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## **Researcher's ethics: between axiological reasoning and scientific discussion**

Gökçe Tuncel

### **Introduction**

In 2011, two young men came up with the idea of citizen journalism news agency which would operate mainly on Twitter. The idea was to challenge the politically biased mainstream media in Turkey. The name of the agency, 140journos, would come from the previous 140-character limit for Twitter posts. Their aim was to transform Turkish society through creative and inclusive journalistic practices. Since January 2017, they underwent an editorial transformation and focus on weekly documentary essays and photojournalism (similar to Vice News<sup>1</sup>) rather than engaging in citizen journalism. Until January 2017, more than 500 people (as of September 2016), all unpaid citizens across Turkey, regularly sent them content. 140journos was filtering, verifying and then diffusing such content through its WhatsApp channel and Twitter account. The news agency (<https://140journos.com/>) has 258.000 followers on Twitter and 114.490 likes/subscribers on Facebook as of 11<sup>th</sup> October 2019 and all its content is free.

This chapter is based on an empirical research that was carried out in two different time periods. The first interviews and observations took place between October 26-30, 2015 and January 4-5, 2016, with the agency's two co-founders, its two editors and with two employees from their subsidiary advertisement agency (which was established to fund 140journos). The second round of interviews were conducted in 2017 again with one of the editors, one former employee of the 140journos's advertisement agency and a former editor. In order to protect their anonymity, all the names of the interviewees are changed.

The objective of this chapter is to reflect upon the ways in which a researcher can conduct scientifically rigorous research without reproducing and complying with the non-ethical practices of the media outlet. What were the dilemmas introduced for me as a researcher while working with 140journos? When I noticed a change in 140journos' values and commitments, I was no longer in the position of a researcher that works with a group whose values I shared and respected. What were the outcomes of this confrontation? What were my ethical dilemmas and contradictions as a researcher who is critical of one of the rare and successful grassroots media outlets in the authoritarian political atmosphere of Turkey?

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1 <https://www.vice.com/fr/topic/vice-news>

In recent years the Turkish media, especially those who tried to remain more or less objective and critical, underwent serious government pressure which meant financial reprisals for media owners or jail time for journalists. Many of the journalists who dared to criticize Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan were either imprisoned or fired by agencies asked to do so by the government. 140journos not only survived in this authoritarian climate but also flourished since its creation in 2011. The main reason why they avoided repression was that, even though the founders are extremely critical of the government and are closer to the political left, they systematically refused to choose sides by, covering news from right wing and Islamic circles (traditionally ignored by the leftist or the Kemalist-nationalist media) in order to reach a wider public and by avoiding the use of biased language when talking about government policies. Instead they adopted what they call a “radically objective approach”. This meant avoiding taking position against or in favor of the government.

### **From citizen media to audiovisual content producer**

Clemencia Rodriguez defines “citizens’ media” as the medium through which emancipatory practices and new world visions emerge (Rodriguez, 2001). In fact citizens’ media imply a political auto-education since the act of becoming a producer of information is in its own right an empowering practice. The end product is less relevant than the production process considering the fact that the use of media technologies to make films as well as radio and television programs serves the basis to establish the capacity to challenge possible social issues. Citizens’ media becomes “the lived experience of non-violent ways to manage conflict, deal with difference, and interact with one another” (Rodriguez, 2011: 254). On the other hand, Chris Atton defines “[...] alternative media as much by their capacity to generate non-standard, [...] methods of creation, production and distribution [...]” enabling a large participation (Atton, 2002: 4). There are many different and contradictory definitions of “Alternative Media” in the present scientific literature. Sandra Jeppesen points out that “[t]o clarify our understanding of alternative media and its potential challenges to power, we need to examine the different theoretical foundations and underlying ideological perspectives” (Jeppesen, 2016: 56). She identifies four key categories: Do It Yourself Media & Culture, Community & Citizen Media, Critical Media and Autonomous & Radical Media. Each category is then distinguished according to three criteria: *Content* (politics, goals), *Process* (organization and structure) and *Social movement actions and Interactions* (Jeppesen, 2016:66). This categorization allows us to avoid binary definitions when defining alternative

