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## ARTICLE

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# Post-truth politics in the Middle East: the case studies of Syria and Turkey

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## Abstract

This article presents two case studies of disinformation from the Middle East which fit within the broader academic discussion of 'post-truth politics'. The first case study analyzes a disinformation campaign via social media targeted at a Syrian humanitarian organization known as the White Helmets. The second case study recounts Turkish President Erdoğan's strategy to leverage the mobilization and consensus-building potential of social media after the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Both cases present similar dynamics of authoritarian or autocratic regimes coopting social media, particularly in the form of citizen journalism, user-generated content (UGC) and 'trolling' supported by State authorities to challenge the opposition's discourses.

## Keywords

post-truth, disinformation, propaganda, social media, Syria, Turkey

## *Políticas posverdad en el Próximo Oriente: los estudios de caso de Siria y Turquía*

### **Resumen**

*Este artículo presenta dos estudios de caso de desinformación del Próximo Oriente que encajan con el debate académico más amplio de las «políticas posverdad». El primer estudio de caso analiza la campaña de desinformación a través de las redes sociales dirigida a la organización de ayuda humanitaria en Siria conocida como «Casco Blanco» (White Helmets). El segundo estudio de caso relata la estrategia del presidente turco Erdoğan, que se ha aprovechado de la movilización y del potencial de creación de consenso de las redes sociales tras las protestas del Parque Gezi en 2013. Ambos casos presentan dinámicas similares de cooptación de las redes sociales por parte de regímenes autoritarios o autocráticos, especialmente en forma de periodismo ciudadano, contenido generado por usuarios (UGC, por sus siglas en inglés) y «troleo» apoyado por las autoridades del Estado para enfrentarse a los discursos de la oposición.*

### **Palabras clave**

*posverdad, desinformación, propaganda, redes sociales, Siria, Turquía*

## **Introduction**

The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is likely to go down in history as the era that ushered in the so-called “post-truth” politics, defined as a type of political discourse whereby appeals to emotions and personal beliefs play a greater role than evidence and facts in informing discussions on public affairs. This periodizing concept illustrates a public sphere increasingly operating via the Internet and social media and characterized by a breakdown in the authority of traditional mediating institutions such as mass parties and legacy media (Harsin 2018). This post-truth political public sphere is currently plagued by the circulation of intentionally or unintentionally false information, and by a highly fragmented and polarized public opinion engaged in bitter and emotional disputes that hinder the public’s ability to reach a democratic consensus on key political issues. The phenomenon under discussion rose to prominence after 2016, particularly in the US and Europe, and it is currently affecting various regions, including the Middle East.

The current epistemic crisis that is affecting multiple political contexts – leading to increasingly inability for people around the world to tell the truth from fiction – is not only linked to technological and cultural transformations brought on by social media platforms, but it can be seen as the offshoot of a broader fiduciary crisis of mainstream Western media and political institutions. Liberal democracy and its main institutions are suffering a fiduciary crisis, and consequently such formerly established global truth-arbiters are facing the mounting epistemic and ideological challenge posed by formerly marginalized political actors, both at the domestic and at the international level. This problem is not limited to the Western world, but as Benkler et al.

argue, the crisis of liberal democracy is concerning many countries which “saw shifts from liberal democratic forms to a new model of illiberal, and in some cases authoritarian, majoritarianism” (Benkler et al. 2018, 4).

Syria and Turkey represent two different approaches to post-truth politics, the former being a conflict-ridden country led by an authoritarian regime and the latter a democracy increasingly veering towards authoritarianism under President Erdoğan. Despite the differences, both countries present parallel dynamics and share technological, cultural and political features similar to those defining the post-truth condition of Western democracies. In both cases, authoritarian regimes and government parties leveraged the crisis of authority of liberal democracy and mainstream Western media to defend their authoritarian politics, and also closely monitored the use of social media by activists and dissidents in order to both track oppositional voices and spread propagandistic narratives. In fact, citizen journalism and user-generated content (UGC) – important innovations introduced by activists during the Arab Spring in their resistance towards government crackdowns – have been utilized and “weaponized” both in Syria and Turkey by the very authorities being challenged. These two case studies were chosen because of their political saliency and relevance with respect to the growing threat of illiberal or authoritarian politics worldwide. Both Syria and Turkey signal a crisis in the emancipatory thrust of the Arab Spring, and embody the authoritarian backlash that stopped its further development in the broader Middle East. In the case of Syria, the example provided also contains elements that in an exacerbated and precocious form predate similar trends later visible in other political contexts. The following quote by scholar and journalist Trombetta

