Memorialising media use: reflexivity, spectacle and power in the commemoration of Turkey’s failed coup attempt
Dr John McManus

On the 15th July 2019, Turkish newspaper Yeni Şafak printed a special edition to commemorate the third anniversary of the 2016 failed coup attempt. Chosen as the main image of the pullout was a picture of a person within a crowd. The image focused on a poster the person was carrying, which was a reproduction of a television image from the night of the coup – a picture of President Erdoğan speaking to a news broadcaster on FaceTime.

Media in Turkey – both from a material and social perspective – was central to the failure of the 15th July 2016 coup attempt. From the coup plotter’s inability to take down internet infrastructures, to Erdoğan’s now famous FaceTime call for people to take to the streets, many scholars have shown how the night and its immediate aftermath was a thoroughly 21st century ‘networked’ experience (Altınordu 2017, Carney 2019, Yanardagolgu 2017).

What is equally fascinating, but has received less attention, is the role of media infrastructures in the subsequent memorialization of the failed coup attempt. Declared a national holiday, the 15th July has been labelled by pro-government forces as Turkey’s ‘second day of Independence’. Now in its fourth year, the celebration is marked by rallies in Istanbul and Ankara and a saturation of mainstream and social media with retellings, commentary and memorialization of the experience.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork from three years of commemoration (2017-19), along with collection of media discourse (both mainstream and social), I examine why practices of memorializing media have become central to the 15 July celebrations. The reflexive attention participants give not simply to media but to mediums – as the opening anecdote attests – underlines the limited utility of a classic media studies approach. As participants collapse distinctions between spectacle, public gathering and media use, so scholars need a non-media centric approach (Krajina, Moores, and Morley 2014) to understand fully the battles over Turkish nationalism and state-backed claims to power and visibility that lurk within the commemorations.

Chiming with the conference’s desire to move attention to media’s ‘back end’, the paper finishes by opening avenues for comparison across the region: is reflexivity of citizen media use stoked by living under non-democratic conditions of media production? What is the role of spectacle in the memorialization of media? Do the 15th July commemorations point to a shared ‘Middle Eastern’ take on structures and facilities of media production? Should such collation even be our aim?

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References