media such as professional journalists as indicating mainstream media and amateur or citizens as belonging to the field of alternative media. It introduces a nuanced approach by giving importance to practices, modes of organization as well as ideological orientations. According to this categorization, 140journos, before its editorial transformation on 2017, seems to belong to both categories of Critical Media and Citizen Media. Its content aims to engage civil society through the representation of opinions and actions coming from different ideological perspectives, which falls in the category of Citizen Media. At the same time, by its ambition to be “a solution for highly polarized media space of Turkey” it defies mainstream media and, thus, can also be considered as counter-hegemonic, which characterizes the content of Critical Media. In terms of process, we find skill sharing and participatory media practices (Citizen Media) as well as vertical internal structure (Critical Media). Lastly when we look at the criteria of social movement and interactions, although 140journos do not report on anti-capitalist social movements, it has an organic link with the progressive and anti-governmental social movement that took place in 2013 in Turkey (Critical Media). At the same time it aims for community building by engaging citizens in news production (Citizen Media).

In a repressive political context where it is nearly impossible for a news outlet to oppose the politics of the government openly and publicly, it is very difficult if not impossible for an alternative media to pursue their project without serious repercussions. For example, Sendika.org, founded in 2001, is known for its coverage of Kurdish issues and was among the first few dozen sites blocked by the Turkish government after the armed conflict in July 2015 between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The government controls access via “Turk Telekom”, the formerly state owned Turkish telecommunication company. Upon receiving orders from The Information and Communication Technologies Authority (ICTA), the national telecommunications regulatory body, Turk Telekom blocks the access of Domain Name System (DNS) and Internet Protocol addresses (IP) that is assigned to this DNS of the web site. That is why, it is possible to bypass the block by moving the site to another address under a different name. This works until Turk Telekom and ICTA discover the new domain and block the access once again. The blocked site appears in Google searches but when clicked on it a message appears saying that the site is out of access by the court order. Sendika.org responded to the access block by registering a sequence of names, e.g. Sendika62.org as of December 2017, each of which has been blocked in succession.

When we look at the 140journos’s case we see a media project that was originally founded in order to create news content by interacting with the people on the ground who sends reports and raw information. The aim was to resist the increasing political polarization

in Turkey by covering news not only coming from an educated elite but from different and opposing communities such as hardline Islamists and the LGBTI communities.

The medium had to adapt itself progressively to the political conjuncture by changing its editorial line altogether and becoming more professional and less amateur and citizens' media. A less citizen and more professional editorial line means that the agency changed both its *process* and *content*.

In terms of content, the media no longer aims to engage civil society by interacting with the people on the ground due to decreasing number of citizen journalist and political repression. In 2016 the number of citizen journalists decreased from 750 to 500 and the citizen journalists, especially those in the Kurdish region were not able to cover the events due to the military curfew which was imposed by the Turkish authorities during the armed conflict between the Turkish and Kurdish armed forces. After the military coup attempt on July 15, 2016 and the declaration of the state of emergency that followed it, 140journos' sources chose to remain underground. Although 140journos's editors do not mention directly recently intensified repressive politics of the government, it is hard to imagine that they transformed 140journos only because of the decreasing number of citizen reporting. They no longer cover protests and even when they do dossiers or mini videos on current political issues, they do it in an artistically edited but neutral format without any political comment. For example, in the video called "Conservative Democrat"<sup>2</sup>, while briefly presenting the public discourses which announce the introduction of conservative practices to the Turkish society, their impacts on Turkish civil society are not mentioned or discussed in the video. In short, this artistic turn of the 140journos can also be defined as a part of an editorial line strategy put together in order to avoid possible government censorship while enlarging its audience and optimizing its product quality.