deftly encapsulates the impact of social media in the context of the Syrian war, which created the conditions for the post-truth and disinformation dynamics analyzed in the first part of the chapter. Trombetta argues that since the early years of the Syrian Civil War the new media environment was characterized by an “overabundance of information, heightened polarization, the birth of digital enclaves isolated from one another, and the production low quality content based on emotional images and data, rather than on rational texts and arguments” (Trombetta 2013, 48).

The Syrian case study, focusing primarily on the latest stage of the conflict, after the 2015 Russian intervention, discusses how propagandistic narratives in support of the regime were amplified via social media by a group of bloggers, independent journalists, social media influencers, automated bot accounts and so-called “trolls”<sup>1</sup> or sock-puppet accounts,<sup>2</sup> according to a network propaganda model (Benkler et al. 2018) which presents similarities to other Russian influence operations. The specific conditions of the Syrian conflict, which prevented established media from covering it freely and independently, allowed for a dramatic surge in the importance of amateur videos and UGC shared via social media. The increased importance of UGC and independent journalism also needs to be read in light of the broader fiduciary crisis suffered by traditional journalism (Harsin 2018). Scholars have referred to the Syrian war as the first “socially-mediated” conflict of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Lynch et al. 2014), where coverage occurred primarily through a massive outpour of audiovisual material and commentary from activists and rebel groups.

On top of creating an unfiltered and realistic account of the events, this new form of war journalism also lent itself to propagandistic ends by means of curatorial hubs which served as filters between activists and the mainstream media (Trombetta 2012; Sienkiewicz 2014). The Syrian regime exploited these new conditions of mediation to spread propagandistic narratives, via its official news agency and government-friendly television networks, often circulating unverifiable or falsified amateur videos. This form of UGC-based propaganda was later also given major global visibility by a set of social media influencers backed by a secondary state actor, Russia, who intervened in the conflict to defend its major geopolitical stakes in the region. Russia has pioneered computational propaganda<sup>3</sup> strategies and tactics and information warfare via the Internet since

its military intervention in Ukraine in 2014. This included creating digital propaganda outfits like the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a “troll farm” which is considered to have played an important role in spreading disinformation during the 2016 US elections. As the coming section will demonstrate, Syria was an opportunity for Russia to employ its arsenal of media manipulation tactics tested in the 2014 Ukraine conflict.

In the case of Turkey, one can observe a similar dynamic whereby authorities seized on the opportunity provided by social media in order to track and counter the oppositional views and efforts that had coalesced around the Gezi Park protests of 2013. After initially rejecting social media, the Erdoğan government chose to coopt its potential for communication and mobilization with a twofold strategy aimed at circulating fictional or misleading political narratives and systematically harassing the regime’s opponents. To this end, it employed a carefully constructed disinformation network, the AKTrolls – whose tactics are very similar to those used by the IRA (Yesil 2016) – which was developed in response to activists’ use of social media after the Gezi protests. The two case studies discussed offer important insights into the implications of social media use as a consensus-building and propaganda resource, specifically in undemocratic or semi-democratic regimes. They also shed light on the functioning of post-truth politics in non-Western contexts, especially with respect to the current crisis of the values and institutions of liberal democracy.

