



The Role of Social Media in the Spreading of the Turkish Red Crescent Tent Sale Story in Türkiye

Social Media Monitoring

August 2023

To support the earthquake response in Türkiye and Syria, Insecurity Insight is conducting ongoing social media monitoring to understand perceptions and key concerns around the aid response in these countries and contribute to the development of aid agencies' communication strategies in response to community feedback.

Summary

Between March and April 2022, 72% of the over 323 sampled social media users expressed [negative sentiments](#) in response to reports that the Turkish Red Crescent had sold tents to a charity organisation in the aftermath of the earthquake. To better understand the role of social media in the dissemination of information related to the humanitarian sector, this report presents data on how the tent sale story emerged and spread online, finding the following:

- Social media platforms, mainly Facebook and Twitter, played a key role in the diffusion of the story, with data suggesting that thousands of social media posts were published online immediately following the revelations.
- As a result of the story's high visibility on social media, tens of millions of people were exposed to the story on various social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok.
- At the same time, hundreds of thousands of social media users, mainly on Instagram, interacted with the story by commenting on, liking and sharing posts on the issue.
- Part of the reason for the story's virality is that it took on a political dimension, with key political figures and pages – often with large numbers of followers – sharing the story or commenting on it on social media.
- Data suggests that the tent sale story adversely impacted the Red Crescent's popularity, with average net sentiment towards the organisation declining significantly following the revelations.

The report highlights how social media plays an increasingly important role in the dissemination of stories or reports related to agencies working in the humanitarian sector, and how, unlike information disseminated on edited media, social media discussions often include expressions of sentiments that reveal perceptions about aid operations. Social media monitoring offers opportunities to capture such feelings. However, social media discussions make it much harder for communication professionals to control any narratives.

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Context

In late February 2023, weeks after the 6 February earthquake struck south-eastern Türkiye and north-western Syria with devastating effect, Turkish media reported that in the days immediately following the earthquake the Turkish Red Crescent had sold thousands of shelter tents to charity organisation AHBAP. Emerging at a time when many questions were being raised over the national response to the earthquake, the reports of Turkish Red Crescent tent sales rapidly became a national issue.

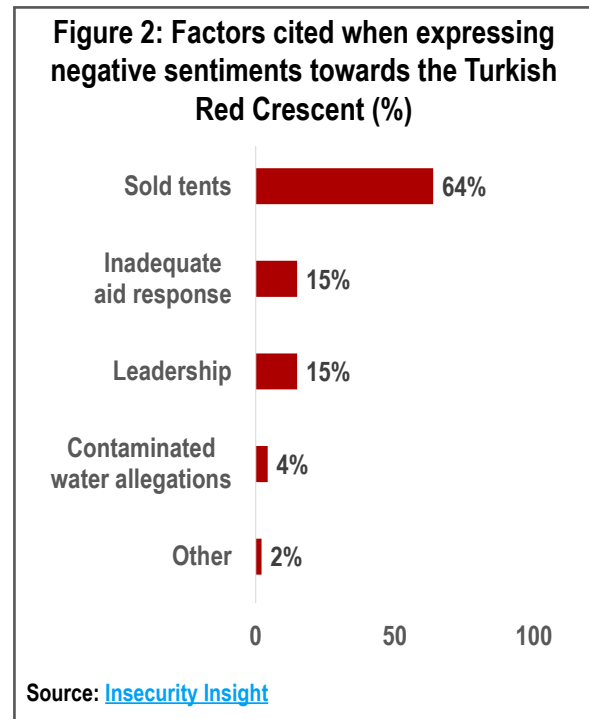
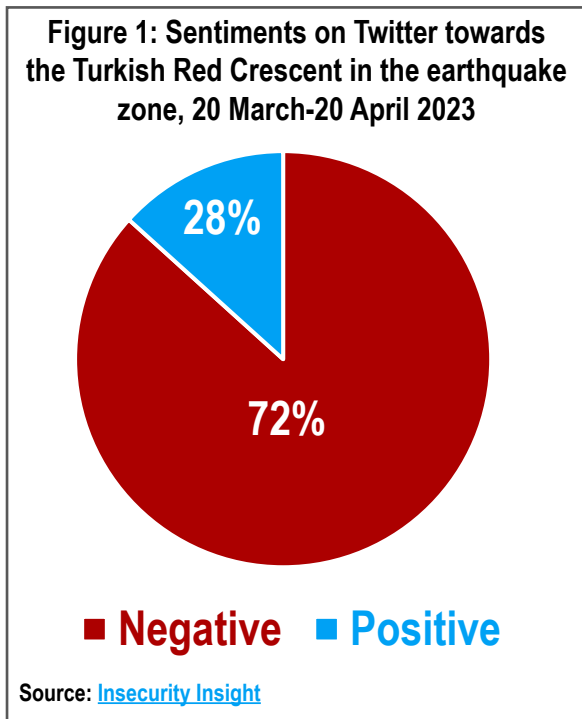
Timeline of the tent sale saga:

