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Censorship and conspiracy theories rule the day in post-election Turkey

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There is an undeniable link between media censorship and the proliferation of conspiracy theories in Turkey. In turn, society is so polarized that it lacks the means to negotiate truth claims.

November elections, Turkey. Demotix/Avni Kantan. All rights reserved.

On 1 November 2015, Turkey reached the end of an early election period

that saw bombings, mob violence, the burning of party offices, political arrests, a nationwide media clampdown and military curfew in the Kurdish region of the country.

After failing to establish a majority government in the 7 June elections, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) won a landslide victory with 49 percent of the popular vote. Ranging from announcements of a "Ballot Box Revolution" to "Fear's Triumph," media responses differed drastically.

TV coverage of joyful celebrations by AKP supporters on the streets were matched with a sense of shock and incredulity circulating through social media among the supporters of opposition parties. They have been sharply awakened from the dream of ending the AKP's monopoly over state power and preventing the implementation of a 'Turkish-style' super presidency.

In the wake of these general elections, what is it about Turkey's media culture that it undergirds the formation of a society so divided, that people seem to inhabit parallel realities?

Take the media reporting on the recent Ankara bombings, when two explosions near the Ankara Central railway station left 102 dead and more than 400 injured. The victims were about to participate in the "Labour, Peace and Democracy Rally" that was organized by dissident trade unions and civil society organizations to call for an end to the fighting between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), reignited after the June 7 elections. Casualties included many activists, unionists and pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) members.

We soon noticed that different stories about the bombings emerged in domestic and international media. On 12 October, we compared top search results for the international domain of google.com to the Turkish domain google.com.tr, using a 'research browser' (which cancels Google's personalization of results). In the former domain, top-ranked international news sources cited Turkish security sources to

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report that ISIL was the chief suspect behind the attacks. The Turkish domain results, however, were dominated by national pro-AKP media that implicated the PKK alongside ISIL, echoing prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's speech on national television.

Moreover, querying the international Google domain for "PKK" resulted in international news items highlighting what was absent from the top results in the Turkish google domain: the military attacks by the Turkish state on the PKK in the wake of the Ankara bombings.

The aftermath of the Ankara bombings has seen not less but more ambiguity around who ought to be identified as a "terrorist." President Erdoğan made the puzzling claim that parties fighting each other in Syria – ISIL, the PKK, Syrian intelligence, and the Syrian Kurdish organization PYD – committed "a collective act of terror" in order to manipulate the 1 November elections. A few days later, he had narrowed down his list to the PKK and ISIL. Even after the Ankara chief public prosecutor's office informed the public that the attack had been carried out by ISIL alone, an unfazed Erdoğan continued to implicate the PKK in the attack.

A nationwide poll on 17-18 October found that 42 percent of AKP supporters believed that the PKK was responsible for the attack.

*Relatives of the Ankara victims. Demotix/Recep Yılmaz. *

These differentiated explanations surrounding the Ankara bombing, for domestic and international audiences, indicate the existence of separate spheres of communication and information. Similarly, Turkey's national media is split to such an extent that 'neutrality' carries neither much validity nor relevance nowadays.

For instance, Turkish public television is considered 'partisan media' by the opposition. Figures shared by the latter show that in the run-up to the recent elections, the AKP was allocated 30 hours of screen time, Erdoğan was given 29 hours, the main opposition party CHP had five hours, the far-right MHP was allotted one hour, and the pro-Kurdish HDP only enjoyed 18 minutes.

For many within Turkey, privately owned broadcast media had already lost their credibility during the Gezi protests of 2013. "Penguin media" has emerged as a descriptor for CNN Türk, and other channels deemed alike, which aired a penguin documentary instead of covering the mass uprising.

Under AKP rule, between 2002 and 2014, Turkey's place on the World

Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders slid from 99 out of 134 to 149 out of 180 countries. Only last week, two newspapers and two TV channels affiliated with the AKP supporter-turned-nemesis Gülen movement were seized and placed in the hands of a trustee.

The internet, while often associated with connectedness and information flow, is split, too. One factor is the set of information management techniques that construct a 'clean' and 'safe' internet. Filters that are voluntary in private use and mandatory in places such as schools and libraries work with blacklists of banned websites and whitelists of permitted ones. Amendments in 2014 and 2015 to the law regulating access to information on the internet enabled the swift temporary banning of websites by the prime minister and other ministers.

