Conspiratorial Webs:
Media Ecology and Parallel Realities in Turkey

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This article aims to contribute to a theory of populism that considers not just discursive antagonistic struggle but also the material-ecological dynamics of communication reshaping populist politics. By focusing on Turkey's "split media ecology," which is both censored and algorithmically filtered, we show that instead of simply instituting disconnection and blockage, censorship also exploits connectivity and triggers further communication. The paradox of blockage and flow supports the proliferation of conspiracy theories and results in the conception of moral, epistemological, and ontological orders for Internet communication. The question is how media-ecological affordances reconfigure antagonistic struggle and populist politics. We argue that emerging political strategy exploits connectivity and flow while incapacitating and excluding other networks. Thereby, the segregations of the split media ecology support flexible rearticulations of the "enemy" on behalf of sovereign power. Yet techno-cultural dynamics including netwar and post-truth media engagement also prove detrimental to sovereign power as we know it.

Keywords: censorship, media ecology, post-truth, populism, Turkey

"AK troll" is a speculative term referring to paid or voluntary social media users and bots that threaten other users who are critical of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) that has been ruling Turkey since 2002. These trolls also allegedly retweet messages in support of the government and create social media trends to manipulate public opinion. AK trolls are considered to be a by-product of the Gezi Uprising of 2013 that alerted AKP leaders to the relatively low number of active social media users among their supporters (Saka, 2016). Despite the denial by AKP representatives, for many the presence of AK trolls was proven by a leaked phone conversation between the daughter of AKP leader and then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his chief adviser Mustafa Varank in early 2014. Erdoğan's daughter told Varank that she was going to campaign for a civil society project and added: "Tell our trolls to support

our TT (Trending Topic) campaign" ("Sümeyye Erdoğan," 2014). The speculations and rumors regarding these social media actors were so persistent that when AKP opened its New Turkey Digital Office in May 2015, the oppositional media dubbed it the "AK troll center."

The discussion around AK trolls indicates the complexity of constructions of truth and authenticity in a media environment that is widely accepted to be manipulated, where "nothing is what it seems," and every statement is expected to advance some kind of hidden agenda. This article considers the media-ecological effects of censorship, their relation to the circulation of conspiracy theories, and the kinds of politics that this relation affords. We raise the following questions: In what ways does censorship combine disconnection/blockage and connection/flow? How does this combination provide a milieu for the proliferation of conspiracy theories as well as negotiations by the state and its critics over binaries of truth/deception, transparency/opaqueness, trust/suspicion, and legitimate/illegitimate? Last, how do media-ecological dynamics reshape populism? By raising this set of questions, we aim to contribute to a theory of populism that considers not only discursively expressed antagonisms but also the material-ecological dynamics that reconfigure antagonistic struggle and populist politics. Our notion of the "split media ecology" underscores that censorship constitutes a paradox of blockage and flow, resulting in disparate (though not hermetically contained) communication circuits that are conceived by users in terms of moral, epistemological, and ontological orders. Turkey's media ecology does not just provide channels for disseminating conspiracy theories but its medial dynamics also become agents in such theories. Considering media-ecological affordances and significations together with emerging political strategies and articulations of us–them binaries allows us to rethink antagonistic struggle and populist politics.

Before going into our analysis, the following section defines and connects three core concepts we deploy in our analysis, namely, media ecology, conspiracy theory, and populism. Subsequently, to investigate the material affordances of the Turkish media ecology, we identify censorship assemblages consisting of particular techniques of blockage/disconnection and communication/connectivity. Third, we focus on discourses and practices of various Internet users, including politicians, progovernment groups, and dissidents. Using discourse analysis, we consider what Gehl (2014) terms media ideologies or Chun (2006) terms media representations—namely, the discourses about media that frame their usage. Last, we highlight two media-ecological situations: one revolving around strategic usage of segregated circuits of communication and another around transgressions of this segregated order. Through these we explore how media-ecological affordances reinforce populist politics on behalf of sovereign power yet also engender wider techno-cultural dynamics attenuating its control.

Censorship, Conspiracy Theory, Populism

The "censored media ecology" strikes as a paradox to the extent that censorship is commonly considered to signify blockage whereas the concept of media ecology underscores flow and connectivity. Advancing a materialist approach, Fuller (2005) deploys the concept of media ecology to examine "various and particular or shared rhythms, codes, politics, capacities, predispositions, and drivers" of media systems and "how these can be said to mix, to interrelate, and to produce patterns, dangers, and potentials" (p. 2). Rather than static objects per se, this approach highlights "dynamic interrelation of

processes and objects, beings and things" (Fuller, 2005, p. 2) and hence the mixtures of affordances, energies, and human–nonhuman interactions.

Accordingly, this article shows that Internet censorship does not simply involve disconnection and blockage but consists in processes and interactions that are shaped by heterogeneous techniques, media formats, and infrastructures. Aligning censorship with disconnection and flow builds on the distinction between defensive and offensive strategies of censorship regimes, the latter encompassing propaganda (Jiang, 2012). Information warfare techniques that target affect, memory, and attention seek to manipulate moods while thwarting capabilities for reflection and logico-discursive response (Terranova, 2007). Following Rand analysts Arquilla and Ronfeldt's assertion that "it takes networks to fight networks" (2001, p. 54), netwar as a "soft" military strategy consists in managing networks: mimicking and stimulating the formation of certain "grassroots" networks while incapacitating and pre-empting the emergence of other, undesired ones (Bratich, 2011).

