DISINFORMATION REPORT TURKIYE

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PEACE & JUSTICE

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Türkiye's Disinformation Ecosystem: Manipulation, Intervention and Ownership in Media

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Abstract

Türkiye's disinformation ecosystem is characterized by pro-government actors aiming to mobilize support. These actors strategically circulate disinformation through social media, as well as traditional media, such as television, and on political websites. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) manipulates media by proliferating pro-government narratives, as it also shuts down media channels. Additionally, as emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, increase in popularity and accessibility, Türkish media has been infected by pro-AKP trolls. This report aims to outline Türkiye's disinformation ecosystem within traditional and social media, starting from the failed military coup in 2016. It first provides a brief history of disinformation and outlines new technological influences on disinformation. Then, it discusses the media landscape and its challenges, especially with digital media. Next, the report outlines state-owned media and partisan media organizations, as well as manipulation techniques, including virtual fakes and amplifiers. The report concludes with five approaches to combatting disinformation.

1. Introduction

In illiberal democracies, disinformation is employed as a tool of authoritarianism through press censorship and the suspension of basic freedom rights.[1] Paid or volunteer, anonymous or identified users carry out online political activities and messaging to oppress voices who are critical or oppositional to the political regime. Tools of disinformation are used not only as a means of serving the domestic interests of the government, but also influencing global public opinion.[2] Türkiye provides an excellent case study to explore the modern disinformation ecosystem. Türkiye's ruling party, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) uses government-backed trolls and pro-AKP social media accounts to praise Turkish president and leader of the AKP Recep Tayyip Erdogan. These accounts demonstrate support for the ongoing struggle against any opposition groups whether they are in or out of the country.[3]

Türkiye has been met with a series of domestic and international crises, including an economic crisis, a coup attempt in 2016, a migration crisis and cross-border military conflicts. These crises led to changes in the sets of tools utilized by pro-government actors to amplify their narratives and demonstrate power over the media.[4] In this context, the media has been vastly politicized and takes a partisan role in support of the government. The AKP government's key strategies include manipulating information in the media and proliferating content related to pro-Erdogan and AKP narratives.

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[1] Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2020). A Brief History of the Disinformation Age: Information Wars and the Decline of Institutional Authority. *In The Disinformation Age* (pp. 3–40). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628.001

[2] Yesil, B. (2021). Social media manipulation in Turkey: Actors, tactics, targets. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (pp. 386–396).

[3] Yildiz, E. and Smets, K. (2019). Internet trolling in 'networked' authoritarianism: A qualitative content analysis of tweets by regime supporters and 'AK trolls' in July 2016. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 12: 348–368.

[4] Yesil, B. (2021). Social media manipulation in Turkey: Actors, tactics, targets. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (pp. 386–396).

The dissemination of disinformation and media control under the AKP can be classified in three stages. In the first stage, the crackdown of the media started before the coup attempt in 2016. The AKP government aimed to cover up its own illegal actions, including fraud and corruption with repression and appointed trustees to some media organizations (such as Zaman Newspaper, Samanyolu TV, Bugun TV). This began to expose the dark face of the government. In the second stage, the 2016 coup attempt marks a concerted increase in control of traditional media and digital media.[5] The government's decree laws have been used to take over media outlets and silence critical voices. In the last stage, with the newly enacted disinformation law, the AKP government has almost maximum control over the digital media. Now, it has the ability to jail any person who is alleged to be disseminating untrue information about the country's internal and external security.

The focus of this report is on Türkiye's disinformation ecosystem. The overview will discuss the rise of disinformation and fake news in traditional and digital media in Türkiye. Then, it will discuss the impact of artificial intelligence and the use of trolls and bots. Additionally, it will explain state-sponsored disinformation and manipulation techniques. Next, the report will examine ideas on how to prevent disinformation. This report will conclude with a brief summary.

This report is descriptive and details the AKP government's disinformation campaigns in the domestic and international spheres. While academic and media reports have analyzed Russian influence campaigns and its disinformation ecosystem in Türkiye,[678] the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on fake news in Türkiye[9], and the role of fact-checking organizations in the country,[10] only a few reports have solely discussed Türkiye's information ecosystem.[11]

It is imperative that policymakers understand Türkiye's disinformation ecosystem as the government increasingly cracks down on free speech and freedom of expression. The recent introduction of the disinformation law, dubbed by some activists as the "censorship law," ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections in May is especially concerning due to its potential to intimidate individuals to self-regulate and its draconian prison sentences for disseminating misleading news. [1213]