## 1. The disinformation campaign against the White Helmets

The case study in this section focuses on a propaganda campaign via social media that has targeted the humanitarian search and rescue organization Syria Civil Defence, globally known as the White Helmets.<sup>4</sup> The White Helmets – who claim to have saved nearly a hundred thousand lives since the beginning of the war – were the subject of an Academy Award winning documentary in 2017, they have been twice nominated for the Nobel Prize, and have received several awards and accolades for their humanitarian work. While the White Helmets claim to be an independent and impartial humanitarian NGO, with no affiliation to political or military

1. “Initially, the term “troll” described those who deliberately baited people to elicit an emotional response. Trolling can refer to relatively innocuous pranks, but it can also take the form of more serious behaviors. (...) In practice, however, trolling has grown to serve as an umbrella term which encompasses a wide variety of asocial internet behaviors” (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 4).

2. A sock-puppet account is a fake on-line identity created for purposes of deception and manipulation.

3. “Computational propaganda describes the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks” (Woolley and Howard 2018, 4).

4. The nickname comes after the signature white headgear they wear. The White Helmets were founded in 2014 in the areas of Aleppo and Idlib outside of government control, as a response to the lack of institutional resources to assist and protect the civilian population affected by the conflict. The group consists of nearly 3500 people, largely coming from civil society, who receive a modest salary and training thanks to the funding by Western countries, including the US, the UK, Japan and Turkey. The group discloses the sources of funding on its web site.

actions, they are however considered close to the opposition by some international observers.<sup>5</sup>

Starting in 2016, shortly after Russian intervention in Syria, the White Helmets have been subject to what several media outlets including the BBC, the Guardian and France 24 and think tanks like the Atlantic Council consider a sustained disinformation campaign relying on all the resources of the Russian and pro-Assad propaganda arsenal. Disinformation campaigns via social media are one of the most visible dimensions of post-truth politics (Benkler et al. 2018), particularly in the form of influence operations carried out by State actors aimed at destabilizing elections and governments, or to influence the course of armed conflicts. Bennett and Livingston see these as important elements of the current post-truth or disinformation order, and “the targeting of domestic political processes, parties and politicians by foreign agents and governments as a growing form of strategic information warfare” (Bennett and Livingston 2018, 132). Such strategic forms of computational propaganda (Woolley and Howard 2018) are aimed at inserting false and polarizing information and narratives into the political conversations of other nations. They operate by leveraging the technological features and affordances of social media, by taking advantage of the difficulty that lawmakers have in regulating and policing them, as well as by tapping into the feelings of discontent and frustrations that accompanies the fiduciary crisis of political and cultural institutions in liberal democracies worldwide.

The Russian disinformation campaign against the White Helmets followed what an Atlantic Council on the Kremlin strategy in Syria called a 4D approach: “Dismiss the critic, distort the facts, distract from the key point, and dismay the audience”.<sup>6</sup> As for the first component – dismissing the critic – the main reason for targeting the White Helmets from both a symbolic and military perspective is that they often provide immediate documentation of the consequences of the Russian and Syrian regime bombing campaigns which also affect civilians. The members of the organization wear body cameras and provide footage of the destruction caused by air strikes against civilian infrastructures and population, thus emerging as an essential source of evidence of alleged war crimes. Given the lack of independent and reliable journalistic accounts from mainstream media on the frontline, the humanitarian organization has filled a gap by providing evidence portraying the human cost of the military offensive to regain the areas of the county controlled by the rebels. This ability of citizens and activists to participate in the public sphere and provide direct and unfiltered coverage of the ongoing crisis fits into the broader

trend of citizen journalism and UGC that became prominent among the Arab Spring movements (Sienkiewicz 2014). As it had been since the beginning of the conflict, the role of UGC remains a key element in the coverage of the conflict, particularly in challenging the regime narratives, thus becoming a target for a counter-information strategy.