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The introduction of a new government-controlled Internet Service Provider Union (ISPU) with obligatory membership further enabled the quick enforcement of take-down decisions. ISPU members are asked to obtain control utilities such as Deep Packet Inspection (DPI), which enable the extensive surveillance of personal and encrypted communication. These utilities further support DNS hijacking, namely the redirection of internet traffic for surveillance or access restriction purposes.

And in recent years, Twitter has been blocked at crucial moments, such as during the local elections in 2014. The Removal Request Report by Twitter on Turkey, covering July to December 2014, shows that requests from Turkey were higher than all other countries combined.

While the actual number remains unknown, the independent initiative Engelli Web crowdsources information on blocked websites. It listed 80,000 of them in May 2015. While the majority of banned websites concerned porn, they also involved dissident and pro-Kurdish websites. During the run-up to the recent elections, just between 20 and 24

October, 12 dissident news websites were blocked.

Yet where there is a filter, there necessarily is an 'outside', too: a 'dirty' or 'unsafe' internet that seems lawless, immoral, and threatening. The technique of filtering comes with the idea of an outside enemy, or Other – although the AKP's media policy also addresses cleansing and controlling the Other within oneself when facing the seductions of pornography or terrorist propaganda. After the Gezi uprising, Erdoğan declared Twitter a "menace" to society that he vowed to "eradicate completely."

According to a recent survey, a large number of AKP supporters favoured an internet free of intervention, but nonetheless deemed regulatory measures necessary. Of all respondents, regardless of their political orientation, 41 percent believed that the internet is "used wrongly to spread false rumors and lies about public figures." Indeed, before its turn to DPI tools, the government relied on voluntary peer-surveillance by citizens, convinced of the need to clean up the internet.

In contrast, for opponents and dissidents, what lies beyond the filter is often a realm where truth is spoken, people voice their opinions and disclose information through citizen-journalism and 'sousveillance'

(bottom-up surveillance) tactics.

During the elections, the independent civil initiative "Vote and Beyond" ("Oy ve Ötesi")*,* which provides training for observers at polling stations in order to curb election fraud, used an online system to collect digital photos of ballot box results for comparison with the official reports.

Lacking proper screen time, leaders of the opposition parties used internet platforms to communicate with voters: the leader of CHP chose the popular urban dictionary "Ekşi Sözlük" to answer voter questions under the entry, "I'm Kılıçdaroğlu and I'm with you." Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of HDP, used Twitter's Periscope and Facebook's Livestream apps to answer direct questions from voters, a solution to overcome exclusion from broadcast media that is commonly used by journalists laid off for their opposing views.

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While both associated with transparency *and* dark forces, the blocked internet has not been eradicated. On more than one occasion, when Twitter was been blocked in Turkey, the hashtag #TwitterisBlockedinTurkey began trending. Likewise, in the hours following the Twitter ban during the March 2014 local elections, there was a 138 percent increase in the volume of tweets from Turkey: around 17,000 tweets every minute.

Since December 2014, voice recordings suggesting corruption at the highest levels of the government have been leaked by the @Haramzadeler333 Twitter account. After its closure, the still active @fuatavni_f (Fuat Avni) account, which has 2.2 million followers, has continued with similar releases, recently including the names of citizens and judges claimed to be involved in election fraud in support of the AKP.

The censored and filtered web comes together with a culture of conspiracy theories that reduce oppositional forces to 'dark' forces, sprouting from the supposedly shady side of the internet. If Fuat Avni

remains a mysterious account inducing all kinds of speculation regarding its origins, "Vote and Beyond" maintains a public profile and is transparent about its own workings. Yet pro-government newspaper *Sabah* claimed that it was working to undermine the AKP's electoral success with support from abroad and the 'terrorist' Gülen movement's media.

Protest against internet censorship, Ankara, 2014. Demotix/emrah özesen. All rights reserved.

