Digital Populism:
Trolls and Political Polarization of Twitter in Turkey

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This article analyzes political trolling in Turkey through the lens of mediated populism. Twitter trolling in Turkey has diverged from its original uses (i.e., poking fun, flaming, etc.) toward government-led polarization and right-wing populism. Failing to develop an effective strategy to mobilize online masses, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP/AKP) relied on the polarizing performances of a large progovernment troll army. Trolls deploy three features of JDP's populism: serving the people, fetish of the will of the people, and demonization. Whereas trolls traditionally target and mock institutions, Turkey's political trolls act on behalf of the establishment. They produce a digital culture of lynching and censorship. Trolls' language also impacts pro-JDP journalists who act like trolls and attack journalists, academics, and artists critical of the government.

Keywords: trolls, mediated populism, Turkey, political polarization, Twitter

Turkish media has undergone a transformation during the uninterrupted tenure of the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) since 2002. Not supported by the mainstream media when it first came to power, JDP created its own media army and transformed the mainstream media's ideological composition. What has, however, destabilized the entire media environment was the Gezi Park protests of summer 2013.[1] Activists' use of social media not only facilitated political organizing, but also turned the news environment upside down. Having recognized that the mainstream media was not trustworthy, oppositional groups migrated to social media for organizing and producing content.

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[1] Gezi refers to the nationwide antigovernment protests that spanned the period between June and September 2013, which were sparked by a municipal decision to replace a small park in central Istanbul with a shopping mall (Yörük, 2014).

Since the Gezi protests, researchers have examined various dimensions of social media: alternative journalism (Ataman & Çoban, 2015), satirical linguistic production (Yeşilyurt, 2016), state–social media corporation negotiations (Bulut, 2016), and political organizing (Baruh & Watson, 2016).[2] Yeğen (2015) and Yesil (n.d.) argued how social media are not tools but spaces to perform dissent as exemplified by oppositional activist platforms and journalism outlets—professional and citizen—such as diken.com.tr; Otekilerin Postasi (The Post of Others), Capul TV (now Hayir TV), T24, 140 Journos, and sendika.org. Avcı (2014) underlined social media's role to connect bodies within public spaces that otherwise would remain isolated within the context of a TV-based communication. Vatikiotis and Yörük (2016) discussed how social media redefined the public sphere and citizenship in the age of networked movements.

Research on social media and Turkish politics is not temporally limited to Gezi per se. Even before, but especially after Gezi, scholars investigated citizens' use of social media for political purposes (Şener, Emre, & Akyildiz, 2015); online interactions of leaders with Twitter users during the heavily mediated March 2014 local elections (Meriç, 2015); political parties' use of Facebook during the 2011 general elections (Bayraktutan et al., 2014); and the use of social media during campaigns, politicians' unidirectional use of social media, and Twitter wars between contesting political groups (Doğu, Özçetin, Bayraktutan, Binark, Çomu, Telli-Aydemir, & İslamoğlu, 2014). These studies concluded that citizens' and politicians' use of social media was mostly for consumption or propaganda, not leaving much room for interaction. Coskuntuncel (2016, pp. 12–13) argued that the Turkish government's censorship policies should be understood within the framework of privatization of governance, in which government censorship itself is outsourced to private intermediaries. Drawing on linguistic anthropology, Koçer (2015) examined the performances of the elite in constructing social media as a criminal realm using a divisive discourse.

Despite the insights, this literature overlooks how trolls in social media—specifically Twitter—are strategic tools for the state to energize citizens. Examining Twitter trolls' language within the context of populism enables us to understand power networks and discourses through which trolls not only disrupt political conversations, but also consolidate government's power by networking scattered masses. Specifically, we examine how JDP uses trolling to reassert its declining hegemony in the broader civil society. Governing Turkey since 2002, JDP owes its success to its provision of formal and informal networks of communication, politicization, and welfare. It gathered different sects of the society, including the urban poor, pro-EU left liberals, pro-EU Turkish capital, the center-right, and the Islamists. Especially thanks to pro-EU liberals' support, JDP's blended politics helped neutralize the demonized view of political Islam. However, JDP's illiberal politics since 2010 alienated certain demographics, including Kurds and liberals. A radicalized secular constituency comprising feminists, LGBTQ groups, Kurds, Alevis, and precarious workers (both blue and white collar) challenged JDP's hegemony during Gezi. Gezi revealed the government's incapacity to prevent the creative use of social media for political organizing and

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[2] In addition to media, scholars have addressed other dimensions of Gezi, including class composition (Gürcan & Peker, 2015; Yörük & Yüksel, 2014), state violence, medical help, and human rights (Açıksöz, 2016; Can, 2016); and urban citizenship (Kuymulu, 2013).

circumventing mainstream media. The Twitter population increased from 1.8 million to 9.5 million during Gezi (Yaman, 2014, p. 21). Although the government quickly revised the legal framework so that URLs could be suspended or could initiate social media arrests, there was an increasing need for the JDP to solidify its fragmented social media audience. The answer was to found a troll army.

We ask the following questions: What is the discursive strategy of JDP trolls on Twitter? How do they perform populism to polarize Twitter? And what material implications do trolls have in terms of journalism and democratic online participation? We initiate a conversation between two distinct literatures: media populism and Twitter trolling. First, we insist on understanding populism in relation to media performance and political style. Second, we survey the literature on trolling and examine JDP's trolls in the broader context of Turkey's social media crackdown. Our analysis reveals how JDP trolls followed the broader aspects of JDP's populism to polarize Twitter and tame the civil society by conducting Twitter campaigns or targeting dissident figures. Trolling in Turkey is associated with political lynching. In addition to complicating the meaning of trolling, our article contributes to the literature by connecting trolling with populism, the studies of which are restricted to the Global North and traditional media.

