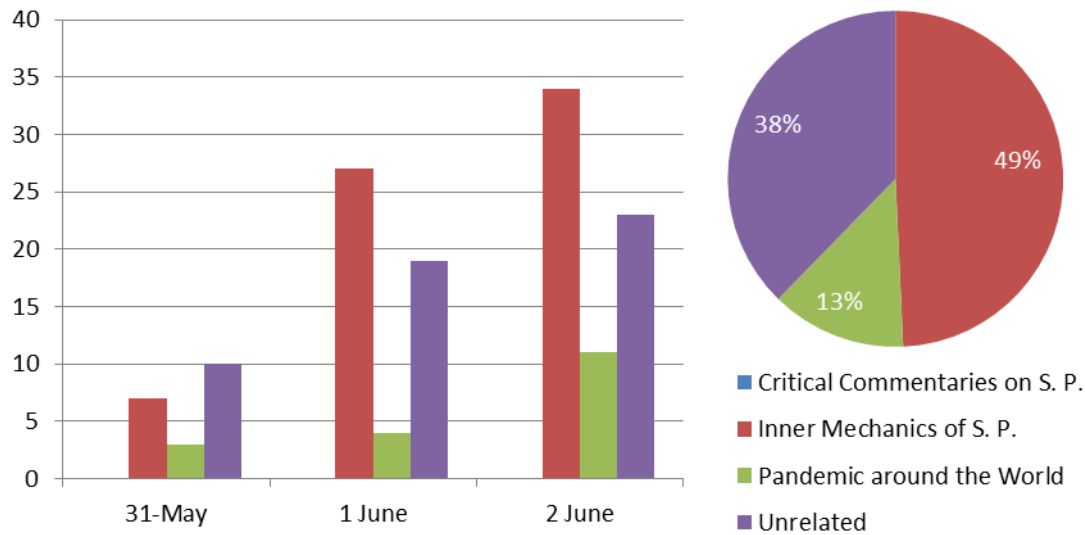

Figure 7: CNN Turk News Items Topic Classifications Related to the Pandemic on 31 May-2 June 2020

Criticism was entirely non-existent within CNN Turk's frame, and the Health Minister and the Advisory Board members were shown far less again considering the number of news items. Replacing the criticism coverage, there was a state of tranquility shown within the country achieved by the efforts of law enforcement officials. The "new normal" and the rare individuals that were failing to cope with it repeatedly pointed out, and the new rules imposed on the public regarding the disease were conveyed in that news. Experts of the pandemic subject were directly shown in the related news items in following numbers:

- Health Minister Fahrettin Koca / 6 times

- Members of Scientific Advisory Board / 1 times
- Other experts / 9 times

Within the terms of Montgomery's (2007, p. 52) methodology of news subsidiary analysis again, both of the channels have similar opening and closing visuals, namely the 'new normal' social life with masks and social distancing and people with hazmat suits disinfecting places. The difference on that point is that in FOX TV coverage, criticism efforts on both the political and societal front is shown, whereas on CNN Turk those images are replaced with the ones of tranquility assured by the government and their law enforcement units. News items categories are similar to the period before:

Critical Commentaries on Societal Precautions cover 21% on FOX TV (3+4+3) and none on CNN Turk and they mostly target the economic decisions taken by the ruling party. The president Erdoğan and the Treasury Minister Berat Albayrak are frequently quoted and criticized in these items as the topic suggests. There are also changes that the government has not yet made, namely the ongoing curfew for children and elderly citizens. Normalization did not involve those people at that point.

Inner Mechanics of Societal Precautions are shown in 39% of FOX TV (7+5+6) and 49% of CNN Turk (7+27+34) evening news coverage. Due to the whole country now stepping into uncharted territory, each new regulation change is examined and explained in these pieces. The precautions themselves and changes applied to regulations are not criticized within these items, but citizens who have not complied with, or are trying to take advantage of them, are. The terms 'normalization' and 'the new normal' are frequently mentioned. Sheer numerical data about the daily advancement of the disease within the country is still given in these as "breaking news" content. The necessity of face masks is also repeatedly stated.

Coronavirus around the world topic is shown only in 2% of FOX TV (0+1+0) and 13% of CNN Turk (3+4+11) coverage. The percentage remained minimal on FOX TV and experienced a decrease on CNN Turk since other related international news mostly focused on the anti-racism protests in the US following the murder of George Floyd. The few COVID-related news items from around the world mostly focused on the statistical side of things, unlike in the first two timeframes studied.

Other news items were increasing in number and coverage with 38% on FOX TV (5+6+7) and 38% on CNN Turk (10+19+23), as arguably another form of normalization. Political conflicts both new and old, events around the world such as protests after the murder

of George Floyd, other programmes aired on the channel and other minor events were covered like the old times. Even though these items were not directly related to the pandemic, related visual elements such as face masks were frequently seen in them.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine how a deception process employing mass media works if and when the "need" for mass control manifests itself in a particular case. News items of the evening news programme broadcast by the FOX TV and CNN Turk channels in Turkey are analyzed mostly in three distinct periods (11-13 March, 11-13 April, and 31 May-2 June 2020) in relation to coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Items are divided into categories with critical discourse analysis method and each category's functions are discussed.

