



# The AK Party's social media strategy: controlling the uncontrollable

**T**he AK Party seems to have taken the same approach to social media as it took to traditional media. Instead of a long-term social media production strategy, the party seems to prefer containing social media externally. This will not deter many users, who are skilled at circumventing such obstacles. However, it represents a distinct blow to freedoms in Turkey, and may also have a long-lasting effect on the country's digital economy

**ASST. PROF. ERKAN SAKA**  
*Istanbul Bilgi University*

## TURKEY ONLINE

Turkey's citizens are a rapidly growing online presence, particularly when it comes to social media. A report from Turkish e-commerce site Markafoni recently stated that Turkey is one of the top 20 countries for Internet penetration (ranking 11th).<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile Madreport, an agency that specializes in mobile marketing, says 94 percent of Turkey's online population uses Facebook.<sup>2</sup> The same report states that nearly 25 percent of female citizens and 34 percent of male citizens in Turkey use smartphones, with mobility increasingly being an essential aspect of being online. While user rate does vary across platforms, nonetheless in Turkey Internet usage increasingly means social media usage. This is also reflected in a report from eMarketer, which announced recently that Turkey has the highest penetration rate in Twitter usage globally<sup>3</sup> as well as being second in the world for check-ins on Foursquare, a location-based social media service<sup>4</sup>. In yet another report by Turkey's Ministry of Youth and Sport, a high positive correlation is found between social media usage and education level.<sup>5</sup>

## INTERNET AND THE AK PARTY

The Internet is relatively decentralized, and the same is true of social media. In this context, a top-down campaign style has trouble functioning effectively in the social media environment. The generation of digital natives who grew up using media on the Internet has even more difficulty in understanding command and control systems and, therefore, continuously develop ways in which to challenge them.

The Justice and Development Party (AK Party) leadership does not seem to have understood or accepted the nature of Internet communications, and their strategies have relied primarily on dominating<sup>6</sup> from top-down, as if it is a centralized media. Since volunteer work or pro-AK Party opinion leaders in social media could not shape the public agenda as they wished, new strategies of domination had to be found.

A few months before the March 2014 local elections, a new Internet Law was proposed<sup>7</sup> that aimed to increase and legitimize both digital surveillance and online censorship. The amendments to the bill appeared to follow the AK Party's general approach to social media in particular and to the Internet in general: A refusal to understand the nature of media but an insistence on controlling it.



## THE AK PARTY LEADERSHIP DOES NOT SEEM TO HAVE UNDERSTOOD OR ACCEPTED THE NATURE OF INTERNET COMMUNICATIONS

Then, in the immediate aftermath of the new law discussions, Twitter was banned. This caused domestic and international outcry and dealt considerable damage to Turkey's reputation. Domestic Twitter usage increased rapidly after the ban,<sup>8</sup> while criticism was harsh: An official from the US State Department likened the Twitter ban to "21st century book burning."<sup>9</sup> Turkey's President Abdullah Gül, known as a good user of social media, explicitly opposed the Twitter ban.<sup>10</sup> One should be wary of Gül's position, however, as he approved the law in the first place,<sup>11</sup> despite his concerns regarding two articles and wider condemnation from society and activists alike. Amendments to two articles would later be made: Decisions to block websites had to be sent to court within



Turks protest the Twitter ban in Ankara. March 21, 2014  
PHOTO: AP, BURHAN OZBILICI

Ankara Mayor Melih Gökçek is an avid user of Twitter. Dec. 16, 2012  
PHOTO: ANKARA MUNICIPALITY



A poster punning on the name of Turkey's president (Abdullah Gül) at a rally against the proposed Internet Law. Feb. 22, 2014  
PHOTO: AP, EMRAH GÜREL



## PRO-AK PARTY HASHTAGS SPEND A RELATIVELY SHORT TIME IN TWITTER'S TRENDING TOPICS CATEGORIES

24 hours by Turkey's Internet watchdog, while Internet traffic would be collected based on IP numbers and subscriber numbers instead of URLs.<sup>12</sup> This defanged the law to some extent, but did not entirely tame it.

