

Who Sets the Agenda? Polarization and Issue Ownership in Turkey’s Political Twittersphere

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Research on political agenda setting, in general, is interested in how issues are conveyed to the political agenda, and how governments tend to reflect on those issues. Media are assumed to have an effect on governmental policies; however, the extent to which media agenda influences the political agenda is ambiguous. Ambiguity is further exacerbated in predominant-party systems, where the media are more likely to be directly linked with the state. In this study, we examined whether the news media can still set the political agenda in a highly polarized political environment. In line with this, we applied the network agenda-setting model to Twitter, and compared the issues on the media and political agendas in Turkey. Findings indicate political parallelism as the major factor in defining the relationship between the issues and accounts. The results also show that in all cases the political agenda essentially preceded the media agenda.

Keywords: media agenda, political agenda, network agenda-setting, network analysis, Twitter, polarization

Twitter has a vast potential for advancements in political communication and has brought a new dimension to the mediation process between media and politics. It offers a space for diverse actors competing for attention to their issues of interest. Among these actors are the news media organizations, who were quick to realize the benefits of Twitter almost a decade ago; political agents, who typically spread party ideologies, and provoke polarization in the platform; and the public, who turn to Twitter not only to become better informed but also to participate in political discussions. Twitter functions as a platform for the diverse needs of these actors: as a platform to amplify news content for the media organizations, as an arena in which political actors can directly communicate with the electorate, and as a marketplace for ideas of the public. In this broad setting, Twitter basically presents a distinct agenda, but it is interconnected with, and is a part of, the media, political, and public agendas.

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Date submitted: 2018-06-05

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Twitter acts as the contemporary grounds for the competition between issue proponents and provides an online space for the emergent forms of civic engagement. This space allows researchers to observe the agenda-setting process, as media organizations strive to safeguard their long-established position as mediators between the political agenda and the public agenda, while political actors become more conscious of the potential of their online presence. Agenda on Twitter is an outcome of the competition among several proponents, and the salience of issues can be taken as evidence for understanding news media's competency in this process. The news media's role and capabilities in the agenda-setting process may be rather limited, particularly in predominant party systems, such as in Turkey, where the effects of polarization can be directly observed through power groups' efforts in identifying themselves with certain issues.

In this article, we study the competition between the media and political agendas on Twitter, and investigate whether the media can still influence political discourse under direct political pressure. We present the current state of the media and politics relationship based on our findings from applying the network agenda-setting (NAS) model to Twitter, and explore the effects of political parallelism on agenda setting. We find that the media and political agendas are consistent as a whole, whereas Twitter serves as a tool for the propagation of political discourse, principally based on issues raised by political figures.

Twitter in Turkey's News Media and Political Environment

Twitter is one aspect of a dynamic political environment in Turkey, where different factors influence the news media's role. One of the most prominent is the concentration of media ownership. The media in Turkey have long been owned by a small number of powerful capital groups, which typically have investments across sectors. These capital groups tend to develop close relations with the state, and their economic dependency on political power results in political parallelism, a notion which relies on Seymour-Ure's (1974) conceptualization of press-party parallelism, defined as "the degree to which the structure of the media system parallels that of the party system" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 27). In simple terms, this refers to media content, but the concept involves various components and indications, which can be manifested in organizational connections, partisanship of media audiences, and journalistic role orientations and practices (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 28).

In Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has adopted a policy of changing the media landscape via excessive taxation on pro-opposition companies since coming to power in 2002 (Akın & Doğu, 2017, p. 5). Accordingly, after the 2001 economic crisis, the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund took over many companies, owned by the major media conglomerates, and sold them to AKP allies. This strategy of acquiring and selling bankrupt media firms to progovernment capital owners has become policy, resulting in a sharp polarization of the media landscape. Over the years, the fragmented corporate and clientelistic interest in Turkey has become embedded in a predominant-party system (Wuthrich, 2015, p. 250).

Another factor shaping the media environment in Turkey is the direct political pressure on media companies and journalists. According to Human Rights Watch (2016), trends employed as the

apparatuses of political pressure include using the criminal justice system to prosecute journalists for terrorism, insulting public officials, or crimes against the state; threatening and physically attacking journalists; interfering with editorial independence; and pressuring media organizations to abandon critical journalists. In addition to these pressures, the failed coup attempt in July 2016 resulted in the closure of 178 media outlets, and at least 2,500 journalists became unemployed ("Media Ownership Monitor," n.d.).

Currently, the Reporters Without Borders (2018) lists Turkey as 157th of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index. This index reflects a scene in which new patron-client relationships emerged, political parallelism increased, and the resignations and dismissals of critical voices from mainstream news media became normalized (Yesil, 2016, p. 93). Considering its merits, the Turkish media system now represents an archetype, which can help further our understanding of how political parallelism draws on agenda-setting affairs.

Until now, the consequences of political incursions into the media field have been generally discussed within the framework of press freedoms, journalistic autonomy, and professionalism (Yesil, 2016, p. 104). Studies in the literature dealing with the dynamics of the politics and media relationship in Turkey are emerging; however, the field remains understudied (Çarkoğlu, Baruh, & Yıldırım, 2014; Christensen, 2007; Kaya & Çakmur, 2010; Yesil, 2016). In this study, we propose a distinctive approach to reveal the outcomes from media-state and market-state relationships. We employ the NAS model to reflect on the coverage of issues based on time-series analysis, while particularly focusing on the effects of polarization. We turn to Twitter, a platform that we consider to be an extension of the media system, with the aim of exposing the long-term consequences of a polarized network of relations on the agenda-setting process.

Twitter has gained a significant role in Turkey as a consequence of constant pressures on media organizations, becoming an open playground for journalists and political figures. Its popularity in the country particularly derives from its extensive use in the course of the 2013 Gezi protests, which the mainstream news media failed to cover, whereas Twitter provided a platform for news and information, and essentially challenged the role of conventional news media (Barberá & Metzger, 2013).¹ Many news Twitter accounts opened in the aftermath of the protests continue to serve the public-information need. Turkey's news media landscape on Twitter is still growing in richness, with many various organizations contributing.