In terms of process, the agency recruited a number of professionals such as photojournalist, video editors and art directors and it no longer practices skill sharing or participatory media practices directly with citizens on the ground. This means that the editors do not interact with citizens in order to collect, verify and publish news sent by citizens. If they do events such as "backstage"<sup>3</sup> where they present the production process of their

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2 "Conservative Democrat", [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=199&v=sreUi-ahVdw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=199&v=sreUi-ahVdw), 140journos, 25 august, 2017.

3 "How to prepare a 140journos documentary? " <https://www.facebook.com/140journos/photos/a.495839613778499/3095246017171166/?type=3&theater>, 140journos, 30 December, 2019

documentaries, these do not include direct participation of the citizens to the content production.

On January 19, 2017, 140journos became an *audiovisual content producer* and stopped functioning as citizen media who aimed at community building and social change. This political and editorial shift has opened up a range of interrogations, contradictions and ethical dilemmas in regard to my relation, as a researcher, with the research subject. In order to comprehend how and in which stages of my research I was confronted with ethical dilemmas I will conduct an auto-analysis of the research process. First I will reflect on the choice of my research subject. What were the impacts of the socio-political context on this choice? What were my motivations to study an activist media? This reflection will be followed by a critical discussion of the first phase of my work on 140journos (from October 2015 to January 2016). Were there any normative orientations in this work? If so how did I as a researcher established self-distance (or not) from my subject of study? This critical discussion of my research process will serve as a tool to understand and analyze the contradictions and tensions that emerged when it was no longer possible for me to share and respect the values of the subject of study. Lastly, I will show the particular ethical difficulties when working on a political subject of study whose ideological perspectives are in conformity with the researcher's own political opinions.

### **140journos, founders and origin:**

The two co-founders (C. and E.) of 140journos decided to create an alternative news agency when the news about the Roboski Massacre were accessible only on Twitter and not on the mainstream media. The massacre took place on December 28, 2011 when 36 Turkish citizens were killed by the Turkish armed forces who mistook some smugglers for PKK fighters and carried out an airstrike. Fascinated by the abundance of information on the Roboski Massacre on Twitter in contrast to the complete lack of coverage in the mainstream media, one of the co-founders thought about recording events with a mobile phone in order to inform citizens by diffusing raw information on Twitter without any commentaries.

After quitting college in his senior year, C. started working as a cultural and artistic projects coordinator for the municipality of Şişli in Istanbul. When he was organizing a flash mob for a municipality project on social awareness for blindness, he contacted E., at the time a university student, and 14 of his classmates in order to do the project with them. They had founded in 2010, during their senior year at the University of Bahçeşehir, the Institute of

Creative Minds (Yaratıcı Fikirler Enstitüsü<sup>4</sup>), a university project that organized events such as flash mobs<sup>5</sup>, and cultural events. Having previously organized a flash mob, the Institute participated in the municipality project and later C. quit his job to work with the Institute of Creative Minds. Together they transformed the university project that became a more institutionalized organization that encompassed innovative projects such as 140journos as well as marketing and advertising projects such as the advertisement agency created in order to fund 140journos.

The two co-founders do not have a political activism background; they define themselves as concerned citizens who are well informed about the history of modern Turkey.

### **Situating the choice of subject of study: normative orientations and preconceptions of the researcher**

The Gezi movement was initially triggered by a core group of protesters from the Chamber of architects and environmentalists who organized concerts, sit-ins, and partly occupied the park as of May 27, 2013. The park was one of the few remaining green spaces in central Istanbul and a project was underway to build a shopping mall on the land occupied by the park. After the first couple of days of clashes between the police and the protestors, the police withdrew and left the park and the neighboring Taksim Square, which had been occupied by protestors for more than two weeks. The social and political outburst generated by the occupation spread to almost all the cities in Turkey with at least 3.6 million active protesters countrywide.<sup>6</sup>

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) was a defining feature of the repertoire of contention during the 2011 social movements from Occupy Wall Street to the Arab Spring (Mattoni, 2013: 39-57). Coupled with face-to-face communication, such digital tools and platforms like Twitter and Facebook helped to *set the scene* and to *co-orchestrate* actions by *soft leaders* who emerged as individuals capable of directing increasing frustration and construct an emotional space in which collective action can unfold (Gerbaudo, 2012: 40). As *public square movements* such protests opened up new spaces within the public sphere in which individuals could engage in new forms of citizenship and democracy through humor, art and performances in a public square (Göle, 2014). ICTs were used in order to