One of the public justifications of the new Internet Law was that there would not be bans like the previous YouTube ban in 2007.<sup>13</sup> However, Turkey continues to ban access to sites. Not only major ones like YouTube or Twitter, but also minor ones. A civil initiative, Engelli Web,<sup>14</sup> lists the number of banned sites in Turkey: as of January 2014 the figure exceeded 40,000.

Thus, while online restrictions will not deter digital natives from surfing independently through the many easily available and widely known tools to circumvent online censorship -- public DNS servers, VPN usage, Tor Project and other peer-to-peer anonymous networks, as well as e-mail/chat encryption and meshnets<sup>15</sup> -- it is a blow to emerging digital economies in Turkey.<sup>16</sup> More troublingly, they also limit the right to access to information, and curtail freedom of expression and privacy rights.<sup>17</sup>

### OLD HANDS AND NEW USERS

Supporters of Gezi were largely already actively engaged in social media users before the protests started. This meant that as the movement grew, these people were able to simply transfer their social media use to support the protests. Supporters of other groups in Turkey, however, were in general latecomers to the social media world. Many new, but real, Twitter users came along with Hizmet activism -- with several anonymous accounts emerging to leak rumors from Turkey's bureaucracy (for example @TwitAnkara or @FuatAvni -- the latter account having recently been withheld in Turkey by Twitter).<sup>18</sup>

One should also not be misled by Erdogan's continuous criticism of Twitter in particular and social media in general. At an official party administration level, many party branches already had their own Twitter accounts, and there had been regular workshops to encourage better social media usage. The author of this essay was even invited as a speaker



to one of the workshops.<sup>19</sup> However, these efforts did not turn ordinary AK Party sympathizers into frequent users with social capital in digital media battles.

### AK PARTY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Pro-AK Party voices focus their social media use on Twitter, while other social and political movements spread their usage across the media ecosystem. This can in particular be seen in the Gezi Park movement (a diffuse anti-government movement born out of small-scale environmental demonstrations in İstanbul's Gezi Park last summer), where the use of online mapping, blogs, video sharing platforms and crowd-sourced knowledge production are just some examples of the other platforms used.<sup>20</sup>

While Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan may rarely be positive about social media,<sup>21</sup> there are many active Twitter users in his cadre. One category that is easily observed is that of AK Party officials, parliamentarians and ministers. Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek, Ankara Mayor Melih Gökçek and AK Party advisor İbrahim Kalın frequently express opinions on Twitter. These people have become opinion leaders in the Twittersphere, some earning their blue "verified" badges. Gökçek is particularly



active on Twitter, not only promoting his own and his party's agenda, but also engaging with his followers.

The second category of AK Party users are what, in Internet argot, are referred to as "trolls." These are users who have the specific goal of attacking opposing or contradicting views. Twitter users such as @Esadce, @kuscuesref, @DetroitliKizil and @WUattack are examples of pro-AK Party trolls, and launch ad hominem attacks against opponents on the platform.

After these trolls come the hashtag campaigners. These are AK Party supporters who launch campaigns on the platform using Twitter's preferred method of highlighting a discussion point or topic. Hashtag campaigns have been launched by AK Party supporters (and opponents alike) to bring global recognition to a topic through the hashtag prefix. It is this group that constitutes the AK Party's self-declared 6,000-strong "social media army."<sup>22</sup> These volunteers promote the party and its agenda and challenge the opposition.

The final group of AK Party-supporting users identified are the Twitter accounts (such as @gizliarsiv and @akkulis) who are believed to leak intelligence information. Many conspiracy theories are leaked from these accounts and then re-tweeted by other pro-AK Party Twitter users.<sup>23</sup>

Many ordinary AK Party-supporting Twitter users prefer not to use their real identity online or, those that do, couple their identity with pro-AK Party or Rabia (the four-fingered salute that emerged to signify support for former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi following the killing of his supporters in Cairo's Rabia al-Adawiya Square on Aug. 14, 2013) symbols. (However, Rabia symbols seem to have been used less frequently in recent months.) Supporters of the Gezi Park movement and the Hizmet movement (affiliated with Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen) traditionally used their own offline identities in online communities, not avatars. However, as government intimidation of social media users has increased, anonymous pro-Gezi accounts have started to emerge.