Media and Populism

Although "it has become almost a cliché to start writing on populism by lamenting the lack of clarity about the concept" (Panizza, 2005, p. 1), it is possible to classify different perspectives on populism. Historically, populism as a phenomenon goes back to the People's Party in the southern and midwestern United States in the 1890s, the Narodniks in 1860s Russia, the mid-1950s United States and McCarthyism, and 1960s Latin America (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 14–16). Not restricted to any particular ideology, period, or geography (Evo Morales in Bolivia, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Donald Trump in the United States, Carlos Menem in Argentina, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand), theoretical discussions within the literature are "in a relatively staggered and disjointed manner" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 17). Nevertheless, four fundamental approaches to populism exist: ideology, strategy, discourse, and political logic (Moffitt, 2016).

In the first approach, populism is defined as a "thin-centered" (Mudde, 2004) ideology that constructs antagonistic camps. "Populism as strategy" is concerned with organizational strategies or leadership qualities. Especially useful in Latin America, "populism as discourse" is understood "as a particular mode of political expression, usually evident in speech or text" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 21). It differs from populism as ideology because discourse, as a constellation of relatively fluid words and practices, lacks the precision of ideology and strategy (Moffitt, 2016, p. 21). Finally, there is Laclau's (2005) approach to populism as a political logic that defines populism as politics itself through which demands of different kinds (i.e., logic of difference and logic of equivalence) are made by creating a division between "us and them." For Laclau, the association of populism with corrupt political practice is wrong, and populists have the ability to potentially achieve radical democracy (p. 19). Not satisfied with these, Moffitt (2016) builds the notion of "populism as a political style" to which performance and mediation are central. We too approach populism as a political style (Block & Negrine, 2017; Moffitt, 2016) that has to be performed and appeal to people through media. We benefit from the notion of "mediated populism" (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015; Mazzoleni, 2003) because it emphasizes how populist movements make

political claims on behalf of the people and gain a "mediatic legitimization" through "reality construction, framing, news making, media logic, and agenda building" (Mazzoleni, 2003, pp. 7–10). Mediated populism evokes the spectacularization of politics (Street, 2004; van Zoonen, 2006). However, we deploy the term in specific relation to different media logics and performances through which claims on behalf of the people are made (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015). Although not specifically concerned with the media, we also benefit from Müller's (2016) definition of populism as a political style that claims to represent the real people through distinctly moral claims.

"Little has been written on how the media work as the initiators or catalysts of public sentiments, how media content may voice sectional populist claims" (Mazzoleni, 2003, p. 2), and this is more so regarding Twitter trolls. Literature on media and populism has focused mainly on (a) the impact of media coverage on populist success and (b) how populist leaders use the media. Research on mass media effects has "failed to come up with conclusive results"; disagreements about the extent of media's role (primary or coresponsible?) and the level of media impact (is the coverage positive or negative?) prevail (Moffitt, 2016, p. 71). The question of how populist leaders use the media, on the other hand, appeal more to those operating within the "populism as strategy" approach. And media barely register in the work Ernesto Laclau.

As the cases of Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and Gianroberto Caselleggio, Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra (McCargo & Zarakol, 2012), and the Tea Party reveal, politicians effectively deploy YouTube (Thailand's Shinawatra) and use blogs and Facebook (Beppe Grillo's MoVimento 5 Stelle in Italy and Gabor Vona's Jobbik in Hungary) to address their fragmented audience with viral messages. If we accept Canovan's (1999, p. 6) proposition that "heightened emotions" are essential to authoritarianism and populism (Fuchs, 2017), we cannot disregard Twitter's 140-character media logic.

Twitter and Political Trolling

Due to its global use for news sharing, scholars have argued that Twitter should be called not social but "news media" (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010) thanks to its real-time features (Rogers, 2014, p. xv). As Bruns and Moe (2014) describe, Twitter's various "structural layers of communication" that include interpersonal communication (micro level), following somebody within a network (meso level), and hashtags (macro level) produce different socialities. These layers are not mutually exclusive, thereby making Twitter an "undetermined and recombinant" platform (Lievrouw, 2002). Twitter's success relies on the "flexibility of Twitter as a platform for public communication at various levels of 'public-ness'" (Bruns & Moe, 2014, p. 21). In short, users shape Twitter differently with their practices (Halavais, 2014), paving the way for its users to embed it within their everyday lives (van Dijk, 2011).

Trolls are controversial. The literature on trolls (Burroughs, 2013; Donath, 1999; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002; Milner, 2013) agrees that "the word itself is a battleground" (Fuller, McRea, & Wilson, 2013, pp. 5–6). Indeed, "there is far too much variation within the behavioral category of trolling (even within the same raiding party) to affix any singular, unified purpose to constituent trolls' actions" (Phillips, 2015, p. 7). Besides the Internet, the term has different histories and connotations: the Scandinavian tradition of trolls as the horrific characters that lurk under bridges; provocation of enemies

(trolling for MiGs) during the Vietnam War; and fishing (Binark, Karataş, Çomu, & Koca, 2015; Bishop, 2014b, pp. 8–9). By deceiving and provoking others, trolls disrupt a rational debate to distract the participants of a debate. Bishop (2014a, 2014b) classifies trolling in several ways: (a) classical trolling "done for the community's consensual entertainment in order to build bonds between users"; (b) anonymous trolling "done at the expense of someone outside of a particular community even if there is a victim whom has no benefit from it"; (c) kudos trolling as "transgressive humour"; and (d) flame trolling as offending somebody else (2104a, pp. 9–10). Overall, it is plausible to argue that are mainly two categories: humor (*lolz*) and flame trolling (*lulz*).