Currently, there are many accounts constituting the media agenda in Turkey's Twittersphere, including the mainstream media, opposition media, civic media, activist media, news agencies, ethnic media, women's media, and international media. Twitter provides a heterarchical space for all these types of organizations; nevertheless, the majority of activity on the platform derives from the operations of nonmainstream organizations (Doğu, 2017). Although the news environment on Twitter is dominated

¹ People were even encouraged to turn off their televisions during the events to protest the lack of coverage delivered by the mainstream mass media. The hashtag #BugünTelevizyonlarıKapat (Turn off the TVs today) was widely used throughout the protests.

by the mainstream media, their nonmainstream counterparts have far fewer followers but a higher level of engagement—because, for the majority of these organizations, Twitter is the only stage on which they are able to sustain their operations.

Twitter is not only a microblogging platform or a news service but also a stimulating platform reflecting everyday politics in Turkey. It is a critically important tool, which has been subject to substantial debate among politicians. The former prime minister and current president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan personally acknowledged Twitter's potential danger, as he sees it: "There is now a menace which is called Twitter. . . . The best examples of lies can be found there. To me, social media is the worst menace to society" (Letsch, 2013, para. 4). In line with Erdoğan's argument, the platform has often been throttled and even banned by the Turkish government. Nevertheless, Twitter continues to represent a convenient space for the opposition members of parliament (MPs) to reach the 13.5 million active users in the country (Genart, n.d.). It is now a platform for the opposition to assert their presence, making it much more than simply an election campaign tool.

Analyzing Issues With the NAS Model

Agenda-setting theory suggests a correlation between the media attention to certain issues and the relative importance attributed to these issues by audiences (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory originally focused on the transfer of the salience of political issues from the news media to the public; however, it also may be regarded as a more general theory of salience transmission (Lasorsa, 2018). As defined by Dearing and Rogers (1996, pp. 1–2), agenda setting is an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites. The process is principally based on the appropriation of issues; therefore, issues are generally taken as the unit of analysis in the agenda-setting literature.

Differences in the variety and number of issues communicated at any point eventually shape the competition environment for diverse agendas. For instance, political agendas necessarily deal with many issues, whereas media agendas tend to regularly focus on a selected set of issues, and largely ignore others (Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008, p. 826). As the social media issue agenda is far more expansive than the priority issue agenda defined by responses to the Gallup MIP question (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014, p. 789), Twitter represents a fiercely competitive environment for the issue proponents. Given the context of diversity, Twitter use, particularly by political actors, substantially adds new issues to the agenda, while making these more apparent to the public. The amount of data produced on Twitter makes conventional methods inapplicable for the analysis of issues, as it becomes difficult to determine the relative importance of each.

This study employs the NAS model (Guo, 2013; Guo & McCombs, 2011a, 2011b; Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014) to reveal the links between issues and actors. Also referred to as the third level of agenda-setting theory, the NAS model suggests that the salience of the network relationships among

issues can be transferred from the news media to the public.² Instead of simply listing the frequency of media content as in traditional agenda setting, NAS focuses on the connections between issues, and identifies their centrality in the network. It complements the findings from the hierarchical approach, and provides the researchers with an integrated image of agendas based on an analysis of the relationships between issues (Guo, 2012, p. 628). The model draws on the potential offered by network analysis and enables a study of issues as a bundle, clearly highlighting the links between issues as well as agendas. The recent application of network analysis to agenda-setting research is timely, considering the proliferation of information and communication channels (Guo, 2012, p. 617).

Despite a limited literature on the recently introduced NAS, several studies provide empirical evidence for its applicability. Guo and McCombs (2011a, 2011b) conducted two empirical studies to compare the media and public agenda networks during the 2002 and 2010 Texas gubernatorial elections. In both studies, they compared the news coverage of different personal attributes of political candidates and their public perception, using a different data set for each study. In both studies, they found significant correlations between the media and public network agendas. More recently, Vargo, Guo, McCombs, and Shaw (2014) applied the model to Twitter, finding significant NAS effects between different types of news media and candidate supporters.

In this study, the issues presented in the media and political agendas are explored with regard to issue ownership network (Guo & Vargo, 2015). The term, which derives from the theory of issue ownership (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996), suggests that news media and political campaigns can determine the public's identification with a political party or a candidate not just on the basis of individual issues but on entire networks of issues (Guo & Vargo, 2015, p. 558). Our potential contribution to the theory of issue ownership derives from the polarized political environment in Turkey, where power groups tend to identify with certain ideologies and employ the news media to propagate issues attached to them. Political parties come to be associated with certain issues, which they regularly promote to the media agenda, thus consolidating the polarization of the media environment.

Methodology

This exploratory research presents the current state of the media and politics relationship based on the analysis of issues and applies the NAS model to a social networking site, Twitter, with a particular focus on issues with political references. The sample for this research consists of the official Twitter accounts of the media organizations and MPs in Turkey. Our media collection includes 81 accounts, which represent prominent mainstream organizations, as well as various nonmainstream news providers. The politics collection includes all 550 accounts of the current MPs and 129 accounts of former MPs. We collected all tweets shared by these accounts for 15 months between February 2016 and May 2017 through the Twitter Streaming API, and then filtered the data on a spreadsheet to determine the popular

² The first level of agenda setting is focused on the relative salience of issues, and the second level explores their attributes (Weaver, 2007, p. 142). Simply put, the first level concentrates on which issues are covered, whereas the second level deals with how issues are reported.

issues on the agendas.³ A total of 2.2 million tweets were sent from the selected accounts within this period, and the daily number of tweets for each hashtag made up the total score for the respective topic. We applied individual filters considering the difference between the number of accounts and issues in both collections. Regarding the media agenda, issues introduced by at least 10 accounts were considered, whereas for the political agenda, the filter was set to 30. Consequently, the number of issues on each agenda was closely matched.

