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The Sphere of Consensus in a Polarized Media System: The Case of Turkey During the Catastrophic Coup Attempt

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How does a highly polarized media system respond to a catastrophic event? The July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey provides fertile ground to examine how a catastrophic event has shaped the editorial policies of news media outlets in a highly polarized media system. This article hypothesizes that, mainly due to the peculiarities of the Turkish media system, even at the time of a catastrophic event, the framing strategies of media outlets converge only to a limited degree on a sphere of consensus. Adopting a content analysis methodology, we analyze the framing strategies of four national newspapers affiliated with specific sociopolitical camps (the pro-government *Sabah*, the moderate *Hürriyet*, and the oppositional *Sözcü* and *Cumhuriyet*). We reach the counterintuitive conclusion that these news outlets used different framing strategies in the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt and that the gap between them widened over the period of analysis.

Keywords: political communication, framing, content analysis, media systems, authoritarian regimes, catastrophic event, Turkey

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On July 15, 2016, a faction of the Turkish army, allegedly linked to the Fethullah Gülen movement, executed a plot to overthrow the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) government by creating a chaotic environment through coercive means (e.g., closing the main transportation routes, bombing the parliament and presidential buildings, shooting down a military helicopter, and taking the Turkish military chief hostage). Although the coup attempt was short-lived, both the conventional and digital media played a vital role in the event. Indeed, Esen and Gumuscu (2017) contend that the plotters' inability to secure hegemony over the media paved the way for their failure. CNN-Turk—a mainstream TV channel during the coup attempt and later acquired by a pro-government conglomerate in May 2018—gave President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan much-needed airtime to reach out to different segments of the public. Nevertheless, Ünver and Alassaad (2016) assert that Erdoğan's TV appearances played only a belated role, and the authors offer empirical evidence of an organic mobilization driven by seemingly unrelated social media campaigns and prayers broadcast by mosques.³ Meanwhile, both moderate (i.e., *Hürriyet*) and oppositional print media outlets (i.e., *Sözcü* and *Cumhuriyet*) were united in their opposition to the coup attempt (Way, Karanfil, & Ergiftçi, 2018).

Various studies (Hallin, 1986; Robinson, 2001; Schudson, 2003) have suggested that during and following catastrophic events, the media may enter a period of homogenized reporting in which coverage gravitates toward a focal point as they mimic the government's stance on issues and try to appeal to unassailable national (or religious) values.⁴ Robinson's (2001) policy-media interaction model asserts that when elite consensus exists on an issue, journalists are unlikely to take a critical stance. Schudson (2003) emphasizes that, in moments of public danger, journalists trade professional objectivity for obeisance to shared values and shared assumptions. Thus, focusing on post-September 11 journalism, Schudson portrays journalists as communicators of shared feelings, trying to invoke a generalized "we." On the other hand, Lang and Lang (1980) argue that the media can become a battlefield for contending perspectives and sometimes play an active role in the dispute. The July 15 coup attempt in Turkey presents an intriguing case of this type. By analyzing the Turkish media's response to the attempted coup, this article examines how a highly polarized media system with organic ties to different sociopolitical camps responds to a catastrophic event under a "competitive authoritarian regime" (cf. Esen & Gumuscu, 2016, 2017; Özbudun, 2015).⁵

³ According to Konda (2016), 84% of the mobilized anti-coup protesters were AK Party voters.

⁴ The concept of catastrophe is discussed in more detail later in the article. The coup attempt qualifies as a catastrophic event because it sent a shock wave through the system and substantially disrupted social and political life. Events of this scale force media outlets to abandon their routines to provide coverage of the events.

⁵ As a hybrid regime type, competitive authoritarianism has features of both democracy and authoritarianism. It is democratic in the sense that democratic institutions serve as the principal means to gain power. However, due to abuse of state and media resources, violations of civil liberties, and fraud setting the playing field, it is not fully democratic. On the other hand, such regimes are competitive because democratic institutions (e.g., independent media) are not solely a facade. Indeed, opposition parties utilize them to compete for power, but they are handicapped by a highly unfair or even dangerous playing field. For example, they are frequently confronted or threatened with (tax) fines, attacks, suspensions, and lack of advertisements (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

This article continues with a discussion of the formation of consensus spheres following catastrophic events, drawing on Hallin's (1986) original theory and subsequent revisions (e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012).⁶ We then contextualize the Turkish media system and the questions it poses. After describing the contextual and theoretical framework, we present our content analysis of media coverage after the failed coup attempt. Finally, we discuss the implications for a broader understanding of how different media systems respond to specific developments.

Sphere of Consensus: A Necessary Evil?

Hallin's (1986) original "spheres of opinion" categorization aimed at establishing a theory of media objectivity. Hallin proposed that the collective output of a given media system can be described in terms of three concentric spheres, delineated by how the system makes editorial choices in reporting the news. The outer "sphere of deviance" represents the area of excluded views that are believed to be outside the boundaries of normative behavior. A middle "sphere of legitimate controversy" is a province in which journalists promote pluralistic debates while striving for objectivity in a relatively balanced fashion. The innermost "sphere of consensus" represents news reporting practices that do not feel compelled to present opposing ideas (Hallin, 1986, pp. 116–117).

According to Watkins (2001), the "sphere of consensus" type of reporting occurs during moments of celebration, mourning, or crisis. The literature reveals that during catastrophic events (e.g., war, terrorism, natural disasters, and accidents) in which the metanarrative shifts toward complicity in a consensus, journalists not only summon the generalized "we" and supposedly shared national values (Durham, 2008) but also replicate policy makers' normative themes (e.g., Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2008; Edelman, 1993; Hallin, 1986; Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeau, & Garland, 2004). As Chadwick (2001) notes, politicians' constant need for media opportunities to maintain their positions of power becomes even sharper during crises.

The media is an important institution for helping the state enforce its aims, presence, and legitimacy (Edelman, 1993). Therefore, in a crisis, it becomes difficult for media outlets to perform their watchdog role by challenging those in power against abuses and informing public. As the "uncertain guardians" (Sparrow, 1999), particularly in catastrophic times, media outlets' motivations are shaped by various material pressures (i.e., political and economic) and normative considerations (i.e., journalistic ethics such as adherence to objectivity). This is especially so in a polarized media system like Turkey's, where media outlets gravitate toward the ideologies of their affiliated sociopolitical groups and become increasingly partisan.

⁶ Due to shortcomings and methodological problems in their application to the non-Western context, Hallin and Mancini's four dimensions and three models have faced various criticisms. These led Hallin and Mancini (2012) to compile a book to discuss non-Western media systems. Despite the shortcomings, however, many scholars continue to employ these dimensions in various ways and for various purposes (Hallin & Mancini, 2017).