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<sup>4</sup> “Yaratıcı Fikirler Enstitüsü” <https://enstitu.com.tr/>

<sup>5</sup> A flash mob is a group of people who assemble suddenly in a public place, perform an unusual and seemingly pointless act for a brief time, and then quickly disperse, often for the purposes of entertainment, satire, and artistic expression.

<sup>6</sup> “Emniyete göre, Gezi Parkı şüphelilerinin yüzde 78’i Alevi!”, T24, 25 November 2013. URL: <http://t24.com.tr/haber/gezide-kac-eylem-gerceklesti-kac-kisi-goz-altina-alindi,244706>

produce and broadcast a creative narrative, to make the protesters and their demands visible and in many cases to bypass censorship. Use of communication and information technologies was also a crucial part of the Gezi demonstrations. Although 140journos was founded in late 2011, it was only after the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013 that it became popular and reached a nation-wide audience mainly due to the mobilization of mass number of citizens who became journalists covering Gezi protests primarily on Twitter. Whereas international news channels such as the BBC or CNN were covering the protests, CNN Türk, a franchise of CNN, chose to broadcast a documentary on penguins during the peak of the events on May 31, 2013. As the protests progressed, more or less everyone became aware of mainstream media's submission to government pressure. Broadcasts were either politically biased or some channels proactively resorted to auto-censorship in order to avoid possible government reprisal (Yüksek, 2015). The interaction with the mainstream media reinforced moral and emotional indignation and consolidated the *injustice* (the identification of harm produced by human actors) and *identity* (the identification of a specific adversary) components of the movement (Gamson, 1991)<sup>7</sup>. Upset by the lack of media attention and eager to make themselves and the movement nationally and internationally visible, many protesters became themselves news producers. This tendency to become a news producer manifested itself with massive use of social media platforms (mainly Twitter) and led to the emergence of many activist news channels (blogs, tumblr's, Youtube channels etc.) dedicated to report and facilitate the communication and coordination between activists as well as to document and archive the protests. Among these channels; "Everywhere taksim"<sup>8</sup> a web site created in order to record and denounce human rights violations during Gezi movements; the blog "Delilim var" ("I have proof") created to expose the proofs (photos) of crimes committed by police forces against protesters; "Parklar bizim"<sup>9</sup> ("the parks are ours"), a blog where one can find debriefings of public assemblies organized almost in every neighborhood of Istanbul.

The importance of social media during the protests is also evident in statistics. The number of active Twitter users in Turkey went from 1.8 million on May 20 to ten million less than one month. On May 29, 2013 more than seven million tweets were tweeted, most of them carrying a hashtag<sup>10</sup> related to Gezi. On the following day, after disproportionate police

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<sup>7</sup> Collective actions frames have three major components, injustice, identity and *agency*. The latter defines the belief in the possibility of changing conditions through collective actions.

<sup>8</sup> <http://everywheretaksim.net/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://parklarbizim.blogspot.com/>

<sup>10</sup> Hashtag is a type of tag used on social networks such as Twitter and other micro blogging services, allowing users to apply dynamic, user-generated tagging that makes it possible for others to easily find messages with a



intervention against the protesters, the number of tweets skyrocketed. Over 18 million tweets were tweeted the next day (Yüksek, 2015: 7).