During the final phase of the Aleppo siege, in the fall of 2016, despite the denial by Russian authorities, the White Helmets recorded the use of barrel bombs and cluster munitions, which had been banned by a UN resolution in 2014. In 2017, the White Helmets also provided crucial evidence to the UN body in charge of investigating the use of chemical weapons in the Khan Shaykhun attack.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the White Helmets provided essential information and evidence to the critics of the Russian intervention in Syria, upsetting the Syrian and Russian narrative on the goal of their military campaign. As such, the White Helmets were targeted as unreliable or biased critics.

As far as distorting the facts, the second component of the strategy, the main goal of the disinformation campaign was to portray the humanitarian organization as linked to Jihadist militants and terrorist groups, thus a potential military target undeserving of humanitarian protection. This followed the “war on terror” tropes and narrative consistently pursued by the regime since 2011, and by Russia after 2015. Pro-Assad news outlet *Hands Off Syria* and Russian officials and Kremlin-friendly media such as RT have accused the White Helmets of working the Al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Nusra front. As is often the case in the Syrian conflict, amateur photos, videos and other UGC from sources difficult to verify are often used as evidence to back up these claims. A France 24 investigation has declared such claims as either unproven or debunked, while however reporting that on several occasions that the White Helmets had to negotiate with armed Islamist groups in order to operate in the territories under their control.<sup>8</sup>

The White Helmets were also accused of staging their reports on civilian casualties or even fabricating evidence of chemical attacks to cater to Western media, audiences and policymakers. Such allegations have come directly from the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and from the Russian Ministry of Defense spokesman Konashenkov.<sup>9</sup> In a speech organized by the Syrian mission at the UN, Eva Bartlett, who also writes for RT, alleged that the White Helmets had staged rescues using “recycled” victims, a claim that originated as a meme. Lavrov repeated this claim, which was eventually debunked by Channel 4 News.<sup>10</sup> Social media influencer Sarah Adballah was one of the most vocal critics of the White Helmets, accusing them of fabrications

5. Atlantic Council. 2017. *Breaking Aleppo*. <http://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/breakingaleppo/>.

6. Czuperski, Maksymilian et al. (2016).

7. Di Giovanni (2018).

8. France 24 (2018).

9. Sputnik (2016).

10. Worrall (2016).

and she voiced her criticism to a pro-Assad information ecosystem populated by “supporters of pro-Palestinian causes, Russians and Russian allies, white nationalists and those from the extremist alt-right, conservative American Trump supporters, far-right groups in Europe and conspiracy theorists”.<sup>11</sup> Vanessa Beeley – the daughter of a former British diplomat, who is a frequent contributor to RT and editor of the alternative news outlet 21<sup>st</sup> century, founded by a former editor of the controversial news website Infowars – has also been noted by researchers as dominating the on-line conversation around the White Helmets. Although she presents herself as independent, her connection with the Kremlin have been widely documented.<sup>12</sup>

A further accusation against the group claims that it is funded by Western powers with the covert intention of bringing about a regime change in Syria. The funding that the White Helmets publicly disclose, coming mainly from the UK through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, as well as other Western countries, is thus used as proof that they have an agenda and that the evidence they provide on the war cannot be trusted. After the Khan Sheikoun chemical attack, Infowars went so far as to accuse the White Helmets of being an “al-Qaida affiliated group funded by George Soros”.<sup>13</sup> The organization however has never received funding from George Soros or any of his foundations. While some of the accusations leveled have in fact been proven correct or at least not disprovable – like the frequent contacts between the White Helmets and some rebel Islamist groups, or the accusations that members of the group carries arms – the most serious allegations have been found baseless by various fact-checking investigations,<sup>14</sup> particularly those carried out by the BBC, the Guardian, France 24, Channel 4 News and by fact-checking web sites such as Snopes.<sup>15</sup>

Distorting the facts about the White Helmets, labeling them as terrorists and alleging that they staged chemical attacks also helped reach the third goal of the Russian counternarrative strategy, which was distracting the public opinion from the key point of the Russian intervention: the military support for the Syrian regime to regain territory and crush the opposition forces. By dismissing key witnesses of the consequences that their aerial bombing campaign had on civilians, Russian and Syrian authorities were able to deceive the public opinion about their military ends. This counternarrative has been quite successful, attracting a vast on-line audience also by the same means of computational propaganda that Russia employed in Ukraine in 2014 and in the US in 2016. By tricking social media algorithms with an outpour of coordinated content circulated by bots,

sock-puppet accounts and by giving extensive media exposure to the network of on-line influencers, agitators and propagandists, Russian and Syrian authorities have been able to create a manufactured consensus on the White Helmets and to give fringe contentious views mainstream visibility and legitimacy.

