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Social Media in Turkey as a Space for Political Battles: AKTrolls and other Politically motivated trolling

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on AKTrolls, defined as pro-government political trolls in Turkey, while attempting to draw implications about political trolling in the country in general. It examines their methods and effects, and it interrogates whether (and how) Turkish authorities have attempted to shape or counter politically motivated social media content production through trolling after the Gezi Park Protests that took place in 2013. My findings are based on an ethnographic study that included participant observation and in-depth interviews in a setting that is under-studied and about which reliable sources are difficult to find. The study demonstrates political trolling activity in Turkey is more decentralized and less institutionalized than generally thought, and is based more on ad hoc decisions by a larger public. However, I argue here that AKTrolls do have impact on reducing discourses on social media that are critical of the government, by engaging in surveillance, among other practices.

KEY WORDS: Censorship; Political trolling; Social media; Surveillance; Turkey

A wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in Turkey began on May 28, 2013, initially to contest the urban development plan for Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Park, and which, in Twitter parlance, came to be called ‘Occupy Gezi.’ Social media was a major tool used to mobilize and disseminate news about the protests. In the aftermath of the Gezi Park Protests, Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), was believed to have started ‘a troll army’1 to counter the growing hegemony of Gezi protesters on social media.2 This was the first time AKTrolls—as pro-AKP political trolls came to be called—began to be used widely in public discourses. This article examines the trolls’ methods and effects, and it interrogates whether (and how) Turkish authorities have attempted to shape or counter politically-motivated social media content production in the form of trolls after the Gezi Park protests.

To do so, I pose several questions. First, as the AKP leadership officially never has acknowledged the relationship between the government and AKTrolls, how do we construct

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evidence of that linkage? Second, in the context of rising political pressure on traditional media, as reported in various Freedom House media reports, with increases in censorship, economic restrictions, journalist imprisonments and media company confiscations, social media has grown in importance as a communication and political tool. How has government reacted to this shift? Third, how can we contextualize surveillance, which plays a major role in debates about government control over social media? The research aims to contribute to existing surveillance literature by elaborating the role of political trolling as an aid of surveillance in social media.

Methodology

The research for this article is based on an ethnographic approach that combines conventional and digital sources in a setting that is very much under-studied and in which reliable data are difficult to obtain. Archival research is used, as most digital data can be purchased on the open market from social media agencies, enabling the researcher to trace and collect the necessary digital documents. At times, data is provided free of charge if the purpose is academic. Media representations of political trolling in mainstream and social media also have been surveyed.

Participant observation is the primary basis of this research: The author actively engaged in social media communications with users who took part during and after the Gezi Park protests. These were both pro-Gezi activists and anti-Gezi social media users, some of whom can be classified as AKTrolls. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, including three with actors (interviewee 04, 06, 08) officially involved in social media political campaigns. Two other interviewees (02, 11) were self-identified as AKTrolls. One was a digital media producer with close ties to AKP circles, whose documentaries have been broadcast on state TV channels. Another troll, according to AK party circles, was a ‘Gülenist organizer’ on Twitter (interviewee 13). I also interviewed a relatively high-level bureaucrat (14) specializing in Turkey’s communication sector. Additionally, I engaged 30 user-activists in online and offline conversations/interviews to address specific questions.

Most online engagement occurred through Twitter and Facebook; offline engagement took place in cafes in the neighborhood of At Pazarı Meydanı in Istanbul’s conservative district, Fatih. Well-known for having cafes frequented by Islamists from predominantly pro-AKP circles, it also became a favorite locale for Gülenists after the December corruption case in 2013. Gülenists are not known to socialize with other Islamists but the graft case and the ruling party’s heavy-handed assault on the group motivated some of the members to socialize with other Islamists to propagate their views. Finally, I used a network-mapping tool, called Graph Commons, to create a map of AKTrolls (see Appendix A). All data used was collected through fieldwork.

