The Use of Media in Promoting Sexual Minority Rights in Turkey

This new media school is very important for us because by that we don’t only educate our correspondents, we, at the same time...educate people to be an independent reader. We give them ... a kind of media literacy.

Murat Köylü

Whether it has been through derogatory statements dismissing homosexuality as a “sin” or “unnatural” (thus ostracizing the LGBTI community); an unwillingness to include sexual orientation as a category of protection in Turkish law; ambiguous interpretations of national law that demonize and offer few protections for those who are LGBTI; or disruptive behavior by police and others, including arbitrary arrests and evictions, individuals within this community have not been given the opportunity to live their lives freely. They have been persecuted, stigmatized, and discriminated against in terms of employment, holding public office, and other aspects of Turkish society.

As a result, human rights activists in Turkey have been working tirelessly to improve the conditions of the LGBTI community. The next few chapters are dedicated to the different strategies that individuals and NGOs use or have used to improve the standing of the LGBTI community in the country. Through examination of the literature, interviews with individual activists, and leaders of LGBTI organizations, such as Kaos GL, Pembe Hayat, Social Policies, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Studies Association (SPoD), and LISTAG, among others, I shall examine how activists use media, politics, education, and other avenues to highlight concerns that the LGBTI community may have, as well as to bring to light rights abuses by the state and members of Turkish society. As I shall show, some, such as Murat Renay, the founder of GZone Magazine, are using digital media, in this case a magazine, to focus on LGBTI issues. Others, like Barış Sulu, the first openly gay candidate to run for elections to Turkey’s parliament, have decided to run for political office as a way to alter the legal
positions that might negatively affect the LGBTI community. Along with Barış Sulu, some political candidates and politicians outside of the LGBTI community have also shown their public support for the rights of the LGBTI community. Others still are working within government municipalities and through nongovernmental organizations in Turkey. This particular chapter will examine the history of LGBTI rights abuses, and then will specifically address the use of media in LGBTI activism in the country.

**History of Same-Sex Rights Activism in Turkey**

In order to understand the current conditions facing the LGBTI community in Turkey, as well as how activists are operating in the country as it pertains to fighting for equal rights based on sexual orientation, it is imperative that we first understand the history of same-sex rights activism in Turkey. As we shall see, LGBTI activists have had decades of experience advocating for equal rights in Turkey. Their strategies and goals have varied throughout the years, with some continued constants. A lack of full rights for the LGBTI community throughout the years in Turkey has made the work of these activists all the more important.

While much of the history presented here will be devoted to the work in the 1990s and onwards, it is important to examine the early history of same-sex rights activism in Turkey. While the celebrity of Turkish singers Zeki Muren and Bulent Ersoy brought attention to not only homosexuality (and transgender issues, respectively) but also the reexamination of gender norms in Turkey (Özbay, 2015), some of the earliest activism work for sexual minority rights in Turkey was in the 1970s, in which sexual minorities began to establish communication with one another. One of the first places for more-established activism came from the city of Izmir. It was here that Ibrahim Eren, while employed at the Izmir Environmental and Health Organization, “established therapy/conversation sessions with gays and lesbians of Izmir” (International Lesbian and Gay Association [IGLA], 2009). While the 1980 military coup resulted in the suppression of human rights and free speech and the closing of this organization, Eren and others worked to establish a Radical Green Party as a platform from which they could advocate for sexual minority rights (and although the party was not officially established, many LGBTI individuals become
more politically involved through this network of activists). Then, in 1987, after systematic police discrimination towards the transgender community, in which they would harass those who identified as transgendered, and following little media attention on the issue, thirty-seven LGBT activists began a hunger strike. ILGA (2009) speaks of the significance of this event, saying that “[a]lthough no substantial success was achieved from the action, it raised attention both internally and internationally. Some successful figures of the time such as Rifat Ilgaz (author) and Turkan Soray (actress) supported their cause.” This strike has been called a “watershed event” by the LGBTI community in Turkey (Çetin, 2015). While the party itself ended up breaking apart, some continued working on LGBTI issues. For example, Sevda Yılmaz, a writer who works under the name of Ali Kemal Yılmaz, then served as the spokesperson behind this protest strike (İnce, 2014). Yılmaz still works on transfeminist issues in Turkey (Güneş, 2014; Baş, 2015).

The early 1990s were important for the LGBTI rights movement in Turkey. Not only did we see the beginnings of LGBTI rights-based organizations but it was also during this period that a stronger push for public advocacy in the form of marches and protests in Turkey took place. For example, in 1993, activists in the country were organizing the first Gay Pride March. However, Turkish authorities put a halt to the march on the grounds that, in their eyes, “society was not ready” for what was happening (COWI, 2010). Yet, despite the intervention by Turkish authorities, LGBTI rights activists continued to press forward with the idea of holding public marches centered on LGBTI rights. Because of their persistence in the years that followed, these activists succeeded in being able to successfully hold such public Pride Marches. While it took a decade, “Since 2003 the marches [were] not ... banned or stopped by the police” (COWI, 2010: 8; until 2015, when all this changed). These victories did not come easily. Even though the police acquiesced, allowing LGBTI marches, “every year the organisers have to negotiate with the police authorities about where the demonstrations are allowed to be held – an issue not only applicable to LGBT-organizations” (COWI, 2010: 8). Again, despite continued problems caused by Turkish authorities, 2015 marked the 23rd year that the Istanbul Pride Week took place (Tokyay, 2015).