Twitter's distinct data model allows an exclusive focus on issues through hashtags. In this study, while mapping issue networks, we adopted an approach based on hashtags, which indicate the keywords or phrases especially worth indexing, and provide an opportunity for third-party providers to track and aggregate tweets with the same tag (Halavais, 2013, p. 36). Hashtags (presented as proportional issue nodes on the maps) were analyzed regarding their connection to specific accounts, and therefore diverse factions in the network could be observed. We merged hashtags with similar connotations—for instance, two nodes referring to the same issue (e.g., #terror and #bombattacks). Their connections (edges) to other nodes were conjoined, and weighted degrees were recalculated. The labels for hashtags were also revised to provide consistency in the maps. Modularity class was taken into account in the merging process.⁴ We employed Gephi in calculating the modularity class, and used a resolution of .8 to produce more subnetworks. We then reduced the number of nodes within each of the three subnetworks generated by the software. We merged hashtags with the same reference only if they shared the same modularity class, and not if the values were different.

For the visualization of issue networks, we employed Gephi with the ForceAtlas 2 layout algorithm, which offers a smooth and accurate experience in visualizing any network without the need for optimizations (Jacomy, Heymann, Venturini, & Bastian, 2011). We created bipartite networks, in which Twitter accounts are linked to issues based on attributes such as retweets, hashtags, and mentions, then we color coded the maps to demonstrate diverse factions. The accounts in the media network were color coded with respect to their modularity class, whereas those in the political network were coded according to their party affiliation. After finalization, we compared the issue networks to explore the interrelations among the media and political domains, and selected a set of issues for longitudinal analysis. We presented the volume of tweets associated with these issues on time-line graphs, and illustrated their propagation over time to reveal the order of the emergence of issues on the agendas. We normalized all the data for the media agenda and the political agenda in both processes of mapping and generating time-line graphs because the volume of tweets varied considering the relative number of accounts identified with each agenda. To make the tweet volumes comparable, we normalized them using their standard scores, which is calculated by subtracting the mean value of daily tweet counts for each set from the individual number of daily tweet counts and then dividing the difference by the sum of the standard deviation of that particular set.

³ The data set used in our study can be openly accessed at <https://gist.github.com/onurmatik/dd59f8ed0d0dc091bb8d67cbddfca4ce>

⁴ Modularity measures the strength of divisions in a network. It is basically used to reveal subnetworks (also called clusters or communities).

The Coverage and Diffusion of Issues on Twitter

Various issues were brought onto agenda during the period of this study.⁵ These issues drew different levels of attention from each Twitter account. Regarding the media agenda, a sharp contrast was observed between the distribution of issues of the mainstream and nonmainstream news accounts. Similarly, the political accounts were segregated by their affiliation to political parties. We present the issue networks in two parts. First, we introduce the media coverage of issues and reflect on the media agenda considering the types of news accounts. Then, we examine the diffusion of issues on the political agenda, with a particular focus on their connections to the political accounts affiliated with parties.

Media Coverage of Issues

Findings from this research indicate three subnetworks for the issues on the media agenda. These subnetworks suggest dense connections between the accounts sharing the same modularity class, but sparse connections across different modularity classes (see Figure 1). Subnetwork #1 is composed of the mainstream media organizations close to the government. Some of these pro-AKP media organizations have many followers due to their institutional heritage despite not being very active. Subnetwork #2 includes the international news organizations with Turkish sections, such as the BBC and Deutsche Welle. Subnetwork #3 represents the opposition media accounts, such as Sözcü and Birgün, as well as nonmainstream news organizations, some of which emerged in the aftermath of the Gezi protests. Issues on the media agenda typically fall under one subnetwork, although they may also be mentioned across different subnetworks.

⁵ We only concentrated on the political issues and did not study the items that fall into categories such as lifestyle, fashion, or sports.