#### HASHTAGS BATTLES AND TWITTER BOTS

When they picked up on the uses of social media and Twitter hashtags in particular, AK Party supporters were quick to coordinate campaigns and embrace the use of automated "Twitter bots" -- accounts generated by software that tweets automatically to spread messages, spam links and attract followers. Despite claims to the opposite in pro-AK Party circles, there is evidence of a relatively centralized campaign aimed at topping the lists of "trending topics" -- that is, hashtags that are tweeted at a greater rate than others. Two researchers, Peter Nut and Dieter Leder actually made an analysis of a pro-AK Party hashtags and discovered more than 18,000 fake Twitter accounts. Most profile photos were harvested from the Internet (in general, attractive female images were chosen).<sup>24</sup> The AK Party, therefore, seems to have a "robot army" on Twitter. This is a major way to shape hashtag lists.

Compared to pro-dersane (crammer-style preparatory schools, many of which are run by Hizmet members, and all of which are currently threatened for closure/nationalization) or Gezi Park protesters' Twitter campaigns in Turkey, the pro-AK Party hashtags spend a relatively short time in Twitter's trending topics categories. In addition, pro-AK Party hashtags frequently appear in reaction to existing opposition hashtags. Their tone is either defensive or aggressive. Most discourses are full of conspiracy theories and frequently attack critical users. Ad hominem attacks or threats of blacklisting are frequent. Humor, when present, accompanies the aggressiveness. An example of this can be seen at the cartoons circulated after the death of Ahmet Atakan, an

Smart phones  
are ubiquitous  
in modern  
Turkey.  
March 21, 2014  
PHOTO: DHA,  
UGUR CAN



anti-government protester, in Antakya. A pro-AK Party humor magazine *Cafcaf* published a cartoon claiming his friends threw Atakan from the roof.<sup>25</sup> Pro-AK Party cartoonist Salih Memecan's cartoon had the same theme.<sup>26</sup> Later, in early January 2014, when protests and clashes in Hamburg, Germany occurred,<sup>27</sup> pro-AK Party users started a hashtag (#DirenHamburg) supposedly in defense of protesters but actually to mock Gezi protesters.

Compared to campaigning by the AK Party and

## PRESSURE ON NEW MEDIA SHOULD BE CONTEXTUALIZED IN THE BROADER ISSUE OF MEDIA FREEDOM

Hizmet movement, the Gezi Park campaigns illustrate the most decentralized forms of organization. Gradually, a few anonymous or centralized Twitter accounts appeared and played a main role (such as the RedHack Twitter account), but in general the formation of trends remained decentralized. Hizmet campaigns seem to be the most centralized ones. Accounts such as @SosyalPencere and some opinion leaders play a central role and, as such, provided a protracted manner of Twitter campaigning. These accounts determine new hashtags for Twitter, which other supporters then push to become trending topics.

### CONCLUSION

Despite its members' increasingly embracing Twitter in particular, the AK Party seems to have taken the same approach to social media as it took to traditional media. Turkish governments even appear to have taken the same attitude toward transnational companies such as Twitter, using tax to tame<sup>28</sup>the relative freedom found in Twitter usage. This might not work,<sup>29</sup>but the overall strategy does not change. Instead of a long-term media production strategy, the party seems to prefer containing social media externally by means of the restrictive Internet Law and campaigns to demonize it.<sup>30</sup>These will not deter many users, who are skilled at circumventing such obstacles. However, it may have a long lasting effect on digital economies particularly and Turkey's economy in general.