4 Interview details are provided in Appendix B.
5 Initial engagement with anti-Gezi users at times became adversarial, resulting in ‘unfollows’ or reporting harassment on Twitter. Most social media connections remained stable, even at the height of tension, and, in several cases after a rupture, reconnection took place online through mutual Twitter contacts, offline at conferences, or in one case, when a troll became my student.
Theory

Trolling has existed since the early days of the internet and was common by 1996.7 In internet slang, a troll ‘is a person who sows discord on the internet by starting arguments or upsetting people by posting inflammatory comments.’8 A turning point that gave trolling a more collective and political sense occurred in 2008 in the course of a showdown between the Anonymous hacking group and Scientology.9 ‘Political trolling’ as a label emerged later, the term ‘web brigades,’ known in English media as ‘the troll army,’ being used initially to describe state-sponsored anonymous internet political commentators and trolls linked specifically to the Russian government.10 Observations on the Russian case demonstrate that a centralized political trolling structure was made possible with a series of internet laws and the opening of centers to host trolls who intervened in digital agendas.11

According to Whitney Phillips, a theoretical shift occurred in the late 2000s in analyzing trolling. Where previously, Lincoln Dahlberg12 and others viewed trolls in terms of ‘deception,’ Gabriella Coleman,13 among others, interpreted them as using a ‘communitarian’ approach. The contrast was stark. Against an emphasis on deviance14 and possible criminalization of trolling activity, trolling for the fun of it was highlighted through aspects of community building. Both approaches are evident in the literature on Turkey;15 a current study,16 for example, argues that ‘entertainment trolls’ contribute to—using John Hartley’s17 term—cultural citizenship.18 Political trolling more often is located in the ‘deception’ category and

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18 However, as in Anthony McCosker’s study of YouTubers, digital citizenship ideas may emerge out of ‘agonistic publics.’ Excluding negative aspects of trolling, such as flaming, hating and provocative reaction, may result in a limited understanding of citizenship. See A. McCosker (2014) Trolling as Provocation: YouTubers Agnostic, Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, 20(2), pp. 201–217.
currently is seen as anathema to human rights, while trolling more generally is experiencing a new wave of criticism, if *Time Magazine*’s 2016 ‘Trolls’ cover is any indicator.

This research focuses on political trolling, which has proved to be long-lasting and effective. Unlike Whitney Phillips, whose research was based on self-identifying trolls, not all subjects of this study identify themselves as such. Here, trolls are understood as pro-government internet users whose productive engagement with the authorities through social media networks can be seen as a form of digital surveilling, which in turn triggers restrictive consequences for citizens located in the ranks of Turkey’s opposition. Evgeny Morozov has highlighted this networked surveillance approach by demonstrating how authoritarian governments use social media to track and crush opposition. Surveillance literature tends to focus on software; however, I argue here that political trolling as a social media activity equally can be used as a tool to track and pressure political rivals. Additionally, this surveillance technique has networked characteristics. In contra-distinction to a frequently expressed view that a centralized troll army is in use, my ethnographic work shows that AKTrolls function in a decentralized networking pattern, with different nodes finding their own ways to participate in the government’s struggle with opponents.

**The Ruling Party’s response to digital dissent**

As of 2014, Turkey had the highest Twitter penetration in the world. Social media, and Twitter, in particular, served as organizing tools for political and social purposes throughout the Gezi Park protests. Zeki Osman Gökcé and his colleagues highlight the funeral of Berkin Elvan (a 15-year-old allegedly killed by police during the protests) as just one example in which online crowd mobilization occurred, concomitant with a massive surge in social media usage. Visual representations would go viral, and political humor would

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flash through the crowd, enabling the protests to build a particular public sphere among heterogeneous social elements. A major tool for the Turkish authorities to intervene in digital communications is the 2007 Internet Law, commonly known as ‘No. 5651.’ Amendments in 2014 restricted the law further. They broadened the scope of administrative blocking and allowed the authorities to access user data without a warrant. A month after their passage, the Constitutional Court overturned these provisions, but they were passed again in March 2015 after the court’s chief judge retired. Although circumventing the block is not difficult, recent changes in 2015–2016 centralized the governance of Internet Service Providers (ISPs), making blockage easier.

Effective internet regulation relies on advanced software-based blocking and surveillance. The center-left opposition daily Cumhuriyet reported on October 18, 2014, that Turkey’s internet regulatory body, ICTA (The Information and Communication Technologies Authority), has a budget of 2 billion liras in the context of a story on Turkey’s possible acquisition of advanced surveillance services from foreign companies. The most concrete evidence of software-based surveillance came from the hacking scandal related to Italy’s HackingTeam, an information technology company that sells offensive intrusion and surveillance capabilities to governments, law enforcement agencies and corporations. A data breach in 2015 demonstrated that the company had customers all over the world including, allegedly, the Turkish Police Department.