Media ecology provides a useful framework for our analysis as it overcomes the binaries that keep apart technological objects and the human/social actors using them. Instead, it foregrounds the reconfiguration of "social" practices through their mediation by particular technological formations that themselves exist as temporary externalizations or settlements of further material practices (Fuller, 2005; Stephens, 2014). For the current study, this means that the Internet is not simply an environment, let alone a passive backdrop, for discursive antagonistic struggle but a complex ensemble of affordances and dispositions that shape and express such struggle. While we still make reference to actors with social identities (the "state," "pro/anti-government" users), we consider their actions to be fundamentally mediated in ways that they do not and cannot fully control.

By conceiving of a Turkish media ecology, however, we evoke a sense of particularity and situatedness. First, we emphasize how media-ecological affordances are conditioned and modulated by legal frameworks and institutional-political rationalities. In Turkey, media censorship and control by state institutions most directly impact broadcast media, yet this situation has repercussions for the Internet, too. Even though censorship and partisanship in Turkish mass-media circles predate AKP's rule, AKP has created its own media after the state's seizure of some centrist media companies in the wake of the 2001 economic crisis. These companies were gradually handed over to businessmen with close ties to AKP (Çarkoğlu, Baruh, & Yildirim, 2014; Kaya & Cakmur, 2010; Sozeri, 2011). Other media companies were "disciplined" through tax investigations, denial of accreditation, and court cases (Akser & Baybars-Hawks, 2012). Furthermore, the public broadcast agency TRT (Turkish Radio Television) has been dominated by the government over the years, denying representation to oppositional views. Following the failed coup attempt of July 2016, and through statutory decrees passed under the State of Emergency, the number of jailed journalists reached 81, which is the highest in the world ("Turkey's crackdown propels," , 2016), and 177 press organizations, including newspapers, magazines, TV and radio channels, and news agencies, were closed down ("OHAL'de gazetecilik," 2016). The closures not only targeted the media owned by the Gülen Movement, which was deemed responsible for the coup attempt, but also dissident and pro-Kurdish media.

Moreover, the "Turkish" quality of the media ecology comprises the use of the Turkish language, which continues to define communication circuits, not in the least because language, in addition to geo-

location, helps global platforms filter content and target local users. We consider especially what particular medial dynamics mean to historically situated subjects and how they inform particular techno-cultural sensibilities. Our understanding of media ecology incorporates cultural significations and practices of use, which Hayles (2002) considers to be "interpretive strategies . . . that include physical manipulations as well as conceptual frameworks" (p. 33). Hence, we attend to significations and affects both in terms of their mediation and circulation by media techniques, formats, and infrastructures and as (speculative) interpretations of medial dynamics and conditions. In their study of social media networks of protesters in Turkey during the Gezi Uprising of 2013, Haciyakupoglu and Zhang (2015) developed a media-ecological approach that advances "the relative and situated reading of any medium against the background of a myriad of contextual factors and their continuous interactions" (p. 463). Their study maps the distribution of "trust" as a particular affect or sentiment. What they call "system trust" is the "faith vested in the functioning of technological systems based on the technological affordances they provide" (p. 451). Along similar lines, we investigate how the Internet has become a domain simultaneously associated with freedom and threat, or authenticity and illegitimacy, in response to the tight control over broadcast media in Turkey. More specifically, we note that the censored media ecology forms a particularly fertile milieu for the proliferation of conspiracy theories. The material affordances of the censored media ecology and the significations and affects implicated in conspiracy theory feed on one another.

Much of the analysis of conspiracy theory focuses on the politics of knowledge. Birchall (2006) advances a Foucauldian approach that defines conspiracy theory as a discursive formation, a collection of statements and texts that develops "its own rules of formation that determine how knowledge is produced within it" (p. 11). Identification of a conspiracy theory does not require that its claims are per definition illegitimate or incorrect. Rather, statements can still constitute conspiracy theories even if underlying claims turn out to be correct (Andrejevic, 2013; Bratich 2008). Hence, key for us is the ontological claim to hidden forces operating behind the apparent reality of things and the epistemological indeterminacy rendering proofs and justifications ineffective in the face of this claim. Moreover, shifting back to ecological concerns, it is not just the case that the censored media ecology provides the conduits through which conspiracy narratives travel. Rather, Internet users' speculative interpretations pose that media systems stage and enact conspiracies by engendering mysterious, "dark," illegitimate and less-than-human agencies. According to research from 2015, 43% of respondents in a nation-wide poll believe that social media is misused to spread rumors and lies about public figures (Çarkoğlu, Kalaycıoğlu, & Nisbet, 2015).