The analytics firm Graphika, which specializes in studying Russian disinformation campaigns, found very similar patterns in the on-line ecosystems of over ten thousand Twitter users talking about the White Helmets. Pro-Kremlin accounts figured among these users, generating in some cases over one hundred tweets per day, which is typically an indicator of a bot account. On Twitter alone, an army of social media accounts and bots was able to reach an “estimated 56 million people with tweets attacking (...) the White Helmets during ten key moments of 2016 and 2017”.<sup>16</sup>

The notion of the White Helmets as a terrorist organization seemed to have entered the mainstream as it was also publicly circulated by Pink Floyd co-founder Roger Waters, who in 2018 accused the humanitarian organization of being “a fake organization that exists only to create propaganda for the jihadists and terrorists”,<sup>17</sup> signaling the narrative pushed by the Syrian and Russian propaganda had become dominant. This made it evident that the fourth component of the Russian disinformation audience, dismaying the audience and stoking fears and confusion, had also been achieved.

The Syrian Civil War might be remembered as the first conflict in which the lines separating military and civilians, and between material and narrative dimensions, became irreversibly blurred and overlapping. As argued by Patrikarakos (2017), contemporary conflicts are characterized by a growing role of non-state actors, and a surge in the relevance of emotional and narrative dimensions. Non-state actors involved in contemporary conflicts know that they can attract international support if their pleas are heard by the global community. Activists and citizens journalists who are at a disadvantage from a military standpoint attempt to win the conflict at the discursive level, and the White Helmets’ testimony of the civilian suffering is part of this strategy. As previously seen, new technology significantly assisted activists in this process. It is telling that the White Helmets really started to be targeted in the aftermath of the global wave of indignation that emerged after the rescue group posted the picture of Omran Daqneesh, a dazed four-year-old boy, covered in dust, who had been rescued when his house in East Aleppo had been bombed. As the world wept for Omar, the regime swiftly pushed back by showing new pictures of him, clean and neatly groomed, accusing the White

11. BBC News (2018).

12. Solon (2017).

13. *ibid.*

14. France 24 (2018).

15. See: <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/syrian-rescue-organization-the-white-helmets-are-terrorists/>.

16. Di Giovanni, Janine (2018).

17. Freedland (2018).

Helmets of manipulating the child against his parents' will.

Children suffering put a human face to the thousands of nameless and faceless victims of the Syrian conflict, and thus could move public opinion and governments to react. However, just like any YouTube video posted in Syria could become a piece of evidence about a suspected atrocity on the ground, every tweet could also become a possible source to confirm or refute a particular narrative. The Syrian government and its ally Russia, amplified by social media users, fought back against the opposition with effective counternarratives, by taking advantage of this constant flow of information to confuse and distort, and in some cases to spread falsehoods and disinformation.

In the case of White Helmets, the Russian strategy was particularly effective as it managed to dismiss a potential critic, distort the facts, distract from the key points and dismay the international public opinion regarding the true motives and goals of a humanitarian organization which had received praise and recognition for its documented search and rescue operations in combat zones. The disinformation strategies employed in Syria are an example of Russian modern information warfare based on computational propaganda, with the goal not only to push for a certain narrative, but also to confuse an issue with multiple narratives so that people cannot recognize any truth (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014).