- **06 February 2023:** Earthquake hits south-eastern Türkiye and north-western Syria, killing tens of thousands.
- **10 February 2023:** Turkish Red Crescent sells 2,050 tents to the AHBAP charity organisation.
- **25 February 2023:** In the evening the newspaper Cumhuriyet [publishes an article](#) detailing an investigation that confirms the sale of Turkish Red Crescent tents to AHBAP in the aftermath of the earthquake. The journalist behind the investigation, Murat Ağirel, was detained in 2008 as part of the Ergenekon trials and contested the 2018 parliamentary elections for the right-wing İYİ political party.
- **26 February 2023:** Charity organisation AHBAP confirms the reports, noting: *“While everyone was freezing to death (in the quake zone), we didn't have the luxury of [questioning the opportunity to buy tents from the Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent)]”*.
- **26 February 2023:** The head of the Turkish Red Crescent, Kerem Kınık, also confirms the reports, arguing on [Twitter](#): *“The cooperation between AHBAP and the Kızılay is moral, rational, legal. Anyone who claims otherwise either does not understand the issue or is malicious”*.
- **27 February 2023:** Kerem Kınık says on TV that [he was not aware of the tent sales](#) and criticises his organisation for the decision.
- **11 May 2023:** With elections looming, Turkish president Erdoğan criticises the Red Crescent for the selling of tents in the aftermath of the earthquake.
- **12 May 2023:** The head of the Turkish Red Crescent, Kerem Kınık, [resigns](#) following Erdoğan's criticism of the organisation.

In a Social Media Monitoring update published in May 2023 using data from March and April 2023, Insecurity Insight [found](#) that the majority of opinions towards the Turkish Red Crescent expressed on Twitter by social media users living in areas affected by the earthquake were negative (see Figure 1) with many users complaining that they can no longer trust the

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organisation following the revelations. Moreover, the findings suggested that the tent sale reports were primarily responsible for the negative sentiment. In fact, out of a number of factors cited by social media users as underlying their negative sentiments towards the Turkish Red Crescent, including an inadequate aid response and bad leadership, the tent sales was by far the most frequently cited issue, representing 64% of negative sentiment towards the organisation (see Figure 2). When discussing the tent sales, social media users tended to accuse the Turkish Red Crescent of corruption and of prioritising its commercial interests above humanitarian ones.