Twitter's architecture is particularly enabling for trolls' performances. First, thanks to its 140-character limitation and creative use of memes, Twitter can produce "the revivalist flavor of a movement, powered by the enthusiasm that draws normally unpolitical people into the political arena" (Canovan, 1999, p. 6) and providing easy answers to populist questions such as "what went wrong; who is to blame; and what is to be done to reverse the situation?" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 4). Second, Twitter is different from Facebook. We would not friend trolls on Facebook, but we can follow them on Twitter. There are undoubtedly trolls commenting on Facebook, but Twitter trolls impact the national agenda by creating trending topics. As Bruns and Moe (2014) suggest, "tweeting to a topical hashtag resembles a speech at a public gathering—a protest rally, an ad hoc assembly—of participants who do not necessarily know each other but have been brought together by a shared theme, interest, or concern" (pp. 18–19), and such shared interests are amplified through retweets. Trolls mostly coordinate populist discourse within the macro level, but this does not negate other flexible forms of communication, which makes Twitter "a platform for public communication at various levels of 'public-ness'" (Bruns & Moe, 2014, p. 21).

Trolls' political performance is a global phenomenon. Performed by real human beings or bots based on algorithms (Wooley & Howard, 2016), political trolling points to a trend beyond Turkey to include Russia, India, China, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Lakhsmi, 2016; McCormick, 2016; Shearlaw, 2015). Among these, the Kremlin's trolls resemble Turkey's trolls (Saka, 2016; Walker, 2015), who have even warred with their Russian counterparts following Turkey's downing a Russian jet (Sözeri, 2015b). To explore Turkey's trolls, we need to situate them within the broader politics of social media in Turkey.

The Politics of Social Media in Turkey

Twitter is key to Turkey's politics. Since Gezi, leaked tapes of corruption and media censorship demands and e-mail leaks of the country's most powerful media conglomerate have been released through Twitter. The government responded by blocking access to Dropbox and Google Drive. During Gezi, President Erdogan—then the prime minister—defined Twitter as "the worst menace to society" (Coyne, 2013, para. 1). Not only social media but media in general have been one of his favorite targets. Speaking at the 30th meeting of the Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Collaboration of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, he said, "Just because I said that Muslims discovered the Americas before Columbus, I was targeted by the Western media" ("Erdoğan: Batılılar inanın," 2014).

Mainstream media are usual targets for him because he, as "the chief," carries out his struggles on behalf of the "silent majority" against the "elite," "so-called intellectuals," and "the interest-rate lobby."[3]

Despite insults against conventional media, JDP managed to build a "neoliberal media autocracy" (Akser & Baybars-Hawks, 2012) through a patient struggle with the existing mediascape (Aladag, 2013; Yeşil, 2016). It initially followed a relatively liberal path between 2002 and 2007 but shifted toward an authoritarian model, the dynamics of which accelerated after Gezi.

JDP's first five years before Gezi were characterized by a superficial adaptation of a Europeanized legislative framework (Sümer, 2010). This period was a contradictory process of Europeanization involving both liberalization accompanied by the introduction of minority language channels (public and private) and the persistence of nationalism toward non-Muslims and Kurds (Yeşil, 2016, pp. 78–87; Yılmaz, 2016, p. 154).

The "de-Europeanization" phase began after the 2007 elections. JDP eradicated a political rival's (Cem Uzan) media group. Center-leaning Merkez Group's media outlets (*Sabah*, ATV) were seized by the state and sold to Çalık Group (Turkuvaz Media), the former CEO of which is the current Minister of Energy. JDP's pressures on conglomerates reached another peak when a penalty of 3.75 billion Turkish Liras—the most substantial tax fine in Turkey's history—was issued to Doğan Media, following the group's disagreements with the government over property and critical coverage of a donation scandal. The Doğan Group had to sell the *Milliyet* and *Vatan* newspapers and Star TV, close down *Gozcu newspaper*, and terminated contracts with some journalists at *Hurriyet* and *Radikal* newspapers, as these journalists were critical of the government. This phase also legally targeted other journalists—Ahmet Şık, Nedim Şener, Soner Yalçın, Mustafa Balbay, Tuncay Özkan, among others—who were charged with activities to overthrow the government.

Gezi accelerated the media witch hunt. Seventy-seven journalists were fired (Yesil, 2016, p. 111). Online censorship peaked following the corruption investigation in December 2013 involving top-ranking politicians, locating Turkey among the countries that rank high in terms of content removal requests from Twitter.

The final blow to media critical of JDP came in two historical moments. First, the government seized *Cemaat*[4] media such as Kanalturk, Bugun TV, and the *Zaman* newspaper in October 2015 and March 2016. Following the coup attempt in July 2016, the government crashed oppositional media, arrested more than 120 journalists alleged to have had ties to the putschists, and shut down more than 150 media institutions, excluding news websites (DW, 2016).

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[3] *Interest-rate lobby* refers to a vague combination of financial actors that conspires to undermine Turkey's economic growth of which they are allegedly jealous. The term does bear anti-Semitic tones.

[4] The *Cemaat* (community) refers to a religious network led by Fethullah Gulen, who is accused of plotting the failed coup in July 2016.