## 2. The Government Co-optation of Twitter in post-Gezi Turkey: the AKTrolls case study

For nearly a decade, Turkish president Erdoğan had an unquestionably firm grip on the media in Turkey. Turkish media outlets have traditionally been under the control of a handful of private groups, which led to lack of pluralism of views presented in the public sphere. Furthermore, the already rare views opposing the government became less frequent as some media holdings were forced to sell their television channels and newspapers to either foreign or local pro-Erdoğan investors. It is thus safe to say that that mainstream media has failed to provide the Turkish public with unbiased and rigorous reporting independent from government interference. In a similar vein to what happened in Russia with its burgeoning blogosphere of the early 2000s, which emerged as an alternative to the Kremlin-controlled broadcast media (Sanovich in Woolley and Howard, 2019) social media and citizen journalism emerged as arguably the main sources of news for a considerable portion of Turkish citizens.

After initial skepticism, the attitude of Erdoğan and his AKP<sup>18</sup> vis-à-vis social media has changed drastically over the course of

the past five years. If social media like Twitter and Facebook were at first seen as serious threats to the government's control of the media because of the free flow of information they enabled, after the 2013 Gezi Park protests they became one of the main weapons to build consensus, manipulate public opinion and in some cases spread outright disinformation. Gezi Park protests refer to the wave of demonstrations<sup>19</sup> that began on May 28, 2013 in Istanbul's Gezi Park, a park located in the heart of Turkey's most populous city. In a matter of days, the demonstration became a medium to voice general concerns with the government and the then-Prime Minister Erdoğan.

The use of social media, especially Twitter, has soared in Turkey since the early 2010s. The accessibility and freedom of social media offered a safe haven for those who were becoming wary of the lack of pluralism of mainstream information outlets. In a political climate where mainstream media gave little or no coverage to the events in Gezi, Twitter provided not only an environment to share news, but also a medium for demonstrators to communicate and mobilize. However, as the protests unfolded the authorities were closely monitoring social media, resulting in Twitter and Facebook being sporadically shut down during the protests. Between the summers of 2013 leading up to 2014, Twitter and Facebook both played a key role in the organization of anti-government demonstrations. Twitter users in Turkey increased from 1.8 million to 9.5 million during Gezi (Yaman 2014).

Erdoğan initial approach to Twitter and social media in general was dismissive as we can see from this quote: "Twitter and all that, we will root them away. Whatever the international community might say, I don't care. We are taking fast measures towards this, it is a matter of national security".<sup>20</sup> This statement was made in 2014, in the period leading up to the 2015 general elections. It was the culmination of a political climax during which social media was being used as a major communications tool by the opposition and critics of the government. From 2015 on, however, Erdoğan and the AKP have significantly changed their approach to social media, especially to Twitter. The platform, earlier seen as a threat, gradually became part of a broad propaganda strategy, and it became such an important tool for the government that a semi-official "troll army" on Twitter was established in 2015 under the name *New Turkey Digital Bureau*. As argued by Turkish scholar Yesil "The AKP's 'Twitter army' echoes the 'troll army' that the Russian Department of Internal Policy created in response to anti-Putin rallies in 2011 with the aim of harassing political dissidents, promoting Putin's agenda and slamming the Western narratives" (Yesil 2016, 126).

Social media users organized and funded by the AKP, also known as the AKTrolls, served as the *de facto* Internet propaganda branch

18. Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP.)

19. Protesters initially gathered in order to protect the public park, which was to be demolished in favor of constructing a mosque and a shopping mall. It was a contested plan of urban development fervently supported by Erdoğan, to the point of making it a major topic of political discussion.

20. See: [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/52603/Erdoğan\\_\\_Twitter\\_in\\_kokunu\\_kaziyacagiz.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/52603/Erdoğan__Twitter_in_kokunu_kaziyacagiz.html) (Translated by the author).

of the Turkish government, and their discourse evidently shares multiple aspects of the AKP's official rhetoric. The Turkish scholars Bulut and Yörük (2017) summarized the online pro-Erdoğan discourse around three main themes: *servicing the people*, *fetishizing the will of the people* and *demonizing the opposition* (Bulut and Yörük 2017). Erdoğan political speeches, especially after 2011, took even a more populist turn and the otherwise vague concept of "servicing the people" became the basis of his ideology. Economic growth and progress were also being rhetorically linked to infrastructure-building and real estate development, and the AKP's propaganda echoed these views.