Turkey's Media System: A Tale of Polarization and Party-Press Parallelism

With its 19th-century Ottoman roots, the Turkish press has always been politically connected (R. Kaya & Çakmur, 2010). While the relationship is close and state pressure on critics has always been present, the 1950s saw the Turkish press industrialize rapidly to become a relatively rich media environment by the 1980s (Adakli, 2009; A. Kaya, 1999). This transformation involved shifts in ownership from a newspaper traditionally owned by its editor in chief to one owned by capital with investments in other business sectors, such as energy, construction, and finance (Kejanlıoğlu, 2004). By the late 1990s, the system had become oligopolistic (Bıçakçı & Hürmeriç, 2014), with most influential media groups having organic ties to banking, petrochemicals, and construction. This context fits with Hallin and Mancini's (2012) definition of a polarized/pluralist media system, where the state both directly and indirectly dominates the media landscape. Governments, political parties, and industrialists with political allegiances have profound power over Turkey's media, so most journalists behave more like political activists than professional journalists. Consequently, commentary-oriented and advocacy journalism is common. However, during the 1990s, the Turkish media landscape was not particularly polarized while frequent government changes and coalitions limited the political parties' direct influence on coverage.

Given this background, Turkey's conservative/Islamist media is particularly interesting. Once on the periphery of the media landscape, those news outlets have gained a significant share and now enjoy a privileged status (Rethink Institute, 2014). Because the circulation rates of dailies (e.g., *Yeni Şafak*, *Yeni Akit*, and *Milli Gazete*) are not economically viable, these outlets are either sponsored by conservative/Islamist business groups (e.g., Albayrak Media Group for *Yeni Şafak*) or various Islamist religious groups to disseminate their ideology. Unsurprisingly, they maintain a mostly pro-AK Party stance (Bulut & Karlıdag, 2016; R. Kaya & Çakmur, 2010; Media Ownership Monitor Turkey, 2018; Toruk & Olkun, 2014). Because the AK Party has favored the development of a pro-government media landscape, particularly since 2007, the boundaries between media outlets that were previously classified as mainstream (Çarkoğlu, Baruh, & Yıldırım, 2014; R. Kaya & Çakmur, 2010) and conservative/Islamist have become increasingly blurred.

The Turkish media sector is peculiar in the sense that it serves as a venue for business owners to do favors for governments—not the other way around—to become successful in other sectors (Buğra & Savaşkan, 2014, pp. 158–162). That is, since the Turkish government plays a critical role in the economy (e.g., through various regulatory amendments, arbitrary tender criteria changes for major infrastructure projects, and tax fines/evasions), knowledge of the media tycoons' nonmedia business activities can help us understand media outlets' framing differences. For example, leaving aside their concern for sales and advertising revenues (since the state/government is the principal advertiser; Sözeri, 2015) (see Table 1), the owners of *Sabah* and *Hürriyet* would hesitate to report news that might jeopardize their relations with the government, perhaps even opting to take a clear pro-government stance. Unsurprisingly, therefore, some evaluated the Turkish state's imposition of the heaviest tax fine ever on Doğan Group—the owner of *Hürriyet*, which has the highest circulation—as the Erdoğan-led AK Party's punishment for severing its ties ("Dogan v Erdogan," 2009). Overall, the Turkish media system faces constant economic (through owners' industrial and commercial commitments) and political pressure to moderate its coverage.

Table 1. Newspaper, Circulation, Ownership, Other Business Interests, and Coverage Style in 2016.

Newspaper	Circulation rank	Ownership	Nonmedia business activities	Coverage style	Digital performance regarding page views and daily visitors	Top 10 (online) media outlet ranking for "providing accurate and reliable news"
<i>Hürriyet</i>	1	Doğan Group ^a	Energy, retail, industry, tourism	Moderate	8	5
<i>Sabah</i>	2	Zirve Holding (Kalyon Group) ^b	Construction, energy, transportation	Pro-status quo/pro-incumbent AK Party government	7	
<i>Sözcü</i>	3	Burak Akbay (Estetik Publishing Joint Stock Company)		Oppositional	21	1
<i>Cumhuriyet</i>	19	Cumhuriyet Foundation-Yenigün News Agency Press and Publishing Joint Stock Company		Oppositional	47	9

Note. Data are compiled from Çarkoğlu et al. (2014); Panayirci, İseri, & Şekercioglu (2016); Sözeri (2015); Istanbul Chamber of Commerce (2016); Alexa (2016); Medyatava (2016); Yanatma (2017); and Media Ownership Monitor Turkey (2018).

^a The acquisition of Dogan Media Group (including *Hürriyet*) by Demirören Holding, a pro-government conglomerate loyal to President Erdogan, was finalized on May 21, 2018 ("Turkish Media Group," 2018).

^b In 2008, Çalık Group, a conglomerate close to the AK Party, acquired *Sabah* (and the ATV TV channel) from Turkey's Savings Deposit Insurance Fund. This move was interpreted as Erdoğan's attempt to establish his own media outlet (Esendemir, 2008; Mavioğlu, 2012). In December 2013, the pro-Erdogan/AK Party Kalyon Group bought *Sabah* (and ATV) from Çalık Group. This news outlet is known for acting as an AK Party mouthpiece (Media Ownership Monitor Turkey, 2018).

One group that particularly experiences this pressure is the pro-Kurdish media. Turkey's Kurdish minority has faced identity problems since the foundation of the Turkish Republic (Yeğen, 2015). Several Kurdish political parties have been closed, and southeast Turkey (where the population is predominantly Kurdish) was under a state of emergency for 25 years until 2002. Unsurprisingly, pro-Kurdish media outlets with ties to ethnic Kurdish nationalism have also faced pressure, with most being temporarily closed during those years (Moustakis & Chaudhuri, 2005). Nonetheless, Aydin and Emrence (2016) contend that, due to the AK Party government's instrumentalist Kurdish policy, pro-Kurdish media experienced fewer problems from 2002 to 2014. However, since 2015, and especially following the coup attempt, most pro-Kurdish media, such as Azadiye Welat, Özgür Gündem, and IMC TV have been ordered to close ("Turkish Authorities," 2016).

As Akin (2017) notes, access to "healthy" news became rather complex after the coup attempt. Polarization was inevitable given that Turkey's sociopolitical camps made every effort to disseminate their narrative, ranging from government-guided "screened publics" choreographed to the media's needs (Carney, 2019) to Gülenists trying to purify themselves by disclosing past activities (Bulut & Can, 2019). In his analysis of Turkish media outlets' frame adoption strategies, Oz (2016) finds a clear pro- and anti-government divide in the Turkish media system. By the time of the failed coup attempt of 2016, the media was already highly polarized, with high levels of party-press parallelism, which made it markedly more difficult for the system to follow an extended period of consensus.