This might hint that Turkey's (social) media have always been under an authoritarian rule. Here, our intervention becomes important. First, even though the structural conditions for commercial and progovernment media had long been in the making since the 1980s (Yesil, 2016), Gezi proved that partisan media were not enough for JDP.[5] Understanding Turkey's new authoritarianism requires us to pay attention to media's relationship with the emergence of a more particularistic and personalized political power (Somer, 2016, pp. 494–496). JDP not only had to control and suppress oppositional voices, but also had to further manipulate and instrumentalize public opinion online. Specifically, Twitter becomes vital to dislocate the truth claims of anti-JDP groups. JDP's trolling campaigns aim to "frustrate and weaken the opposition by generating an image of resoluteness and invincibility" and "recruit new people into the elite and to mobilize supporters" (Somer, 2016, p. 496). Even though JDP's social media backlash initially included first- and second-generation controls, trolls belong to the third generation in which the goal is to create national cyberzones, initiate infowars, and silence the opposition (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010). Trolls aim to "energize disorganized crowds and/or facilitate the formation of networked publics around communities, actual and imagined" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 9). In a somewhat contradictory fashion, Turkey's trolls ultimately act on behalf of the establishment, whereas populist politicians in Turkey and elsewhere attack the establishment on behalf of the people they claim to represent.

Method

In this research, we drew on two different methods: (a) keyword search analysis and frequency analysis of textual data and hashtags and (b) thematic analysis of trolls' tweets. Regarding the former, we received professional support from Kimola Company, a Turkish social media analytics company. We focused on two groups of Twitter users: JDP trolls and ordinary Twitter users aligned with five political blocs in Turkish politics: JDP, CHP (Republican People's Party), MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), HDP (People's Democratic Party), and the *Cemaat*.[6] To select Twitter users inclined toward certain political parties and to ensure randomness, we relied on Kimola's database of political users called Kimola Politics.[7] The first step in creating sample groups from each political position was to list the most active and influential users based on the number of retweets and likes. For identifying political tendencies, Kimola used the political hashtag and keyword database of Kimola Politics, which contains critical hashtags and keywords delineating party or political affiliation.[8] Then, Twitter Search was used to scan entire sets of

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[5] JDP has zero tolerance for the slightest criticism even from its own supporters, thereby leading to the gradual demise of "partisan polyvalence" (McCargo, 2012) and the consolidation of a press–party parallelism (Carkoglu, Baruh, & Yıldırım, 2014).

[6] CHP: Center-left party with nationalist leanings. MHP: ultranationalist party. HDP: pro-Kurdish left party. All of these parties are represented in the Turkish Parliament.

[7] An analytical tool to examine the political content posted by social media users, Kimola Politics was created before the June 2015 elections. We paid the Kimola Company to reach their database and get professional support.

[8] We used more than 150 keywords to identify political, polarizing, and insulting language. Political examples include #BizimleYürüTürkiye (Walk with us, Turkey), #YaşanacakBirTürkiye (A Liveable Turkey), #OyumHDPye (I vote for HDP), #OyumAKPye (I vote for AKP); polarizing keywords include *dinsiz*

tweets sent by these most-active users. Also, as a secondary verification mechanism, Twitter Search was used to locate hashtags promoted by political parties or hashtags that indicated Twitter users' electoral choices. In addition to hashtags, other variables such as leaders' pictures, party propagation materials, political content produced by users (e.g., vine videos, caps, etc.), or political symbols (e.g., Rabia for AKP, Wolf for MHP, signature of Atatürk for CHP, Kurdish national colors for HDP, etc.) in the form of profile or cover pictures were considered. These selection procedures were applied to these users independently, ensuring the randomness of the sample and minimizing the risk of selecting accounts related to each other through following or interactions. Only the users satisfying the following criteria were included in the samples: (a) active at least since Gezi (June 2013); (b) sending at least one tweet per day; (c) user activity through tweeting, retweeting, replying, and commenting; and (d) consistent ideological/political positions. The samples of JDP trolls, on the other hand, were formed based on the list of Hafıza Kolektifi [Memory Collective] (2015) and our interview with a Twitter troll who helped us figure out the troll networks. After creating the samples, we collected tweets starting from early 2013, before the Gezi protests. Overall, we extracted up to half a million tweets of a sample of around 20 users for each group for the last three years (120 users in total). This quantitative analysis tracked the temporal trajectories (time series) of these groups and determined the level of politicization and polarization.

Although big data are helpful to visualize polarization, thematic analysis of the most retweeted and favorite troll tweets intersecting with JDP's populism better equipped us to explore trolls' populist performance and ideological function (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fuchs, 2017; Marwick, 2014; Papacharissi, 2012). Kimola provided us with 10,000 most retweeted and favorited tweets of trolls. Among this data corpus, we chose individual tweets exemplifying the three key aspects of JDP's populist discourse: serving the people, the will of the people fetish, and demonization. Driven by our theoretical interest in mediated populism, we conducted a thematic analysis of trolls' tweets. Because most of the tweets in the list belonged to a few of the prominent trolls, we randomly chose major nodes from Hafıza Kolektifi's map and searched for tweets eligible for the themes we determined. Ultimately, we demonstrate that Turkish Twitter has been polarized because of government-led trolls and that JDP trolls' populist language with elements of polarization and lynching is permeating the language and practice of pro-JDP journalists as well.