Once the Gezi protests began, pro-AKP individuals, not only in the government but also in communications industries, saw opportunity. An interviewee, who would become one of the best-known AKTrolls, explained the process. He co-owned a small social media agency that worked with AKP municipalities and various public institutions, and realized he needed to seize the moment. In the early days of the Gezi protests, in a cafe in Üsküdar,

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31 All ISPs are organized under Erişim Sağlayıcılar Birliği (ESB) [Union of Service Providers] since February 6, 2014. An article was added to existing Internet Law to legalize the union. The official statement (only in Turkish) is available at: https://www.esb.org.tr/biz-kimiz, accessed July 24, 2017.
32 As of August 2016, more than 110,000 sites in Turkey have been blocked according to a civil initiative that lists all blocking of such cases (https://engelliweb.com/). The site is now closed. The latest version is available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20161127220929/https://engelliweb.com/, accessed May 20, 2017.
38 Interviewee 02.
an old and relatively conservative Istanbul district on the Asian side, he met with a group of notable pro-AKP columnists and told them about the power of social media. This gathering formed the basis of a strong node that would lead to many counter campaigns. Most of the columnists who contributed to the media dissemination of the infamous Kabataş harassment incident were in that Üsküdar gathering. The interviewee, and his associates listed activist names and agencies that supported the protests and sent the list to Yeni Şafak a pro-government newspaper. A well-known advertiser included on that list, Serdar Errener, lost many contracts that included Turkish Airlines. Critically the AKTroll does not mention in the interviews any support or input from the AKP; he acted on his own. In contrast, another leading AKTroll (@tahaun) who might have followed a similar path, later would be sidelined in the intra-party quarrels. After being labeled in a now famous blog post Pelikan bildirisi (the Pelican Declaration) as pro-Davutoğlu (then prime minister), he stopped tweeting in May 2016. The creators of the Pelikan Declaration, whose financial backer is believed to be Erdoğan’s son-in-law, Serhat Albayrak, emerged from one of the major centers critical of the AKTrolls’ role within the party. This incident also demonstrated most explicitly that AKP is composed of factions.

AKTrolls and the Party

The first public news about AKTrolls, according to a Google News search, was in the Wall Street Journal on September 16, 2013, which quoted AKP party officials as stating they were recruiting ‘6,000’ people for a ‘social media army.’ In a leaked tape, Erdoğan’s

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39 This widely was reported in pro-government media, which claimed a head-scarf mother with her baby was harassed in Gezi Park by protesters in the Kabataş district, a busy hub for Istanbul’s ferries. Erdoğan immediately declared the tape of the harassment should be aired, but to this day there has appeared no proof: see Berivan Orucoglu (2015) Turks, Lies, and Videotape, Foreign Policy (March 13). Available at: http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/13/turks-lies-and-videotape-turkey-erdogan/, accessed May 30, 2017.


43 He resumed tweeting after Davutoğlu resigned following the Pelikan case.

44 All data in this paragraph is based on author interviews. For more on the Pelikan story see Efe Kerem Sozeri (2016) Pelikan Derneği: Berat Albayrak, Ahmet Davutoğlu’nu neden devirdi? [The Pelikan Club: Why did Berat Albayrak topple Ahmet Davutoğlu], Medium (November 3). Available at: https://medium.com/@efekerm/pelikan-derne%C4%9Fi-berat-albayrak-ahmet-davuto%C4%9Flunu-neden-devirdi-5fabad6dc7de#.3q4vkwf4v, accessed May 30, 2017. The Pelican Declaration is shrouded in online mystery. In a single long Wordpress blog post, Davutoğlu was accused of plotting against President Erdoğan and that trolls under his control were promoting his agenda on social media. Strongly believed to be the work of columnist Hilal Kaplan and her husband, Süheyp Öğüt, who led a pro-İnsanlık inside the party, they have gained status since Davutoğlu’s resignation.


daughter, Sümeyye, can be heard demanding that his advisor, Mustafa Varank, ask ‘our trolls’ to help a campaign for an NGO she heads up (February, 2014). Yet, AKP personalities also have been targets, and pursued by AKTrolls with hate speech directed against them when they strayed from the party line (August, 2014). It turned out that Prime Minister Davutoğlu’s faction in the AKP had controlled most of the AKTrolls in the early months of 2016, according to several anonymous interviews. Most of the revenue sources for these trolls go through government channels, and thus a gatekeeper Prime Ministry could easily control them through contracts and by employing some trolls as civil servants. Interviewees 03, 05 and 09 confirmed this. When he came to power, Davutoğlu may have seen that AKTrolls could help control both intra-party rivals and political opponents.