The choice of 140journos as a subject of study is directly linked to the Gezi movement. After getting my Bachelor's degree in France, I participated as a protester to the Gezi park occupation in Istanbul. This was my first participation in a political movement. The main reason why I had never participated to protests until Gezi was the traumatic left-wing political heritage of my family. As most of the post 1980 military coup d'état generation, certain members of my family were extreme left-wing activists who suffered greatly from violent state repression 1980s (Cormier, 2017)<sup>11</sup>. Gezi movement radically shifted my perception and understanding of political protest. Because of its characteristics explained above, it opened up a new field of possibility where it was possible to be political without identifying myself or the modes of action of the protesters with radical left's tradition, marked by the heavy collective trauma. The Gezi Park was also particularly significant to me as I spent more than four years of my life walking in the streets of Beyoğlu (the neighborhood where the park is situated) where my high school was located. That is why I felt directly concerned with the urban development plans for the park and decided to protect it by joining the movement. The year that followed Gezi movement, I decided to apply for a postgraduate degree and wrote a dissertation on the political use of new information and communication technologies. In my second year of postgraduate studies (2015) I then decided to conduct an empirical study on the activist media, 140journos that I had first begun to follow during Gezi Park's protests in 2013 on twitter.

This biographical description of how I came to be interested with 140journos can be seen at first as anecdotic. But it had a decisive impact on the construction of my theoretical framework and how I perceived and analyzed the actions of 140journos during my fieldwork. In 2015, when I started to put together the theoretical framework of my empirical research on 140journos (the questions of interviews, my hypothesis, research questions) I had an implicit and unconscious objective that I did not acknowledge at the time. This objective was to ensure a form of legitimation of the media outlet's mode of organization and actions by studying and eventually writing an article about it.

What were my illusions, normative orientations and preconceptions about 140journos and how did they reflect on my research? I will respond to these questions by explaining the

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specific theme or content.

<sup>11</sup> Headed by Chief of the General Staff Kenan Evren, this coup d'état was carried out under the pretext of stopping the violent conflict between, far right and far left activist.

construction of my study's theoretical framework. Then I will analyze the research methods that I applied during my fieldwork. Finally, I will critically review my research results.

My first research question was as follows: "how and by which process 140journos negotiates its identity and its activist media actions in the Turkish media space in order to form an *oppositional public space*?" Developed by critical theory scholar Oskar Negt, the notion of oppositional public space is a theoretical reply to Jürgen Habermas's concept of bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1988). Negt's objective was to enrich the notion of public sphere by introducing the plebeian public sphere (Negt, 2007). Whereas Habermas pays attention to the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere and argues that reaching *consensus* constitutes its basis, Negt reintroduces *conflict* as the core motor of the plebeian, or oppositional public space. As for Habermas, the media also plays a key role in the formation of the oppositional public space. The media represents a "genre intended to increase the possibility of public expression of interests and needs of human beings who find few channels [...] to make their voices, opinions and conceptions of the world heard" (Negt, 2007: 162). When the apparatuses of state domination, political parties, or corporations appropriate this media space, the bourgeois public space strengthens. This in turn makes it more difficult, if not impossible, to hear the voices, and perceive the lived experiences of people who are not in the bourgeois public space. Media space becomes a *second reality* that functions for the preservation of the status quo and therefore merely duplicates and repeats established norms. A functional and political media space would be based on "[...] lived situations and a political creativity that opens up perspectives, [in order to] enrich the field of possibility for political actions" (Negt, 2007: 165).

Building on this notion, I argued in my paper that 140journos, as an activist media that found an audience and a reason to exist with a social movement (Gezi movement), was contributing to the ongoing formation of the oppositional public space. At the time, according to my observations, one of the indications of this contribution was how 140journos was aiming at building a media space that expressed the perceptions and opinions of not only one part of the population but all of Turkey. At this point of theoretical construction, I did not include in my research how I came to be interested with 140journos and the reasons behind my motivation.

When I was at 140journos for conducting my fieldwork, I had very little distance with my subject of study because of my personal history on Gezi movement, I had tendency to idealize my subject of study. After Gezi movement, mainstream media was criticized and citizens were investing web sites, blogs and social networks, such as twitter, for political use

as mentioned earlier in this chapter. In this context of high grassroots political mobilization, I associated 140journos with the “spirit” of Gezi movement; progressive, democratic, innovative, horizontally structured, anti-governmental and capable of triggering social change. The impact of this idealization on my work could have been minimized by integrating a self-reflection on my personal and political motivations on the subject of study. I did have chosen however to adopt an ethnographic research method for this field precisely to overcome such difficulties and take a certain distance with my subject. But the access to the field appeared to be particularly limited making difficult the application of ethnographic research method for this study.