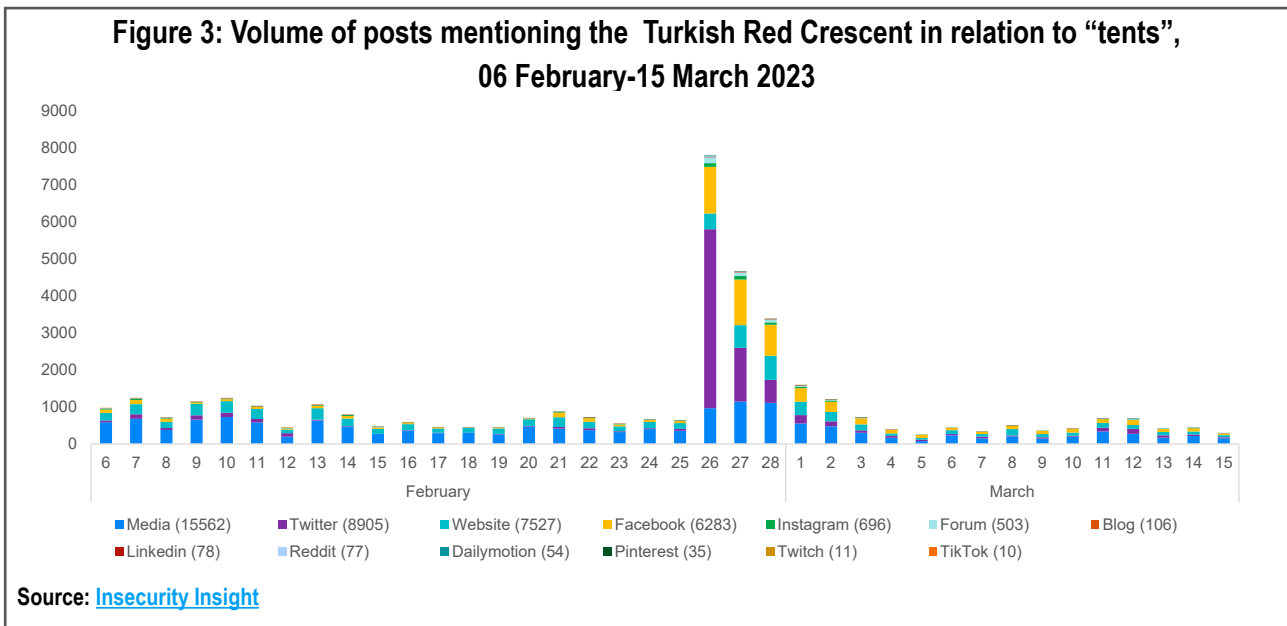
Findings

- **Social media platforms – mainly Facebook and Twitter – played a key role in the diffusion of the story when thousands of social media posts were posted after the tent sale scandal was reported.**

From the beginning of the humanitarian crisis on 6 February until 15 March 2023, nearly 39,900 online posts on social and non-social media (e.g. online newspapers, websites, blogs, etc.) discussed the Turkish Red Crescent in relation to the topic of “tents” in the Turkish language.¹ Because the tents sale scandal erupted in public in the evening of 25 February 2023, discussions and comments on the Turkish Red Crescent and tents prior to this date did not refer to the tents sale scandal.

Until 25 February the vast majority of online content discussing the Turkish Red Crescent and “tents” was generated by the edited media (i.e. newspapers) and other websites, and mostly consisted of the reporting of news of the organisation’s activities in the affected areas, which included the mentioning of tents in general ways. During this period social media played a negligible role in ongoing discussions of sentiments towards the Turkish Red Crescent.