Indeed, the AKTrolls followed suit, organizing mass on-line propaganda whenever a significant construction project was developed, and targeting activists voicing concern. An example of this was the extensive AKTroll activity on Twitter in 2013 during the days leading up to the opening of Osman Gazi Bridge, a suspended bridge on the Gulf of Izmir linking Gebze to Yalova.<sup>21</sup> Whenever the Turkish opposition raised concerns about this project, the AKTrolls were quick to single out critical Twitter users and target them fervently.

Gezi was a turning point in the sense that traditional trolling tactics like harassing Internet users became employed as a political tool. Pre-Gezi trolling activity in Turkey was mostly limited to fringe parts of the society and to the tech-savvy youth. During and after Gezi, however, trolling evolved into coordinated misinformation and disinformation campaigns. Pro-government groups, as well as highly motivated supporters of Erdoğan, started using Twitter to spread fabricated news and false narratives. Some would claim, for example, that Gezi protesters drank beer inside of mosques or had attacked veiled women, a claim repeated also by Erdoğan in his speeches to discourage demonstrations. These accusations would later be discredited and proven false, despite achieving widespread circulation at the time.<sup>22</sup>

In late 2013, in the aftermath of the falling out between Erdoğan and the Gülen Movement,<sup>23</sup> Twitter, Facebook and YouTube accounts started to publish leaked audio recordings of Erdoğan and his entourage suggesting dubious or criminal activity, later to be known as the 2013 corruption scandal in Turkey.<sup>24</sup> Some recordings for example revealed plans by Erdoğan daughter to launch a campaign on Twitter with the coordinator of the AKTrolls. In March 2014, following a court order, access to Twitter was temporarily banned to block the spread of these recordings. During that time, Turkey also became one

of the top countries in requesting content be removed from Twitter (Sozeri 2017). In the aftermath of the leak, several pro-governmental accounts started to appear on Twitter to discredit and harass those who were sharing these documents.

The AKTrolls played an indispensable part in every major political event in Turkish politics from 2014 on. Following the anti-Gezi and anti-Gülen efforts between 2013 and 2015, trolls shifted their focus to polishing Recep Tayyip Erdoğan image in his bid to become president for the 2014 presidential elections, and to discrediting the rising pro-Kurdish party, the People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*; HDP). Defamation and smearing HDP officials were the main focus of AKTrolls leading up to the 2015 general elections as the HDP was gaining support from liberal elites and underprivileged Kurds alike. Since the AKP saw the HDP as a possible political threat, the troll army acted accordingly.

The AKTrolls use some well-known techniques, tactics and schemes in order to carry out their operations. These techniques can be better understood with the help of the descriptions and patterns laid out by Turkish scholar Saka (2016). AKTrolls indeed follow a similar trend to the other troll groups on social media, such as the previously mentioned IRA. According to Saka, they band together to carry out planned attacks on targets, designated by the AKP's top-level officials. AKTrolls, knowing there would be near to no persecution for their actions, lash out to individuals in violent manners, often resorting to doctored documents and photos to prove their point.<sup>25</sup> Following the October 2015 terrorist attacks in the nation's capital, Ankara, they discovered AKTrolls were using a vast number of automated bot accounts. This, as Saka speculates, gives AKTrolls the tools to orient the conversation and frame events in a manner that is instrumental to the government agenda.

Since its development, social media has fostered a mostly unregulated and widely accessible environment for political exchange in various regions of the world, including Turkey. Such digital arenas have been first occupied by opposition, minority or dissident voices, and even served as a major tool for mobilization and organization in historic events such as the Arab Spring, the Syria uprising and the Gezi Park Protests. President Erdoğan, skeptical and wary of the impact of social media on politics at first, slowly shifted his attitude and policy in order to control the power of the new technology rather than simply repressing or censoring it. By harnessing the power of

21. Journalistic research conducted by *140journos* on the North Forests of Istanbul, which were mostly destroyed for the bridge. See: <https://140journos.com/kuzey-2-e3a2bc28098a>.