The 1990s were a time when activists also began forming more human rights organizations, and NGOs established additional networks centered on LGBTI rights. As previously mentioned, in 1993,
those in the LGBTI community and their allies worked to establish an LGBT Pride conference in the city of Istanbul. However, despite organization efforts, the event got called off shortly before it was to commence. According to the governor at the time, this event was not only against the “morals” of society but it was also seen as a disturbance to peace. Following the ban, “[t]he next day, Turkish authorities detained 28 foreign delegates, most of them while they were on their way to participate in a press conference in protest of the ban. They were detained for over 5 hours, threatened with possible strip searches and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) tests, and deported on a Turkish airline to Germany. The organizers had previously received approval of the event from the Interior Ministry” (ILGA, 2009). However, from this government crackdown rose new LGBT organizations such as Lamba Istanbul (1993), Kaos GL (1994) as well as Lezbiyen Gay Toplulugu, and LEGATO, which was among the very first LGBT student organizations in Turkey (ILGA, 2009). This last organization spread rapidly to have chapters throughout universities in Turkey (ILGA, 2009).

As mentioned, the 1990s were a time when activists began forming more human rights organizations, and NGOs established additional networks centered on LGBTI rights. Some of this can also be attributed to the 1997 “post-modern coup,” where the military called for “recommendations” that the government followed. This coup was heavily structured on the principles of secularism, and was highly critical of religious organizations. During this coup, “the military issued a series of ‘recommendations,’ which the government had no choice but to accept. Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, agreed to a compulsory eight-year education programme (to prevent [pupils] from enrolling in religious schools), a headscarf ban at universities, and other measures. Erbakan was then forced to resign” (Al Jazeera, 2016). The military also stressed an increased role for citizens in democratic society.

While the Islamist AKP party came into power in 2002, arguably shifting attention away from LGBTI rights, activists point to the period from 1997 until 2002 as an important time for the development of LGBTI rights organizations. It was with the rise of civil society at this time that LGBTI groups began forming. Throughout this period, LGBTI activism was also centered on community building. It was then that “generally . . . people were meeting in each other’s homes, getting to know each other, and that’s the time where people just wanted to get
together ... with others who are facing the same problems. So this is ... the understanding of that time period. But starting with the 2000s, the LGBT movement ... start[ed] to appear more in [the] public sphere” (Sedef Çakmak, City Council Member, Department of Social Equality, Beşiktaş İstanbul).

During the 2000s, the number of LGBTI organizations and public activists increased greatly. While initial membership numbers were much lower than what we see today,¹ the groups were able to make great strides on LGBTI rights, especially with public events such as the Pride Marches. Along with the first LGBTI Pride March in Istanbul that took place in 2003 (Pearce, 2014b), “[t]he first demonstration marking the International Day against Homophobia was held in Ankara in 2008 – the march was jointly organi[z]ed by Kaos Gay and Lesbian Association (Kaos GL) and Pink Life LGBT Association” (COWI, 2010: 8). Along with the International Day against Homophobia, a year later, Kaos GL held another rally, this one also with the purpose of speaking out against homophobia. The day that they organized their events purposely coincided with “the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia” (COWI, 2010: 8). Then, in 2010, Turkey also witnessed the first separate march for the rights of the transgender community. These sorts of successes have been crucial to the formation of the current LGBTI rights platforms in Turkey.

Activists noted that a very important reason that Turkish civil society opened up at that time (which allowed LGBTI organizations and activism to flourish) had to do with Turkey’s desire to enter into the European Union. Attempts at greater ties between Turkey and the European Union led to a shift in civil society within Turkey due to the European Union’s demands for greater human rights and democratization within the country. Boysan Yakar, an LGBTI rights activist who worked as the first openly gay advisor to the mayor in the Şişli municipality in Istanbul, mentioned that during this time period it was much easier to form a recognized association. Before then, the Turkish government would restrict groups from organizing, often citing concerns about terrorism or Turkish values-based arguments. As Murat Köylü of Kaos GL also explained,

in 2003, 2004, [and] 2005 the atmosphere and the political agenda of Turkey was much, much different. Those times were the first times of AKP
government, and the first days of Turkey’s European Union candidacy, and those times [the] AKP was a coalition of different political groups. Of course the political Islamists were one of them but they were labeling themselves as conservative democrats or liberal, conservatives ... and among [the] AKP there were social democrats, liberals, and other Kurdish people, some ... groups from Kurdish movement, and individuals ... Those times Turkey had its reformist era, actually, ... and KAOS GL used that, decided to utilize that momentum in the society and in the political spheres, and started to ... debate ... adding sexual orientation and gender identity in the constitution, in the ... legislation.

Yakar believed that it was also around this time, in 2006, for example, where the LGBTI community’s visibility in the eyes of the state increased. But if we recall, the government was not sitting by idly as the LGBTI movement was pressing forward. In fact, it was during this period that the government attempted to close Lambda Istanbul and other LGBTI rights organizations. So while LGBTI visibility was on the rise, the government – under the AKP – was still taking a hardline position with LGBTI organizations.

Yet, despite the attempts at shutting down these groups, activists continued their work, often by sharing information about the presence of the LGBTI community with the greater public, as well as fighting to make people aware about issues related to the LGBTI community. As Sedef Çakmak explained,

it was really hard to break their homophobia, transphobia back then. And in media it was ... impossible to see any positive comment about LGBT rights in 2006. You would be seeing lots of negative issues ... that the LGBTs [were] represented in a negative way ... So, back then we were monitoring these media reports, we were doing all of these voluntarily, by the way. We weren’t getting any money from the association whatsoever and we [were] monitoring all of these media and we were trying to reach out to journalists, we were organizing ... trainings, I would say for the ... journalists. But ... this was so amateur ... We would just be getting up with the journalists. We will be telling our stories to the journalists and we [were] trying to ... change their perspective.