JDP Trolls and the Polarization of Twitter in Turkey

The first network analysis of JDP trolls was revealed by Hafiza Kolektifi (2015), which examined trolls' network based on the prominent troll account @esatreis. Using Twitter Application Programming Interface, this work is based on @esatreis's own friendships and the accounts followed by @esatreis's friendships that follow at least 40 other accounts. The analysis revealed two distinct groups: One comprises mostly real accounts that belong to JDP politicians, ministers, pro-JDP TV pundits, and advisors; the second group is predominantly the network of anonymous trolls. At the center of the network is @varank (president's advisor), providing "important links with the anonymous accounts that provide content and the official accounts of JDP" (Hafıza Kolektifi, 2015). Figure 1 shows that JDP trolls have

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(godless), *çapulcu* (looter), and *Siyonist* (Zionist); insulting keywords include *çomar* (chav), *bebek katili* (baby murderer), *fitneci* (hatemonger), and *hırsız* (thief).

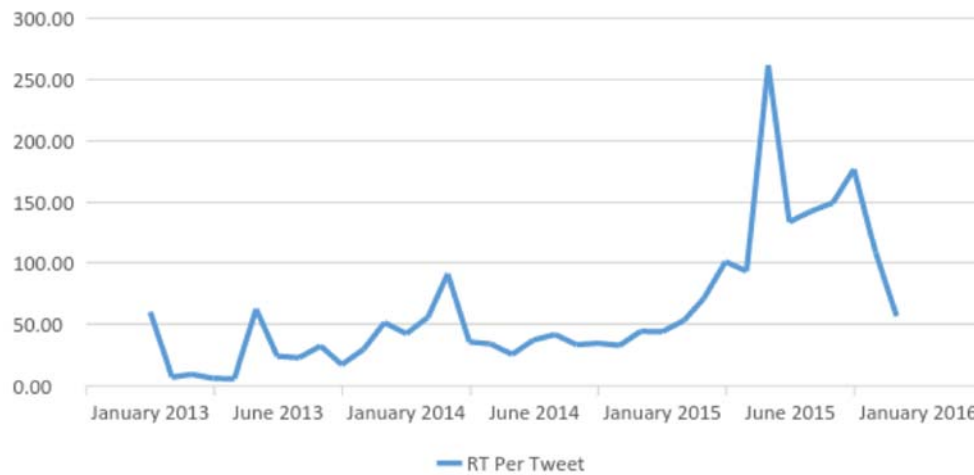gained prominence during the past three years. The number of retweets they received has steadily increased since 2013.[9]

*Figure 1. Changes in the number of retweets (RT) per tweets by
Justice and Development Party trolls.*

Huseyin Özay wrote that the JDP troll team was founded by a vice chairman of JDP. According to Özay ("Genç troller rahatsız," 2014), trolls were initially composed of JDP's youth but gradually expanded to reach 6,000 people with a core team of 30 that guided the rest of the team and converted "JDP sentiments into trending hashtags" ("Ruling JDP hires thousands," 2013, para. 3). Özay underlined that most of the trolls were graduates of *imam-hatip* schools (religious high schools), were paid a minimum of 1,000 Turkish Liras, and received more money based on merit ("Trollere ne kadar," 2016). If successful, trolls are allegedly rewarded with public tenders and conduct commercial business with major media companies such as Turkcell or TRT (Saka, 2016, forthcoming).

Since Gezi, trolls have decisively politicized the platform. We illustrate that the level of political content has steadily increased over the past three years, reaching a peak in November 2015, when general elections were strategically repeated given that JDP avoided forming a coalition government in the June 2015 elections (see Figure 2).

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[9] The peak moment is June 2015, during the general elections when JDP lost its majority for the first time.
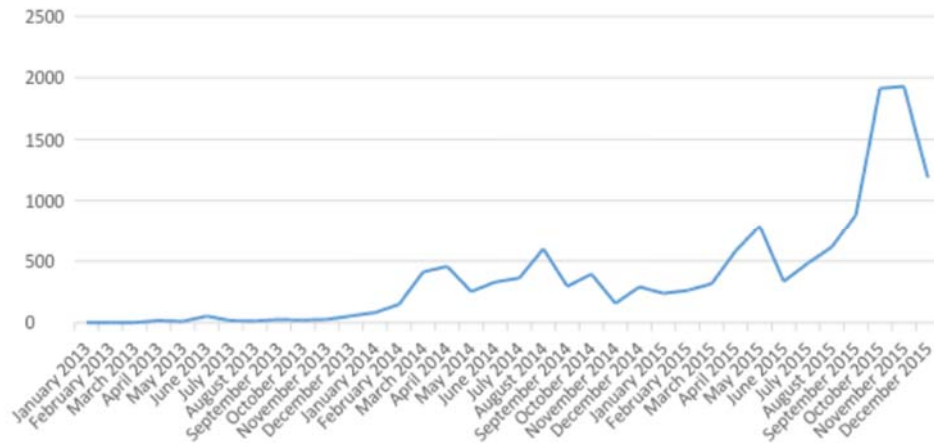
Figure 2. Changes in the number of troll tweets with political content.

Along with the trolls, the broader Twitter community has become politicized, as shown by the increased number of overall tweets with political content (see Figure 3).
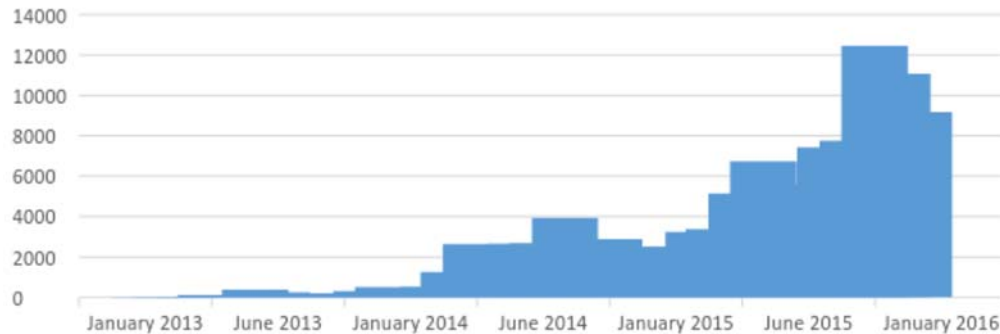

Figure 3. Changes in the total number of tweets with political content.