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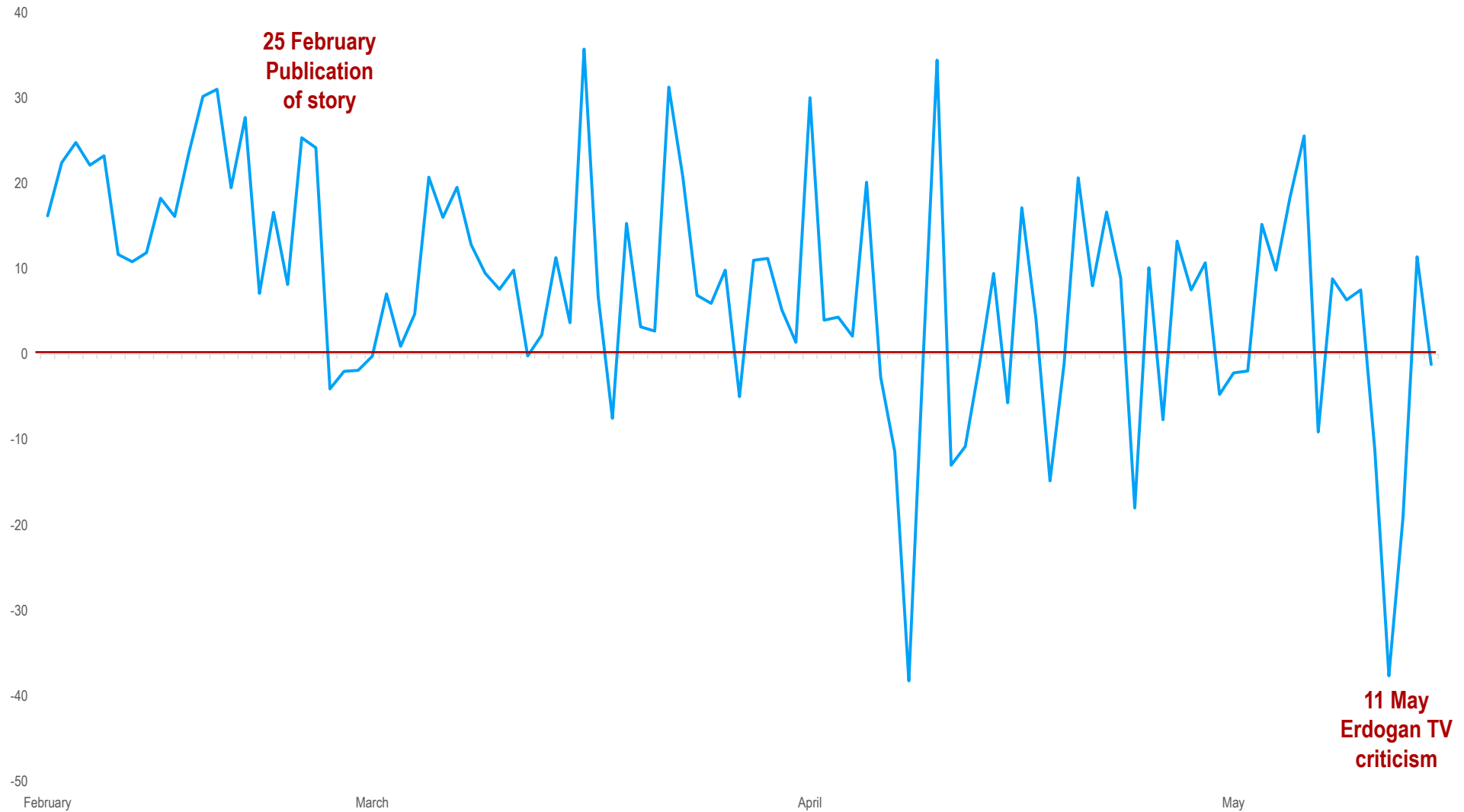
This changed when the story of tent sales emerged on 25 February 2023, when the prominent Turkish-language newspaper Cumhuriyet [published](#) an online article detailing its journalist’s investigation into tent sales, including the questions that the journalist sent to the Red Crescent and the organisation’s answers, which confirmed that tents were sold to AHBAB after the earthquake. Since the story was first published in the evening of 25 February, the impact of social media would only come into play the following day, on 26 February (see Figure 3). On this day nearly 5,000 posts referring to the story featured on Twitter, while there were a further 1,259 posts on Facebook and 102 on Instagram.

Although non-social media discussions also increased to reflect greater interest in the topic, with media, websites, and forums registering 965, 424, and 150 online posts, respectively, on 26 February, nevertheless they were significantly overtaken by a much larger volume of posts on social media. This remained the case for the following days, until the mass discussion on the subject gradually declined as public attention moved on to other topics.

Data suggests that public online sentiment towards the Turkish Red Crescent was significantly and immediately affected by the revelations of tents sales, and later even more so as the topic was increasingly politicised, including through statements by President Erdoğan. To understand the impact of the revelations on public online sentiment towards the Turkish Red Crescent, we rely on data on net sentiment (i.e. total positive sentiment minus total negative sentiment). As suggested in Figure 4, in the weeks following the earthquake (6-25 February), on average net sentiment towards the Red Crescent was highly positive (i.e. above zero), with a score of 19.6. This picture evolved following the public revelations on 25 February 2023. Firstly, on 26 February the net sentiment score dropped sharply to below zero, with total negative sentiment outweighing total positive sentiment towards the organisation. Unlike the period before the revelations, during which the net sentiment score remained very positive throughout, after the revelations the net sentiment repeatedly dropped below zero, including on 12 May when President Erdoğan publicly criticised the Red Crescent on television. Secondly, on average, the net sentiment score remained much lower following the revelations than in the previous period (6-25 February), as total negative sentiment towards the organisation increased. While the net sentiment towards the organisation averaged around a high score of 19.6 between 6 and 25 February, from 26 February onwards it declined to an average of 4.9. This highlights how one specific story had a significant negative impact on public online sentiment towards the Turkish Red Crescent.

