

Fieldwork Report – SFOU Grant

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TRT World headquarters, Istanbul. Photo taken during my field trip, February 2020.

As part of my MPhil Modern Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford, I wrote a 30,000-word thesis entitled “TRT World: Changing Channels of Turkish Power Projection.” As the English-language arm of Turkey’s state broadcaster, TRT World constitutes an important aspect of Turkey’s soft power strategies. Yet, surprisingly, the network’s emergence in 2015 has attracted very little scholarly attention. With the aim of filling this gap, my thesis critically examines two central claims made by TRT and government officials: firstly, that the channel’s emergence was simply a natural by-product of Turkey’s rapid development and international rise in the early 2000s; and secondly, that TRT World is the voice of the “voiceless” and the “oppressed” rather than that of the Turkish government. I argue that TRT World is the cornerstone of Ankara’s new public diplomacy, which aims at repositioning Turkey as the voice of the “voiceless” and “oppressed” Muslims worldwide, and that the ambiguity and contradictions lying at the heart of the TRT World project strongly limit the network’s ability to effectively project soft power.

Thanks to the generosity of the Swiss Friends of Oxford University, I was able to travel to Istanbul in February 2020 in order to conduct interviews with TRT World employees as well as analysts and journalists with relevant expertise. In large part because many potential interviewees were reluctant to take part in my research project, I only had two interviews lined up when I landed in Istanbul on 10th February. However, thanks to the “snowball effect,” I was able to speak with a significant number of individuals once on the ground. At the TRT World office, where I spent almost two days, I interviewed several journalists, digital content producers, researchers, and management figures. In addition, during my trip I also had the chance to interview Cansu Çamlıbel, editor-in-chief of Duvar English, Bayram Balcı, director of the French Institute for Anatolian Studies (IFEA), and Osman Sert, who served as press advisor to Turkey’s former foreign and prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, from 2009 to 2016.

My stay in Istanbul was highly productive and hugely beneficial. The numerous interviews I conducted during my field trip not only allowed me to enhance my understanding of TRT World’s role in the context of Turkey’s changing soft power strategies; they also gave me a better sense of how TRT World is managed, who works there and why, and what the channel’s strategies and priorities are. I would therefore like to express my gratitude to the Swiss Friends of Oxford University, whose generous travel grant greatly contributed to the successful completion of my thesis as well as my degree, which I officially completed with Distinction in early July.