However, these groups have made large strides in LGBTI activism since the early years. Let us now turn to discuss the more-recent ways that these activists and organizations have fought for equal rights.

In order to understand modern LGBTI rights-based activism, we have to examine recent civil society protest movements in the Middle
East. The uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in 2010–2011, and the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey, can be viewed as part of yet another period with increased human rights activism, as civil society groups came together in these different countries to challenge authoritarian rule. In the case of Egypt, for example, Muslims and Christians, secularists and Islamists worked together to overthrow the dictator Hosni Mubarak. Now, while the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East did not spread to Turkey in 2010 and 2011, the country did see its own large-scale mass civilian movements in 2013, which have been labeled the “Taksim Square” and “Gezi Park” protests.

At the time, Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was calling for a series of changes in Turkey related to his push for economic development. However, many of these policies were at the expense of environmental issues (Muedini, 2015). Initially, hundreds of protesters came out to challenge Erdoğan’s plans to build a mosque in Gezi Park in Istanbul. However, others quickly joined them, speaking out not only against these development plans but also other issues that included rising authoritarianism, concerns over Erdoğan’s attempt at controlling parts of the judiciary, and other matters. Here, those from throughout different parts of Turkish civil society – united in their concerns about the direction Erdoğan was taking the country – called for democratization and a repeal of many anti-environmental actions put forth by the state. In addition, they also used the protests to advocate for a full set of human rights for everyone in Turkey. The protests received further attention after police responded to them with violence, unwilling to allow freedom of speech to be practiced uninterrupted. The police were reported to use tear gas, rubber bullets, and additional acts of violence against some of the protesters. Human rights organizations like Amnesty International (2013) quickly condemned the authorities for their actions against civilians as well as their violations of the right of people to free and peaceful assembly.

Looking at the Gezi Park protests from the perspective of the LGBTI rights movement, many activists argued that the events in 2013 were when the LGBTI community greatly expanded their public activities in the country. The LGBTI movement was quite vocal during the Gezi Park protests against Erdoğan. In fact, it has been argued by many that for the LGBTI community and LGBTI human
rights activists, these particular protests not only showed how violent the government is towards the LGBTI community (which in turn may have actually mobilized more individuals to get involved in the movement) but that the activities during this time also helped LGBTI activists build networks across the different communities in Turkey (Feldman, 2014). Activists such as Volkan Yılmaz argue that even though the LGBTI movement was quite large before Gezi Park, “Gezi led to a leap in awareness among the left about LGBTI rights. The movement’s voice was heard in more venues and taken more seriously” (Ayyıldız, 2015). As explained to me in our interview, Sedef Çakmak, among others, decided that “right after the Gezi incident... we just thought that we should be getting into politics [political parties].” So, among other outcomes, the LGBTI activists mobilized further following Gezi Park protests, moving some of their efforts towards electoral politics.

While I will go into the impact of the 2013 protests in greater detail later on, it is important to step back momentarily and examine the decades-long struggle for equal rights based on sexual orientation in Turkey. While much of the attention to LGBTI rights is recent, in the case of Turkey, the LGBTI rights community has been working diligently on advancing equal rights for quite some time. This becomes evident once one traces the history of LGBTI activism in Turkey. Again, the Turkish-based human rights and specific LGBTI human rights organizations we see operating today were first formed in the 1990s. These initial organizations served a variety of functions early in their activism. We have to keep in mind that although a great portion of their work centered on advocacy, the organizations also provided places where people from the LGBTI community could congregate, support one another, and work together on these rights issues. The organizations also played an important role in the providing of resources. This point is important to mention not only because it shows the diversity of activities that early LGBTI groups offered (and still provide today), but it also reminds us of the negative consequences that face LGBTI individuals when the government attempts to shut down these organizations. They are rarely just suppressing a political voice; the state is going after groups that provide so many critical social services that the government itself has either failed to provide or purposely choses not to offer to LGBTI individuals.
Strategies and Successes of LGBTI Rights-Based Advocacy in Turkey

As discussed in the earlier chapter on the history of same-sex rights, the Turkish government has gone after both LGBTI individuals as well as those advocating for their cause. Yet, despite the attempts to suppress LGBTI rights, human rights groups have been able to make numerous strides with their work. In fact, some, such as Andrew Gardner of Amnesty International, argue that the increased visibility of the LGBT community and LGBT rights has been a result of the work of activists and human rights organizations, saying that “[t]he change, where it has come, has come from civil society and LGBT groups.” Gardner added, “In previous years there was a situation where virtually all [LGBT rights groups] faced closure on grounds of public morality. Largely, this isn’t happening anymore – there are fewer of these cases now” (Jamieson and Akyavas, 2015). The late Boysan Yakar, who served as an advisor to Hayri İnönü, the mayor of the Şişli district in Istanbul, even argued that the Lambda Istanbul closure case brought more awareness to the plight of the LGBTI community in Turkey.