Figure 4: Number of people estimated to have been reached by posts mentioning the Turkish Red Crescent in relation to tents, 06 February-15 March 2023

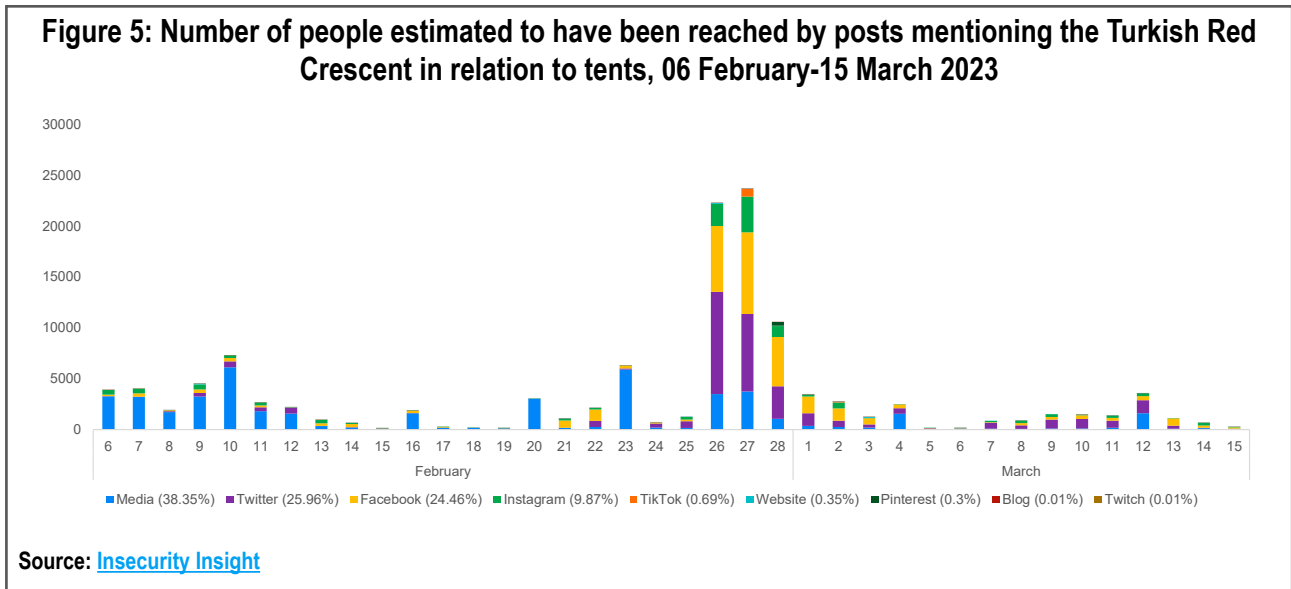
Net sentiment refers to the value obtained after subtracting negative sentiment values from positive sentiment values. Net positive sentiment occurs when positive sentiment is greater than negative sentiment, while net negative sentiment occurs when the value of negative sentiment is greater than that of positive sentiment. Net positive sentiment is reflected in the graph when values are above zero, while net negative sentiment is reflected when values are below zero. For example, if on a particular day expressed negative sentiment outweighed positive sentiment, this would be shown by a value which drops below zero.



Source: [Insecurity Insight](#)

- **Millions of social media users were exposed to posts discussing the issue.**

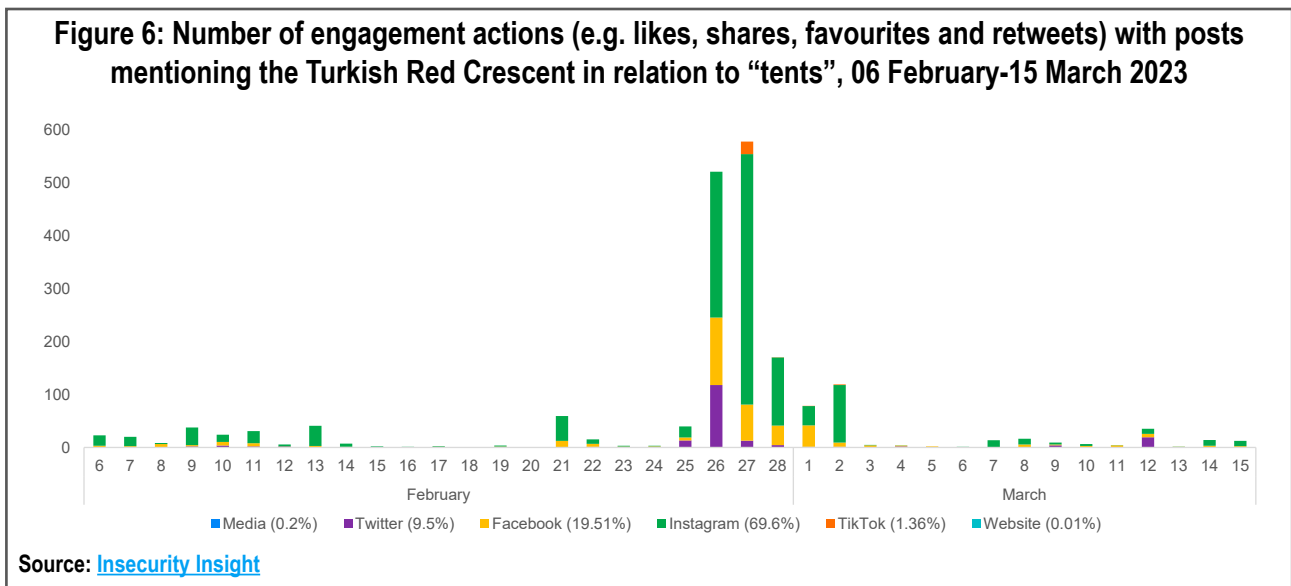
As a result of the thousands of posts discussing the issue that were posted on social media, tens of millions of social media users – mainly on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and to a lesser extent TikTok – were exposed to the story. Indeed, on 26 and 27 February 2023 the estimated reach of relevant social media posts amounted to nearly 20 million users (see Figure 5).