The Turkish Media's Trial With the Catastrophic Coup Attempt

Despite its failure, the coup attempt was catastrophic in severely disrupting the population (the death toll reached 237, including 34 coup plotters, while 2,191 people were injured), government functions, and national morale. Beyond its immediate impact on Turkish society, the event prompted the Turkish president to declare a three-month state of emergency on July 21, 2016, allowing rule by decree without the two largest opposition parties' parliamentary approval (Republican People's Party, or CHP, and Peoples' Democratic Party). This decree was later extended several times by the AK Party and its ally, the Nationalist Party.⁷ From the very beginning, the government accused Gülenist elements in the Turkish armed forces of plotting the coup. The decree decisions enabled a "post-coup massive purge" (Keyman, 2017, p. 456) whereby more than 100,000 public servants were dismissed, hundreds of civilian institutions were closed (including nongovernmental organizations, media outlets, and universities), and politicians were arrested or detained (including the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş). At the time of writing, more than 150 journalists and media workers had also been arrested, including the editor in chief of *Cumhuriyet*, Murat Sabuncu, accused of having links to the Gülen movement (Amnesty International, 2018; Arslan, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Some scholars have interpreted these state-of-emergency measures as the last step of the AK Party's increasingly authoritarian policies to eliminate all groups opposing its rule (Başer & Öztürk, 2017).

⁷ The state of emergency continued for two years before ending on July 18, 2018.

Considering these characteristics of the event and its aftermath, this study investigates the coup attempt as a case to comparatively analyze the news coverage of Turkey's high-circulation print media outlets affiliated with contending sociopolitical camps (pro-AK Party, moderate, oppositional).⁸ As noted in the introduction, various academic studies have revealed the polarized pluralist characteristics of Turkey's media system. Thus, we predict that the system will struggle to achieve a sphere of consensus, as proposed in the following hypotheses:

H1: The consensus sphere will be limited, if it exists at all, to a shallow anti-coup sentiment while coverage of the coup attempt and government responses will remain polarized.

H2: Media coverage of the coup attempt and the government's responses will reflect existing lines of political polarization between sociopolitical camps.

⁸ The historical roots of these sociopolitical divisions go back to the late Ottoman/early Republican era. Since then, the conflict between the Westernizing/modernizing secular elites (i.e., Young Turks, Republican Kemalist cadres) and the rest of Turkey's traditional ethnic/religious population has been considered "the most important social cleavage underlying Turkish politics," conceptualized as "the center-periphery" (Mardin, 1973, p. 170). This is not to argue that this divide is the only cleavage, as Mardin describes it as a tentative theoretical proposal and confesses that the reality is much more complex, noting other cleavages within the periphery (e.g., between Kurds and Turks; p. 187). Regarding Mardin's most important cleavage, the pro-Western secular center dominated the state apparatus throughout the Republican era. As the periphery—representing the traditional and religious segments of society—gained wealth through rapid economic modernization, it first penetrated then dominated the center, prompting the prehegemonic rule of the pro-periphery AK Party. This transformation prompted an academic debate on whether Mardin's framework can still explain Turkish politics in the new era (Açikel, 2006; Bakiner, 2018; Wuthrich, 2013). Bakiner (2018) has proposed a research agenda to examine microlevel dynamics within and between social actors and institutions for cases that contradict Mardin's binary scheme. Indeed, the AK Party represents the emergence of new socioeconomic and political elites that rival and in some ways have transformed Turkey's traditional secular elites (Somer & Liaras, 2010). However, Mardin's cleavage is not irrelevant for explaining current Turkish politics. On the contrary, a new but persistent divide has become apparent, namely *Kulturkampf* (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012), delineated by the socioculturally liberal and secular coastal provinces (mainly represented by CHP) versus the more religiously conservative hinterland (mainly represented by the AK Party). Labeled the "new Islamic bourgeoisie" (Yankaya, 2014), the latter's business elite has emerged as significant political actors—such as the owner of *Sabah*, ATV Broadcasting, and the Kalyon construction firm Orhan Cemal Kalyoncu—in the country's rapidly growing economy, thereby becoming integrated into the central distribution of wealth under the "new capitalism in Turkey" (Buğra & Savaşkan, 2014, pp. 142–155). Alarming, even for optimists, a 2016 survey, "Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey," revealed a high polarization between the constituencies of different parties, especially between the AK Party and CHP (Erdoğan, 2016).

Data and Analysis

This study is based on a quantitative content analysis of media coverage of the July 15, 2016, coup d'état attempt in Turkey. This event provides an opportunity to explore how national news outlets covered this major catastrophic event. The coverage of four national newspapers—*Hürriyet* (moderate), *Sözcü* (opposition), *Cumhuriyet* (opposition) and *Sabah* (pro-AK Party government)—were analyzed for the three-month period after the attempt, from July 16 to October 16, 2016. The main criteria for selection were the papers' affiliation with specific sociopolitical camps, circulation rates, online performance, reputation as news sources, and the owners' nonmedia business activities. *Cumhuriyet* was included because of its deep impact on Turkish political history (Aslanbay, 2017), its digital performance, and reliability, despite its low circulation rates (see Table 1).

As previously explained, Turkey's media system is multifaceted due to the sociopolitical camps behind it. This complexity is exacerbated by various identifications and loyalties, including left versus right, Turkish nationalism versus Kurdish nationalism, Sunni Islam versus Alevi Islam (see Semerci & Erdoğan, 2018; for a comprehensive study of political ideologies in Turkey, see also Bora, 2016). This study, however, focuses on another major polarizing sociopolitical cleavage in Turkish society: conservatism/Islamism (principally represented by the AK Party) versus secularism/Kemalism (principally represented by CHP; Erdoğan, 2016).

Because this study analyzes news outlets' institutional strategies rather than columnists' personal opinions, the unit of analysis is news articles. Any news article focusing on the coup or that cited/quoted relevant political actors was included in the analysis. The front pages of all four newspapers were coded for issue frames. In total, 1,829 news articles from 372 daily newspaper issues were analyzed. Issue frames were selected as the method of decoding content in preference to coding valence (positive-negative) frequency or intensity, or number of mentions of specific terms (party names, leader names, etc.) for two reasons. First, although simple mention counts or valence coding may be easier and provide more stable measures, they are low in resolution because they do not give a nuanced summary of the content analyzed. For the purposes of this study, we needed to not only test whether outlets were similar in content choice but also decode differences in terms of content choice. Although identifying issue frames is more subjective and a potentially less stable measure, it can provide better resolution regarding media outlets' content choices. Second, as discussed below in some detail, news reporting itself is an exercise in framing. Therefore, a measure that can capture these editorial choices is necessary to understand the dynamic relationship between sociopolitical context and content choice.