We argue that this politicization on Twitter occurred because of an orchestrated triggering effort of trolls. To illustrate the effect of trolls' triggering, we randomly chose some three-day sample periods from our database. We chose these narrow windows because we intended to show the effect of troll triggering by pointing out the small time lags between troll tweets and ordinary users' tweets. For example, Figure 4 represents the number of tweets that were sent every three hours between August 9 and 11, 2014.[10] Hikes in troll tweets precede tweets of ordinary users, suggesting the possibility that ordinary users follow trolls and they become activated by troll activities (see Figure 4). We observed similar results from other randomly chosen time windows.

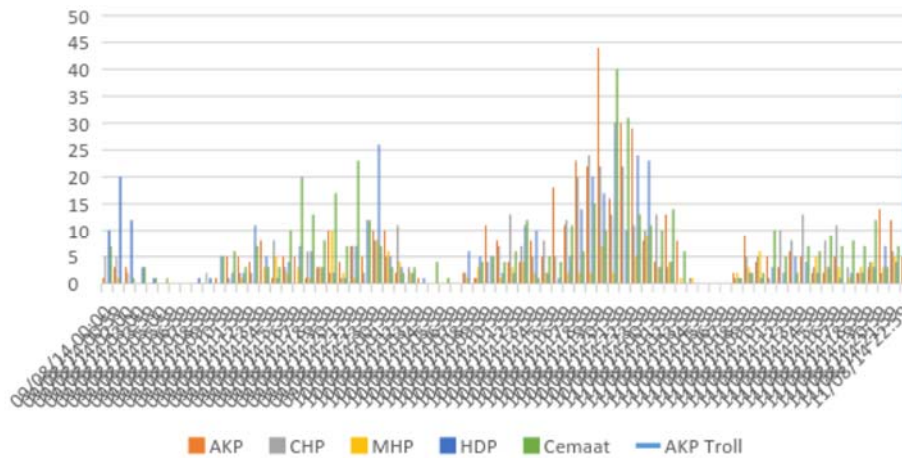[10] August 10, 2014, was when Recep Tayyip Erdogan was elected president.

Figure 4. Trigger effect of trolls.

Trolling in Turkey is directly associated with manipulation, insult, accusation, polarization, and therefore is to be regarded as *lulz* (flaming) trolling related to politics. Figure 5 shows the increases in the absolute number of tweets with insulting, polarizing, and accusing content for the total of 120 users, including both trolls and ordinary accounts.[11]
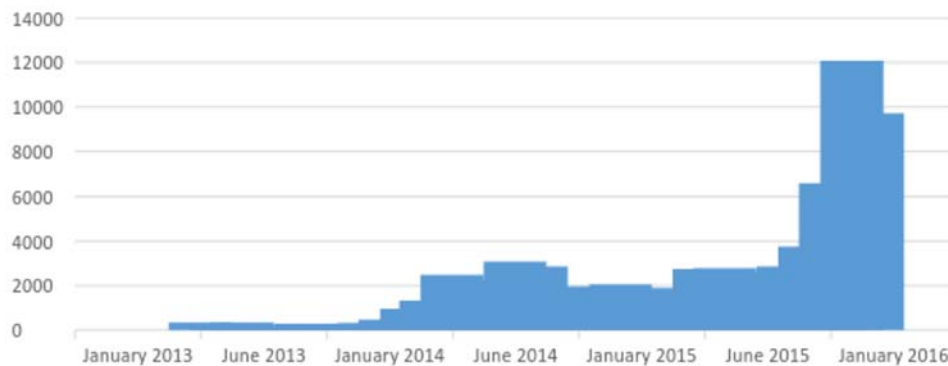

Figure 5. Changes in the number of tweets with insulting, accusing, and polarizing discourse.

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[11] A recent content analysis of Turkish trolls by the International Press Institute similarly revealed that troll content in Turkey can be classified according to four broad categories: humiliating insults (9.6%), intimidating insults (10.0%), sexually related insults (8.0%), and violence threats (72. 4%; Zimmermann, 2016).

Ultimately, as they polarize Twitter, trolls have developed peculiar strategies. First, they collectively lynch oppositional figures. This strategy involves screen-grabbing (saving a Web page as an image) the tweets of that oppositional figure, constructing a context based on misinformation, and then having numerous Twitter users attack that account, at times leading to arrests of oppositional figures (Sözeri, 2015a). The second strategy relies on Twitterbots through which JDP creates trending topics or spams a target. Trolls also hack oppositional journalists' Twitter accounts and make them apologize to JDP (Shearlaw, 2016). These strategies ultimately aim at silencing the public sphere, and can be better understood through analyzing the trolls' performances.

Trolls' Populist Performances: Projects, the Will of the People, and Demonization

In the context of "neoliberal populism" (Yıldırım, 2013), scholars have studied the discursive and performative dimensions of Turkey's right-wing populism (Türk, 2014; Yeşil, forthcoming; Yetkin, 2010) along with parallels and divergences between Argentina's Kirchnerism and Turkey's Erdoganism (Aytaç & Onis, 2014). Even though there are new aspects of populism in the neoliberal era, there are also ongoing religious and nationalist motifs that inform contemporary populism in Turkey, and we believe that the nationalist, emotional, and religious elements of what Açıkel (1996) called "sacred subalternity" strongly inform trolls' performances.