Social media has played an important role in protest mobilization since the Gezi uprising, assisting self-organization beyond formal political parties or existing organizations. For opponents of the government, the awareness of censorship constitutes the belief in a more authentic and transparent public 'beyond' the filter. Yet conspiratorial reasoning undoes such claims to political authenticity: nothing is 'what it seems' in a conspiracy and the unfiltered internet will deceive you.

The discourse of 'lobbies' that stir up dissent in Turkey substitutes the claim of spontaneity with the accusation of manipulation. For instance, Erdoğan has accused a "robot lobby" of targeting his party through viral tweets. While it is true that Twitter has taken note of an extraordinary amount of fake accounts in Turkey operated by bots, researchers and

media activists have found them working on the government's side, with some suspecting the organized operation of what they call "AK trolls."

In conspiracy thinking, the best evidence for the existence of a dark force is probably the lack of clear evidence: how could a dark, ungraspable force ever become completely clear? This type of rhetoric and its affective communication characterizes the above-mentioned claim that ISIL and PKK plotted the Ankara bombings together.

Rather than evidence, the reasoning focused on political effect: the PKK and HDP expected to raise the pro-Kurdish vote by killing their own supporters. 'Shady' social media was made part of the narrative again – after the Ankara bombings, the pro-government media found two Twitter accounts that had warned against the possibility of a bombing during the rally the night before. They linked these accounts to HDP members to claim that the HDP and PKK were responsible for the attacks. One of the arrested claimed that police tortured him to accept ownership of the account. Both HDP members were soon released without charge.

Conspiracy theories create an atmosphere of fear: anyone can be randomly accused and persecuted as an affiliate of a 'dark' force. Their ambiguity and contradictions also allow for flexibility in constructions of who the 'enemy' is. Dozens of high-ranking army generals were arrested in 2009 in the "Ergenekon" case on charges of plotting a military coup, yet they were exonerated as soon as the AKP fell out with the Gülen movement, members of which had helped build the case in the first place.

Accordingly, the AKP's narrative of an army plot against the elected government eventually gave way to a Gülenist plot against the army, while AKP representatives claimed to have been 'tricked' by Gülenists.

Growing skepticism towards broadcast and social media alike clouds the domain of the

Recently, the talk of lobbies has been replaced with references to some kind of invisible "üst akıl", or "mastermind," the ambiguous meaning of which can connote western powers, a secret global organization with connections to

visible and knowable.

Israel akin to the Illuminati, as well as a long list of pawns within Turkey.

This converges with incessant talk about a "parallel state", referring alternatively to Gülenists that retain their bureaucratic positions despite recent purges and to the People's Assemblies affiliated with the PKK that seek to initiate self-governance in Kurdish regions, despite the fact that the PKK has long relinquished its claim to establish a sovereign Kurdish state.

Conspiratorial reasoning is not the prerogative of the AKP, and it is not just a political rhetorical device. It is also a cultural response to the particular media conditions of Turkey, which are, however, sustained and exploited by the government. Censorship creates its own 'outside' and hence, rather than erasing the impermissible from the public's mind, it *constructs* the notion of 'unsafe' and 'dark' forces.

Growing skepticism towards broadcast and social media alike clouds the domain of the visible and knowable, to the extent that all kinds of mysterious forces can be evoked. The splits within the Turkish media ecology, afforded by censorship and information management, shape, and are shaped by, an extremely polarized society that currently lacks the means to negotiate differences or weigh truth claims. Instead, we are left with a much rawer type of information warfare, while opposition parties inhabit parallel realities.

Those who did not get what they wanted in the recent elections will not only have to disrupt censorship, but also break the spell of conspiracy thinking. They will have to foster a media for an inclusive politics of hope, one that can counter polarization and the politics of fear.

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Turkey, as in turkish politics, AKP politics, is a disgrace and it is a disgrace that talks between EU and Turkey are not suspended.

At the same time, Turkeys membership of NATO should be suspended.

The YPG, Yezidis and PUK peshmerga should be armed now and directly with more and heavier weapons.

Turkeys should be warned no more interference with Syria or bear the consequences and be bombed.

If Turkey does not want to listen, does not respect minority rights, they will have to bear the consequences. They could be given an ultimatum : talk with kurds, HDP, civil society should start within say a year, cessation of attacks within 6 months, an equitable proposal within 24 months.

No compliance, that means arms for the PKK.

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