As Patterson (1997) notes, the power of the press stems mainly from the way in which it frames situations. Entman's (2010) framing theory suggests that politicians and journalists promote a particular side of the story, thus influencing and hindering each other. The literature on framing theory offers a rich spectrum of generic frames that are ubiquitous and applicable to different contexts and issue-specific frames for particular topics or events. To analyze the media coverage of the failed coup attempt, we identified seven frames that were used in at least 10% of the coverage by at least one media outlet (see Table 2).

Table 2. Explanations and Examples for Selected News Frames.

Frame	Explanation	Example
Commonality Carey (2008)	Focuses on creating a sense of union among the members of a community Emphasizes national unity Suggests disregarding ideological or racial differences Depicts shared celebration or mourning Provides a human example and associates it with loss while mentioning greater good	"Democracy Gathering" (<i>Sabah</i> , July 30, 2016) "Long-Awaited Scene" (<i>Sözcü</i> , July 22, 2016)
Ostracism	Counterframe for commonality Suggests that society is not unified against developments Implies that protesters and/or supporters of certain political views do not represent community at large Reflects disagreement between parties and social groups	"The Witch Hunt Begins" (<i>Cumhuriyet</i> , July 19, 2016) "We Understand Different Things From Democracy Gathering" (<i>Hürriyet</i> , September 4, 2016)
Demonization (Hutcheson et al., 2004)	Depicts certain individuals/groups as evil Contains written or visual information that might generate feelings of outrage and hate	"Claims Himself as Spiritual Leader [referring to Gülen] and Rips Off the State" (<i>Sözcü</i> , August 2, 2016) "Traitors That Sold Their Soul for 1 Dollar" (<i>Sabah</i> , August 31, 2016)
Attribution of responsibility (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000)	Suggests that some level of government can alleviate the problem Suggests that some level of government is responsible for the issue/problem	"Government Did Everything It Could to Send the Terrorists to the Constitutional Court" (<i>Sözcü</i> , July 18, 2016) "May Both God and the People Forgive Us" (<i>Hürriyet</i> , August 4, 2016)
Consequence (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).	References consequences of pursuing a course of action Mentions political, social, economic consequences	"Treacherous Conversations of Coup Plotters" (<i>Cumhuriyet</i> , July 19, 2016) "Resignation Order From YÖK to All University Deans" (<i>Hürriyet</i> , July 20, 2016)
Mythicizing	Depicts resistance against the coup attempt as epic and heroic endeavors	"Martyrdom Ring Instead of Engagement Ring on July 15" (<i>Sabah</i> , July 23, 2016)
Abuse of power	Emphasizes the government's abuse of power Focuses on the purge and neutralizing anti-government power groups	"[The purge] Surpasses the Terrorists and Turns to Opponents" (<i>Cumhuriyet</i> , September 3, 2016)

Coding Procedure

To operationalize the news frames, our study draws heavily on measures developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). To identify the issue frames, a series of yes/no question items was developed. Coders responded to questions about each news article. If at least one question was answered in the affirmative for a particular frame (each frame was identified with three to six questions), the article was coded in that frame. Each article could be coded into more than one frame or into none of the 12 frames identified. Two native Turkish speakers, who were not involved in analyzing the frames, carried out the coding procedure. There was 84% agreement among the coders, and intercoder reliability for the frame assignments provided a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.89. Given the high number of frames (12), this agreement level was more than acceptable. Subsequently, the articles were assigned to a frame to check whether both coders had allocated the article to that particular frame.

Results and Discussion

According to Hypothesis 1, there should not be strong consensus in the aftermath of the attempted coup, and any consensus that does exist will be limited to a shallow anti-coup sentiment. We also expected coverage to remain polarized. The first test of this hypothesis involved total frame usage patterns. In total, 3,133 frames were identified in 1,829 articles. Table 3 breaks down total frame usage by frame and outlet. Although we identified and coded 12 different frames, the news outlets focused on relatively few of these, with only seven appearing at least 10% of the time in at least one media outlet. The following tables and figures report the results from these seven frames (shaded area in Table 3).

The first evidence supporting Hypothesis 1 can be found with a glance at Table 3. How the four outlets framed their coverage varied highly. For example, the pro-government *Sabah* never used the abuse of power frame, whereas *Cumhuriyet* used it in almost a quarter of its stories (23.47%). *Sabah* used the commonality frame in more than 20% of its coverage, while *Cumhuriyet* used it less than 4% of reports. Similar contrasts can be found elsewhere in Table 3, but it suffices to note that media framing of post-coup coverage showed little, if any, convergence toward an official line. Only *Sabah*, with its emphasis on the commonality, mythicizing, and demonization frames (48.74% of its total frame usage), conformed to the government's attempt to rally the people around the AK Party against the alleged perpetrators of the coup. *Cumhuriyet* remained the most critical, emphasizing the ostracism and abuse of power frames (49.3% of total frame usage).

While the overall frame usage patterns indicate a lack of convergence on an official position initially, it is possible these newspapers later diverged in their coverage. To test this, we investigated how the use of frames changed over time. First, we present the overall temporal pattern in Figure 1.

Table 3. Frames Adopted by News Outlets.

	<i>Cumhuriyet</i>		<i>Hürriyet</i>		<i>Sabah</i>		<i>Sözcü</i>	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Commonality	31	3.85	73	11.07	227	22.4	43	6.55
Ostracism	208	25.83	36	5.46	1	0.09	73	11.12
Attribution of responsibility	63	7.82	34	5.15	24	2.36	80	12.19
Demonization	2	0.24	21	3.18	150	14.8	63	9.6
Consequence	263	32.67	396	60.09	343	33.85	306	54.15
Abuse of power	189	23.47	21	3.18	0	0	21	3.2
Mythicizing	4	0.49	17	2.57	117	11.54	8	1.21
Naturalization	2	0.24	9	1.39	20	1.97	15	2.29
Call to action	6	0.74	9	1.39	49	4.83	9	1.59
Affirmation of Republican values	21	2.6	17	2.57	20	1.97	17	2.59
World opinion	12	1.49	17	2.57	27	2.66	1	0.15
Sinister powers	4	0.49	9	1.39	35	3.45	20	3.04
Total number of frames	805		659		1,013		656	

Note. Gray-shaded frames appear with at least 10% frequency in at least one newspaper.