Again, the Lambda Istanbul Closure Case was an attempt by the government in 2008 and 2009 to shut down the LGBTI rights organization Lambda Istanbul (while they initially shut down the organization, Lambda Istanbul won its appeal in 2009) (Amnesty International, 2009). In our interview, Yakar said that the case “help[ed] ... the movement a lot to show all the homophobia and transphobia going around the movement actually. So with the [help] of these candidates, it was one of the very first [times] I ever seen in my life in a city center the independent candidates talking about human rights plus LGBTI rights as well, so we saw for the very first time with our eyes that it’s happening in the streets by them.” He went on to say that “from 2003 to now [2015], we are marching, we’re giving press releases, openly, I mean, in 2006, 7, 8, 9, me and many other friends of mine. We became the faces of the associations, and we began to give releases with our names, real names, and faces. It was an important thing also. The Closure Case helps all the activists to join themselves [as] individuals to fight.”

There are many active nongovernmental organizations in Turkey working on LGBTI rights issues. A number of them are specifically devoted to LGBTI issues, whereas others are more general human
rights organizations that, in their work, have given attention to the human rights of LGBTI people in the country. While there are dozens of organizations that are actively fighting to improve the lives of LGBTI people in Turkey, there exist a number of very well-known and active organizations that I will discuss in greater detail. As I shall show, these groups are steadfast in their work, despite the risks associated with their activism, and are operating on various fronts, whether it is through social media, politics, education, health services, networking with international groups, etc. Let us now turn to the categories of activism, beginning with attention on the use of media for advancing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex rights in the country.

Media

Traditional as well as “new” media have both been important tools for LGBTI activism in Turkey. However, traditional media has been viewed as failing to provide adequate coverage for LGBTI issues. In fact, the media often framed same-sex issues in a problematic way. As Kaos GL (2005) explains,

In the first period, (early 80’s) the homosexual man, the “gay[,]” was something not fully understood. Gays were portrayed as a stereotype. A distinction between a homosexual man and a transgender was not made. Anyone “not normal” was considered to be homosexual. The inside pages of the newspapers often used homosexuals as subjects to news of “murder, perversion and immorality.” Homosexuality was shown as an issue to entertain the public. This was also the period when AIDS became known as a disease of homosexuals. AIDS was breaking news, along with homosexuality.

But along with this, over the years, the media has failed to adequately report on rights abuses against sexual minorities. Here are just some examples of how the media has chosen to not report on violations against the LGBTI community. In 1987, police harassment of transgendered individuals in Istanbul was very high. Yet, while the media knew about what was taking place, they “chose not to report it” (Kaos GL, 2005). In 1995, the Istanbul government decided to ban an LGBT conference. It was here that “Lambda Istanbul announced the city government’s anti-democratic actions to the free world through the Internet and Reuters. Despite the Turkish media’s failure to report these developments, the international media did, and
the Turkish Ministries of Internal Affairs and Culture received overwhelming national and international [condemnation]” (Kaos GL, 2005). In 1996, police-forced evacuations of transgendered individuals received little attention from the media, and even with some reports, very few stories approached the issue from the perspective of the transgendered community (Kaos GL, 2005). For example, even when there was coverage about the incidents, the media did not discuss the underlining causes of the oppression that the transgender community was experiencing (Selek, 2001, in Görkemli, 2015).

Part of the negative treatment of the LGBTI community also had (and has) to do with the way that people from this community have been portrayed in both television and film. Saruhan (2013) argues that despite the positive intention to highlight the transsexual members of society and portray them in a sympathetic way, these films still succumbed to the same stereotypes present in the heteronormative discourse treating prostitution, alienation, [and] psychological and physical violence. The films portray the worst-case scenarios transsexual subjects may face, while failing to empower the transsexual characters or punish violent actions aimed against them. Therefore, the Turkish media and film industry seem to contribute to the prevalence of stereotypes about transsexual subjects, who also may reproduce and reinforce these stereotypes, even though unwillingly.

Just to give an example, in the case of Turkish cinema, there have been few depictions of transgendered individuals in the twentieth century. However, in many of the cases where there are examples, it is usually found in the genre of comedy. Instead of open and honest depictions of characters representing transgendered persons, what has often happened is that a non-transgender character dresses up as someone of the opposite gender for some other non-gender-based purpose. For example, in one of the first depictions of a transgender character in Turkish cinema, in the 1923 film Leblebici Horhor, the main character, who is a male, dresses as a women in attempts to help save another character, his girlfriend. Then,

[in the following decades, until the 1980s, stories in which men dressed as women were almost unanimously seen in comedies. In the Turkish version of Billy Wilder’s timeless classic Some Like It Hot, two popular actors, Sadri Alışık and İzzet Günay, dress as women to escape the mafia before falling for the same girl. Perhaps the last example of transvestism used as a source of
comedy came in 1984 with one of the most popular comedies in Turkish cinema, Şabaniye, in which the central plot revolves around men dressing as women to hide their identities. (Güler, 2012)

These sorts of representations do not accurately depict the transgender community, and actually make matters worse, since the viewer might incorrectly assume as to the reasons why some are transgender.

Thus, because of the power and influence of media, having someone from the LGBTI community working in traditional media outlets has been very effective for the advancement of LGBTI rights, as it offers a positive image of the LGBTI community to the public. A consistent theme that links various LGBTI rights organizations and individual activists are their goals to increase the visibility of LGBTI community in Turkey. They believe that an increased presence will lead to further discussions about their challenges and rights abuses in Turkey, which will hopefully generate more attention from these outlets, as well as from politicians and the state.