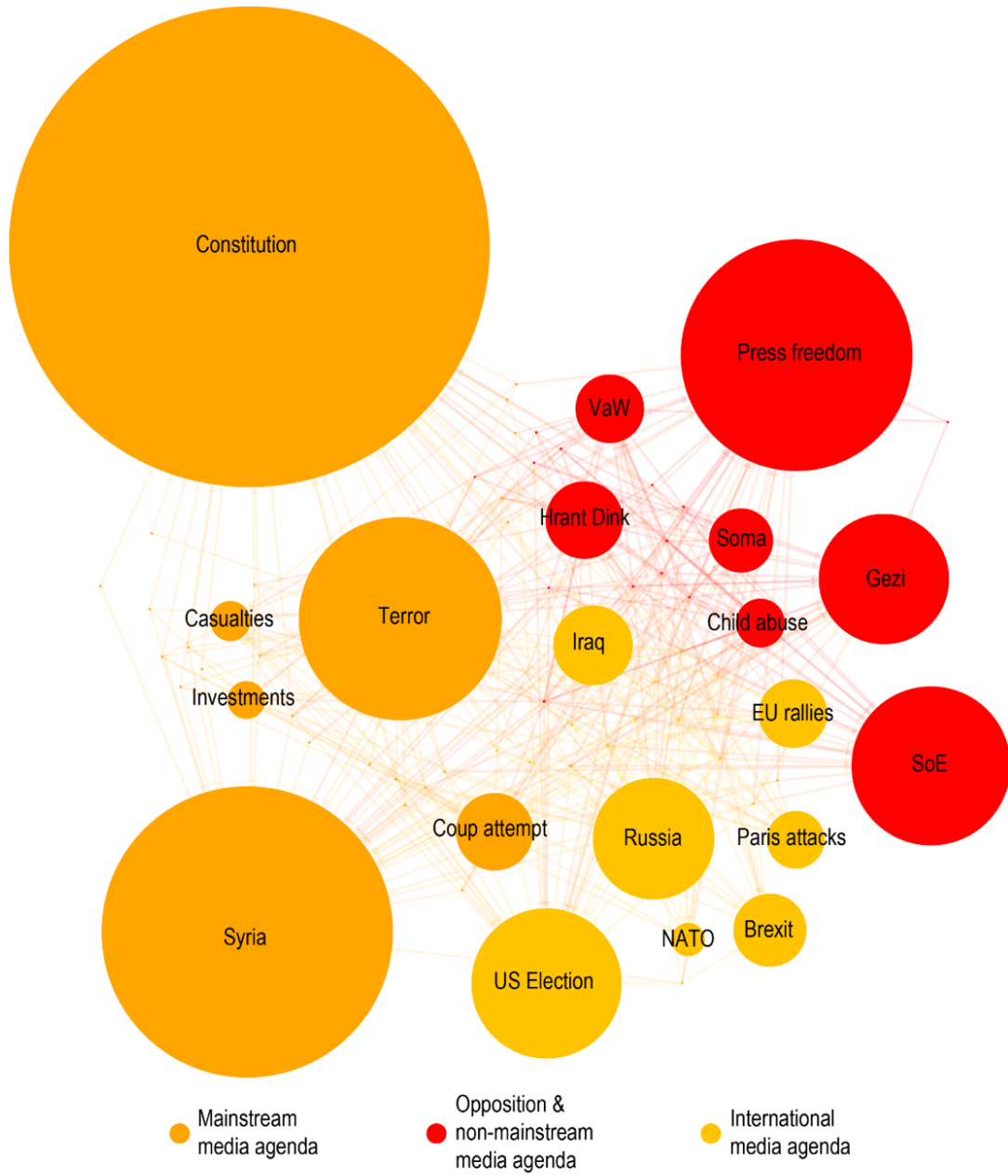


Figure 1. Media network agenda. Size of issue nodes proportional to degree (February 1, 2016–May 1, 2017). VaW = violence against women; SoE = state of emergency.

The issues on the media agenda were widely scattered across subnetworks, but the position of each on the map was far from being random. Overall, the constitution appeared as the most predominant issue, having the highest degree count. This was expected because the constitutional amendment, which heralded a presidential system, remained long on the agenda. The amendment was first accepted by the parliament in January 2017, followed by a referendum in April. The constitution was followed by another issue of high significance, Syria, due to the long-standing turmoil in the country. Both issues were positioned in the mainstream media subnetwork, attracting attention from the majority of accounts, regardless of their affiliation. Indeed, these issues, along with the failed coup attempt against the Erdoğan government and the terror incidents throughout the country, were addressed by the great majority of accounts. Only two issues in this subnetwork, government investments and casualties resulting from the conflicts in southeastern Turkey, were addressed solely by the mainstream media accounts.

As expected, international media subnetwork incorporated issues mostly related to foreign policy, many of which directly corresponded to Turkey's relations with other countries. Accordingly, the most prominent item in this setting was the 2016 U.S. election, taken as the main determinant for future relations with the U.S. Turkey's capricious relations with Russia also appeared as another significant issue. Somewhat related to the dealings with these two rival powers were two other important cases: Turkey's military operations in Northern Iraq, and Turkey's status as a NATO member. Also widely covered were the AKP rallies in EU countries (mainly in the Netherlands and Germany) before the constitutional referendum, and the consequent dispute between Erdoğan and Merkel. Among issues not directly related to Turkey's foreign policies were Brexit and the Paris terror attacks.

Opposition and nonmainstream media subnetwork was discrete to a high degree, drawing no significant attention from the media accounts in other subnetworks. The most prominent issue in this subnetwork was press freedom, which stayed on the agenda during a lengthy period in which many journalists were detained and several media outlets were closed. The second most prominent was the state of emergency, declared by the AKP government immediately after the failed coup attempt. Earlier issues around the Gezi protests and the mine disaster in Soma were widely debated because of related ongoing legal procedures. The nonmainstream media had their own agenda, based on the common grounds of rights and justice, including issues such as the monitoring of trials regarding the assassination of the Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, frequent incidents related to violence against women, and the child-abuse bill, which recommended suspended penalties for perpetrators who subsequently married their victims. The nonmainstream accounts were involved in efforts to raise awareness of issues generally overlooked by the mainstream media, and in a few cases were successful in raising these issues on the political agenda.

Reflecting on the Political Agenda

Turkey has a predominant-party system, in which the AKP controls the majority of the parliament, local governments, and the presidency in an increasingly stable party system with reduced electoral volatility and low fragmentation (Çarkoğlu, 2011; Gumuscu, 2013). The shaping of the political agenda was closely related to the composition of the Turkish parliament formed after the November 2015 general election. Four political parties share the 548 seats in the current composition, in which the AKP has the majority (317). The Republican People's Party (CHP) has 133, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) has 57, and the

Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) has 36.⁶ Figure 2 presents three subnetworks that developed over 15 months, with the issues clearly dispersed throughout the network. The map was shaped mainly by common issues present in the course of the research period. However, it also includes a number of distinctive issues, some introduced by the AKP, and others which emerged in the intertwined subnetworks of CHP and HDP. It should be noted that the dynamic relationship between the political parties occasionally results in tactical collaborations, such as in the case of rapprochement between the AKP and MHP before the 2017 constitutional referendum. Consequently, many of the MHP accounts dissolved in the AKP subnetwork, and the party was not able to form a subnetwork of its own.