22. See: <http://haber.sol.org.tr/devlet-ve-siyaset/portakal-gazi-ve-diger-efsaneler-haberi-74016>.

23. The Gülen movement is an international religious network organized as a cult around its leader Fetullah Gülen, a former ally of Erdoğan. He was most recently accused of organizing the 2016 coup attempt and still resides in the United States as Turkey asks for his extradition for trial.

24. The Gülen Movement had apparently been tapping the phones of some people close to Erdoğan, and the recordings revealed conversations of the Turkish president with his son regarding concealing large sums of money.

25. An example of this is the planned attacks on *ekşisozluk*, Turkey's equivalent of Reddit. At midnight on April 13, 2018, AKTrolls infested several discussion boards on *ekşisozluk* and shared a range of false documents like Erdoğan alleged university diploma, or documents proving connections between the People's Republican Party (CHP) and the Kurdish militant organization PKK.

social media to his own advantage, Erdoğan has been able to orient the political discourse and deflect and suppress criticism, which is helping him retain his position as the President of the Turkish Republic.

## Conclusions

The case studies discussed in the previous chapters illustrate how social media can provide both opportunities for citizens to express themselves and mobilize as well as tools for government-sponsored propaganda and harassment of oppositional voices, especially in non-Western contexts. This seems to confirm the views expressed by cyber-skeptics like Morozov (2011), who has been cautioning against an overly optimistic view of the Internet as an inherently democratizing medium.

During the past years, it has become evident that the very set of incentives that have turned social media into successful and pervasive global missionaries of digital communicative capitalism (Dean 2010) have also had troubling consequences in the way they affect citizens' discussions of public affairs, their interaction with politicians, their process of political identity formation, and their access to information (Vaidhyanathan 2019).

However, the goal of this article wasn't to convey an overly pessimistic view of the role of new media in the political process, particularly in countries that suffer of a democratic deficit. What we wished to emphasize from the comparative discussion of the Syrian and Turkey are rather the tensions between freedom and control, between liberation and repression that are visible around the political use of the Internet. To this end we have highlighted the similar dynamics of imitation and co-optation between activist and government strategies in their use of social media as both tools for communication and mobilization. The sphere of public discussion provided by social media did allow, both in Syria and Turkey, for unprecedented opportunities to gather information, organize opposition and cover injustice and brutalities. In Syria, this assisted the efforts by activists and rebels to spread a narrative on the uprising that help them secure, at least in the initial phase of the civil war, funding and military backing from international state actors, as well as political support from wide sectors of the Western public opinion. However, social media has also been instrumental in disseminating a counter-narrative that, increasingly after the Russian intervention in 2015, assisted the Syrian government in crushing the rebel resistance, regaining most of its territory and, most of all, and regaining legitimacy in the eyes of the global community. Similarly, Erdoğan and the AKP in Turkey, once they became aware of the disrupting effects of social media on established political practices and faced with the challenge that a free and unregulated Internet posed to their political dominance, decided to implement a sophisticated computational propaganda apparatus via social media. In both cases, as complete control and censorship of the new medium was neither technologically nor politically viable,

the two regimes decided to pursue a strategy of weaponizing the 'entropic' inclination of the Internet, fabricating and amplifying a plurality of narratives, blurring the lines between facts and fictions, with the goal of creating a self-serving informational chaos to be exploited for repressive political or military ends. The examples provided also work as cautionary tales for Western democracies, which are currently grappling with the disrupting effects of social media on political discourses, which include empowering far-right movements in the United States and in Europe.

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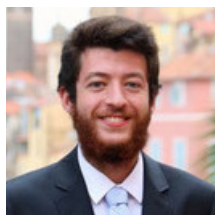
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