Another way in which the LGBTI community has been able to receive visibility has been through nationally known LGBTI individuals. While a later section spotlights some of the political candidates in the 2014 and 2015 elections, there are also nonpolitical personalities who are doing their part in bringing attention to the plight of the LGBTI community. Take Michelle Demishevich, for example. Demishevich was Turkey’s first transgender television reporter, working for IMC TV as a reporter for a current affairs show (Mchugh, 2014). She began working for the company in March of 2013 (Tahaoğlu, 2014). Her appointment has been a great success for LGBTI rights in the country. Her presence on television has helped the LGBTI rights movement by increasing visibility for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered rights. This form of activism is not focused on elections or on publication of news articles per se but is done through the continued presence of a LGBTI transgendered individual in front of millions of television viewers. As Demishevich explains,

Activism is not about only marching on the streets with flags. What I call activism is my working as TV reporter when other trans people are only depicted negatively by the media. It is important to show that ‘others’ are also capable of doing meaningful things. Therefore, I decided to march with my flag in the hand. At work, I am just like everyone. My gender identity is out of question. I love my job.” (Mchugh, 2014)
Demishevich’s position allowed her to bring increased attention to LGBTI issues, as well as to the transgendered community in Turkey (Kellaway, 2014). In addition, she has also spoken about a hate crime committed against her in 2012 (Mchugh, 2014), sadly something that is not a rare occurrence in Turkey. Her speaking about the issue has helped bring much-needed light to such horrible situations taking place in Turkey and throughout many parts of the world.3

Human Rights Advocacy through Digital Media

Given the lack of positive attention to LGBTI in traditional media, the rise of digital media has been able to partially fill this gap left by traditional media outlets. Digital media has not only allowed for more stories to be written about sexual minorities, but the stories have approached the topic with a positive narrative. As Gorkemli (2012) argues “Turkish lesbian and gay activists have utilized the Internet to advance their activism since its inception in 1993” (63), adding that “the Internet built on the sexuality-related legacy of traditional media by enabling something altogether new: It provided the means by which otherwise isolated individuals with nonmainstream gender identities and/or sexual orientations could connect with each other to form communities” (73). This has continued for years, with new approaches to LGBTI advocacy through this medium. For example, in 2001, activists initiated a campaign called “Coming Out of the Internet”4 where people could not only express their sexual identities, but they could also find others from within the LGBTI community (through an online group named Legato) (Görkemli, 2012, 2015).5

Among the best recent examples of the use of digital media is the work of activist Murat Renay. Murat Renay is an internationally known human rights activist and music DJ. In fact, Renay has played in clubs around the world and was also asked to play in Stroudsburg during the Gay Pride Parade in the city. Moreover, he has also been asked to play by LGBTI organizations. He views music as a way to further promote LGBTI rights. However, along with playing music, Renay has been a leading voice with regard to LGBTI rights for years in Turkey. He began his own work by writing a blog called Homo-Hobia, where he documented his personal experiences. He said of this blog, “It’s basically a story of a gay person in Turkey, or in general, or all in the world. [Renay is] ... telling the stories starting from the child,
to being an adult.” However, after developing a strong fan base that called for Renay to write a book, he decided to write two. One is in the form of an autobiography. Renay explained to me that “[i]t’s [an] autobiography of a gay guy, a normal gay guy in Turkey or in any part of the world that what can he experience from birth to being an adult and [in addition to Renay’s life story,] it [also] has some short stories about tri sexual people, lesbian people, and all of them.”

However, Renay’s work is not limited to writing books and being a DJ. Among his various activities with regard to same-sex rights advocacy, Renay is also a founding editor of the primarily online Turkish language magazine *Gay Zone Mag* (or *GZone Magazine*), which focuses on gay lifestyle issues (Feldman, 2014). Renay explained to me how the online digital magazine came about, saying that after his work with his own writings, as well as his DJ work, that “all of these [works] are not enough” and that “[w]e started to think with my friends that we should print a gay magazine.” He explained (and was aware) that there existed a variety of LGBTI magazines in Turkey, but he found a specific niche for *GZone Magazine*; this online publication would differ from most in Turkey because it would not be focused on politics. Rather, this publication would stress a variety of gay issues in Turkish society. Renay explained the reason for his work with the magazine: “We want people to know that we exist.” Renay also said, “We have personalities, identities. We’re not just about people’s bedrooms” (Feldman, 2014). He also realized that Internet and social media presence is critical for the advancement of LGBTI rights in the country, saying in one of our conversations, “We believe media, social media, is really important. I mean ... it’s 2015, it is important even though you may not be a magazine, a Twitter account who is tweeting about LGBT issues is important. We have Twitter accounts, Instagram accounts, Facebook accounts, and we are reaching maybe one hundred thousand people every month.” Thus, his magazine is building a strong following in Turkey and elsewhere. It is important to now examine what strategies Renay and his team are using through his magazine to promote LGBTI rights in the Middle East.

**The Normalization of LGBTI Life in Turkey**

One of the primary objectives of *GZone Magazine*, to Renay, is to use it to normalize the LGBT community in the country. They do this
through covering a variety of pop culture issues, such as discussing music, movies, and other lifestyle topics. Many activists often approach the issue of visibility in the context of the government, given that part of their strategy is to affect current laws or government behavior. However, the issue with visibility is that it is often difficult for groups to become known in society and visible to political leaders. Some of this has to do with the lack of attention in the media. For example, Currier (2007) cites Koopmans (2004: 371), who works on LGBT rights in Africa, and speaks about the number of stories that exist in a media cycle, and how this may make it difficult to become visible. Applying this to the situation in Turkey, in my discussions with Renay, it seems that a goal for the magazine was not necessarily to direct it just to the government officials but to help shape perceptions in civil society by being more visible.