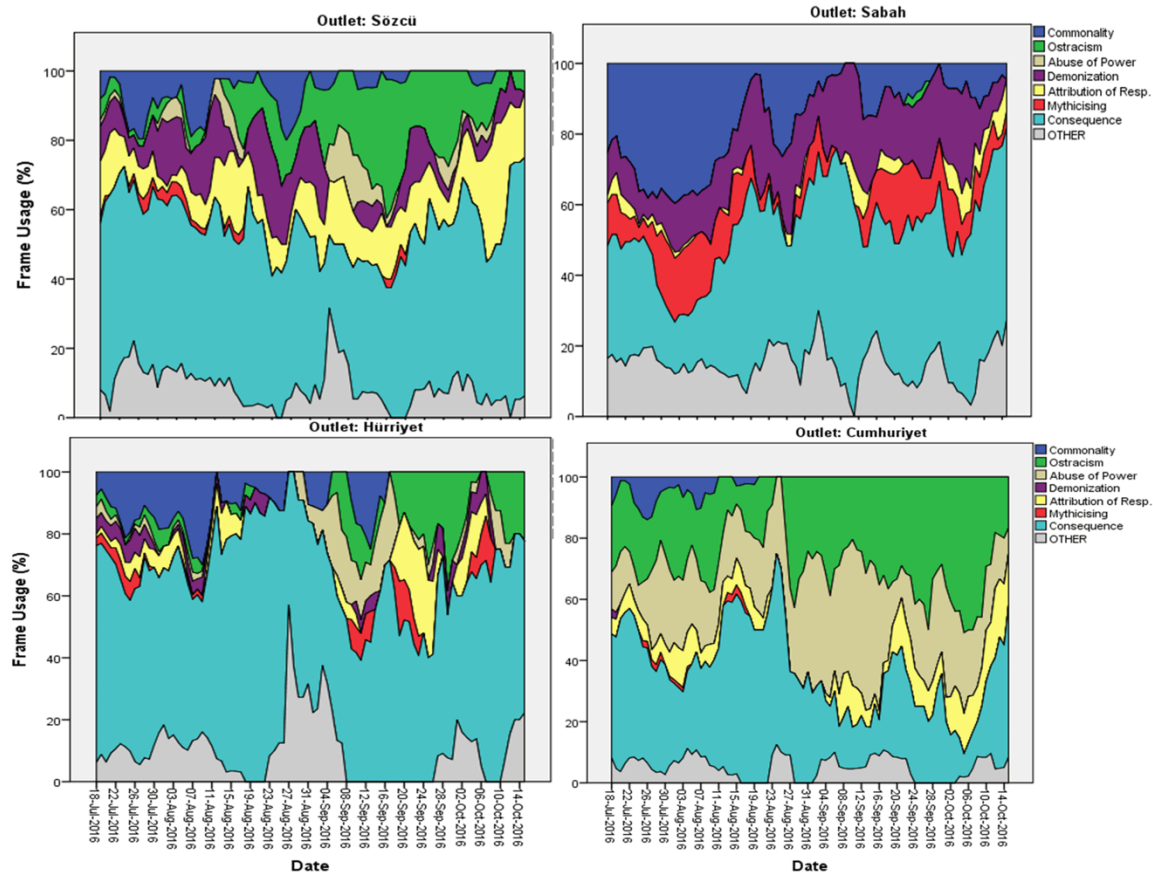


Figure 1. Frame usage by time and media outlet.

If each media outlet maintained a consistent position in the sphere of consensus during the study period, we would expect this to be reflected in its frame usage patterns over time. However, Figure 1 clearly shows that the four outlets did not converge on a common framing pattern at any time. Therefore, frame adaptation needs to be considered in relation to important events during this three-month period. The first general decline in use of the commonality frame occurred as early as July 21, after the declaration of a state of emergency, which created elite disunity regarding the power balance and the government's authoritarian leanings. As a CHP member bluntly stated, "After the declaration of the state of emergency, polarization became a little bit more legal, a little bit more institutionalized" (Aydın-Düzgüt & Balta, 2017, p. 10).

On July 24, 2016, during CHP-led demonstrations in Taksim Square, Istanbul, CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu declared that coup attempt suspects should be judged fairly. Then, in early August, use of the commonality frame increased, mainly due to the Democracy and Martyrs Rally led by President Erdoğan in Yenikapı, İstanbul. *Cumhuriyet* was the only outlet that questioned and criticized the rally for excluding the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party ("Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan,"2016). *Cumhuriyet* also highlighted Kılıçdaroğlu's rally speech on the importance of democracy and the rule of law and a reference to separation

of powers and media freedom. While the ISIS terrorist attack on August 21 at a wedding ceremony in Turkey's southeastern province of Gaziantep affected the agenda, *Sabah* and *Sözcü* instrumentalized this incident by equating the Fethullah Gülen Terror Organization (FETO)⁹ with ISIS ("FETO, PKK, ISIS: You Become the Mastermind's Pawn," *Sözcü*, August 22, 2016; "You Will Not Succeed, There Is No Difference Between FETO, PKK, ISIS," *Sabah*, August 22, 2016).

During late August, *Hürriyet* and *Cumhuriyet* focused on the start of the Euphrates Shield military campaign in Syria on August 25 and the terrorist attack claimed by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) near the town of Cizre in southeast Turkey on August 27 and devoted less coverage to the coup attempt. *Cumhuriyet's* preferred frame of coup coverage was ostracism, with 26.88% of all frame usage. In the last week of August 2016, this percentage temporarily dropped to 8.21%. After these shocks, starting in September, *Cumhuriyet* intensified its use of the ostracism frame. Between September 1 and October 14, the use of the ostracism frame increased to 32.86%. Similarly, *Hürriyet*, which until late August demonstrated a relatively balanced use of frames, used no (0%) ostracism, commonality, or attribution of responsibility frames between August 25 and September 1. In contrast, the coup attempt still dominated coverage in *Sabah* and *Sözcü*. In fact, those two outlets continued to cover coup-related news throughout the analysis period. As shown in Figure 1, both *Sabah* and *Sözcü* continued to employ the demonization frame in depicting the Fethullah Gülen movement. Even after a car bomb attack in southeast Turkey that killed 18 people and wounded 26 (BBC, 2016), *Sabah* chose to headline FETO-related news ("That's How FETO Got Hold of the Universities," July 10, 2016, *Sabah*) rather than the bombing, limiting its coverage to a smaller article ("Treachery in Şemdinli," July 10, 2016, *Sabah*), while all the other outlets headlined the bombing.

The only striking commonality in the frame usage patterns was that all four outlets heavily used the consequences frame (albeit with variations). However, the very nature of the consequences frame leads us to expect that a certain proportion of media coverage in any given context would be framed as consequences of the events. This finding is in accordance with Houston, Pfefferbaum, and Rosenholtz's (2012) contention that disaster news largely concerns what is happening at that moment. Of the news outlets investigated here, the moderate *Hürriyet* relied most on the neutral issue frame.