### **Obstacles of the fieldwork and ethical dilemmas**

After completing my empirical research in 2016, as I was still in contact with my interviewees, I learned that all the employees of the ad agency resigned after another employee who had resigned was unable to get his last salary due to a late submission. The ad team defended their co-worker claiming that refusing to pay the salary is unprofessional. Their critique was met by a rather negative response. Being subject to work overload and frequent mobbing by one of the founders, the team had decided to resign after this incident which proved to be the final straw. According to my interviewees this was not the first time that employees, due to similar reasons, resigned from 140journos’ news or the advertisement teams. At this time, 140journos had three paid editors and a small ad agency that the co-founders founded from scratch. Sometime after starting up the agency, they brought in four employees, all of them having already worked in advertising. 140journos and the ad agency have an organic link: the ad agency funds 140journos and in return it benefits from the success of the news agency as they showcase their media content to potential clients of the ad agency. In fact, the ad agency and the 140journos were initially developed as part of the larger Institute of Creative Minds, which included other marketing projects.

I was deeply shocked and disappointed with this news because during my fieldwork I had not observed any tensions between the ad agency, co-founders and editors of 140journos. The reasons behind this lack of observation were limited access to the field and the fact that I did not adopt and/or review my research methods during the fieldwork when encountered with obstacles.

My first contact with 140journos was made through an employee of its advertisement agency. This employee was my high school friend and it was she who introduced me to the

co-founders as well as to the editors of 140journos. Because I was friend with someone who worked at 140journos I was able to stay at the agency during the day. Nevertheless I felt that my presence was “tolerated” and I was not allowed to enter and exist the room of editors as I wish unlike the room of the ad team. The Ad team was physically separated from 140journos’ editorial team. They were operating in another room and each time 140journos team had a meeting they were closing the doors, the ad team was not allowed to enter either. That is why my interaction with the employees of the ad agency was more frequent and informal compared to the editors with whom the interaction was less frequent and much more formalized. It was impossible to adopt a “participant observer” research method in this internal work configuration. Proposing my participation to the work would be very unnatural since I was not even allowed to have a visibility on their process of production such as reunions, discussions etc. I learned from the co-founders that I was not the first researcher who came to the 140journos for doing interviews. This was particularly evident during the interviews with editors and co-founders: although the interviews lasted more than one hour, their responses were highly constructed, formal and included theoretical developments on 140journos. They told me how this project was born, developed and what were the novelties of it compared to other alternative medias in Turkey. During the interviews, none of my interlocutors mentioned what they thought, personally, of alternative media and of 140journos and did not mention any critics or difficulties about the agency. In short, the material collected from the interviews was superficial. The latter was linked partially to the lack of confidence of my research interlocutors in me: I was a Turkish researcher living abroad and producing academic material in French, meaning that my work would not be accessible to them immediately. Writing a critical article on 140journos could damage the image of this news agency that was just taking off by gaining more and more popularity in a context where the competition between “alternative” news agencies was very high due to the arrival of new actors in media space after 2013.

My fieldwork also included informal discussions with my friend on her work experience at the ad agency. Except small complaints about workload, she did not address any other critic about the work environment at 140journos. After four days on the field, I understand that it was not possible to have more access to the field and integrate the editorial team by maintaining the position of researcher. As the other researchers who did interviews with them, I was expected to exit the premises of 140journos after finishing my interviews. Since I was at 140journos during the whole day, after the interviews, my presence was

becoming more and more troubling and less tolerated. That is why I ended my field research after completing my interviews and four days of observation.