To delineate three key aspects of Erdogan's populism, we draw on Türk's (2014, p. 211) classification. First is the technical view of politics as a realm of leaving a concrete legacy and serving the people by building airports, hospitals, and highways or distributing tablets. In his political imagination, media and the establishment are there to benefit from national crises and stop the "sacred walk of Turkey." His populism is flexible: "Our values know no obstacles for highways. Even if there is a mosque on the path where we build the highway, we demolish that mosque and rebuild it elsewhere" (BBC Türkçe, 2013, para. 1). Trolls also tweet to promote the government's services. @esatreis, a primary troll account, writes (both with 2,000 retweets and likes),

> @esatreis: Following the third bridge, the court now decided to halt the construction of the third airport in Istanbul. These guys with the mindset and intelligence of Gezi will probably trash their mobile phones and cut Internet cables.[12]

> @esatreis: Let us go to the ballot box on November 1 and vote for the thieves who are building the third airport, the third bridge over the Bosphorus, double high-ways and the treasury of 900 billion dollars.[13]

The construction of a third airport and a third bridge over the Bosphorus has been heavily criticized by anti-JDP circles. This has given JDP ample opportunity to perform populism based on developmentalism. In the first tweet, @esatreis aims to humiliate Gezi supporters for their environmental concerns. The second tweet devaluates corruption accusations targeting the government by highlighting the

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[12] https://twitter.com/esatreis/status/611060246002462720

[13] https://twitter.com/esatreis/status/658736338292842496

infrastructure investments of the government. Both tweets exemplify a populist communication style through which a polarized political spectrum is constructed. *Us* represents the real people for whom JDP serves, whereas *them* refers to the establishment, which attacks JDP as part of an international conspiracy.

The second aspect of JDP's majoritarian populism concerns "the will of the people," to which fetishization of the ballot box is crucial. The president said, "The biggest theft, the biggest corruption is the theft and corruption of 'the will of the people.' Go ahead and look at the coup d'état periods" ("En büyük hırsızlık," 2014). Trolls followed the lead:

> @esatreis: So, Twitter is saying Turkey is a third world country? THEY WILL BE SHUT
> DOWN. YouTube doesn't care about your national security? WILL BE SHUT DOWN.
> Strong will of the people, strong state.[14]

Turkey's complex relationship with technology and the West is at its sharpest in the tweet above. Not only is Turkey pitted against Western media corporations, but it is also constructed as the underdog that thrives thanks to the people's will. Similarly, the next tweet praises the ordinary conservative man, disdained by the secular elite, according to JDP, for his dedication to come to a JDP demonstration (see Figure 6).

> @tahaun: The city of Kocaeli is waiting for the PM. My lovely uncle who is saying "I am
> here despite the hot sun." Your will is going to win.[15]

Figure 6. Caps from @tahaun's tweet.

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[14] https://twitter.com/esatreis/status/449202464466538496

[15] https://twitter.com/tahaun/status/602134239014985729

Third is a flexible and comprehensive conceptualization of the enemy, which has gained momentum since Gezi. Creating a cult of Erdogan as the "tall man under constant attack" (Türk, 2014, p. 241), the enemy includes as diverse political groups as secular elites, mainstream media, Gezi supporters, or Gulenites (FETÖ). Pro-JDP media resort to never ending conspiracies, equipping JDP's supporters with the practical tools to cope with social trauma such as corruption. Pro-JDP pundits particularly criminalize critical voices, perpetuate the discourse of "New Turkey" that is under attack by supporters of "Old Turkey," and produce spectacular TV performances against political enemies (Türk, 2014, pp. 390–394). As the networked, anonymous, and interactive manifestation of these pundits, trolls tweet to simplify complex issues, proliferate conspiracy, and reproduce discourses of demonization and victimization (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 4; Türk, 2014, p. 254).

With respect to this third feature, the underlying theme of troll discourse pertains to crisis and chaos created by a coalition of domestic and international conspirators. On top of the list is @esatreis's tweet (5,337 retweets; 5,465 likes) entitled "The chief [President Erdogan] has a message for you." This was tweeted on June 9, 2015, two days after the general elections when JDP, for the first time, was not able to secure a single-party majority government. With his trembling voice, Erdogan deploys emotional language:

> Every dark night has a morning. Every winter has a spring. There is a sacred hand and a holy force that transforms dark into light and that converts sadness into peace. Don't be hopeless. Don't get upset. Don't bow your heads down. *You are superior if you believe*. Don't forget this.[16]

Through the president's poetic tone, @esatreis mobilizes religious sentiments, emphasizing that one is superior if s/he is a believer. This video includes populist dualities (night/morning, winter/spring) and an imagined political victory. Another troll targets pro-Kurdish HDP's cochairman and writes (approximately 5,000 retweets and likes):

> @TimarRutherford: For me, there is no difference between the terrorist on the mountain and those who vote for this man.[17]

Such tweets do get attention. One response to this tweet (2,513 retweets; 2,753 likes), for instance, says, "a ground operation needs to be started against these b****es and they should be cleaned dead, not alive."

