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Persvrijheidslezing 2017

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Hilversum - 3 May 2017
World Press Freedom Day 2017

Today we are here to talk about Press Freedom, which obviously a pressing matter for several countries in the world, Turkey, my country included. However, today on a more global level people of the press are equally interested in another matter, which we chose to call Post-truth. All around the world in various contexts and levels, journalists, writers, artists, intellectuals, and politicians are discussing the matter. Even in the countries where the press is considered to be the freest, journalists do not feel free when it comes to the profession being strangled or choked by the massive operation of “creating alternative truth” or fake news. Some of us in this room are old enough to remember that this actually is called lying or not telling the truth. But on several occasions, we now witness that the shame one would have felt once his lies were revealed, is not there anymore. It seems shame is passé and the current fashion is manufacturing your own truth in a very proud manner and not giving a damn whether it is the agreed truth or not. As I wrote in a Guardian article last December, having a proper dialogue with agents of Post-truth is like trying to play chess with a pigeon. Even if you win within the rules, the pigeon will clutter up the pieces, and finally, it will shit on the chessboard, leaving you to deal with the mess.

And as a Turkish writer, I can say that my country has become the master of playing chess with pigeons. It did not happen overnight of course. It started 15 years ago, with a phenomenon that will now be familiar to you. It started when intellectuals and journalists reacted to a nascent populism with the self-critical question: “Are we out of touch?” To counter that possibility, they loosened the parameters of public debate to include those

who were said to be representatives of “real people”. We thought that our own tool, the ability to question and establish the truth, would be sufficient to keep the public debate ground safe. Well, it wasn’t. Soon we were paralyzed by the lies of populism, which always sounded more attractive than our boring facts.

We found, as Europe is now finding, that the new truth-building process does not require facts or the underpinning of agreed values. We were confronted – as you are being confronted – by a toxic vocabulary: “elite”, “experts”, “real people” and “alienated intellectuals”. The elite, with experts as mouthpieces of that oppressive elite, were portrayed as people detached from society, willing to suppress the needs, choices, and beliefs of “real people”.

We recently lived the most outrageous example of playing chess with the pigeons due to the referendum for the Presidential regime. Although there was a massive fraud in voting and vote counting process, it did not stop the government announcing its victory despite the fact that the voting process was not yet finished. All of a sudden not only the state-controlled national media but also the international media jumped to the conclusion that the referendum ended with a “tight win for Erdogan” which actually was the official narrative pumped by Erdogan himself.

It was interesting to follow how the fake truth was produced and embraced real time during the night of the referendum. Although some journalists and some media outlets

were concerned about how to fight back against the fake news in the post-truth age, they themselves were falling for it real time. It is, of course, wonderful organizing all these journalism panels and summits about what to do in the post-truth age. However, the journalists must also be alert enough to protect the truth at the crucial moments like the Turkish referendum. Because protecting the truth is also not surrendering to the manufactured spectacle of reality when it is most tempting and to be able to recognize the voiceless in the chaos created by political power and being a voice for them.

The reason I am first and foremost talking about international media is that at this very moment where Turkish democracy is facing its most dangerous challenge, international journalists are the ones we depend on simply for the reason that Turkish media is completely silenced.

As everybody on the planet learned by now, Turkish media is under severe attack by the political power. The number of imprisoned journalists is more than the ones in China. They are imprisoned in such a fast manner that we have to keep track on daily basis. It is not only Turkish journalists who are suffering from the attack on the media. Recently an Italian journalist Gabrielle Del Grande is released from the prison and he still does not know why he was taken into prison in the first place. German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel is still kept in prison in spite of a massive international campaign for his release. These are two relatively lucky examples simply because you see their names on international media

outlets whereas there are more than hundred names you don't and cannot know. These journalists mostly spend several months in prison without an indictment and when they finally see the judge in court they consider themselves lucky. Among them are journalists from Cumhuriyet, several members of Kurdish and socialist media and some of them are kept in the prison with the suspicion of being a member of Fethullah Gulen movement.

We are living in the age of “being informed about”, unfortunately the age of “knowing” is over. Therefore, even in best scenario you could only know the names of these journalists who are suffering one of the most unjust justice systems on the planet. Even if you come across their faces on the international media outlets you just see some victims. After a while, let's admit the fact that, the victims become too many to know, and after a while too many to care about. There at that point, starts the normalization of the victimhood which seems to me the most dangerous turning point in such a situation. Recently I read a book on Turkey written in English for the foreign audiences. The book mentioned the most significant names that became the victims of crackdown on Turkish media. However soon I realized that there was not a single quote from them. Their faces and names were counted as victims but which words got these people in the prison, was obscure. Even though the release campaigns for the imprisoned journalists is a wonderful thing to do, I take the liberty to assume that they would not want to be represented as silent victims but rather preferred that their words would be repeated by the international media. Their words should be multiplied not their victimhood. Only then, one can serve their

courageous quest for freedom and justice that they joined not only for themselves but also for their country.

The members of international media might find this approach rather more like activism than journalism, however, I want to emphasize that we are entering a new age where the line between journalism and activism must be thinner than ever. Considering the fact that our colleagues in Turkey are in prison because of the post-truth age and its endless sources of creating fake truths; fighting for the truth in the post-truth age is also fighting for them as well. And I believe that this is the connection between freedom of press and the post-truth age which leaves us with the fact that these two issues should be dealt with together not separately.