Because I was sharing ideological inspirations and editorial politics of 140journos, I did not include to my analyze, at this phase of my research, my field notes about spatial organization of the work environment and its implications on production process of both advertisement and editorial team. Furthermore, I did not examine the limited access to the field and the ways in which the editorial team as well as the co-founders “dealt” with my presence, as a researcher, during four days of observation. Instead, I focused on the analyze of their content and how this could, or not, engender a substantial change in media space of Turkey.

By the time when 140journos was undergoing its editorial transformation, I contacted one of its editors and did a brief Skype interview, as it was impossible for me at the time to go to Turkey for another ethnographic field research. I was planning to do another field research during the summer holidays in order to understand the changes in 140journos and deepen my first empirical study. Once again the editor was highly formal in its responses during the Skype interview, which made me understand that it was necessary to adopt ethnographic method. After some time, another friend of mine, Ebru, became interested with 140journos and applied to editor position. During our informal conversations she talked about how 140journos was organizing “a data collection” event. The event was open to everyone and consisted of collecting information on, for example, a specific period of political history of Turkey. The participants would learn how to collect data but would not be paid for their work that they were producing for 140journos, the work that would be used in the videos, documentaries etc. of 140journos. Present during this conversation, another person made a comment stating that the event of 140journos was in fact work exploitation, thus highly unethical. According to him 140journos was obtaining a substantial data to be used in its contents and was doing it for free under the pretext of “free” formation on data collection. Ebru opened this subject to the one of the co-founders during the event saying that maybe they should think about a form of payment for this “free” data collection provided by the participants. Her proposal was not only met by a negative response but the co-founder told also to Ebru that I was, from now on, banned from 140journos because, according to him, I was accusing them by work exploitation.

Because of this ban, my research methods were now limited only by interviews with Ebru who accepted to talk about her work experience at 140journos emphasizing the heavy workload and the pressure to finish assignments by working overtime till very late as well as

on weekends without any extra compensation. However Ebru was highly anxious about the publication of an article including her statements. She refused to give me the contact information of interns who were, according to her, badly treated. Internships were unpaid and neither their meals nor their transport were compensated. I also did a short interview with two former ad agency employees. As Ebru they said to me to do not include their comments on 140journos in my work because they were afraid of possible repercussions of their statements on their career.

These numerous obstacles that I have encountered during this field demonstrate particular difficulties of conducting an empirical study on a news agency that is born and flourished in a specific socio-political context of Turkey. First of all the circle of “alternative medias” (here as opposed to established mainstream media companies) and of advertisement agency in Istanbul is relatively small. More and less everyone knows each other especially because of the circulation of the employees. It is highly common that they resign, change company and then return to the same company in order to negotiate for higher salary or another position. One of the former employees of the 140journos’ ad agency returned for example to the international ad agency where she was working before 140journos. That is no doubt one of the reasons why my research interlocutors were very formal and reserved during the interviews, in order to prevent the possible “rumors” that could affect their future integration in another news or advertisement agency.

Secondly, the rapidly changing nature of the subject of study (a news agency operating on social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) makes the research field hard to grasp and calls for a review of research methods rather frequently, during the field research for example. The transformation from an idealistic grassroots news agency, inspired from a national social movement, to an institutionalized audiovisual content producer was relatively rapid. I finished the first phase of my research in January 2016 and exactly one year later 140journos was undergoing a total transformation in terms of both content and production process.

Taking into account the obstacles encountered during the first phase of field research, I could have waited before contacting the editor for a Skype interview and try once again to do an ethnographic research. But this time instead of contacting 140journos directly (by writing to them or by going to tis workplace), I could have participated to their events that are open to everyone and organized outside of 140journos. Then, depending on the evolution of my relationship with them, I could have proposed to contribute to their work while explaining in every step why and how I want to conduct a study on 140journos.