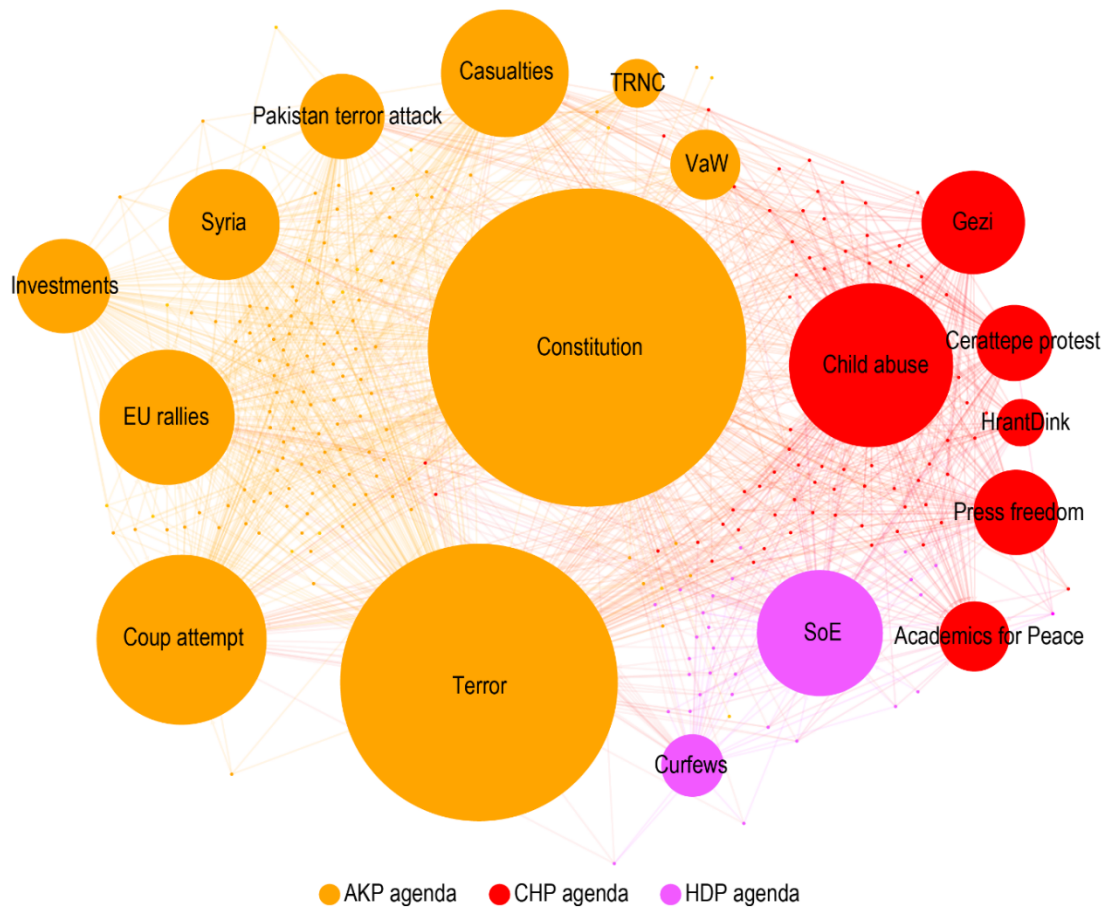


Figure 2. Political network agenda. Size of issue nodes proportional to degree (February 1, 2016–May 1, 2017). TRNC = Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus; VaW = violence against women; SoE = state of emergency.

⁶ There are also five independent MPs in the parliament in addition to the listed counts.

The range of issues on the political agenda varied depending on domestic and international events, the parties' interest in their relevant domains, governmental policies, and the projected outcomes for particular scenarios. The constitutional amendment and terrorism were by far the most prominent issues on the political agenda, and both positioned around the center of the network, drawing attention from MPs regardless of political party. Besides these two issues of common interest, the AKP members addressed a number of other issues that defined their subnetwork. Some directly related to the government's internal operations, such as the failed coup attempt, rallies in the EU countries, government investments, and Turkey's fragile relations with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus; whereas others emerged independently of party policy, such as the casualties from terrorist bombings, war in Syria, and the terror attack in Pakistan. Violence against women appeared as an issue of common interest to AKP and CHP, perhaps as a response to the nonmainstream media coverage and related published reports.

Other issues on the political agenda formed oppositional networks defined by the CHP and HDP accounts, mainly based on the criticism of government policies. The child-abuse bill emerged as the most prominent issue in the CHP subnetwork, and also attracted attention from the AKP members. The environmental protests against the excavation of natural resources in Cerattepe and the Gezi protests were issues addressed exclusively by CHP MPs. Among other oppositional issues were the state of emergency, press freedom, Hrant Dink, Academics for Peace, and curfews. These were generally covered by both CHP and HDP members; however, two related issues were more prominent for the HDP: curfews in the southeastern towns, imposed as part of the security operations against the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), and Academics for Peace, a group who signed a petition in January 2016 calling for an end to violence in the region. The curfews were also considered by the AKP members, although in a different context. Whereas the HDP members demanded the curfews' removal, the AKP members mainly used the issue in relation to the former prime minister's visit to Sur, a district of Diyarbakir, destroyed following the government's military operations. In fact, many issues in the oppositional network received attention from different political parties, who debated issues with reference to their particular ideologies.

A Comparative Overview of the Network Agendas

We highlight three main points about the features of the two networks. The first point is that the issues listed on the media and political agendas were consistent as a whole, and political polarization provides evidence for the interrelations between accounts and their issues. This finding supports the work in the literature, which argues polarization in a political system contributes to press-party parallelism (Çarkoğlu et al., 2014). Accordingly, the media agenda overlapped with the political agenda particularly in certain parts of the network, where the accounts belonging to similar ideological camps were positioned. For instance, the issues that opposed the ruling party's line typically revolved around the subnetworks formed by the CHP and HDP members on the political agenda, and these issues appeared correspondingly in the nonmainstream subnetworks on the media agenda. This shows that the nonmainstream media were generally interested in the issues that challenged governmental policies, whereas the issues raised by the government side corresponded with the mainstream accounts on the media agenda.

Certain issues on the political agenda did not match with those on the media agenda. This could be an assumed outcome from the efforts of the Turkish media striving to sustain in a predominant-party system. For instance, MPs raised issues such as the Cerattepe protest, Academics for Peace, and curfews, which did not transfer to the media agenda. Similarly, many issues related to the international media agenda, such as Brexit, the Paris attacks, and the U.S. election failed to reach the political agenda. We must also note that the media agenda did not coincide with several issues on the political agenda, related to anniversary celebrations, governmental planning, and minor symbolic events. These issues were already excluded in the maps, in line with the research design.

The second point relating to the two networks is that issues on both agendas had different thresholds. According to Lang and Lang's (1991) typology, issues present three different sensitivity thresholds considering the influence exerted by the media: issues arise out of conditions that have the same general direct effect on everyone, issues pertinent to a situation whose effects are only selectively experienced by the public, and finally, issues that are generally remote from everyone. Low-threshold issues gain more attention from the news media, as well as the political elites, whereas high-threshold issues encounter greater difficulties in gaining such attention (Lang & Lang, 1991, p. 283). In this study, the great majority of issues on the media agenda were low-threshold issues (i.e., directly connected to the public). These issues, such as the constitution and terror, were covered by numerous accounts of any category. Some issues with a higher threshold, such as the child-abuse bill, violence against women, and Soma, were brought to agenda as a part of the nonmainstream media subnetwork, whereas others, such as the rallies in the EU countries and the terror incidents in Paris, were only debated in the international media subnetwork. A similar trend occurred on the political agenda, in which issues of a higher threshold, such as the Cerattepe protest, Academics for Peace and the curfews, were debated in the oppositional subnetworks.