For decades now journalism tended to define itself as objective. The word objective might be deceiving for the simple reason that it sometimes in a very dangerous way bends towards neutrality. Many of us tend to mix the objectivity with neutrality and being balanced. Although neutrality seems like a hygienic attitude for journalists where you don't have to dirty your hands and still feel comfortable with your ethics, it actually is not. Taking such an approach in such times when obvious crimes against humanity are committed can actually put you in the same front with the criminals.

Lately, I have been attending international summits and panels about the post-truth age where such matters are discussed. According to my observations, journalists and intellectuals still think that one can save their ethics by fact-checking and then more fact-checking. Unfortunately, we entered into another time where fact-checking could save the face but cannot not work at the end game. What we are going through is the total loss of political and ethical orientation. And it seems to me that it is getting global very fast. This is a political question, therefore, the answer should be political and global as well. To find that global answer Turkish case should be studied carefully. I understand that some of Europeans and Americans might find it rather humiliating to draw similarities between such a crazy country and theirs. Well, Turkey was not such a crazy country 15 years ago. One might like to think that fascism is bad guys toppling down the good guys and kicking them enough to silence everybody. Unfortunately, fascism operates in far more sophisticated and gentle manner and it takes a lot of intellectual legitimization before the ruler becomes the dictator. I could give hundreds of examples from Turkish intellectuals who applauded Erdogan before they themselves became the victims of his rule. However, I would like to share some international media quotes about Erdogan and his regime:

“Turkey is now a vibrant, competitive democracy...”

— New York Times, June 8, 2010

“A vibrant democracy...an example of reform in the region....”

— Foreign Policy, May 26, 2011

“Regionally, a vibrant, democratic Turkey no longer under the military’s thumb, can offer the Arab world a true model.... The Turkish model could also provide a model of how Islamic factions can coexist alongside liberal and secular groups, despite their clashing world views....”

— Haaretz, August 15, 2011

“A vibrant democracy...led by Islam’s equivalent to the Christian Democrats....”

—Financial Times, September 15, 2011

“A template that effectively integrates Islam, democracy and vibrant economics....”

— New York Times, February 5, 2011

While Turkish democracy was praised by respected, prominent international media outlets there were thousands of political prisoners in Turkey. And reading these outlets were maddening for a Turkish citizen living in Turkey and not enjoying such a vibrant democracy at all. Today, especially after the referendum many intellectuals and journalists choose to say that Turkish democracy is dead as if this is a natural death whereas I should point out that it was a homicide and a homicide that had international help as well.

A European or an American citizen or journalist would prefer to assume that such a mess could not happen in their land. Well, I am afraid they are not correct. We are actually witnessing today that it is happening in the US real time. All of us remember how American intelligentsia reacted to Trump's election, how massive were the demonstrations that took place in protest of him. However, you might as well remember that after American bombardment in Syria, a prominent figure in American media, Farid Zakaria made a statement saying that, "Today is the day Trump has become the president of USA." This is how the intellectual legitimization begins and once it catches on, laughing at Trump won't be as easy as it is now. I very well know this due to the fact that it started happening the exact same way in Turkey 15 years ago. And today, as far as I can tell, even in the freest media, or seemingly the freest, one cannot escape from being the slave of the manufactured political narrative of rising populism once it is legitimized enough by intellectual support.

Before ending the speech I would like to say my last words as an author of our times.

One might assume that interesting times provides the writer with infinite material. It does not. On the contrary, the writer, unless she is an ardent recorder operating on the surface of the time, not through it, suffers a paralysis. Because interesting times open numerous pavilions of evil to make the humanity seem like a fair of disgust, which generates intellectual paralysis. However, disgust cannot and must not be central to

writing. Just because of the fact that it derives from arrogance: who are you to be hopeless of humanity?

If you don't already know what I am talking about you soon will because the planet today is reversing Hannah Arendt's famous "banality of evil" to "evil of banality". The mobilized ignorant masses through their very legitimate freedom of choice will change the face of democracy and therefore stick their victory flag on the concept of truth. At the moment the Europeans and the Americans are still busy with asking astonished questions about new political developments but I am hoping that this shock phase will be shorter for you than it was for us in Turkey, so we can get to the heart of the topic collectively which is very much political and philosophical. There is no practical solution to what the world is witnessing today.

So I would say to today's journalists and writers, be prepared to be political. Something we avoided for too long obviously. Truth is a political concept and we soon will have to be political to save our version of it where earth is round and the planets rotate around the sun not the other way around.

Ece Temelkuran (Izmir, 1973)

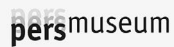
Ece Temelkuran studied Law at Ankara University. She was a columnist for Milliyet (2000–2009) and Habertürk (2009 – January 2012), and a presenter on Habertürk TV (2010–2011). She was fired from Habertürk after writing critical articles of the government. She was twice called Turkey's "most read political columnist". Her columns have been published in international media such as The Guardian and Le Monde Diplomatique.

Temelkuran published 12 books, including two in English (Deep Mountain, Across the Turkish-Armenian Divide, Verso 2010, and Book of the Edge, BOA Editions 2010).

In 2008 she was a visiting fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Temelkuran was awarded the Human Rights Association of Turkey's Ayşe Zarakolu Freedom of Thought Award in 2008.

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Met financiële steun van:

Colofon

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Persvrijheidslezing 2017

Festival of Free Speech

3 May 2017

Hilversum, Netherlands Insitute for Sound and Vision