The overall narratives of the two channels are in line in the first period. In both of them, there is a new and seemingly dangerous disease which, hopefully, would not affect Turkey as much as it had affected some other countries, due to extensive and on-point precautions introduced in the country. The narratives, however, split at the high point and normalization period, since FOX TV recognized that the threat was still imminent and people should be careful, whereas CNN Turk treated the pandemic situation in Turkey as more of a 'done deal' by lessening the coverage of the critical content and assuring people with the state tranquility achieved by the 'decisive actions' of the government. Emergence of targeted criticism on FOX TV (Figure 4) starting from the high point and the lack of criticism on CNN Turk (Figure 5) can be shown as another major divergence in the narrative between the two media outlets.

Differing perspectives on wearing masks between the starting point and the rest *was not a mere coincidence*, since images of people wearing masks in public areas from other countries - mostly in Southeast Asia - were repeatedly shown even in the starting period, and the pandemic is known to have started a little earlier in those countries. Both media outlets also stated by expert opinion that "*masks do more harm than good*" at the starting period. Although this was the common conception about face masks at the time (Willis, 2020), the series of bureaucratic and practical failures to provide people with face masks (Bakir, 2020) suggests that the lack of preparation on the government's side has played a role on this contradictory mask-related information.
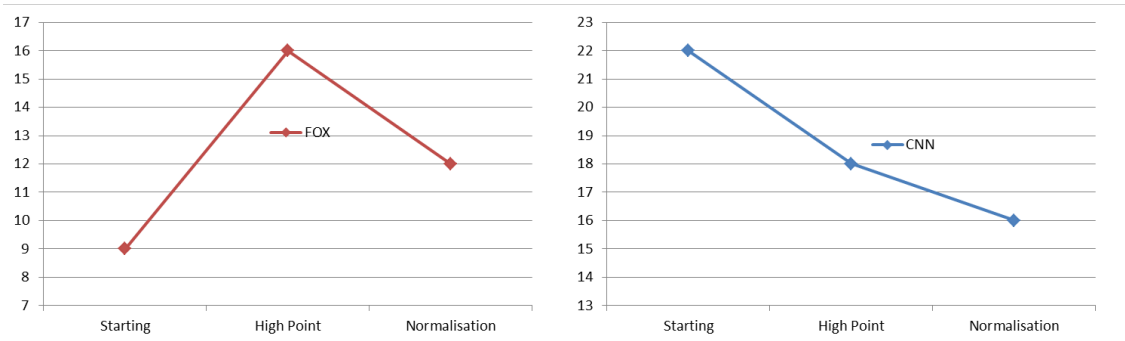
Figure 8: Total number of experts (including the health minister, the scientific advisory board, and other independent experts) shown in evening news programmes on each period.

People seen as absolute experts on the subject - meaning that their expertise was not questioned in any way - were shown extensively by both channels in the first period. FOX TV also used their opinion in the second phase in similar numbers. Health Minister Fahrettin Koca is even regarded as the most reliable source of information in recent studies (Milliyet, 2020). This unusually increased TV appearance rate and the fact that their expertise is not questioned or politicized in any way suggest that their educated opinion in these dire times is highly valued and repeatedly used when encoding targeted messages regarding Hall's (1980, 128-138) argument about mass communication. This evidence suggests that two-step flow of communication is prominent in the distribution of pandemic related messages.

The number of experts - or opinion leaders – given evening TV news coverage in each period indicates that there is a correlation between using experts and the portrayed state of panic. FOX TV evening news coverage generate targeted critical content and raised the panic level in the high point time period, and the level still stayed higher than the starting period at the stage of normalization. The decrease of expert appearances in the third period can be seen as paralleling the decrease in COVID-related content. CNN Turk constantly decreased the number of experts shown in each period, paralleling their approach of order and tranquility (Figure 8).

Out-of-proportion, or - at least - out of the ordinary moral response can be seen most vividly during the first period, indicated by the fact that both channels' discourse attempts and overall narratives were almost perfectly in line: 84% of news items on FOX TV and 83% of the news items on CNN Turk were about the coronavirus in the first period (Figure 2; Figure 3). This was pretty unusual due to the two channels' different ideological positions and evidently suggests that the disease was far more important than any other issues that the country faced combined, which can be said to be a *disproportionate panic response* to the situation due to the

fact that there were only a handful of confirmed positive cases at the time (Figure 1). People did not know enough about the disease at the time to know how much panic is required, and this is discursively constructed especially with the images of people dropping dead at the streets and hazmat suits. There is also a suggested behavior pattern - discursively constructed response - at the first period in the form of *personal precautions* (Figure 2, Figure 3), which later lost its place to extensive regulations upon personal and social life.