Furthermore, pressure on new media should be contextualized in the broader issue of media freedom. The latest Freedom House report stated that the media in Turkey is "not free."<sup>31</sup>Meanwhile the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) cited Turkey<sup>32</sup>as the world's biggest jailer of journalists for the second year running in 2013. With Turkey's mainstream media relatively under control, the battle for freedom of expression is beginning to switch to the new media. As a *Wall Street Journal* piece<sup>33</sup>emphasized recently, Turkey may be presenting a model of censorship for many other countries, with Prime Minister Erdogan becoming one of the world's most determined Internet censors. 

1. "Markafoni'den Türkiye'nin online perakende," *Webrazzi*, accessed April 22, 2014, <http://www.webrazzi.com/2013/10/17/markafoni-eticaret-infografik/>.
2. "Geleneksel, Dijital ve Sosyal Medya," *Connected Vivaki*, accessed April 22, 2014, <http://www.connectedvivaki.com/>.
3. Erman Taylan, "Twitter penetrasyonu en yüksek ülke Türkiye," *Webrazzi*, April 22, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.webrazzi.com/2013/10/25/twitter-penetrasyonu-en-yuksek-ulke-turkiye-webrazzi-pro/>.
4. Erman Taylan, "Omid Ashtari: Dünyada ABD'den sonra en çok check-in," *Webrazzi*, April 22, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.webrazzi.com/2013/09/25/omid-ashtari-dunyada-abdden-sonra-en-cok-check-in-yapilan-ulkesiniz/>.
5. Erman Taylan, "Türkiye'de cinsiyet, yaş ve mezun olunan okula," *Webrazzi*, April 22, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.webrazzi.com/2014/04/19/turkiyede-cinsiyet-yas-ve-mezun-olunan-okula-gore-sosyal-medya-kullanimi-webrazzi-pro/>.
6. Yonca Poyraz Doğan, "Social media expert Saka: AK Party approaches social," *Today's Zaman*, April 13, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-344570-social-media-expert-saka-ak-party-approaches-social-media-to-dominate.html>
7. Daniel Dombey, "Turkey clamps down on internet as Erdogan tightens grip on power," *Financial Times*, Jan. 12, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/af179212-7b6b-11e3-a2da-00144feabd0.html>.
8. James Plafke, "Turkey bans Twitter, tweets rise by 138%," *Geek.com*, March 21, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.geek.com/news/turkey-bans-twitter-tweets-rise-by-138-1588724/>.
9. Tomas Jivanda, "Turkey Twitter ban: White House condemns ban as '21st century book burning'," *The Independent*, 23 March, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/turkey-twitter-ban-white-house-condemns-ban-as-21st-century-book-burning-9210678.html>.
10. "Turkey's President Abdullah Gul Calls Erdogan's Twitter Ban Unacceptable," *Huffington Post*, March 21, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/21/turkey-president-twitter-ban\\_n\\_5005759.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/21/turkey-president-twitter-ban_n_5005759.html).
11. "Turkey's Gul approves law tightening Internet," *Reuters*, Feb. 18, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/18/us-turkey-government-idUSBREA1H1XL20140218>.
12. "President Gül approves disputed Internet bill as gov't offers amendments," *Hürriyet Daily News*, Feb. 18, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/president-gul-approves-disputed-internet-bill-as-govt-offers-amendments.aspx?PageID=238&NID=62654&NewsCatID=338>.
13. Jeffrey Rosen, "Google's Gatekeepers," *The New York Times*, Nov. 28, 2008, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/magazine/30google-t.html?scp=1&sq=youtube+censor+Turkey&st=nyt&r=0>.
14. Engelliweb, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://engelliweb.com/>.
15. For more information on these tactics: Viktor Kotsev, "Why The Global Battle For Control Of The Internet Can't Be," *Fast Company*, May 9, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.fastcompany.com/3029672/most-creative-people/why-the-global-battle-for-control-of-the-internet-is-a-lost-cause>.