Polarization through insulting is a prime strategy during crisis. On October 10, 2015, more than 100 people were killed by ISIS in the heart of Ankara. At a moment when questions regarding security policies emerged, @esatreis initiated polarization (2,700 retweets and likes):

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[16] https://twitter.com/esatreis/status/608263995267641344

[17] https://twitter.com/TimarRutherford/status/641163058480578560

@esatreis: Following the explosion, Erdogan condemned terror, whereas Demirtas [HDP's co-chairman] condemned JDP. A man is a man, a dog is a dog.[18]

Prominent troll @tahaun, married to the First Lady's personal secretary, demonized two very different organizations as part of a coalition controlled by an invisible "master" (3,600 retweets and likes):

@tahaun: Dhkpc [i.e., Marxist-Leninist illegal organization] and the Parallel [i.e., Gulen movement] constitute the same heinous network that serve as the dogs for the same master.[19]

Demonization is flexibly operationalized through anticommunism, anti-Semitism. or new enemies such as the Gulenites (4,300 retweets and likes):

@esatreis: Do not expect him [Fethullah Gulen] to curse against Israel as he resides in their houses.[20]

@OmericoVespucci: I wish success to Besiktas who is playing against the Jewish heathen.[21]

@esatreis: The summary of the Gulen movement. . . . Their prosecutor is on vacation in Dubai. Their academic is at a foam party. Their basketball player is with playboy girls. Their director is in a casino. [3,200 retweets and likes][22]

Within the context of the current presidential referendum campaign, @runmakarnarun's tweet below is an example of demonization through antielitism: "Your making 'No' songs in Beyoglu or Cihangir does not change anything. The chief will strike back with a 'Yes ballad' to get 64 % of the votes" (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Caps from @runmakarnarun's tweet.

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[18] https://twitter.com/esatreis/status/652801210941075456

[19] https://twitter.com/tahaun/status/584080928877768704

[20] https://twitter.com/esatreis/status/490483079140892672

[21] https://twitter.com/OmericoVespucci/status/832322034868842496

[22] https://twitter.com/esatreis/status/617126344514740224

Demonization especially manifests itself in relation to the media. A favorite target has been Doğan Media, which covered pro-Kurdish HDP more favorably until it was significantly warned by the government following the June 2015 elections. @esatreis's change.org tweet reads (3,500 retweets and likes), "We condemn CNN Türk and their Mirgun Cabas [a former anchorman at CNN Türk] who support terrorism and terrorists. Sign and support."[23] Another tweet following an attack against the building of Doğan Media's daily *Hürriyet* reads (3,300 retweets and likes),

> @esatreis: Hey! To those *Hürriyet* employees who call for the police against the protestors at their front door: they are the police of the palace [Erdogan's presidential palace]. DHKP-C should protect you.[24]

Trolls attack journalists when they voice the slightest criticism against the government. For instance, when CNN Türk's anchorwoman Nevsin Mengü did not use "terrorist" as she defined an attack against the Istanbul Security Directorate, she was collectively lynched by trolls ("Yandaş hedef gösterince," 2015). When Nevsin Mengü tweeted, "Paid troll armies have to be discharged in order to prevent polarizing propaganda," pro-JDP columnist Cemile Bayraktar responded, "Ms. Mengü is saying 'Fire me'" ("Yandaş Cemile Bayraktar'dan," 2017). It is a common practice of trolls and pundits to carry out orchestrated operations against whoever is the enemy (i.e., mainstream media, leftist media, former PM Ahmet Davutoglu) of a specific political moment. What one might call "the trollization of journalism" is emerging as a troubling phenomenon to tame the public sphere. Especially during major political events such as elections or terrorist attacks, pro-JDP columnists and TV commentators create misinformation. Pro-JDP columnist Hilal Kaplan once tweeted a Photoshopped image of a poster of a demonstration to be held in Istanbul, trying to convince her followers that nationalist CHP and pro-Kurdish HDP were acting together ("Yalancı provakatör," 2016a). News anchorman Erkan Tan's denouncement of journalist Hüsnü Mahalli—"the dog of the killer"—resulted in Mahalli's being taken into custody ("Yandaş gazeteci," 2016b).

Conclusion

JDP's uninterrupted hegemony since 2002 was shaken during the Gezi Park protests, for which social media were crucial. Here, we investigated how JDP addressed the emerging problem of controlling the online public sphere by founding a troll army to tame online dissidence and polarize Twitter. Consequently, Turkish Twitter has become a highly political space because of trolls' populist performances. Despite attributed techno-utopian potentials, Twitter does not seem to have emerged as a space for deliberative democracy in Turkey.[25] It is a medium of government-led populist polarization,

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[23] https://twitter.com/esatreis/status/582991227630399488

[24] https://twitter.com/esatreis/status/640632867618488320

[25] Turkey's Twitter sphere is not unique in terms of failing the dreams of cyberdemocracy. It does echo other national contexts such as Russia where the government responded to online dissent by both implementing a restrictive legal framework, deploying progovernment forces, setting up fake accounts, and even targeting citizens of other countries such as Finland (Aro, 2016; Klyueva, 2016). It is not unusual for Twitter and the Internet to become spaces of collective lynching, misogyny, and nationalism both in the North and South (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Cole, 2015; Mohan, 2015).

misinformation and lynching. If one would expect trolling to be "equal opportunity laughter" (Philips, 2015), JDP trolls' use of humor fails our expectations given that their language and humor are exclusionary in terms of nation, ethnicity, and gender.

In addition, trolling has impacted the language of politics itself. As citizens, we increasingly find ourselves asking whether we are being trolled by our leaders, who, for instance, suggest that Muslims first discovered America. Politicians endorse trolls' discriminatory language on Twitter to appeal to the masses. Similarly, pro-JDP journalists disseminate fake news just as trolls do. Although one can possibly argue that trolls are no different from mass media's spin-doctors, we would like to underline the affectivity, albeit ephemeral, of Twitter in which politics is highly interactive and fast. Whether interactivity invites deliberative democracy, however, seems to call for further research that looks at the role of state in regulating social media.

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