One of the normalization strategies that they use is related to their cover; they aim to put celebrities on the front of the magazine not only to show that there are famous non-LGBTI individuals supporting LGBTI rights but also as a normalization tactic for LGBTI issues in Turkey. Renay explains that this approach of using celebrities for their magazine is not trying to be done in a way similar to the US outlet TMZ, but they do speak “with celebrities about gay issues, [in] every issue” in attempts to show Turkish and international readers that there are people outside of the LGBTI community who are talking about gay issues and are supportive of LGBTI rights. The non-direct political angle that Renay takes with regards to the magazine’s content is not to suggest that there is no discussion about politics, but, as Renay explained, “[W]e don’t always want to reflect the hate crimes . . . we don’t want to terrorize people . . . We do make them as a new story, but as I say we want to create, we want to feel. People like . . . good feelings about [the] LGBT [community].”

I asked Renay more about this issue of normalization and whether he thought that this approach of normalizing is the most effective way that activists are fighting for LGBTI rights. In response to this, Renay said that activists are using different tactics for the promotion of these rights:

I’m not sure activists are using that strategy . . . They are using it, but . . . they are using it in an aggressive way . . . to make protests, to do something else. But what is more important for me to be in the Parliament, for example, to be
a party that people can vote for and do all that stuff. But they are the local activists, and I respect that, ok. But what we are trying to do, we were invisible, like ten years ago maybe ... [W]e had big singers like Bülent Ersoy [who] is a transvestite ... and also Zeki Muren [who] is really feminine, out male singer[,] but they’re both great singers. People respected them, even though they see that ... one is a transsexual and one is a feminine gay man, of course. But they respected them. But other than that no gay, no LGBT visibility[,] has [been] recorded in Turkish history. So ... within the social media, and the gays that protest, LGBT people are soon to be recognized ... people are thinking, look, there are guys like who can be lesbians, gays, or transvestites and it’s an identity ... it’s a sexual identity, of course, but it’s an identity, [a] social identity, also. They start to accept that. So what I believe it is ... as we can be visible, so people will start to accept us, but not [that] they want [this], but at least they will see and that, oh they are visible, there are people like this.

Or, as Renay says, there may be someone who may say, “‘Maybe I don’t agree with that, but I shall respect that.’ And after that, maybe they start to empathize with our feelings. Maybe they thought something like that.”

Renay believes that this notion of normalization has been instrumental with regard to the advancement of LGBTI rights in Turkey in recent years. For example, Renay says that about “five years ago, nobody [was] ... talking about gay issues ... in a negative way or a positive way ... nobody was speaking. But now, people are speaking [about LGBTI issues].” Renay goes on to say that the visibility may not always lead to positive statements; regardless, the visibility will nonetheless still push the discussion forward. On this issue of negative statements, he says, “Of course, it also has some, they also have some bad reactions ... people are speaking not positively, of course, but when we are visible, of course, maybe half of the people, fifty percent, will talk very bad things about us, I know. But we must be visible for whatever it takes, we must be visible.”

It can be understood that, given the presence of conservative elements (including the government) in Turkey and the greater Middle East, the question of visibility is not without risks in Turkey. It has been well-documented in the human rights literature that the LGBTI communities are under significant stress and discrimination. Again, government leaders in Turkey (with the AKP) have continued to frame homosexuality as a sin. In addition, there are other groups that
have called for violence against LGBTI individuals. Thus, individuals such as Renay understand why visibility is needed but also recognize the realistic possibility that negative reactions might arise from the LGBTI community being more visible in a Turkey, because a number of conservatives are critical of recognizing LGBTI rights. Related to this, Renay said that while the LGBTI community was invisible in years past, “after the Gezi protest and everything we, we start to become visible. But being visible has consequences both negative and both positive... in this period, in this process we will be much, much more visible in every way but it will also bring some, bring out some hate.”

Use of Celebrities in Promoting LGBTI Rights

The use of celebrity status as it pertains to awareness about LGBTI rights has been an approach used not only in Turkey but throughout other parts of the world. Celebrities have attempted to bring attention to the plight of LGBTI individuals through campaigning, public conversation, and service announcements. Celebrities with followings have the ability to influence many people who otherwise may have not thought about that particular issue that the celebrity is advocating.

In my second interview with Renay, he iterated this point about celebrity influence as it relates to LGBTI normalization and visibility, saying that “if a celebrity talks about [an issue such as violence against women] ... you get the message.” He went on to add that their approach is “nothing different from that.” Renay also said that “what we’re trying to do is to be visible, to be visible with the famous celebrities and the people and everything to normalize this ... if [celebrity] Sezen Aksu says something about the LGBTs[,] as a straight fan of Sezen Aksu you may think that ‘oh, she is saying that so it is okay to say this.’” Renay believes that his magazine can be a platform for celebrities, and with them speaking on LGBTI issues, others who read the magazine, or hear about the story, might better see the LGBTI community as a part of Turkey, as well as see them in a positive light.9

However, despite the positive feedback received by using this approach, there continue to be challenges to not only how the celebrities and their messages may be received but also how there may exist
different standards for celebrities and non celebrities in the LGBTI community. In relation to the first point, using the strategy of celebrity activism has at times been met with hatred and criticism. For example, in our first interview Renay explained that

[w]e are using the celebrities . . . in this issue there is one of the biggest pop divas of Turkish music [who] will be on the cover and she will talk about LGBT issues. And she has maybe millions of listeners . . . we are sending this news to the mainstream media, of course, also . . . we are telling them this woman said this about LGBT, [talked] to [a] LGBT magazine and . . . mainstream media sometimes publish that. So people will understand that this is a talkable thing, I mean they can talk about this. So this is our first strategy.”