Last, we consider how media-ecological affordances mediate antagonistic struggles and populist politics, discussing censorship together with algorithmic filtering by ranking and recommendation software. Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) theory of populism considers antagonistic struggle in terms of discursive contestation. Shifting articulations of us–them binaries are for them a sign of "good" democratic politics because they indicate transformative identifications rather than their consolidation into static identities, which can slide into authoritarian populism (Gilbert, 2014; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) framework, however, appears in some ways unsuitable in the case of a material-ecological approach to the split media ecology. It is not that antagonisms have disappeared from current repertoires of cultural signification, but rather that their operation needs to be appreciated in relation to medial and techno-cultural dynamics and their possibilities. How do antagonisms fare in a context of

netwar and information warfare? In what ways does the media ecology we describe reinforce populist politics on behalf of sovereign power, or ultimately attenuate the latter?

When one looks at AKP's populist politics specifically, it was initially predicated on a binary opposition between the disenfranchised conservative masses and the Kemalist bureaucratic elite (Karahanoğulları, 2012; Yabanci 2016). It combined the promise of extending welfare services to the poorest and raising living standards for large segments of the society alongside intensive neoliberal reform (Hadiz, 2014). In recent years, however, AKP's populism has increasingly come to revolve around the evocation of "enemies of the nation." These enemies, often labeled "terrorists," are blamed for Turkey's arrested development and flexibly rearticulated in progovernment conspiratorial discourse. Since the Gezi Uprising, progovernment voices have blamed an expansive list of interest groups, including "Zionist and interest lobbies," of targeting Turkey's growing economic and political power by inciting its citizens to rebel. The talk of lobbies has later been replaced with references to some kind of invisible mastermind (*üst akıl*), the ambiguous meaning of which can connote Western powers, a secret global organization with connections to Israel akin to the Illuminati, and even NATO. However, progovernment opinion makers do not hold a prerogative to apply conspiracy theory. Partly due to "the structural non-transparency" (Ertür, 2016, p. 179) of the state, conspiracy theories with similar genre features are easily deployed by opposing political actors in Turkey (Baer, 2013; Karaosmanoğlu, 2009).

Perhaps the greatest example of flexible rearticulation of enemies pertains to the ally-turned-nemesis Gülen Movement. Capitalizing on the momentum of economic growth between 2002 and 2007, AKP began to tighten its grip on the state apparatus by eliminating the established Kemalist/secularist cadres in bureaucracy and replacing them mainly with the followers of the preacher Fethullah Gülen, the controversial leader of a global Turkish Islamic movement. AKP, with the help of Gülenists, launched the Ergenekon (2008) and Sledgehammer (2010) trials that resulted in the imprisonment and purge of hundreds of army officials who acted as self-appointed protectors of Kemalism. However, the partnership between the AKP and Gülenists began to falter in 2012, over their disagreement about the government initiative to start peace negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and ultimately collapsed in late 2013, when a corruption case targeting Erdoğan and his close circle was initiated by the police and prosecutors affiliated with the Gülen Movement. Gülenists were accused of founding a "parallel state structure," fueling the conspiracy discourse about "enemies within." Gülen-affiliated schools, media, and businesses have been expropriated by the state in retaliation, and tens of thousands of state employees were fired and imprisoned through the charge of being Gülenists following the failed coup. Since the fallout with their former partners, AKP representatives have repeatedly claimed that they had been "tricked" by the Gülenists (Yilmaz, 2017).

Although here we summarize some of the conspiratorial narratives that undergird antagonistic struggle in Turkey, the mediation of identifications and sentiments remains to be investigated. The last section of this article focuses on flexible othering, post-truth,[2] and foreclosure as themes manifesting the intersection between media-ecological dynamics and antagonistic struggle within Turkish society.

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[2] As will become clear, we use the term *post-truth* in Andrejevic's (2013) sense of post-reality, which does not reinforce the notion of objective truth in characterizing current media cultures by its absence. Instead,

Censorship as Blockage and Flow

Censorship does more than simply produce disconnections and blocks. It also involves (excessive) flow. These two aspects of censorship speak to the transformation of political strategy on behalf of sovereign power. The latter consists in information warfare and managing networks by stimulating connectivity as well as imposing disconnection. Yet ensuing media-ecological forces and dynamics also transform power and agency, meaning that they evade full control by sovereign power.

Since the mid-2000s, the Turkish state has become far more active in controlling and regulating the Internet (Yesil, 2016). Implemented in 2007, Law No. 5651 on Regulating Broadcasting in the Internet and Fighting Against Crimes Committed Through Internet Broadcasting devises nine categories that prescribe what content can be banned without a court order, either temporarily or until appeal. Techniques of blocking, such as IP blocking, have led to the temporary closures of the blog host Wordpress.com and the video-sharing platform YouTube. Legal amendments in 2014 and 2015 enabled the swift, temporary banning of websites via URL access restriction by the prime minister and other ministers. The introduction of a new government-controlled Internet Service Provider Union, with obligatory membership, further facilitated the quick enforcement of takedown decisions (Akgül & Kırlıdoğ, 2015). Social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter were pressured to cooperate with the state authorities by monitoring "fake" accounts and blocking accounts critical of government policies (Bulut, 2016). Although the actual number remains unknown, the independent initiative Blocked Web (*Engelli Web*) crowdsources information to count blocked websites, reaching 116,126 as of December 2016 ("İstatistikler," 2016). Although the majority of banned websites has pornographic content, the list also includes numerous dissident and pro-Kurdish websites. During the run-up to the general elections in 2015, and under the state of emergency following the coup attempt, both corporate and independent news websites were taken down. In recent years, Facebook, and especially Twitter, have been blocked, such as during the local elections in 2014, or throttled (slowed down) following the Islamic State (IS) attacks targeting a peace rally in 2015 and foreign tourists in 2016. The removal request reports by Twitter on Turkey repeatedly show that requests for removal per court order from Turkey are higher than all other countries combined ("Removal Requests," 2014). In October 2016, following the arrest of the dissident comayors of Diyarbakir, Turkey's largest Kurdish city, there was an Internet blackout throughout the entire Kurdish region for several days.