Hypothesis 2 proposes a differentiation between media outlets in the framing of their coverage. We went one step further to predict that frame usage would not only differ but also reflect the existing sociopolitical connections of each media outlet. That is, we predicted that a catastrophic event might fail to instigate consensus, partly because existing allegiances would create strong path dependencies from the expectations of a highly polarized readership and because of political and economic constraints. A first probe into this hypothesis is provided in Figure 2.

⁹ FETO (Fethullah Terrorist Organization) is a term coined after the coup attempt to refer to the Fethullah Gülen movement, the alleged perpetrator.

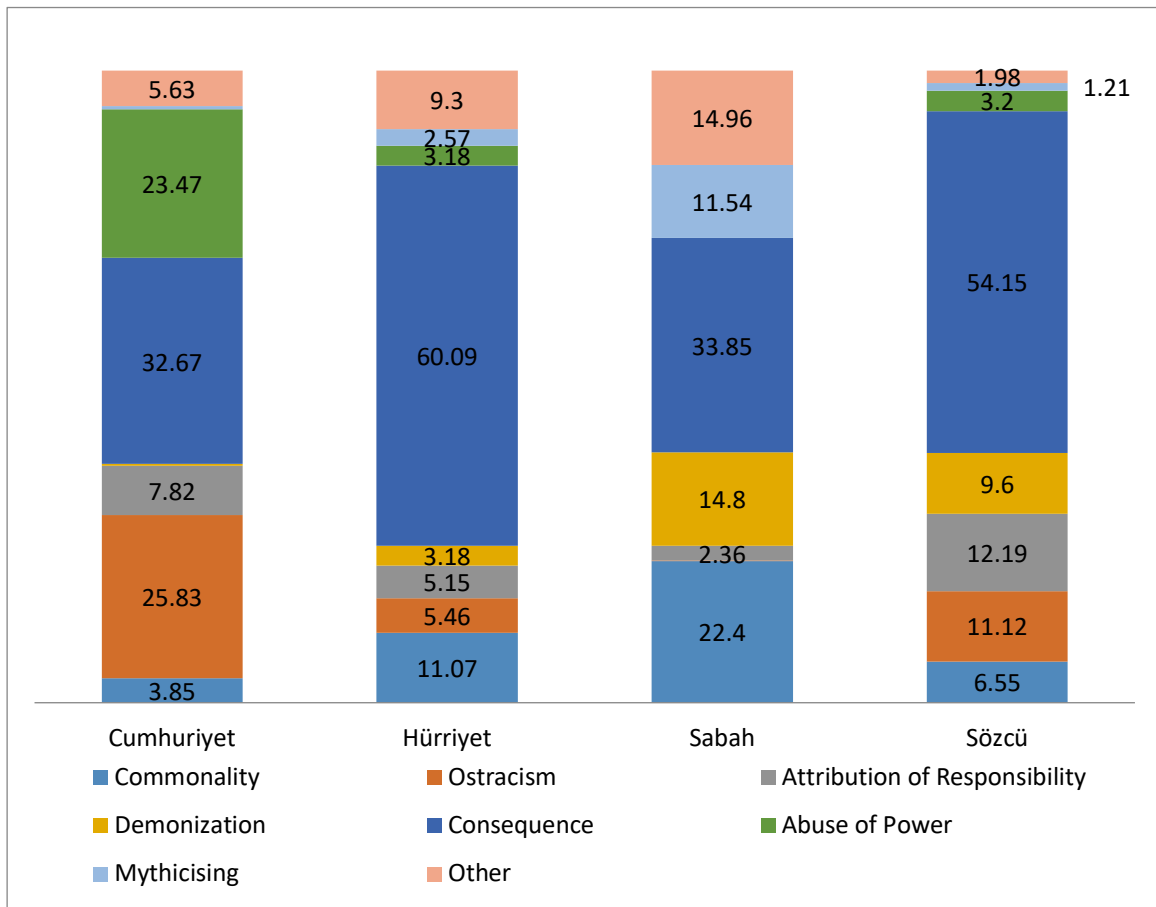


Figure 2. Overall frame usage by outlet (%).

Having discovered no significant convergence of coverage following the coup attempt, in what ways did the coverage of the four outlets differ? Figure 2 reveals several interesting patterns. First, as noted earlier, *Sabah* relied on three frames other than consequences: commonality, mythicizing, and demonization. As the flagship pro-government media daily, this was not unexpected. During and immediately after the coup attempt, the government tried to rally the public around the AK Party and its de facto leader, President Erdoğan (with the constitutional amendments become *de jure* later). *Sabah's* coverage reflected support for this effort through a focus on national identity, the shared struggle against the perpetrators (commonality), vilification of Gülenist movement members (demonization), and stories of the heroism and martyrdom of the people who opposed the coup attempt on the streets (mythicizing). In contrast, through its focus on the ostracism and abuse of power frames, the opposition-supporting *Cumhuriyet* emphasized how the government had turned the coup attempt into a purge of the opposition. *Hürriyet*, as a mainstream moderate outlet, unsurprisingly stayed relatively clear of those frames that implied a strong affinity with any sociopolitical camp. This perhaps explains why around two-thirds of all its

coverage employed the consequences frame. *Hürriyet* also refrained from employing the potentially galvanizing frames of ostracism and abuse of power. These patterns of issue framing are in line with what we know about these outlets in terms of their recent leanings (Çarkoğlu et al., 2014; Panayirci et al., 2016). Figures 3, 4, and 5 show how the coverage changed over time for the commonality, ostracism, and abuse of power frames.