The final point related to the two networks is that the density of the media network was clearly lower than the political network, simply because there were more accounts comprising the political agenda compared with the media agenda, producing a greater number of tweets. The accounts had different engagement levels in terms of their activity, and this helped define the demarcation of subnetworks. For instance, the accounts in the mainstream media subnetwork shared fewer tweets overall, making them less engaged than those in the international media and the nonmainstream media subnetworks. The nonmainstream accounts, such as Ötekilerin Postası, Dokuz8 Haber, Etkin Haber Ajansı (ETHA), and international media, such as Sputnik and Deutsche Welle, appeared to be the most noticeable nodes, with their degrees ranging between 980 and 1,600. In a similar vein, certain accounts in the political network were more engaged in tweeting with hashtags. For instance, Metin Külünk, Fatma Benli, and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu were prominent in the AKP subnetwork, and Elif Doğan Türkmen, Musa Çam, and Mahmut Tanal in the CHP subnetwork. In contrast, a considerable number of accounts presented low levels of activity in referring to the emergent hashtags.

The Propagation of Issues Over Time

Agenda setting is a process complicated by the dynamic nature of relations between different agents. It begins with the agenda-building process, which is often difficult to trace because of the circular relationship and interaction between public officials, the news media, and the public (Wanta, 2009, p. 56). The process is usually an indirect one, considering that issues transfer from the media to the field of politics through the public agenda. The broader political environment and the configuration of the media system in a country set the framework for this process, which is further affected by additional variables, such as the issues emerging inherently from global developments. One way of understanding how the agenda-setting process develops is to focus on issues' propagation over time.

The temporality of issues revealed in this research varied considering their duration. Some issues stayed on the agenda over the whole period of research, whereas others disappeared after several weeks. Issues, such as the constitution amendment, terror, and press freedom were covered over an extended period, as they had long-term consequences. Other issues were much more transient and stayed on the agenda for a limited time due to either their immediate character, such as the terror attacks in Paris and Pakistan, or expeditious speculation by political actors, such as the rallies in the EU countries.

In the remaining part of this article, we highlight certain issues with the aim of revealing whether the media agenda or the political agenda took precedence. In line with this aim, we selected a sample set of issues based on their temporality and prominence, and presented these issues' longitudinal salience in time-line graphs. Findings indicate that for most of the issues, the political agenda preceded the media agenda, whereas in the remaining cases, the news media failed to react to emerging developments (see Figure 3).

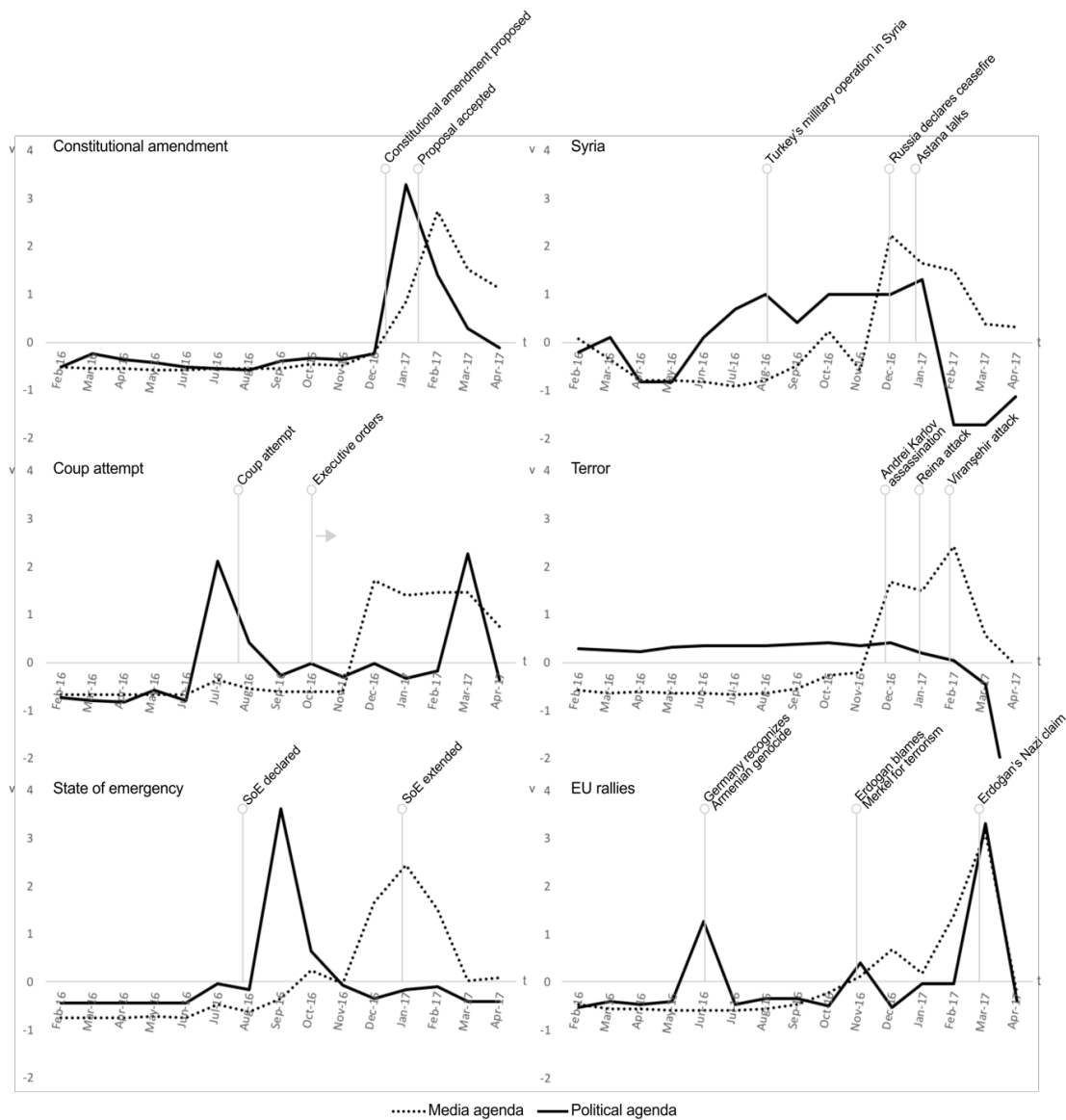


Figure 3. Timeline graphs demonstrating the volume of tweets for constitutional amendment, coup attempt, state of emergency, Syria, terror, and EU rallies. Data presented on a monthly basis (February 1, 2016–May 1, 2017). The x-axis represents time in months, and the y-axis represents the standard score of tweet volume.