- **Hundreds of thousands of social media users actively interacted with posts discussing the issue, mostly on Instagram.**

Although most of the social media users were exposed to the story on Facebook and Twitter (see Figure 5), Figure 6 suggests that engagement with posts related to the issue in the form of likes or shares occurred primarily on Instagram. Engagement can also be seen on Facebook and Twitter, and, to a lesser extent, TikTok.

One explanation for the significant extent of engagement on Instagram is that former political activist Murat Ağirel, who was the Cumhuriyet journalist responsible for the scoop and one of the very first people to share the story on social media, used his Instagram page – which has around 160,000 followers at the time of the publication of this report – to share the news. After sharing his Cumhuriyet article, Ağirel attracted 16,891 likes and 1,621 comments.²



- **The revelations implicating the Turkish Red Crescent were rapidly picked up by opposition figures and parties.**

With elections looming in the background, opposition parties in Turkey used the revelations to criticise both the Red Crescent and the Erdoğan government, which maintains a close and complex relationship with the humanitarian organisation.

Indeed, among the top profiles whose posts on the revelations had a significant impact was that of Tuncay Özkan, a member of parliament in the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP) opposition party. Between 26 and 28 February his five Facebook posts on the revelations are estimated to have reached 447,000 social media users.

Posts by another highly influential page, Atatürk, which also regularly criticises Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government on Facebook, reached 288,000 social media users.

The pro-Kurdish Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP) party's Facebook page also features among the top influencers, with its posts reaching 259,000 users.

In sum, data appears to confirm how the revelations rapidly became an important issue in the political scene, in turn serving to boost the impact of the story on social media in the days following its release.

Information flow in the age of social media

With an estimated 80% of the Turkish population being social media users, social media in Turkish has a critical place in the information ecosystem, which, according to Internews, refers to “complex organisations of dynamic social relationships through which information moves and transforms and flows”. Indeed, research by the CDAC Network conducted in Türkiye in the months following the earthquake suggests that social media platforms are particularly relied on to access information and news, with critical demographic categories such as young adults often shunning traditional sources of information and turning instead to online influencers.

Social media usage in Turkey

In 2022 an estimated 68.9 million Turks – or 80.8% of the population – were social media users. Of these, 34.4 million were Facebook users, 52.15 million used Instagram, 26.56 million were on TikTok, and 16.10 million were Twitter users.

Source: [Datareportal](#), 2023

If we focus on the case of the Red Crescent and online discussions around its decision to sell tents to a fellow humanitarian organisation in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, this report advances quantitative data that highlights and confirms the increasingly central role social media plays in the dissemination of information and opinions related to the aid sector. Due to the humanitarian sector's characteristics, including its inherently international aspect and its role in providing welfare to large swathes of vulnerable populations, in many countries around the world this sector occupies a highly visible and public place in society: indeed, activities linked to humanitarian organisations – including security incidents or changes to programmes – often tend to be a matter of national importance and are therefore often subject to widespread commentary.

