

FROM EARTHQUAKES TO ELECTIONS: MEDIA COVERAGE OF TURKEY IN 2023



Introduction

In a gathering organized by Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul, a group of Istanbul-based journalists engaged in a thought-provoking conversation that peeled back the layers of international media coverage surrounding Turkey's eventful year of 2023. With their boots on the ground during both the [earthquakes](#) and the crucial [elections](#), these distinguished journalists—Ayla Jean Yackley, Elif İnce, and Fariba Nawa—embarked on an introspective journey, sharing their experiences and shedding light on the collaborative nature of news production, the challenges faced by contributors to international media, the pursuit of untold stories off the beaten track, and the transformative shifts that have shaped journalism throughout their careers.

Moderating this conversation was Noah Amir Arjomand, the author of [Fixing Stories: Local](#)

[Newsmaking and International Media in Turkey and Syria](#), exploring the unsung heroes—the fixers, producers, and interpreters—who diligently work behind the scenes to contribute to international media within Turkey and Syria. Together, these speakers unraveled the intricate tapestry of journalism in the region and the evolving landscape that influences the narratives we consume.

Addressing Biases and Blind Spots: International Media Coverage of Turkey

Kareem Shaheen's [critiques](#) of international news media's coverage of Turkey's political landscape played an important role in kickstarting the conversation. Taking this critique as a departure point, Noah highlighted two main issues: the tendency of mainstream media to focus on individuals or groups that share their own ideological biases, leading to a narrow perspective of Turkish society, and the

obsession with President Erdogan in some European and North American publications, stemming from a sense of disappointment and betrayal. “I’ve encountered both the biases and high expectations that Shaheen mentions in international news reporting,” underlined Arjomand. “Editors often have preconceived notions, but it’s our responsibility as reporters to provide nuanced, factual accounts, challenging those biases when necessary.”

It is important to recognize that media biases and blind spots can exist in reporting, particularly in complex political contexts. Journalists and editors may unintentionally bring their preconceived notions and preferences into their reporting. However, it is crucial to distinguish between opinion pieces and factual reporting, as reporters on the ground strive to provide objective and accurate coverage.



Responding to these critiques, the discussion emphasized the need for journalists to reflect on their own biases and seek multiple viewpoints. Fariba and Noah underscored the importance of open discussions, collaboration with local journalists, and a commitment to accurate and fair reporting to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of Turkey’s political landscape.

In navigating biases and blind spots within

international news coverage, journalists face challenges in pushing back against editorial decisions. Building relationships based on trust, providing evidence-based arguments, and presenting diverse perspectives can help address biases or gaps in coverage. By remaining vigilant, journalists can contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive portrayal of Turkey’s political landscape and other complex contexts.



Ayla Jean Yackley, a journalist in Turkey, reflected on biases and perceptions that can influence media coverage in Turkey. She acknowledged the difficulties faced by journalists due to bias and highlighted that even many Turks had reasons to believe that the opposition had a strong chance in the elections. Ayla stressed the importance of journalists pushing back on editors and explaining the nuances and complexities of the political landscape to counter biases.

“As a journalist, it’s our duty to push back on editors and explain the nuances, especially in a complex political landscape like Turkey,” said Yackley. “While there were biases and expectations, it’s essential to consider the various factors that led to those perceptions.”

Unearthing Corruption and Tragedy: Elif İnce's Investigation

As the conversation unfolded, Elif İnce reminisced about her contribution to a powerful

[New York Times article](#) that laid bare the tragic aftermath of the earthquake through the lens of the Renaissance Residence in Hatay, Turkey. She vividly described the arduous process of investigating the collapse, with a dedicated team of 14 individuals working relentlessly for three months. Divided into three groups, they meticulously focused on forensics, corruption and regulatory failures, and collected personal stories from the families and survivors affected by the disaster.



“I was part of a team who worked tirelessly for months, diving deep into the investigation,” said Elif. “We painstakingly uncovered layers of corruption, negligence, and heartbreaking human stories, all connected to the tragic collapse of the building.” Elif’s team went to great lengths to piece together the puzzle, acquiring the building and floor plans to construct a detailed model of the structure. Collaborating with structural engineers and architects, they unraveled the cause behind the collapse. In their quest for truth, they unearthed instances of corruption and regulatory failures, exposing building code violations, non-compliance with zoning plans, and shocking cases of bribery. Drawing on her extensive experience and network, Elif delved into the story, navigating Freedom of Information requests and establishing valuable connections within the Ministry of Environment. However, they faced significant obstacles with incomplete and disorganized inspection documents that crucially lacked essential information.

The team’s investigation uncovered stories of bribery involving neighboring landlords and contractors who claimed to have been coerced into paying bribes during the construction process. Despite the significance of this revelation, the issue received little attention. Elif highlighted the instrumental role of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, in identifying potential witnesses and leads, further emphasizing the evolving landscape of journalism.

During her conversation with Noah, Elif also expressed her reservations about the term “fixer” and delved into her experiences as a local journalist, grappling with challenges, frustrations, and a perceived sense of unfair treatment. Elif’s thought-provoking questions shed light on the contentious aspects surrounding the term. She highlighted how this label can inadvertently reinforce power imbalances and oversimplify the diverse roles played by local assistants in the media industry.