Over the research period, the most prominent issue both on the media agenda and the political agenda was the constitutional amendment, first proposed to parliament on December 10, 2016, by AKP and MHP members. The controversial constitution proposal aimed at expanding Erdoğan's powers by replacing the 1982 constitution that followed the military coup. The intense parliamentary debates witnessed physical aggression, particularly during the voting process. In the political Twittersphere, discussions about the amendment and the proposed presidential system started at the beginning of December 2016, and increased through January. The mainstream media covered the debates on the amendment, highlighting its process and outcomes, while the opposition media expressed concerns about increasing authoritarianism. The news media overall focused great attention on the amendment, however, with a certain lag, as they were mainly interested in the April referendum rather than the preceding debates in the parliament. In fact, media attention on the issue persisted until April 2017, while the MP Twitter activity gradually decreased after parliamentary approval.

Another issue of high prominence, the failed coup attempt, appeared on the political agenda immediately after its incidence on July 15, 2016, when sections of the Turkish military launched coordinated operations to unseat Erdoğan in several major cities. The government blamed Fethullah Gülen, an exiled preacher and businessman, and declared war on the so-called Gulenist Terror Organization (FETÖ). Only days after, a state of emergency was declared, and tens of thousands were arrested on suspicions of links to Gülen. In fact, the failed coup attempt and the state of emergency developed in parallel, resulting in similar time-line frequencies. Tweets sent by the political actors peaked twice: on the day following the failed coup attempt, and on the day the state of emergency was declared. The media accounts also reacted to the failed coup attempt, but this was generally in response to the government's sequentially issued executive orders. The failed coup attempt was once again brought onto political agenda before the referendum for the constitutional amendment in April, by which time the issue had already found its way onto the media agenda, with respect to FETÖ operations.

A major issue that remained on the agenda for a considerable time was the war in Syria, which represented a major concern for both foreign and domestic policies. Over the research period, events triggering Twitter activity included Turkey's military intervention in Syria, Russia's ceasefire declaration, and the Astana talks. Turkey's military operations were debated mainly by the MPs, but these debates did not emerge on the agenda of the news media, which preferred to focus on Russia's role in Syria. The issue that succeeded in drawing the attention of the MPs, as well as the media, was the Astana talks, intended to strengthen the ceasefire and establishing deescalation zones in Syria. The intense response of mainstream news media to the talks in the capital of Kazakhstan was due to Turkey's role, along with Russia and Iran, as a guarantor.

Domestic terrorism is another frequently debated issue in the political arena. In fact, the issue was consistently on the political agenda until February 2017, with no significant fluctuations in the number of tweets. For the political agenda, this issue was driven by two key factors: terror attacks in the major cities and the ongoing conflict with the PKK, mainly in southeastern Anatolia. Media attention on terrorism, rather than being associated with a broader political context, was limited to specific incidents, such as the assassination of Andrei Karlov, Russia's ambassador to Turkey, the Islamic State (IS) attack on the Reina nightclub in İstanbul on New Year's Eve, and the car bomb attack in the Viranşehir district of Şanlıurfa.

These issues, however, were also related to foreign policy, particularly Turkey–Russia relations, the Syrian crisis, and IS penetration of Turkish borders.

The final issue was coverage of AKP rallies. Erdoğan and the AKP had planned to hold rallies in Germany and other European countries ahead of the April 2017 referendum to gather support from expatriates. However, Erdoğan's request to address a rally in Germany was denied, and two states canceled events, with the justification that Germany did not welcome the import of other countries' domestic conflicts. Meanwhile, the heated debates between leaders led Erdoğan to accuse Merkel of Nazi practices over blocked political rallies. Media coverage was rather congruent with the political debates. Because of the majority of the media outlets in Turkey, including the public service broadcaster TRT, maintain close relations with the government, they tend to operate as a part of everyday political life in the country. In such scenario, many issues with a potential to harm the AKP's idealized image are allowed to remain obscure. In this case, the news media focused on Erdoğan's claims and accusations against Germany, and failed to cover that country's recognition of the Armenian genocide.

In theory, media coverage raises the perceived importance of issues among the public and often mobilizes policy makers to take action (Wanta, 2009, p. 56). Policy makers take cues from media coverage and respond to expectations outlined in the news. However, without transferring issues to the political domain, legislative success cannot be achieved. As the findings from this study indicate, overall, the news media in Turkey were not successful in influencing the political agenda over the research period, with one exception. Child abuse was raised as an issue that required urgent response both from the public and political actors when the AKP government proposed a bill, suggesting that offenders have their penalty suspended if subsequently married to the victim. The proposal faced such a strong reaction both from the nonmainstream media and political opposition that the government had to withdraw the bill.

As the evidence from this study suggests, media attention and political attention on concurrent issues followed similar patterns, and over time, propagation of tweets regarding these issues was well aligned. As mentioned earlier, the media agenda was consistently observed to follow the political agenda, although with an apparent lag in media's response to political debates. The literature on agenda-setting research suggests different time lags across various intermedia settings. Coleman, McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (2008, p. 155) define time lag as the optimal time that an issue must appear in the media before it is considered important by the public, and it varies between one to eight weeks in a traditional media setting. The lag varies greatly according to the types of media, audiences, and issues, as well as the reach of media, whether national or local. For instance, according to a research conducted by Wanta and Hu (1994), television coverage has a shorter optimal time lag than newspapers do, but a weaker long-term agenda-setting effect.