After the June 7, 2016 elections, a pro-AKP columnist in Yeni Şafak accused AKTrolls of contributing to the AKPs June 2015 electoral loss. During fieldwork, it became clear, however, that this accusation was due more to a clash among cliques within AKP circles to control the party’s media strategies. The Pelikan Declaration creators had gained more power by early 2016, but several interviewees stressed that only Erdoğan could contain the increasing discord and competition between the Pelikan group and notable AKTrolls to control the party’s social media strategies.

The nature of AKTrolling protects the AKP from accusations of direct involvement. This also gives more autonomy to those involved. A group of Ankara-based graduate students initiated a Twitter network data-based study about the AKTroll network in 2015. The study focused on a Twitter network analysis around the site nicknamed Esad Ç (Twitter address: @esatreis) that openly claimed to be an AKTroll. The analysis starts with @Esad Ç, a well-known troll (as I too found in my fieldwork), who has a cascading network with at least 40 connections. That is, each of the accounts that @esatreis follows, themselves follow at least 40 other accounts (this is shown in the network mapping in Figure 1). The map shows...
President Erdoğan’s advisor, Mustafa Varank (@varank), as one of the connections who acts as a bridge among anonymous trolls and known pro-AKP politicians and columnists.

The image in Figure 1 was the first one to challenge a simple generalization of anonymity on the part of AKTrolls. According to my interviews with AK party members in 2016, the majority of the powerful trolls are only anonymous to outsiders, but within party circles, their real identities are known.\(^{58}\) In another case, Netherlands-based social media researcher, Efe Kerem Sözeri, whose journalistic columns frequently report on the AK Troll social media

\(^{58}\) However, the network image reproduced here might be misleading in that it gives a centralized mapping of AKTrolls (see Appendix A for a more accurate picture).
scene, demonstrated in a series of Twitter messages\textsuperscript{59} in 2015 that Beytişşebap District Governor Kadir Güntepe was using an anonymous anti-PKK Twitter account, @pohjoh02. Güntepe once mistakenly tweeted an official message from the troll account, and although he deleted it within a minute, the damage was done. Sözeri used software at greptweet.com to demonstrate that Güntepe very probably produced the deleted Twitter message. His handle, @pohjoh02, includes abbreviations of ‘police special forces’ and ‘gendarmerie special forces’ in Turkish, and its ownership probably already was known within party circles, but it took a mistaken Tweet for others to learn about it.

### Trolling Practices

A two-time AKP candidate in charge of intra-party organizations in western parts of Turkey stated, according to an interview with an AKP official, that he\textsuperscript{60} once ‘employed 40 trolls’\textsuperscript{61} but found them ineffective and reported this to President Erdoğan. This implies the existence of bursaries for such work. How effective AKTrolls are in maintaining the AKP’s political hegemony is hard to determine, but undoubtedly they have impact.\textsuperscript{62} To contextualize AKTrolls and their political function better, I discuss below their most prominent practices. For clarity, all tweets have been translated. The original can be accessed through the given links.

#### Trolls can Function as a Form of Social Lynching\textsuperscript{63}

The sheer volume of threats and insults can discourage targeted citizens. For example, Pelin Batu, daughter of a well-known Turkish diplomat, and herself a historian with her own TV show, used Twitter on July 21, 2016, to state that she no longer was going to tweet due to threats and insults from AKTrolls.\textsuperscript{64}

#### Trolls will Acquire Pop-culturally Effective Social Media Accounts and Refashion them for their own Purposes\textsuperscript{65}

Accounts that are secular looking and engaging are believed to be effective in reaching non-AKP audiences. Through primarily non-contractual methods, trolls will take over the passwords, and rewrite the messaging, turning them into AKP propaganda tools.\textsuperscript{66} An example, revealed during fieldwork, was that of @gafebesi, a Twitter account with some 2.3


\textsuperscript{60} Interviewee 07.

\textsuperscript{61} This ‘employment’ probably was similar in nature to the ones offered by Davutoğlu, see above, but the existence of bursaries also was implied.

\textsuperscript{62} YouTube (2015) Emre Kızılkaya | Trolls are people, too: How Turkey’s AKP fails to dominate social media (October 6). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9I0pjstZ7E, accessed May 31, 2017.