Next to blocking, filter packages required by the Information and Communication Technologies Authority aim at constructing a "clean" and "safe" Internet. Filters that are voluntary in private use and mandatory in places such as schools and libraries work with blacklists of banned websites and whitelists of permitted ones. Censorship through blockage is not just an objective condition, it also relies on obedient user behavior and constraining technologies of the self (i.e., the effort to install the filter software package, steer clear of "dirty" and "dangerous" influences, and reject the perhaps tempting option of censorship evasion). The notion of a "dark" Internet prevails in official discourse—for instance, when then Prime Minister Erdoğan called Twitter a "menace" during the Gezi Uprising in 2013. In the following year,

we use the term to refer to discursive formations and rhetorical styles that relinquish "rational," evidence-based truth claims.

Erdoğan signified the immorality and danger of Twitter when he argued that the government had to shut down the platform because Twitter had failed to prevent the spread of pornographic content wrongly linked to a Turkish housewife (Tufekci, 2014).

These instances of censorship through blockage and disconnection are inscribed by sovereign decision and moral authority. Yet such institutional approaches coexist with other techniques that exploit the connectivity of the Internet and its material affordances. Censorship can paradoxically be enacted through excessive flow as a means of generating silence, though this problematizes agency. For instance, mood management and information warfare tactics inform social-media campaigns in which an indiscriminate mesh of ideologues and supporters as well as bots and paid users may take part. These produce an abundance of traffic to drown out oppositional voices and threaten dissident figures. In Turkey, dissident journalists, members of minority groups, and AKP's political opponents are regularly targeted. Even the top cadres of AKP are not free from harassment when they express criticism of Erdoğan or party policies ("Arınç'ın geç kalan," 2016). The term *troll* has since become so commonplace that pro-AKP media have recently used it to define 10,200 social media users, tracked by the Cyber Crimes Unit, who allegedly engaged in online propaganda and manipulation in support of the Gülen Movement.

Another form of mood management consists in the use of social media, in particular Twitter, as the vehicle for sharing images that are unlikely to pass the guidelines of decorum reserved for broadcast media. One example is the depiction of the dead bodies of Kurdish rebels—especially naked female bodies—who were killed by state security forces after the resumption of fighting between PKK and the Turkish state in 2015. These pictures are real in the sense that they are very "raw," direct footage, often shot by soldiers on the ground. Yet they are also hyperreal in Baudrillard's (1994) sense. They seek to manipulate the public's mood and turn war into a media simulation. The Twitter accounts that disseminate such imagery typically start out sharing generic content such as popular expressions and online polls. After having built up a following, they turn to spreading violent images that degrade the "enemy" and render manifest the force of the state.

Distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks assist in drowning out oppositional voices through excessive flow, namely through volumes of traffic exceeding what the server of a website can handle. In other cases, hacking forms a method for appropriating communicative capacity. The website of Academics for Peace, persecuted for their signature campaign calling for an end to the state's military operations in the Kurdish cities, was hacked to relay the following message: "We will continue our operations as long as you do not cease your attacks against Turkey" ("Barış için akademisyenler," 2016). In 2014, an ultranationalist hacker group called Cyber Ergenekon[3] took over the Twitter accounts of two deputies of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party to tweet nationalist slogans. The right-wing hacker group

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[3] It is hard to determine the nature and background of this group. On the one hand, despite carrying the name of Ergenekon, the group should not be assumed to have ties to the alleged organization at the center of the Ergenekon trials, in light of the fact that the majority of the defendants refused any knowledge of such an organization. On the other hand, one should bear in mind that the Turkic founding myth of Ergenekon has long had strong appeal for Turkish ultranationalists.

Akıncılar (Raiders), which claims to have ties to the state security apparatus, proudly lists the hacking of websites that discuss the Armenian genocide ("Cyber-Warrior," 2016).

As our review of censorship techniques suggests, censorship involves a paradox of blocking and flow, rendering it not just a tool of sovereign power, working through sovereign decision and interinstitutional cooperation, but also a media-ecological, immanent effect. Viral sharing and so-called troll activity appears to be coordinated but also spontaneous; mysterious DDoS attacks seem massive yet without a socially identifiable actor behind them. To the extent that sovereign power that seeks to use yet simultaneously contain networks is fallible, the outcome can be disorganized, contradictory, and fickle.