In fact, Turkish pop artist Demet Akalın. Akalın – who, as Renay explained, has a very large social media following (over 6.2 million on both Twitter and Instagram as of this writing) – publicized GZone Magazine by bringing attention to it through her social media messages. Because of her posts on social media, he says that many people who had not heard of LGBTI were now first being exposed to the community. But with the positive also came the negative; there were hateful comments that were made as well. But Renay was willing to take controversial risks, saying of this situation, “Some people cursed her. Why are you doing this? But, thirteen thousand people liked the picture so it’s okay for us. I mean, she’s the queen for us, so there is no problem. We may have some . . . impact like this but it’s okay, we will go on doing this. It’s . . . maybe controversial too . . . [for] some LGBT people and some straight people, but it’s okay.”

Despite the risks, as well as debate amongst activists associated with this visibility tactic, the approach of using celebrities for their covers – and in their magazine stories – seems to be a very good strategy for the increased visibility of the LGBTI community with regard to GZone Magazine; the academic literature shows that celebrities and celebrity behavior can influence individuals from an early age onwards. For example, Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) cite Boon and Lomore’s (2001) research on the influence of celebrities, extending it to LGBTI rights: “Boon and Lomore (2001) found that among young adults with strong attachments to celebrities, participants believed that their attitudes, values, and personality characteristics have been influenced by their idols. Although neither Matthews nor Boon and Lomore
examined the influence of the media in relation to sexual orientation, their findings suggest that the media could similarly contribute to the development of GLB identity throughout the lifespan” (332).

One of the other issues related to celebrities and either their support for LGBTI rights outside of the community or as members of the LGBTI community themselves is often the dual treatment that society may give them as celebrities who are publically LGBTI compared to noncelebrities who are LGBTI, which infuriates those fighting for the rights of all LGBTI people (Köksal, 2015). For example, “[p]eople in Turkey’s LGBT community often point to two of Turkey’s most famous entertainers to illustrate what they feel is a dangerous hypocrisy. Zeki Muren was visually equal parts Elton John and Liberace and one of the most beloved singers in Turkish history. Muren was gay, but never spoke publicly about his sexuality. Despite homophobic attitudes, he was awarded Turkey’s version of the Order of Canada.” Along with Muren, “Pop star Bulent Ersoy, known to her fans as the ‘Diva,’ first achieved fame in the 1970s and transitioned from male to female before anyone knew to use the word transgender. She performed as a man early in her career and never changed her name after her transition” (Köksal, 2015). However, activists such as Oyku Ay spoke about this double standard, saying that “[t]he Turkish people, they applaud the ones on stage and stone the ones on the street” (Köksal, 2015). So, while using celebrity status is an effective strategy, and although it has helped matters, LGBTI celebrities themselves continue to be treated differently than LGBTI noncelebrities.

Social Media

Within new digital media, social media has developed to become a fundamental tool of LGBTI activists and organizations in Turkey. In fact, social media is one of the central components of the media strategies employed by groups such as Kaos GL, Pembe Hayat, etc. For example, in one of my interviews, I asked Murat Köylü of Kaos GL about their use of social media. Köylü responded:

At the moment, we have three different [media] outputs. ... One is the Kaosgl.org, second is KAOS GL Journal [which] is [a] printed web design, and [the] third one is KAOS GL Q Plus; it’s an academic journal. And Kaosgl.org is of course, is a new media instrument. It’s a website and it’s integrated with social media, Facebook, Twitter, and other stuff.
Köylü went on to say that

[s]o, this new media school is very important for us because by that we don’t only educate our correspondents, we, at the same time . . . educate people to be an independent reader. We give them . . . a kind of media literacy. I took this same course many years ago as well. And I’m not an expert on new media or media . . . issues actually . . . With [these] new media schools we . . . expand our network, we educate our constituents, we get educated . . . because we have correspondents from every city of Turkey[,] and under this kind of siege of political Islam’s party in Turkey . . . this new media[‘s] existence is very important. And even there are some . . . [things] that they want to get rid of . . . We are still coping with the administration in Turkey and that new media is, again, important . . . because it . . . as the LGBTI movement is international, or even not international, it’s a transnational . . . movement. The opportunities coming out of this new media technique and political opportunities should be used as . . . the transnational . . . movement [expands]. So, as . . . the old media, let’s say is much less slower and much less small than new media dissemination. So yes, this is why we . . . [give] big importance to this new media outlets, I’d say.

Activists and NGOs have been active on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, promoting LGBTI rights issues. They have argued that the work on social media has been quite effective in advancing the LGBTI rights cause. Buse Kilickaya, who is an internationally known LGBTI rights activist and also the head of Pembe Hayat (Pink Life), credits social media for awareness about the LGBTI rights movement, saying, “The struggle is becoming widespread. There is a wider visibility of our advocacy campaigns and people are much more aware of our problems mainly due to the social media” (Tokyay, 2015).

I also asked Janset Kalan of Pembe Hayat about how the organization uses media (and social media) to advocate for transgender rights. Kalan explained that to the organization, media is viewed as “the fourth power in the power system, in today’s society. And Internet is probably the fifth one.” Kalan spoke about the importance of media, saying that the media has a . . . very important role in changing minds and municipal[ity leaders’ minds,] in providing public awareness [on] an issue, and if [the] media likes to show something negatively, it is very easy for them to do that. And they have a huge influence in the society, especially the televised media
and . . . what we can do with our capacity is we can [focus more] on social media and the written media.