[Navigating Identity and Impact: Ayla Jean Yackley's Insights as a Foreign Journalist in Turkey](#)

Ayla Jean Yackley shared her experiences, noting that she preferred mentioning [her work](#) for a foreign publication without explicitly labeling herself as a foreign journalist. For her, this approach sometimes breaks initial barriers and allows her to provide a different perspective. However, it’s a delicate balance, as some assume she’s part of the local press. Ayla navigates this tightrope as a writer critical of various perspectives.

She noted a shift in people’s willingness to speak out, driven by fear or complacency, with some being arrested for criticizing the government. People occasionally question her intentions as a foreign journalist, but being

perceived as impartial has its benefits. Despite the challenges, Ayla remains committed to sharing important stories and perspectives globally.



Identity and Challenges: Fariba Nawa's Perspective as an Afghan American Journalist in Turkey

The conversation then took an interesting turn, delving into the identities of journalists and their perception, as well as the notion of performing one's identity. Noah highlighted Fariba Nawa's article titled “Tears, a tissue, and iPhone photos – an Afghan softens a Turkish heart,” which explored Nawa's reporting style and their exploration of the American identity in Turkey. Noah acknowledged Nawa's previous work reporting on the Afghan and Iranian communities, sharing a profound sense of identity and language with them.

The article provided a window into Fariba Nawa's personal journey as an Afghan American journalist in Turkey, particularly in the wake of the earthquake. It poignantly captured the narrator's encounter with xenophobia towards Afghans and reflected upon the unique challenges faced by a journalist with a specific cultural and ethnic background. Noah eagerly sought to delve deeper into the article and gain Fariba's perspective on being an Afghan American journalist in Turkey, unraveling the intricate dynamics and experiences that shape this unique identity.

“I adapt my identity as needed to connect with people and tell their stories,” said Fawa. “Whether it's being Afghan, a foreigner in Turkey, or American, I use it to build connections and gain access, even though it comes with its challenges.” Fariba Nawa continued by shedding light on the shifting perception of Afghan refugees in Turkey. She emphasized how public opinion changed in 2019 when other migration movements gained more visibility, leading to a decrease in sympathy and support for Afghan refugees. Fariba highlighted the safety concerns she faced, advising her children not to disclose their Afghan origins, particularly to taxi drivers. She further discussed racism as a significant issue in Turkey, with her older daughter and father experiencing discrimination due to their darker skin color.

As a seasoned journalist, Fariba acknowledged developing a thick skin and the ability to remain resilient in the face of offensive remarks. However, she revealed that she has moved away from writing about Afghanistan due to the emotional toll and personal nature of the topic. Despite this shift, Fariba wrote a difficult and personal [piece](#) about the earthquake and its impact on her friend's family, highlighting the profound impact of reporting from conflict regions.

The Journey Still Continuing to Explore the Complexities of Journalism in Turkey

Noah Arjomand raised an intriguing point about a potential standardized system where international colleagues report on sensitive articles to mitigate risks faced by local journalists. Drawing parallels with Colombia, where working for a local publication could expose journalists to threats, he proposed that international journalists could play a role in reporting such stories while minimizing risks

for local reporters. It's worth noting that without further context or specific information, providing a precise response regarding the drives or coverage of the legal team of Times is challenging.



Elif İnce contributed to the conversation by discussing challenges and collaborations within the journalism landscape in Turkey. “In Istanbul, there's a strong sense of collaboration among journalists,” emphasized İnce. “We help each other out, share information and skills, and prioritize getting the story right over competition. It's a supportive community that makes a difference, especially during significant events like the earthquake.” She expressed frustration with the lack of originality in reporting during significant events, where many journalists cover the same stories. However, she appreciated a story by Christina Jovanovski that took a different angle, highlighting the importance of originality. Elif emphasized the prevalence of collaboration among journalists in Istanbul, citing the significance of information sharing and skills exchange, particularly among freelancers. She also mentioned positive experiences with temporary press accreditation during an earthquake, underlining the importance of small acts and support from colleagues in navigating journalism challenges.

In the discussion of positionality and hierarchies within journalism, Noah highlighted the paradox where journalists

closer to the story are seen as less objective, while those with less in-depth knowledge are considered more trustworthy, referring to it as the "pictures paradox." “In the context of journalism, there's a paradox in being close to the story,” explained Noah. “On one hand, it makes you valuable with context and expertise, but on the other hand, it can lead to bias accusations. It's a challenge many of us face in the industry.” Finally, Noah invited interested individuals to attend his upcoming book talk where he will delve further into the subject.



The gathering organized by Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul brought together a group of seasoned journalists who shared their invaluable insights and experiences in navigating the complexities of journalism in Turkey. From the diligent investigative work to unravel the truth behind the tragic earthquake to the challenges of being perceived as an outsider and the shifting dynamics of media coverage, the dialogue shed light on the collaborative nature of news production, the evolving landscape of journalism, and the imperative of capturing diverse perspectives.

Speakers

[Elif İnce](#)

[Fariba Nawa](#)

[Ayla Jean Yackley](#)

[Noah A. Arjomand](#)

Columbia Global Centers promote and facilitate the collaborative and impactful engagement of the University’s faculty, students, and alumni with the world, to enhance understanding, address global challenges, and advance knowledge and its exchange.

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Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul was established in 2011 and is directed by Ipek Cem Taha, a Turkish journalist and businesswoman, and a graduate of Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs and Graduate School of Business. A hub for students and scholars from Columbia and universities in the region, the Istanbul Center has embarked on a wide range of programs since its inception, including key issues of our times: from refugee health to gender equality; entrepreneurship to arts and culture; politics of memory to archaeology, civil society to sustainability.

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