Moreover, censorship inadvertently triggers more communication in the form of aleatory flows of information, affect, and energy. Censorship and anticensorship techniques evolve in response to one another. Dissident Internet users redirect flow by using virtual private networks (VPN) and proxy sites (Yesil, 2016). The Alternative Informatics Association, the Turkish Pirate Party, and the hacktivist group RedHack, as well as Anonymous and alternative media sites, have disseminated information about the usage of VPN tunnels to hide IP addresses, "live CDs" to browse the Internet without leaving a trace on the hard disk, and encryption software like The Onion Router (Hoyng, 2016). Such techniques of censorship evasion constitute what is called the Streisand effect, where censorship only increases the engagement (Jansen & Martin, 2015; Nabi, 2014). For instance, in the hours following the Twitter ban during the March 2014 local elections, there was a 138% increase in the volume of tweets from Turkey—around 17,000 tweets every minute. Likewise, the hashtag #TwitterisBlockedinTurkey has trended during blockage of the platform (Cardullo, 2015; Hoyng, 2016).

Leaking is another example of how censorship and communicative excess form intertwining dynamics. Since December 2014, voice recordings insinuating corruption at the highest levels of the government have been leaked by the @Haramzadeler333 Twitter account. After its closure, a new account with the handle @fuatavni_f (Fuat Avni), which gained 2.78 million followers, continued with similar releases that included the names of citizens and judges allegedly involved in election fraud in support of AKP in 2014. Another notorious leak involved the Marxist hacktivist group RedHack, which hacked into the personal e-mails of Berat Albayrak, the Minister of Energy and the son-in-law of Erdoğan. A number of activists suspected of being affiliated with RedHack were arrested and document storage and sharing platforms such as Google Drive, Dropbox, OneDrive, and the developers' platform GitHub were all shut down. These measures, however, failed to stop the leaks. Fittingly, Rogers (2009) proposes to discuss Internet censorship not in terms of "discrete sites, which are blocked or accessible" (p. 229), but in terms of a circulation space where censorship involves processes of tracking and triggers perpetual rerouting and displacing of content.

Flow can be a techno-political instrument of order—for instance, when it is produced through efficient and reliable logistical or imperial infrastructures (Innis, 2007; Peters, 2015). Yet the Turkish media ecology produces excessive, aleatory flow that not only bypasses sovereign decision but also overrides the instrumentality of media technology (Fuller & Goffey, 2012; Sampson, 2012). Flow renders the agency distributed, ambiguously human and nonhuman, opaque and spectral. The next section addresses the speculative knowledge produced in, and articulated to, the media ecology. As will become

clear, the "split" media ecology is one that features disparate yet not hermetically contained circuits of communication that users conceptualize as moral, epistemological, and ontological orders.

Conspiratorial Vibes

Turkish censored media ecology—in its staging of "dark" outsides, reroutes, bots, and leaks—turns out to offer a particularly fertile ground for conspiracy theories. This section explores conspiratorial media ideologies and their negotiations by progovernment actors as well as dissident ones. It analyzes how medial dynamics inform techno-cultural significations that frame practices, primarily antagonistic struggle.

Wherever there is a censorship barrier, there necessarily is an "outside," too. Censorship creates its own outside and, hence, rather than erasing the impermissible from the public's mind, it constructs the notion of "unsafe" and "dark" forces. Censorship comes with ideas of lawlessness, immorality, and a threatening outside enemy, or Other—although AKP's media policy also addresses cleansing and controlling the Other within oneself when facing the seductions of pornography or terrorist propaganda. Additionally, Andrejevic (2013), citing Stewart, states that the Internet was not just made for conspiracy, but "it *is* a conspiracy theory: one thing leads to another, always another link leading you deeper into no thing and no place" (p. 115). In Turkey, the proposition that the Internet is conspiracy theory becomes even more salient: As the censored media ecology constitutes an outside that is nontransparent and transgressive of the moral and epistemological order, the existence of dark forces, mysterious agents, and pawns can be evoked at will. According to a recent national survey, many AKP supporters favored an Internet free of censorship but nonetheless deemed regulatory measures necessary.

However, in the evocation of "outsides" and "beyonds," the censored media ecology conjures "authentic" and "immediate" agencies, in addition to "lobbies," "secret" agendas, and "pawns." For opponents and dissidents, what lies beyond the censorship filter is often a realm where truth is spoken and people voice their opinions and disclose information through citizen journalism and "sousveillance" (bottom-up surveillance) tactics. During the elections, the independent civil initiative Vote and Beyond (*Oy ve Ötesi*), which provides training for observers at polling stations to curb election fraud, used an online system to collect digital photos of ballot-box results for comparison with the official reports. Leaders of the opposition parties turned to Internet platforms to communicate with voters when they found themselves deprived of proper screen time on the public broadcaster TRT: The leader of Republican People's Party chose the popular urban dictionary Sour Dictionary (*Ekşi Sözlük*) to answer voters' questions under the entry, "I'm Kılıçdaroğlu and I'm with you." Selahattin Demirtaş, the now-jailed leader of the Peoples' Democratic Party, used Twitter's Periscope and Facebook's Livestream apps to answer direct questions from voters. This method has been also commonly used by journalists laid off by media organizations for their dissident views.

