

## How Turkey's imagination was censored during the Olympics

During the closing ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics, a Turkish National TV presenter censored John Lennon's song Imagine. FSD team member Funda Ustek discusses how Turkey is trying to eliminate its citizens' ability to imagine a world without religion.



The whole world was watching the 2012 Olympics closing ceremony on 12 August 2012 and listening to a recording of John Lennon singing Imagine. Perhaps the whole world was trying to imagine a world at that moment with no countries, no possessions, no hunger and no religion too. That is the whole world except for Turkey. While translating John Lennon's song on air, a Turkish National TV (TRT) presenter [translated](#) all the lyrics correctly except for "no religion too". For viewers with language barriers and those who did not know the song, the presenter effectively limited their ability to imagine a world without religion.

One can naively argue the presenter did not fully understand the lyrics and therefore could not translate this particular line. From my own interpreting experience, I could tell that this was not the case. Nevertheless it would be unfair to blame solely the presenter without recognising the bigger

picture of this censorship.

TRT has been known to closely follow and represent the views of the Turkish government. With the ["mildly Islamist"](#) Justice and Development Party (AKP) in power since 2002, no wonder TRT programmes have become ever more sensitive to religious matters. After all, it was only a few months ago that prime minister Erdogan [implied](#) his government's desire to "raise a religious youth". It came as no surprise when one of Turkey's favourite children's cartoon characters started delivering even more religious messages; the main character Pepe learned Islamic ablution techniques and Islamic prayer (*namaz*).

TRT has also been renowned for its covert censorship on matters that would challenge the mainstream government view. If you [search online](#) for "TRT sansürledi", which literally means "TRT censored", you will find more than 85,000 hits and a wide range of censorship topics: from military conflict, to criticism of the government over their handling of social and economic matters, from censoring certain parts of an [old Turkish movie](#) to [songs](#) they consider to be obscene. There is a fine line between maintaining a high standard of balanced and critical broadcasting and declaring anything and everything the government does not want its citizens to hear and see as "obscene, defamatory, valueless, [and] against uses and customs". Needless to say, the former strives to create a platform for free speech, the latter to destroy it.

In the past decade, we have witnessed Turkey move down 50 places on Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index (from [99th](#) place in 2002 to [148th](#) in 2012). We have also witnessed an extraordinary number of students ([2,824](#) as of August 2012) and an unknown number of journalists being held in prison on various accusations. And we have witnessed journalists daring to speak against the government or write against it get overtly sacked, told to keep quiet on air and see their articles never published or broadcast.

With this background in mind, it is less of a challenge to understand why the TRT presenter censored John Lennon's Imagine. He might have feared being sent to prison, becoming unemployed or just crossing the government.

This is only part of the story. The Olympics should be represented as a whole and the public opinion about the games plays a particularly important role here. When a religiously inclined newspaper [blurred](#) out the shoulders of female athletes who dressed against the Islamic code, most media were silent on the matter and public forum discussions on the internet missed the point. The discussions that followed were generally about how women should dress according to Turkish customs and Islam (mind you only how *women* should dress, not men. You can read Maryam Omid's FSD blog post on what not to wear [here](#)).

Whilst there was also objection to these forums from secular circles, there were two important matters that led people to miss the point. Those supporting the idea that Turkish athletes should adhere to Islamic customs on what to wear during the Olympics and those rejecting this

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perspective because Turkey is a secular country were presenting their views on different platforms. More specifically, secular people were sharing and commenting on what the religiously inclined were saying on that matter but not directly responding to them and creating a free speech platform. In these discussions whether the newspaper had any right to censor the shoulders of these two athletes never arose. I believe this signifies why much censorship in Turkey goes without dispute. Censorship creates more censorship when people do not object to it.

Religion is a sensitive matter, and imagining the world with no religion can be controversial. Censoring a few lyrics to a song might sound trivial, but given the background of this censorship, the rights of those who do not believe, have a different understanding of Islamic customs than the mainstream perspective or would merely prefer to imagine a world without religion should be protected.

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