The political context of Turkey adds another layer of difficulty to the field. After the Gezi Park movement in 2013, the media space underwent a reconfiguration by an explosion of alternative medias, grassroots media platforms and citizen journalism practices. This reconfiguration created new alliances, rivalries and political as well as economical opportunities such as international funding etc. In short, the relations of power of the media space underwent a substantial change by the arrival, or re-activation, of new actors such as 140journos. In this context, while I was conducting my field research, editors, ad agency employees as well as its public saw 140journos as a small, amateur, idealist and activist news agency that is associated with the values and claims of Gezi movement. This vision was also valid for me as a young politically engaged researcher who saw at 140journos the promise of social change, a form of continuation of Gezi movement, through media practices. This idealized vision, the rapid transformation of 140journos coupled with limited access to the field made it difficult to go beyond the surface of social phenomenon and, thus, resulted on a lack of observation on the tensions between the co-founders and employees at play at the 140journos during the first phase of my research.

This rapid shift in values and organizational commitments of 140journos confronted me with a contradiction. On the one hand, there was this grassroots news agency born from Gezi movement that produces high quality and original content. But on the other hand the same news agency was practicing non-ethical work practices such as heavy work load, unpaid internship etc. that one can find in almost any mainstream media and advertisement agencies. The fact that my interviewees were preoccupied by the possible impacts on their careers of their critics about 140journos if they were publicly exposed, introduced a second ethical dilemma.

Filled with these dilemmas when I began writing the first draft of this chapter, I could not bring myself to have a reflection on my research process and the difficulties that I encountered during my field. Writing a critical article on 140journos meant also that I was not only jeopardizing the activist media project by exposing its non-ethical practices but also the career of my interviewees. As if I was delegitimizing the actions and the existence of 140journos by the accusation of not having adopted a *radically democratic* internal work structure and methods of production that do not reproduce the inequalities and exploitations that we find in most of the workplaces. However, the argument according to which activist values had to guide and shape *both* the end product and the mode of internal organization and methods of production was never claimed by founders nor by editors of 140journos. Instead of taking this argument as a research thesis to be confirmed or refuted during my fieldwork, this

was a *value judgment* that I had on an unconscious level and on which I constructed my theoretical framework and guided my fieldwork in order to study 140journos.

## **Conclusion**

My personal history and the socio-political context in which I was carrying out this study were two key indications making this self-reflective research method almost obligatory. The reason why the desire to write critically about 140journos's work practices and organization introduced an ethical dilemma is partly linked with this idealization of the subject of study. Seeing and analyzing 140journos from a political perspective, as a group of activists who try to do socio-political change in the authoritarian political atmosphere of Turkey does not undermine scientific "objectivity", nor it contributes to idealization of the subject of study. However, to express or defend ideological or political perspectives without identifying, indicating and clarifying them in the research can cause partial and biased academic work, confusing the reader as well as the researcher. This does not mean however a complete absence of researcher's value judgments in her/his work. It means clarifying them in order to avoid producing a work that is *implicitly* guided by researcher's values (Weber, 1992). One way to overcome this dilemma is to identify and clarify in the scientific work the judgment of facts and value judgments. In other words, the researcher can avoid the confusion between scientific discussion and axiological reasoning by stating directly the value judgments and distinguishing them from the judgment of facts. For example, I did not examine, at the first phase of my research, the difficulties that I had encountered in my field due to the limited access. I ignored the "closed doors", "problematic presence of the researcher at 140journos" and "highly constructed formal responses". Furthermore, as I mention earlier in this chapter, I could have tried to do a second field research by adopting a more subtle and indirect approach such as participating to the open to everyone outdoor events of 140journos, building a relationship with the co-founders and new editors slowly through these events, avoiding of making any negative comments to the persons who are in relation with the co-founders (as the statement of "work exploitation" that got me banned from the field) and by explaining, during this process, my research goals and approach as transparently as possible to my research interlocutors. Instead, by making a value judgment, I took an ideological position by ignoring the facts that were in contradiction with idealized internal functioning of 140journos (first phase of the research, closed doors, unethical work practices in the ad agency). At the second phase of the research, this ideological position



manifested itself by being associated with the comment of “140journos practices work exploitation” and choosing to react to the “field ban” by remaining in contact with Ebru (the editor) and trying to reach former interns. I could have very well contacted the co-founders and, again, attempted to participate to their events that are open to everyone.

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