As for social media, few studies directly focus on the time-lag issue. Grzywińska and Borden (2012) claim that this notion is nearly obsolete in the era of increasing social media usage. Ceron, Curini, and Iacus (2016) compare Twitter and online media in terms of the attention devoted to each issue and content covered, and employed statistical methods, including lead-lag analysis and supervised sentiment analysis. Their results show that online media retain their first-level agenda-setting power, despite a marked difference between sentiment in online news and Twitter. Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang, and Bae (2014)

found a complex and dynamic pattern of leading and lagging indicators among the social and traditional media rather than the expected dominance of traditional media agenda setting in the electronic public sphere.

Findings from our study show an intricate relationship concerning time lag among issues and accounts. Focusing specifically on the media and political agendas, as well as their dynamics on Twitter, the research context and presumptions are quite different from the previous literature. As mentioned earlier, most of the issues were initially brought to the agenda by the political actors, and then the media accounts kept these issues on their agenda for a considerable time, in some cases long enough to stimulate public opinion. Figure 4 shows a detailed profile of tweet volumes based on a sample from the constitutional amendment data, shedding light on the news media's response time to politics and the temporal relationship between their agendas.

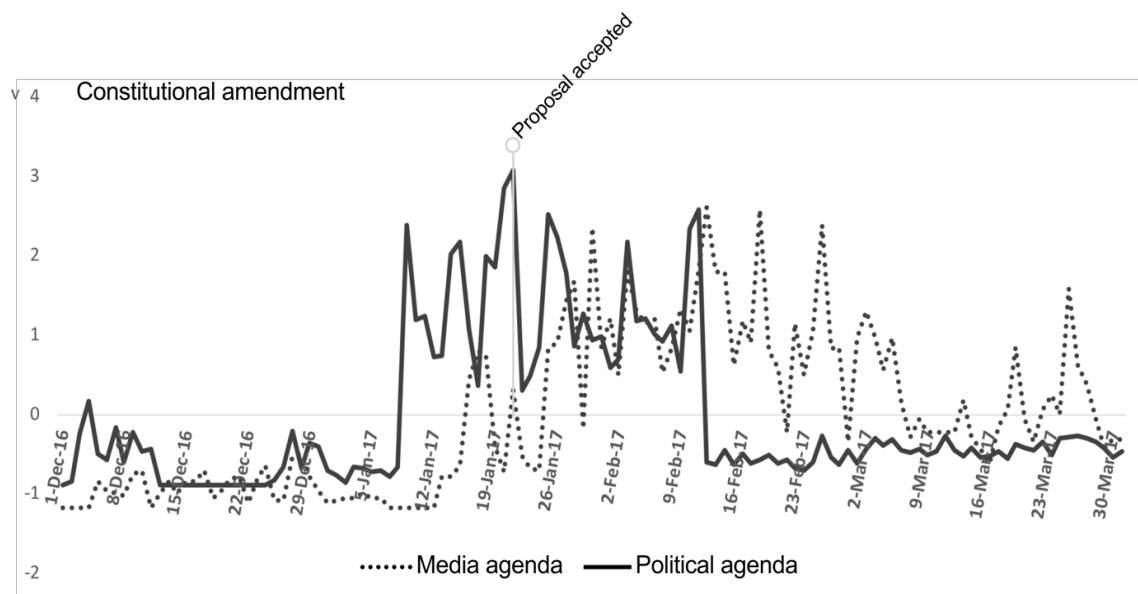


Figure 4. Time-line graph demonstrating the volume of tweets for constitutional amendment. Data presented on a daily basis (December 1, 2016–March 30, 2017). The x-axis represents time in weeks, and the y-axis represents the standard score of tweet volume.

The constitutional amendment, along with the proposed presidential system, had been extensively debated in the parliament by the end of 2016 and were closely reflected on the Twittersphere between January and March 2017, particularly when the concerns about authoritarianism became public. Overall, there was an extremely high volume of tweets about the constitutional amendment for two months following the amendment. Here, the two agendas presented very similar patterns, with the media agenda mirroring the political agenda, although with an approximate lag of one week. The issue remained in the Twittersphere after the critical debates, particularly once it was accepted onto the conventional media agenda.

Conclusion

In this study, we applied the NAS model to Twitter with the aim of understanding news media's competency in the agenda-setting process and exploring the effects of political parallelism in the Turkish Twittersphere. We analyzed the correspondence of issues between the media and political agendas, with a particular focus on polarization. Findings from the issue networks indicate that issues tend to form bundles, in line with the amount of attention paid by political factions and media groups. Members of the AKP, along with the pro-AKP mainstream media, were generally associated with the dominant issues inherent in governmental policies, whereas the CHP and HDP members, as well as the nonmainstream media accounts, were identified with oppositional issues.

Critical theory argues that the news agenda serves a hegemonic function by paying close attention only to the events, political figures, and issues that favor the interests of elites, contributing to a cohesive ideology and set of values that protect the status quo power structure (Reese, 1991). Considering that the media represent the state through direct and indirect relations in predominant-party systems, we tend to define the media agenda as the dependent variable, ignoring the autonomy of media institutions. However, while generally reflecting the trends outlined by the mainstream media, the nonmainstream media in Turkey were also successful in bringing their own concerns to the agenda. There is evidence, such as in the case of terror, that the news media concentrated on incidents ignored by political actors, although this attention did not have a reverberating effect in the political domain.

As for the temporal manifestation of issues, actors in the political domain have largely succeeded in promoting their concerns to the media agenda. Twitter served as a tool for the propagation of political discourse, as media accounts amplified the issues raised by MPs. There are two possible explanations. First, Turkey's predominant-party system makes the media environment conducive to spreading dominant discourses: the majority of the parliament consists of AKP members, whose allies own almost all mainstream media outlets. Second, Twitter has gained a critical role in political communication, for it is able to challenge the news media's conventional role as the mediator between the public and political agendas. Direct communication between political actors and public reduce the need for other institutions to intervene in the information loop. As a consequence, the media have gradually become an institution that relies on the discourses produced in the political domain.

The Twittersphere in Turkey has become highly politicized (Doğu, 2017), and thus the findings are suggestive of the high level of polarization both of the political environment as well as the media landscape. Further research needs to be conducted, both in liberal democratic media systems and also polarized political environments, to compare and contrast findings from this study.

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