Internet users conceive of medial dynamics and conditions in terms of moral, epistemological, and ontological orders. For some, the unfiltered Internet relays the "voice" of the people in some kind of "immediate" and "authentic" way. Social media has played an important role in protest mobilization since the Gezi Uprising, bypassing formal political parties and existing organizations. The notion has emerged of

a heterogeneous, leaderless collectivity, reminiscent of what is called the "multitude" in contemporary cultural theory. Yet conspiratorial reasoning undoes such claims to political authenticity: Nothing is "what it seems," and the unfiltered Internet will deceive you. The discourse of organized online "lobbies" that stir up dissent in Turkey substitutes the claim of spontaneity and authenticity with the accusation of manipulation. For instance, Erdoğan has accused a "robot lobby" of targeting his party through viral tweets.

Internet media "beyond" the filter are simultaneously associated with authenticity and transparency, and with deception and dark forces. The situation can be unresolvedly ambiguous, as the case of Twitter phenomenon of Fuat Avni shows, whose leaks forecasting intrigues repeatedly proved correct. Yet if Fuat Avni–related handles remain mysterious accounts inducing all kinds of speculation regarding their origin, Vote and Beyond maintains a public profile and is transparent about its own workings. Nonetheless, the progovernment newspaper *Sabah* claimed that the latter was working to undermine the AKP's electoral success with support from abroad and the "terrorist" Gülen Movement. Commenting on epistemological indeterminacy that cannot be resolved, Andrejevic (2013) refers to "bad infinity": Fact checkers fail to settle cases because they are encountered with doubt and suspicion themselves. In Turkey, initiatives such as Vote and Beyond that aim at fact checking lack the status of authority or bipartisanship to overcome "bad infinity." But the same holds for the progovernment initiative Vote and Cheating (*Oy ve Hilesi*) that imitated it, needless to say.

However, because of new strategies by progovernment actors, binaries of transparency–opaqueness, trust–suspicion, and legitimate–illegitimate have shifted once more. Following the Gezi Uprising, AKP and its supporters have become more visible in social media platforms. Once calling Twitter a menace, President Erdoğan currently has more than 10 million followers on Twitter. AKP continues to have a love–hate relationship with social media, though. In 2016, the hashtag #WeLoveErdoğan suddenly disappeared from Twitter's TT list during Erdoğan's trip to the United States. Progovernment media cried foul, claiming that Twitter had censored the hashtag. In response, Twitter stated that its TT lists were based not on hashtag frequency but "on an algorithm that measures the speed of tweets," activity ("Twitter Public Policy," 2016) which the dissident media took to mean that Twitter had detected bot. Within the same week, Facebook closed down the progovernment newspaper *Yeni Şafak*'s page on its platform, reportedly because of the purchase of popular pages that would redirect unsuspecting users to *Yeni Şafak*'s page. *Yeni Şafak* columnists complained about "Facebook's censoring."

In the normalization of conspiratorial thinking, mass entertainment, even when framed explicitly as fictional, can play a surprising role in providing meaning for current events unfolding on the Internet. In one instance, intertextual references to mainstream entertainment, evoking mistrust in political authority, provided an interpretative framework for institutional-political change of the highest order. In May 2016, a blog entry titled the Pelican Brief (*Pelikan Dosyası*) was posted anonymously on the blog host Wordpress.com.[4] The reference to a Hollywood movie about a conspiracy that bears the same title now framed the claim that the then Prime Minister Davutoğlu betrayed President Erdoğan. Davutoğlu was made to resign shortly after decrying the "tricks of cyber charlatans" ("Davutoğlu," 2016). Frenzied critics

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[4] See https://pelikandosyasi.wordpress.com/

on Twitter and elsewhere immediately started to guess the identity of the writer(s) of the blog and presented a conspiracy theory about the conspiracy theory in the Pelican Brief: The blog post was the work of forces within AKP working directly under Erdoğan to eliminate Davutoğlu ("Pelikan dosyası yandaş," 2016).

Media are not just a conduit for, but also agents in, conspiracy theory: Speculations of all kinds of dark forces, sometimes of ambiguous human–nonhuman nature, give meaning to medial dynamics and condition. Yet binaries of transparency/opaqueness, trust/suspicion, and legitimate/illegitimate are mobilized and negotiated in different ways. Our notion of the split media ecology refers to disparate circuits of communication becoming conceived in terms of moral, epistemological, and ontological orders. The next section explores some of the ways in which the material affordances and signifying repertoires pertaining to the split media ecology reconfigure antagonistic struggle and populist politics.

Filtered Antagonisms

This section highlights two situations, one revolving around segregated circuits of communication and the other around flows that transgress the divisions of this segregated order. The first signifies how media-ecological affordances can reinforce populist politics on behalf of sovereign power; the second points to wider techno-cultural dynamics that are not fully controlled by sovereign power and may be detrimental to it.

In the first situation, filtering algorithms belonging to ranking and recommendation software aggravate the divides of the censored media ecology. This is because censorship partially relies on users' behaviors and technologies of the self for customization: algorithmic filtering takes cues from performed behaviors. As many (Simanowski, 2016; Van Dijck, 2013) have argued, based on an estimation of our interests, algorithmic filtering tends to present a curated environment. Hence, although Google uses its ranking algorithm PageRank, which measures in-links and other criteria to determine the respective ranks of Web pages in a supposedly neutral manner (Gillespie, 2014), this does not prevent biases and homogenization in search results. Google search selectively caters calculated slices of the World Wide Web to particular users, inadvertently obscuring the diversity of worldviews.