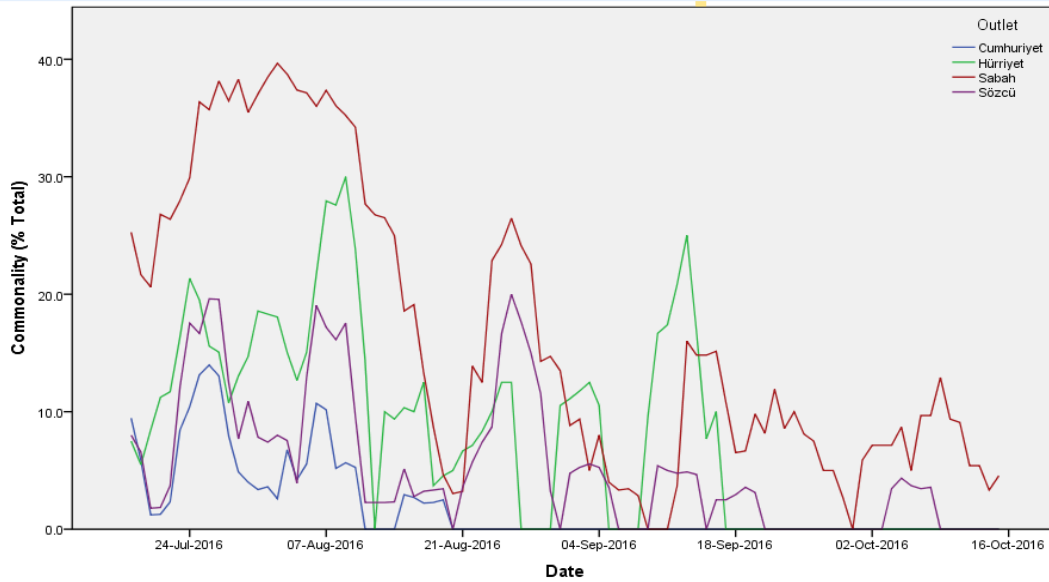


Figure 3. News outlets' use of the commonality frame, July 16–October 15, 2016

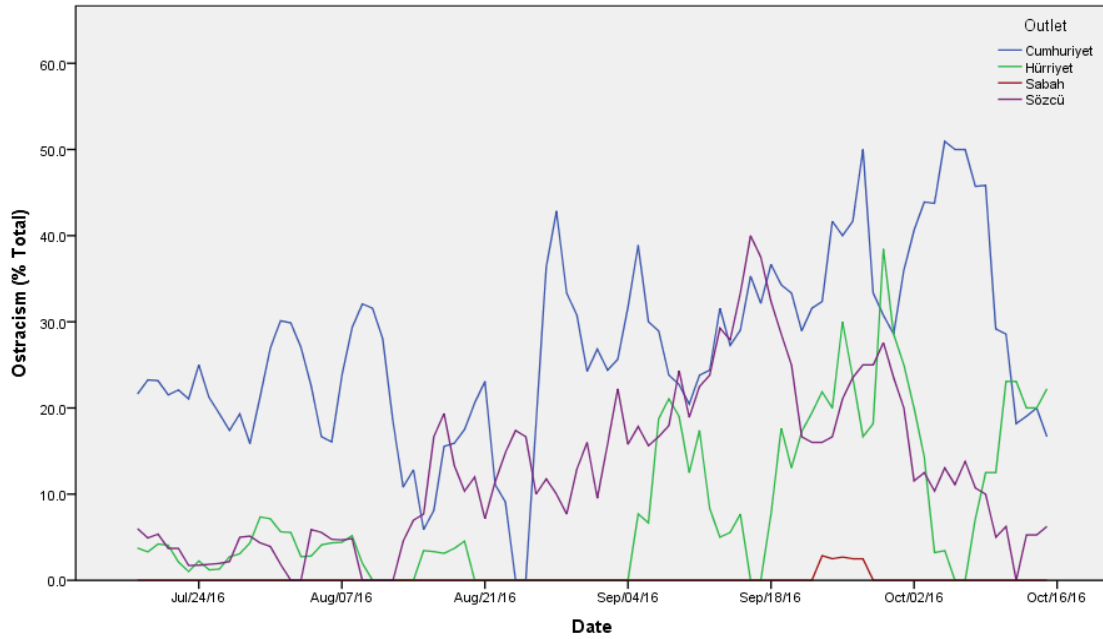


Figure 4. News outlets' use of the ostracism frame, July 16–October 15, 2016.

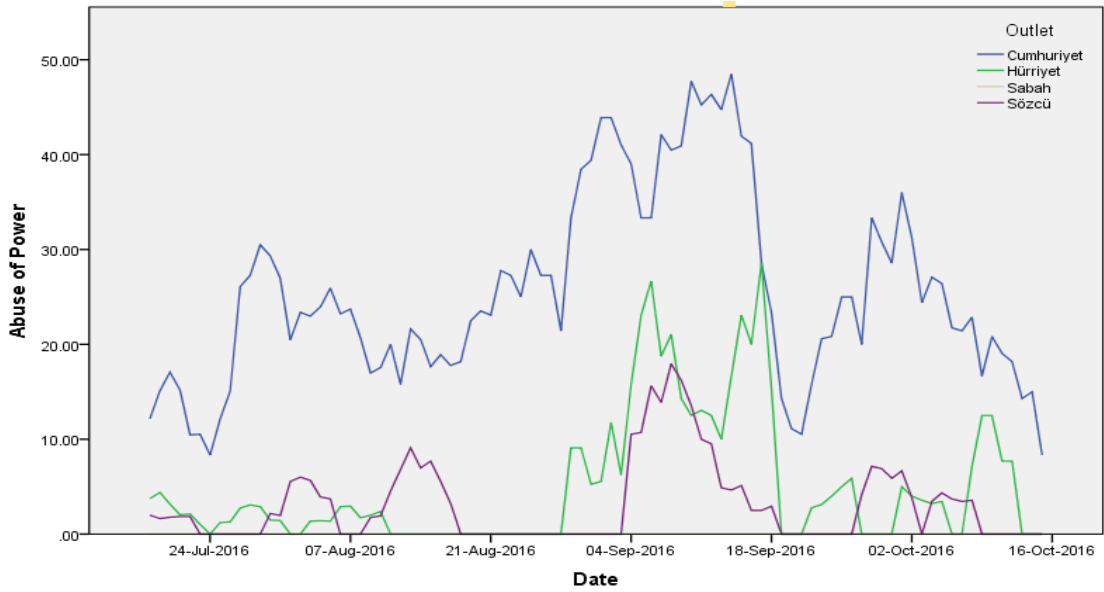


Figure 5. News outlets' use of the abuse of power frame, July 16–October 15, 2016.

The time series shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5 indicate that differences between the outlets persisted over time despite sizable fluctuations. The pro-AK Party *Sabah* tended to use the commonality and demonization frames more than other news outlets both in terms of frequency and percentage. This is what one would expect since, based on previous studies of the Turkish media (Bardakçı, 2013; Çarkoğlu et al., 2014; Panayirci et al., 2016), *Sabah* is closely affiliated with the AK Party government. Strikingly, however, other outlets refrained from embracing the commonality frame, with *Hürriyet* and *Sözcü* using it infrequently and then stopping completely within two months of the incident. As for *Cumhuriyet*, its adoption of the commonality framework was mostly limited to reporting on the speeches of political actors. Thus, Turkish news outlets not directly affiliated with the government had reservations about using the commonality frame, which is the main indicator of a consensus sphere. They did not fully support the government's depiction of social reality; in fact, by employing the ostracism and abuse of power frames, these news outlets created their own symbolic representations of the event. Even from the early days after the coup attempt, *Cumhuriyet* refused to use the commonality frame and instead embraced the ostracism frame.