Price opportunists, medical supply hoarders, and people not abiding by the precautions are repeatedly shown in each period; which generated a *moral disturbance* by creating a visual guide for these deviant outliers, "traitors" - so to speak - in this fight with an invisible enemy. Even though the restrictions are criticized from time to time in FOX TV coverage, not abiding by them is discursively constructed as a morally wrong issue on both channels. This situation also created a *displaced target*, since economical and practical shortcomings of the state when dealing with the pandemic are almost completely disregarded; painting a picture of a bunch of people not wearing face masks and hoarding supplies are the sole perpetrators of the pandemic sustaining for months. *The folk devil* of this panic situation therefore became the people who break the pandemic rules, no matter how drastic affects those rules have on some people such as barbers.

The shift to old narratives and the gradual lessening of the coverage amounts also suggest that the panic situation was volatile to a degree. *Volatility* can also be seen in people's interpellation of normalization when pandemic still continues; the same people that acted like the world come to an end and started hoarding supplies in March when a single case of COVID-19 was made public. Looking from the bigger picture; volatility of the "pandemic situation in Turkey" discursive construction arguably is in the constructed timeline itself; since more than a year from the start of the normalization, pandemic still continues within the country with new and strong waves are coming because of "people cast aside masks and social distancing" (Ertan, 2021).

In no way, shape, or form this study suggests that feeling panic due to an unprecedented situation such as COVID-19 pandemic is unreasonable or unnecessary. Having stated that, the panic levels at the starting period are arguably heightened by images such as people suddenly dropping unconscious, while other claims contradictory to that discursive construction are publicized such as the irrelevancy of face masks. Control on panic levels can be best examined by comparing starting and normalization periods. In the former there were a handful of cases and extensive precautions are being made, yet people made to panic. In the latter, people made

to relax and return to normal activities to an extent; even though pandemic was still present at that time with more than 160000 total confirmed cases (Figure 1).

Combined with the politically influenced framing that differs in each media outlet; the misinformation and lack of complete transparency influenced many people's judgment, which can be best seen on an anti-mask campaign named *#MaskeyeHayır* (*#NoToMasks*) created on Twitter just weeks after normalization started which gathered more than 30 thousand supporting tweets on a single day (Efil, 2020). Much like the anti-vaxxers, climate change deniers, and flat-earthers, there are a number of people that deny the effectiveness of face masks, other precaution methods, and the lethality of the disease. Given that a substantial portion of those people have little knowledge of the working mechanisms of health sciences and scientific studies altogether, they try to cope with a contradictory set of information by examining a vast set of data with the limited tools they gathered from that exact contradictory source which is mass media. In other words, the specialized tools and knowledge set on the scientific front seemingly sustained the ignorance of the masses in this situation since 30 thousand people in Turkey - and frankly many more in other countries - do not believe the effects and contagion rate of COVID-19 enough to put on a piece of cloth covering their mouth and nose. This puts emphasis on how masses can be deceived into constructed responses.

Conclusion, Limitations and Implications For Further Research

This study is aimed to uncover how targeted framing attempts in mass communication affect the overall message conveyed to the viewers. Evening news programmes on FOX TV and CNN Turk channels are analyzed in three separate periods of the COVID-19 pandemic development in Turkey. Results have shown that discursive construction of pandemic or at least politically framed truth presented by those media outlets resulted in a confusing measure of panic within a short amount of time, which led to extensive regulations upon personal and social life of the Turkish people. All the characteristics of moral panic can be traced in the overall event, namely the moral disturbance, disproportionality, displaced target, and volatility. Medical expert is found to have a substantial role in that constructed narrative and its product of panic. The false information given also remained influential in people's minds and created a lingering ignorance, for example in the form of rejecting masks (Efil, 2020).

However, there are some limitations to this study. Although there is a significant difference between the two channels, with FOX TV having nearly 10 times the rating numbers of CNN Turk, these channels represent a considerable portion of the ratings on the evening news time period (TİAK 2020), but they still cover just a portion. Besides that difference, the

two channels have a lot in common, namely they are both linked to international news brands, and they represent different sides of the political spectrum not unlike their counterparts from the US. Other channels were not added to this study because for many of them, content they put out within a given time is hard to gather. FOX TV and CNN Turk share their evening news programme online in an orderly fashion. The ones that can be reached were similar to the chosen two, especially to the CNN Turk broadcast. Having stated that, analysis of more programmes and constructed narratives on the same subject in similar time periods should be valuable in order to further explain how exactly a catastrophic event such as pandemic is presented to the public. Moreover, further studies must be conducted on how such news is received by the public. Different and more extensive timelines can be analyzed for a more detailed narrative, since more than a year has passed since the starting period yet the pandemic still continues with no end in sight.

This study serves as a bridge between moral panic and two step flow theories by underlining the mass media generated framing upon reality which constitutes contradictory or insufficient information. Therefore, it serves as a new addition for understanding those theories while also focusing on a recent catastrophic public health event. It also illustrates how moral panic processes give way to regulatory action. Extended timespans, different channels from Turkey or other countries, or different events can be picked and examined with the methodology given within the paper in order to point out the importance that opinion leaders hold, post-truth politics, and constructed moral panic situations.

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