A politically significant example of a filter bubble was provided by Google's return of hits for queries related to the Ankara bombings in 2015, which left 102 dead and more than 400 injured. The victims were about to participate in the Labor, Peace, and Democracy Rally that was organized by dissident trade unions and civil society organizations to call for an end to the reignited fighting between the Turkish state and PKK. Although top-ranked news sources on Google.com cited Turkish security sources reporting that the IS was the chief suspect behind the attacks, the top-ranked results in the Turkish Google.com.tr domain implicated the PKK alongside the IS, echoing Prime Minister Davutoğlu's speech on national television.[5] Moreover, querying the international Google.com domain for "PKK" resulted

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[5] On October 12, 2015, we compared top search results for the international domain of Google.com to the Turkish domain Google.com.tr, using a "research browser" (which cancels Google's personalization of results).

in international news items highlighting what was absent from the top results in the Turkish Google.com.tr domain: the military attacks by the Turkish state on the PKK bases in Iraq in the wake of the Ankara bombings. The aftermath of the Ankara bombings has seen not less but more ambiguity around who ought to be identified as a "terrorist." President Erdoğan made the puzzling claim that parties fighting each other in Syria—the IS, PKK, the Syrian intelligence, and the Syrian Kurdish organization PYD—committed "a collective act of terror" to manipulate the November 1 elections.

The above case indicates the disparate discursive articulations of "terrorist" that Google's search engine rendered available to Turkish Internet users versus foreign ones, who are by default distinguished by Google on the basis of their geographical position and language use. The case suggests how media-ecological affordances—namely, segregation and disconnection—may reinforce the populist politics enhancing sovereign power. Such politics here operate through the flexible and inconsistent rearticulation of the enemy, which amalgamates into a sense of all-round threat. The capability to exclude and disconnect is key, capitalizing on the segregation of communication circuits afforded by the censored and filtered media ecology.

Segregation in the split media ecology is, however, far from hermetical. The second situation pertains to what happens at the moment of encounter with "Others." Discussing fragmentation within networked media, Dean (2005) contends that it is because specific communities of exchange have become our single point of reference that "anything outside the experience or comprehension of these communities either does not exist or is an inhuman, otherworldly alien threat that must be annihilated" (p. 69). The excluded becomes "foreclosed": something that we cannot accept because if we do so "it destroys the very order produced through foreclosure" (Dean, 2005, p. 69). Rather than dealing with difference, one casts one's opponent as the "Other," who is in no way equal. Dean (2005) mobilizes a psychoanalytic framework when she contends that "the other on the Internet is the Real other—not the other I imagine as like me and not the symbolic other to be recognized and respected through abstract norms and rights" (p. 68).

Flows that transgress the medial orders can be understood as what Thacker (2014) describes as "dark media," through which one "communicates with or connects to that which is, by definition, inaccessible" (p. 81). Dark media mediate "not between two points in a single reality, but between two realities" (Thacker, 2014, p. 131). Accordingly, communication taken as dark media is illegitimate, evil, or inauthentic. Such a response is reflected in discourses of lobbies and trolling that speculate in the fashion of conspiracy theory about "forces" behind apparent online performances. One corollary problem is that discourses of lobbies and troll armies have become overused in a way that prevents tackling historical social difference. Ironically, typical troll behavior (on either side) consists in calling the Other in the encounter a "troll" (or any equivalent), thereby denying the Other's legitimacy and authentic existence. Reactions that seem reduced to innervation take precedence over interaction and engagement. Moreover, the suggestion that Others are merely paid mercenaries or somehow "fake" creates the illusion that by simply blocking, eradicating, or unmasking the trolls, the problem of an extremely divided society would be overcome (Peker, 2016). Accordingly, on Sour Dictionary (*Ekşi Sözlük*), the label of "AK troll" is used to designate a group of Twitter writers who, in various terms, stated that they refuse to denounce the death of Berkin Elvan, a 14-year-old boy with Kurdish-Alevi background who was hit in the head by a tear-gas

canister fired by the police during the Gezi Uprising ("Ak Troll," 2014). Yet the complexity of negotiating social antagonisms is merely downplayed in the easy designation of Others as trolls. In the above example, the designation of AK trolls undermines the very real problem of racism toward Kurdish and Alevi minorities.

The split media ecology lacks common institutions and mechanisms that mediate contestation between adversaries. It is not just that adversaries do not agree on what "neutrality" looks like. Rather, neutrality lacks not just validity but even relevance. With the degradation of capacities for oversight, exposure, and reflection, a paradoxical combination of two modes of media consumption prevails: on the one hand, skepticism toward all media outlets and their representations, as a recent Pew report concerning Turkey found ("Views Lean Positive," 2015). On the other hand, production and sustenance of alternative worldviews, nonetheless, through a mode of media consumption that is not oriented on the problematic of truth/falsehood but on what Andrejevic (2013) calls post-reality assertions grounded in "gut feelings"—meaning that "your [rational, evidenced] analysis can never catch up with my (affective) facts" (p. 137). While we do not argue for the elimination of affect from social struggle (cf. Grossberg, 1992), this attitude makes it hard to negotiate claims or speak back when intuition even meets institutional power, such as when a prosecutor stated in court that the attitude of a militant was "felt" in the journalistic writings of a Turkish human rights activist.