\textsuperscript{66} Each case may be handled differently. The particulars of @gafebesi forms the basis of this explanation. It was not an official transaction. An agreed amount was paid in return for gaining control of the account upon receiving the password and other relevant access data. Twitter itself is excluded in the exchange.
Using Automated Bots to Counter anti-AKP Discourse

The use of automated bots has been on the rise and does not need sophisticated investment. Evidence suggests that as of April 2016, AKTrolls rely heavily on bots (Figure 2). A case brought to public attention revealed, for example, that Twitter banished a bot-powered hashtag that praised president Erdoğan. Twitter is struggling against spam-creating bots and trolls, and despite Turkish ministers’ claims, it is unclear whether this is a result of a general policy. Use of an automated bot differs from having extra accounts in terms of scale. One easily can buy bot services or fake followers for Twitter or Facebook on pirate sites such as www.r10.net.

Figure 2. Observations were verified with a bots analysis report released by a major internet security company, Norton (November, 2016). Turkey is one of the top countries in automated bots usage; see report at https://uk.norton.com/emeabots

70 Interviewee 11.
Phishing for Political Purposes

Phishing differs from mere hacking by masquerading as a trustworthy entity in an electronic communication with the intent to steal personal data for malicious reasons. Though it is difficult to develop hard data at this stage, and the situation may simply reflect a general trend, many hacked accounts soon begin to produce pro-AKP discourses. A self-proclaimed national hacking team, AyYıldız Tim decorates hacked accounts with pro-AKP or pro-Erdoğan images and discourses. One of the latest victims was a popular comedian Atalay Demirci (see Figure 3).

Demirci’s private messages were made public, and he was arrested on allegations of being a Gülenist. Here is an image after it was seized and doctored. According to an interview with the coder, to access private messaging, the hacking group might be receiving assistance from state institutions.

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71 Interviewee 12; personal observations; and Twitter exchanges with journalists.
72 Interviewee 10.
Mobilizing in non-Turkish Languages

New types of actors are becoming active in targeting foreign nationals who are critical of AKP policies. Steven A. Cook, who is Eni Enrico Mattei, senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, often posts complaints about AKTrolls (see Figure 4).

As noted, these tactics do not appear to be determined centrally. Decentralized troll groups act voluntarily or because of a particular power struggle or just for mere business interests.

Conclusion

The emergence of AKTrolls can be attributed to the AK party’s initial reaction to the Gezi Park protests. However, as a general cyber tool, the targets and functions of AKTrolls have changed as the perceived enemy or situations have changed. This article provides evidence to show the relationships between the AK government and AKTrolls, although these never have been formally acknowledged. By doing so, it shows that there never has been an organized party decision to centralize troll organization. However, the AKP leadership often has declared its desire to counter opposition in social media, and many individuals and circles connected in various ways to the party structure, and who believed action of this nature might help the party or their own upward mobility within it, took initiatives on their own to become AKTrolls. Second, the article demonstrates how the AK government has reacted against social media, which has grown in importance as a communication and political tool.

Surveillance through political trolls seems to have become one of the major government responses. The major functions of AKTrolls are twofold: Surveillance through surfing the net; and disruption, by targeting critical accounts in a wide array of ways to change the discourse, discredit the individual or movement, obtain proprietary information, or block an account. Troll targeting has become most effective when it spotlights an item or person to become part of the social media agenda; governmental action or intervention then often follows.

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Graph Commons. Available at: https://graphcommons.com/, accessed May 20, 2017.


Appendix A. A new AKTroll mapping proposal

The image shown in Figure A5 depicts major nodes on Twitter that produce AKTroll discourse. Here, I deliberately connect independent nodes to the AKP or the Palace (President’s Office) in order to make all connections link together. This image gives a picture of centralization that many observers believe is plausible. The independent connections can be linked to the AKP and the Palace via individual Twitter connections. In a more realistic image (Figure A6), I eliminate the AKP and the Palace as the central connectors and the image becomes organically more decentralized: The data is based on ethnographic findings and archival research, and the images were created with Graph Commons software.
Figure A5. Screenshot from the researcher’s Graph Commons-based mapping https://graphcommons.com/graphs/0bb5856e-a7d8-4b5a-b0fc-502844bd1f64

Figure A6. Screenshot from the researcher’s Graph Commons-based mapping. https://graphcommons.com/graphs/29696523-1f35-42cc-bb6e-73df5eb27c19
Appendix B. Interviews

Interviewee 01. An academic with a telecommunications industry experience. Face-to-face. Istanbul. 2016 May.
Interviewee 07. An AKP party representative and deputy candidate. Face-to-face. Istanbul. 2016 September
Interviewee 08. A pro-AKP online news site owner. Face-to-face. Istanbul. 2016 October.
Interviewee 09. Social media specialist close to AKP youth circles. Face-to-face. Istanbul. 2016 August.