Kalan also said that they also set up their own media capacity, our own media channels, our own online news bulletins and I think this has been something what we are going as LGBTI movement in Turkey very successfully because there has been a change of language in the mainstream media as well when it comes to LGBTI issues, when it comes to fighting on hate crimes and then it comes to how to represent LGBTI identities in possible interviews and articles in the media.

Kalan went on to add, “In the televised media . . . there are some subliminal messages which indicate some of the characters are, gay, lesbian, or transgender. And we also succeeded [in the] empowerment of queer actresses and actors and performers to be more visible in the media.” For Pembe Hayat, they have been able to use traditional media, and social media to also provide support to transgender actors. Kalan explains that [t]here are a couple of trans actresses right now. There is one trans actor who was famous before the transition, and right now transitioned, and still wants to continue with his work. And we’re giving support and showing solidarity with that actor, also. And there are a couple of trans journalists who can find job[s] in some of the mainstream corporat[ions], I think that this is this is this is something that we can manage, that we can achieve.

**Human Rights through Film Documentaries**

LGBTI rights activists have also used film to document human rights conditions the LGBTI community faces and to share this information so that conditions can improve. One of the key LGBTI advocacy organizations in Turkey using film documentaries has been LİSTAG (Families and Friends of LGBTIs in Turkey). Although LİSTAG’s primary mission is as “a voluntary support and solidarity group for families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people in Istanbul” (LİSTAG, 2017), the late Boysan Yakar explained to me that some of the most influential work they have done has involved their documentaries. The organization put out documentaries noting the plight of LGBTI members in Turkey. The first film was based on showing how the media portrayed transgender rights. They also
created a documentary on the Pride Parade, among other films. One of the most noted was entitled *My Child* (of which Boysan Yakar worked as the assistant director). *My Child* documents statements, thoughts, and feelings of families of LGBTI individuals. The other films were on transgender issues, including one on a march that was banned by football (soccer) supporters. However, Yakar told me that *My Child* was different, and what separated *My Child* from the others was that before that mothers were getting releases, but they were not sharing their names and faces. But with the movie, before the movie, they began to come out as family members of the LGBTIs, and . . . it [was a big deal] all around Turkey, and the support changed its status. Now it was not only civil society, but many other people were normally adjusted to the LGBTI rights, and with this movie . . . they traveled a lot. We traveled a lot, all around the country. With many different social movements, we did many screenings. We did some screenings, very important ones, with [the] UN in [the] northern part of Turkey . . . [where people] are very nationalistic, and masculinity is a thing there. . . . It was not really easy . . . but . . . the UN [was] there, and the police were there to protect the groups to screen the movies. So . . . legendary things happened on the way of screening the movie.

Yakar described the effect of LISTAG on altering the conversation toward LGBTI rights in the country and also on reshaping the way many in Turkey thought about notions of family. Before, there were many stereotypes surrounding LGBTI individuals. Yakar explained the hostility that he received when meeting with political officials, saying “I remember that when we were going to Ankara to meet with MPs from every party, that were pro-Kurdish or were whatever, they were not even shaking our hands. All the things that they have they have in their minds . . . when you touch [a homosexual], you can become homosexual.” With the release of the film, mothers and fathers of LGBTI people would also go around the country and speak to crowds. These conversations were often emotional, as people were crying and sharing stories. Yakar believed that these discussions shaped the way people thought about family in Turkey, saying that “when we took the mothers down there in 2009, 2010, they were crying, drinking teas, and having important[,] long one [hour], two hours long meetings with them, so yeah they did a huge thing. It was important” Yakar said of this work, “It was the most important thing we’ve done for Turkey.”

Earlier I spoke about the importance “in-group messenger” strategy of activism as a way to change hearts and minds on an issue. If we
recall, it has been found that individuals are much more receptive to a message if the advocate for that message is someone from their own “in-group.” This could be a pastor from within a religious community, an athlete from a team or sport one likes, or someone from your own city who has a positive effect on changing opinions. While I talked about ways that this could be done from a religious perspective, or from a general human rights-based approach (structured on arguments related to the rule of law), there is one other very interesting use of the in-messenger approach that seems to an effective way to appeal to those that were initially opposed to same-sex rights in Turkey. This approach is what LISTAG has been doing with parents of children who are LGBTI. As Yakar explained, parents were able to move people based on their discussions centered on supporting their children, who were LGBTI. Sedef Çakmak felt that LISTAG was able to serve as an organization that could break through barriers and speak to people from different backgrounds, saying that one of the ice breakers we have in Turkey, which I also see it as another milestone, we have [a] families’ organization. It is called LISTAG and LIS-

TAG is formed of mothers and fathers who ha[ve] ... LGBT children. Their formation ... really helped us to ... reach to several groups because when you’re a young villain activist ... lesbian, and when you are talking about LGBT rights[,] some of the people generally do not take you seriously or some of the people just think that your mother and father didn’t properly [bring] you up. But when a mother or father comes and says that ... I was either going to choose my child or choose the society[,] and of course I choose my child[,] and then when they start talking ... that conversation always ends in tears, which is good. I mean, both of the parties start crying ... The families’ organization also help us reach to various groups because ... this is organized by various families; its religious families, its secular families, economically disadvantaged families, or economically advantaged families. So ... it’s quite mixed in [that] respect.

Parents were relating to other parents, and this was being done through an “insider-based” model. Had the organization itself spoken to the public, but without the voices of parents, it most likely would not have been nearly as successful as what the activists saw happen during these film and conversational sessions.