Despite media-ecological affordances effectuating political strategy to the benefit of sovereign power, the latter is also ultimately attenuated by the spread of enmity through uncontrollable networks and techno-cultural dynamics, such as suspicion and disinvestment in neutrality in the split media ecology. The latter enables dismissal of any apparent reality and the erratic embrace of "affective facts." *Differends*, to use Lyotard's term, do not get resolved. A key instance pertains to the events unfolding on the night of July 15, 2016. Progovernment circles narrated that Turkish citizens stood up to what was simultaneously a Gülenist conspiracy intended to topple Erdoğan and a military assault on Turkey's democracy, which would have repeated the repression of the military junta in the 1980s. Yet in some antigovernment circles, a theory was narrated that the coup attempt was a conspiracy staging a conspiracy. This narrative argued that the coup was a setup to masquerade the democratic deficit of the regime. According to this narrative, the fact that social media for once remained unblocked while major political upheaval was occurring indicated manipulation of popular exhilaration: The crowds were called to social media and the streets alike, by the regime. Furthermore, in the antigovernment narrative, the state of emergency following the night of July 15 represents the real coup (by the vindicated regime). At the point of writing, there seems to be no common mechanisms or mediating institutions that would be able to negotiate these opposing claims. To the extent that sovereign power (as we know it) relies at least to some degree on residual hegemonic forces, the situation seems detrimental to it and overall unsustainable.

Conclusion

This article rethinks populism in relation to the split media ecology. Beyond the sovereign decision undergirding blockage, censorship is an environmental effect of (excessive) flows that are capable of silencing oppositional voices. Moreover, censorship inadvertently triggers more, aleatory flow. The

material affordances of the censored media ecology prove fertile ground for conspiracy theories that implicate medial dynamics as agents. The result is a "split" media ecology, whereby disparate communication circuits are conceived as moral, epistemological, and ontological orders. Our analysis of material affordances, together with techno-cultural significations, indicates how medial dynamics inform political strategy as well as antagonistic struggle. Yet the emerging mode of populist politics on behalf of sovereign power, involving information warfare and netwar, also means a transformation and redistribution of agency to the point of undermining sovereign control.

The discernment that information is not neutral but invested with interest and standpoint specificity could indicate awareness and criticality. It is what students in cultural and communication studies are supposed to acquire when taking courses in media literacy (Birchall, 2006; Latour, 2004). However, what are the implications of the fact that suspicion and distrust prevail in the Turkish media ecology and are articulated as particular media ideologies informing terms such as "robot lobbies" and "AK trolls"? It is true that, within Turkey and beyond, the ideological worldviews conveyed through conspiracy theories are diverse, and conspiracy theories' relationship to power is underdetermined: The genre can express a "poor person's cognitive mapping" (Jameson, as cited in Andrejevic, 2013, p. 125) as well as provide power's alibi (Baudrillard, 1994). However, as seems particularly resonant with the case of Turkey's media ecology, conspiracy theory is conservative: it promotes affect-driven, post-truth media consumption entailing nonnegotiable standpoints. In other words, as Fenster (2008) argues, conspiracy theory is conservative to the extent that it is "unable to locate a position at which we can begin to organize and respect people in the complex, diverse world that it simplifies" (p. 289).

This observation aligns with Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) theory of populism, which emphasizes the democratic importance of discursive agonistic–antagonistic struggle, undermining absolute constructions of sovereignty and belonging. Yet our discussion of the media ecology at the same time problematizes their framework and especially Mouffe's (2013) agonistic ethico-political ideal of recognition of adversaries through commitment to common, public institutions, even if their concrete configuration rightfully remains subject to dispute. This is so because the split media ecology lacks such sites or mechanisms, and even undermines their imagination. The modes of populist politics and sovereign power we have examined divert from public discursive struggle over representativeness. Rather than elaborating hegemony, political strategy involves stimulating the formation of certain "grassroots" networks while incapacitating and excluding others. It engages in netwar and information warfare, capitalizing on the segregations and fragmentations of the split media ecology.

At the same time, sovereign power may not just be transformed through emerging political strategy and its media-ecological mediation but also be attenuated by these developments. Emerging techno-cultural dynamics include the spread of enmity through rather uncontrollable grassroots networks, together with the spread of suspicion and disinvestment in the value of neutrality. The latter enable dismissal of any apparent reality and the erratic embrace of "affective facts." These developments urge us to inquire further into online networks in relation to populist politics and the strengths and vulnerabilities of sovereign power (as we know it).

        In addition, this article calls for further comparative research. The costs of conceptualizing censorship only in terms of blockage rather than blockage and flow is that we cannot inquire into similarities between "censored" media environments and supposed "free" ones, such as the media-ecological dimensions of populist politics in Turkey versusEU countries or the United States. Yet what similar and/or different effects stem from filters as measures of censorship versus filters as measures of ranking and recommendation? To what extent does censorship involve a degree of voluntary disconnection (relying on technologies of the self rather than inevitable external technological conditions), while ranking and recommendation algorithms automate disconnection and isolation in ways that are hard to escape? What do we make of the fact that the proliferation of fake news, conspiracy theory, and troll activity appear to be a trait of a "free" media environment and an unfree media environment alike?

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