16. Daniel Dombey, "Social media bans darken Turkey's economic growth," *Financial Times*, April 14, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1692843c-c3d9-11e3-a8e0-00144feabd0.html>
17. "Turkey: Gul Should Veto New Internet Rules," HRW, Feb. 9, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/06/turkey-gul-should-veto-new-internet-rules>.
18. "Twitter withholds account of whistleblower Fuat Avni in Turkey," *Today's Zaman*, Aug. 5, 2014, accessed Aug. 6, 2014, [http://www.todayszaman.com/national\\_twitter-withholds-account-of-whistleblower-fuat-avni-in-turkey\\_354648.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/national_twitter-withholds-account-of-whistleblower-fuat-avni-in-turkey_354648.html).
19. "AK Parti İstanbul'dan sosyal medya atığı," *Yeni Şafak*, May 13, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/teknoloji-haber/ak-parti-istanbuldan-sosyal-medya-atagi-22.04.2013-512896>.
20. "Occupy Gezi", *Know Your Meme*, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/occupy-gezi>.
21. A list of Erdogan's negative quotes on social media: "Turkish Prime Minister's 9 Craziest Quotes About Social Media," *Mashable*, March 28, 2014, accessed 13 May, 2014, <http://mashable.com/2014/03/28/quotes-turkey-erdogan-social-media/>
22. Barin Kayaoglu, "Turkey's AKP Mobilizes Twitter Army for Elections," *Al-Monitor*, Sept. 18, 2013, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/turkeys-akp-twitter-election.html>.
23. For a longer list of active pro-AK Party and pro-Hizmet Twitter accounts: "Sosyal medya muharebesi!," *Milliyet*, May 13, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/sosyal-medya-muharebesi-/gundem/detay/1830663/default.htm>.
24. Elcin Poyrazlar, "Turkey's Leader Bans His Own Twitter Bot Army," *Vocativ*, March 26, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.vocativ.com/world/turkey-world/turkeys-leader-nearly-banned-twitter-bot-army/>.
25. "CafCaf Dergisinden Çirkin Ahmet Atakan Karikatürü," *Başka Haber*, Dec. 11, 2013, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.baskahaber.org/2013/09/cafcac-dergisinden-cirkin-ahmet-atakan.html>.
26. "Memecan, son eylemleri işte böyle çizdi," *On5yirmi5*, Sept. 18, 2013, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.on5yirmi5.com/haber/mizah/karikatur/136066/memecan-son-eylemleri-iste-boyle-cizdi.html>.
27. "Diren Hamburg," *Zaman Hollanda*, Jan. 6, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.zamanhollanda.nl/haber/gundem/2307/diren-hamburg>.
28. Zeynep Cermen, "Government looks to tame Twitter with taxes," *SES Türkiye*, May 8, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, [http://turkey.setimes.com/en\\_GB/articles/ses/articles/features/departments/national/2014/05/08/feature-01](http://turkey.setimes.com/en_GB/articles/ses/articles/features/departments/national/2014/05/08/feature-01).
29. Erkan Saka, "No office in Turkey in near future, No personal data to be given," *ErkanSaka.net*, April 16, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://erkansaka.net/visiting-twitter-team-no-office-in-turkey-in-near-future-no-personal-data-to-be-given-to-government/>.
30. See: Angela McRobbie and Sarah L Thornton, "Rethinking 'moral panic' for multi-mediated social worlds," *British Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 4 (1995): 559-574.
31. "Freedom House report designates Turkish media as 'not free'," *Today's Zaman*, May 10, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-347439-freedom-house-report-designates-turkish-media-as-not-free.html>
32. Elana Beiser, "Second worst year on record for jailed journalists - Reports," *CPJ*, Dec. 18, 2013, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://cpj.org/reports/2013/12/second-worst-year-on-record-for-jailed-journalists.php>
33. Joe Parkinson, Sam Schechner, and Emre Peker, "Turkey's Erdogan," *Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2014, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304626304579505912518706936>.

Copyright of Turkish Review is the property of FEZA Gazetecilik A.S. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.