This report's Red Crescent case study demonstrates that when a story of public interest related to the humanitarian sector is published, social media plays a double role. Firstly, it serves as a conduit for the rapid dissemination of the story. Indeed, immediately following the publication of the tent sale story, social media immediately overtook online edited media as the main medium of dissemination of the news, with thousands of social media posts being uploaded on a number of platforms. At the same time, data clearly implies that when this occurs, many more people are reached and exposed to the story as a result of dissemination on social media than through online edited media.

Secondly, unlike edited media and other traditional sources of information, where the public is often a passive spectator, social media platforms serve as a forum for public deliberations and exchanges on the subject. In fact, data shows that public engagement (e.g. comments) almost exclusively took place on social media platforms. This, in turn, attests that people in general tend to not only be interested in informing themselves about topics linked to the humanitarian sector, but also to engage and participate in ongoing discussions.

Another critical finding that is pertinent to the aid sector in general is the role of influencers, which are often a trusted reference for people to verify information. In fact, influencers – including the journalist who conducted the investigative work about the tent sale story and published it on his newspaper page and then on his personal Instagram profile – were in many ways central nodes in online discussions and story dissemination, with social media publications on the story in some cases reaching hundreds of thousands of users. Although influencers can take any form depending on the country's context, in this case, with elections on the horizon and with the Turkish Red Crescent having close ties to the government in Ankara, some key influencers were known politicians or popular political pages. Users opposed to the administration either looked for influencers linked to the political opposition to verify the information, or were particularly prone to being reached by these influencers through algorithms that often suggest pages and profiles that match one's preferences and tend to reinforce biases or confine users to a bubble of similar-minded people. Once a particular story about humanitarian activities enters the discussions driven by these influencers, it will spread within this bubble, deepening the sentiments shared among this group of like-minded social media users.

Once a narrative is formed on social media networks, communication experts and organisations themselves experience difficulties controlling or fighting against the dominant perceptions and sentiments. Indeed, the Turkish Red Crescent seems to have employed a number of strategies to counter the tent sale narrative, firstly by defending its actions and then, when this did not work, by giving way to the generalised anger and admitting that it made a mistake. Nevertheless, despite this change in strategy, data on net sentiment towards the organisation presented in this report shows that sentiments towards the organisation remained on average lower than prior to the publication of the story, suggesting that the organisation was unable to achieve a complete turnaround.

Politics and elections play a key role in this process. The lasting and damaging impact of the story on net sentiments towards the Red Crescent highlights how politicised social media discussions are of critical importance to humanitarian actors. The case of the tent sale story in Türkiye shows that the adage "if you are not interested in politics, politics will be interested in you" applies to the humanitarian sector committed to the humanitarian principles of

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neutrality and impartiality and that sees itself as profoundly apolitical. Being neutral and impartial should not mean that humanitarian actors can ignore political discussions on social media that may become relevant to their operations. Moreover, it is likely that the risk that “humanitarian stories” are picked up and promoted by politically linked influencers is particularly high in the context of elections when all political camps look for compelling cases to talk about on social media in ways that illustrate their political standpoint either for or against a particular concern.

Methodology

Public data was collected with the help of an artificial intelligence tool using a number of Boolean search queries with search strings related to the subject of the Turkish Red Crescent and the tent sale story in the Turkish language. This identified content from a large range of online sources, including social media platforms, media (i.e. newspapers and journals), blogs, forums and websites. Social media platforms included Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Reddit, Dailymotion, Twitch and Pinterest.

The data collected covers the period from the beginning of the earthquake, 6 February, until 15 May 2023, and an estimated 219,000 online observations (i.e. mentions of the Turkish Red Crescent in relation to “tents” on social media, edited media, blogs, forums and websites) were included in the dataset used for analysis. Furthermore, millions of observations in the form of, for example, engagement actors (i.e. likes, retweets, shares, favourites, etc.) were also captured.

The data was analysed in depth to determine how the reports emerged and spread online, and also to extrapolate insights on the role of social media in the online diffusion of the story.

There are two main limitations in this assessment of sentiments expressed on social media. Firstly, in focussing on data in the Turkish language, the study does not contain data in Kurdish and Arabic, two languages that are particularly pertinent in the area affected by the earthquake. Secondly, the study does not take into account private social media data. Nevertheless, the results presented in this report on net sentiment can still be interpreted as a strong indication of general trends in public opinion relating to the Turkish Red Crescent and the tent sale saga.

¹ This figure excludes reshares of original posts. If reshares were included, the volume of posts would climb to 72,700 posts across all media.

² Information on the number of shares is not available.

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