Based on these findings, we can conclude that there was no meaningful convergence toward a sphere of consensus, even when it was the government's top priority. This is due to the Turkish media system being an increasingly polarized pluralist system. While an attempted coup, at face value, is a severe and catastrophic political event, a closer look reveals an alternative, perhaps more nuanced interpretation. From the very beginning, the coup attempt was branded by the government as being perpetrated by Gülenist elements within the Turkish armed forces. This characterization, while largely perceived to be true, is problematic in two ways. First, the ruling AK Party's relations with Fethullah Gülen's Hizmet movement had already become a major polarizing influence in the Turkish media. This issue became salient during the political scandal caused by the December 17, 2013, corruption probe against several AK Party government ministers and their sons. Differentiation in the Turkish media over the scandal stemmed mainly from their affiliations with contending sociopolitical camps (e.g., the pro-AK Party *Sabah* versus the pro-Gülen movement *Zaman*; Panayirci et al., 2016).¹⁰ As former allies, the AK Party and the Gülenists had neutralized the Kemalist military factions within the Turkish armed forces. However, their marriage of convenience ended and they began to perceive each other as the main threat, culminating in the coup attempt (Şık, 2014; Taş, 2018).

This situation created the possibility that the coup attempt could be perceived and portrayed as a power struggle between two pro-Islamist political camps, thereby making it more difficult for those media outlets associated with the opposition (in our case, *Sözcü* and *Cumhuriyet*) to converge with pro-government outlets (e.g., *Sabah*). Second, if the coup attempt is perceived as a struggle for dominance between two domestic actors, it becomes more difficult to cultivate a common in-group versus out-group dynamic, thus making it less likely for outlets to adopt a consensual stance around a common foe and/or common values. Hence, we can argue that the correlation between a catastrophic event and the emergence of a consensus sphere is context dependent or media system bound rather than generalizable.

¹⁰ On July 27, 2016, *Zaman* daily was shut down due to its alleged links to Gülenists.

Conclusion

This study investigates the factors shaping news media objectivity and consensus in Turkey as a polarized media system. Our investigation of media responses to the coup attempt of July 15, 2016, forms a case for why media systems as polarized and parallelized as the Turkish media system may experience greater difficulty transitioning to a sphere of consensus following catastrophic events. In a complex sociopolitical landscape with numerous forces influencing political events, it is always possible to find at least anecdotal evidence for nearly any narrative. Therefore, our goal was not to offer a speculative narrative but rather to delineate testable expectations considering the theoretical implications of a polarized media system operating during and after a catastrophic event. The existing literature fails to provide answers for why news outlets have difficulty falling into consensus in catastrophic times. Our study allows us to offer some suggestions concerning the possible underlying tendencies regarding this seeming dissensus.

In analyzing media responses to the failed coup attempt, we distinguished between the systemic and contextual factors that determined the reactions of media actors. Systemic factors are derived from the characteristics of the media system that shape and constrain the media outlets' coverage choices. In particular, it is riskier for a media outlet to fall into the sphere of consensus if it is not confident that either its core audience or economic and political patrons expect such a consensus. To investigate this issue, we explored contextual factors and how they interact with systemic factors. Contextual factors include the effects of the sociopolitical context and the characteristics of the catastrophic event. In well-studied examples of consensus-inducing events, two characteristics come to the fore. First, the source of the crisis or catastrophe can be traced to (or at least blamed on) an outside force, thus activating a Manichean binary opposition between good and evil, in-group and outgroup, friend and enemy, or us and them (Kellner, 2004, p. 47). Second, the target or the influenced group is perceived to be society at large or the nation rather than a specific subgroup that might have a polarizing or divisive influence (Durham, 2008). Most mainstream media outlets neither anticipated backlash from their audience nor had to contend with political overlords due to parallelism. In other words, contextual factors and systemic factors did not interfere with the process of consensus formation. Yet can we expect this always to be the case? Based on our findings, we propose three requirements for consensus formation in a polarized media system.

First, the severity of the event or change must be great enough to bridge the peaks in the bi- or multipolar sociopolitical landscape. An attack from an outside source that can easily be identified and vilified will help this process. One might think that an attempted military coup might help as well, but the view becomes more nuanced when we consider the source and target of the attempted coup and how these actors relate to the sources of polarization and parallelization in the media system.

Second, the out-group identity of the source or perpetrator must be easily established. In a polarized system, this requirement limits the possibilities of converging on a common enemy that is an outside source. Catastrophic events that can be blamed on a domestic political actor are also likely to widen the fault lines along which public opinion and the media are polarized. In a highly polarized system, a catastrophic event might even exacerbate rather than suspend existing polarization.

Third, the narrower the target population is, the less likely a sphere of consensus is to be formed. If the intended target or the segment of the society that is anticipated to be affected by the catastrophic event is perceived to belong primarily to one particular sociopolitical camp, or if the event is conceptualized as a conflict between two sociopolitical camps, then a sphere of consensus might be unachievable. Here, the polarization and/or fragmentation of the system plays a dual role. On the one hand, sustained exposure to polarized coverage reinforces the contrast between in-group and out-group, making an us-versus-them interpretation more accessible. On the other hand, the polarized media might perceive political pressure to emphasize the viewpoint of its parent sociopolitical camp, thus creating a centrifugal force away from consensus.

Our study is a baseline for examining the state of the media landscape in Turkey's competitive authoritarian regime. The article reveals that, even during a catastrophic event, news outlets failed to cultivate a landscape where issues are debated and probed in order to provide the public with validated facts and multiple sides of a story to uphold democracy. Considering "the authoritarian turn" of Turkish policy makers outlined above, and its interaction with the global rise of the "new authoritarianism,"¹¹ one could argue that this growing authoritarian environment has polarized the Turkish media landscape to such an alarming degree that a sphere of dissensus has become the *modus operandi*. Arguably, this high level of media polarization and partisan journalism contributes to the survival of authoritarian regimes since it makes them immune from internal criticism and the opposing sociopolitical camps' discourses (cf. McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018). If so, the state of dissensus in the Turkish media at the time of the catastrophic coup attempt was not an isolated development but should be read as a specific case that could take place in other countries that are turning authoritarian with polarized media landscapes. Therefore, we recommend that cross-country comparative studies be conducted to examine the correlation between the type of media system and authoritarian turn.

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¹¹ New authoritarian regimes are based on populist sentiments, elite economic interests, and control over the flow of political information (see Guriev & Triesman, 2015; Krastev, 2011; Somer, 2016).

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