[5] Ibid.
[6] Unver, A. (2019, March 8). Russian Disinformation Ecosystem in Turkey. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3534770
[7] Unver, H. A. (2019, April 21). *Russia Has Won the Information War in Turkey*. Foreign Policy. https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/21/russia-has-won-the-information-war-in-turkey-rt-sputnik-putin-erdogan-disinformation/
[8] Unver, A., & Kurnaz, A. (2021). Russian Digital Influence Operations in Turkey 2015-2020. In *Pomeps.org*. Stanford Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law. http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/POMEPS_Studies_43_Draft3-1.pdf#page=84
[9] Tuncer, S., & Tam, M. S. (2022). The COVID-19 Infodemic: Misinformation About Health on Social Media in Istanbul. *Türkiye Iletişim Araştırmaları Dergisi*. https://doi.org/10.17829/turcom.1050696
[10] Ünal, R., & Çiçeklioğlu, A. Ş. (2019). The Function and Importance of Fact-Checking Organizations in the Era of Fake News. *Medijske Studije*. https://doi.org/10.20901/ms.10.19.8
[11] Kirdemir, B. (2020). Exploring Turkey's Disinformation Ecosystem: An Overview. Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26087
[12] Coşkun, A. (2022, December 19). *Turkey's New Disinformation Law Affects More Than Meets the Eye*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/12/19/turkey-s-new-disinformation-law-affects-more-than-meets-eye-pub-88633
[13] Reuters. (2023, January 22). Turkish elections to be held on May 14 -Erdogan. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-elections-be-held-may-14-erdogan-2023-01-22/

2. History of Disinformation and Emerging Technologies

Disinformation has deep roots. Throughout history, examples of disinformation, such as deception, government propaganda, fake maps, and fake documents are present.[14] It is an element of internal or external interaction between groups, societies, and states.[15] Disinformation does not always aim to convince. It is also used for undermining opposition. It deals with people to make them distracted, paranoid, or passive.[16] The European Commission defines disinformation as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit."[17] Its objectives are: "i) deception; ii) profit gain; and iii) an intent to harm." [18]

The Bolsheviks first introduced the term disinformation *(Russian: dezinformatsiya)* in the 1920s as a political tool to gain power.[19] They established a pioneer disinformation office under the GPU (The State Political Directorate) on January 11, 1923.[20] It was authorized to gather data on "the awareness of foreign intelligence services, utilising relevant information to affect recipients, and exploring the awareness of societies".[21] Aditionally, it put false information into circulation, and wrote articles for the local and foreign press.[22] These operations aimed to mislead decision-makers in both foreign countries and local residents. The Bolsheviks' strategy inspired other states to take up similar tactics. In the modern world, military conflicts are more demanding and expensive than influence and perception operations, making these tactics more appealing for states. In this context, disinformation serves the interests of states by changing the perceptions of the other states' target actors.[23]

Disinformation is often confused with other terms such as misinformation, malinformation, and propaganda. Propaganda is a type of communication to endorse a particular agenda or point of view. It can be employed to shape people's opinions or control their behavior.[24] Dis-, mis-, and mal- information each have nuances, especially in terms of intention. Intentionally spreading fake or wrong information to deceive people is at the core of disinformation. Misinformation is the act of sharing unintentionally false content without realizing whether it is false or not. Malinformation describes factual information spread with the intent to cause harm.[25] It is important to note that the dissemination of misleading and wrong information can evolve. In other words, people who spread misinformation, who are unaware

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[14] Fallis, D. (2015). What Is Disinformation? *Library Trends*, 63(3), 401–426. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0014

[15] Sarts, J. (2020). Disinformation as a Threat to National Security. In *Disinformation and Fake News* (pp. 23–33). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5876-4_2

[16] Lucas, E., & Pomerantsev, P. (2016). Winning the Information War, *Center for European Policy Analysis* Report, 10, https://li.com/reports/winning-the-information-war (accessed 11 October 2022).

[17] European Commission, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, (2018). *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation*, Publications Office. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/739290

[18] Legucka, A., & Kupiecki, R. (2022). *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus.* Taylor and Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003281597

[19] Ibid.

[20] Hingley, R. (1970). *The Russian secret police: muscovite, imperial Russian and Soviet political security operations 1565-1970.* Hutchinson of London.

[21] Legucka, A. & Kupiecki, R. (2022). Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus. *Taylor and Francis.* https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003281597

[22] Ibid.

[23] Thomas, N. (2016). *Social Media as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare.* Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

[24] Cuncic, A. (2022, April 12). *How does propaganda work?* Verywell Mind. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.verywellmind.com/how-does-propaganda-work-5224974

[25] Wu, L., Morstatter, F., Carley, K., & Liu, H. (2019). Misinformation in Social Media: Definition, Manipulation, and Detection. *SIGKDD Explorations*, 21(2), 80–90. https://doi.org/10.1145/3373464.3373475

that the information is false, can be spread intentionally by other content creators with malicious aims, weaponizing it as disinformation.

Although these concepts are not new, the contemporary information environment has led misinformation and disinformation to thrive. In turn, governments and researchers have begun to devote more resources to combating the spread of false information online. The speed of information circulation pushes people to spend less time on news consumption.[26] "This information environment is fertile ground for conducting hostile disinformation campaigns".[27] New information technologies facilitate the dissemination of inaccurate and misleading information.[28] In this regard, the quality and veracity of the news are important.

Additionally, emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and algorithms play a role in spreading disinformation through digital media. The algorithmic structure of digital media affects the visibility of content people are likely to engage with.[29] Artificial intelligence and algorithms are designed to serve users' interests with customized experiences.[30] "The algorithms that dominate our online lives are mostly proprietary and so inaccessible to independent scrutiny".[31] This feature of digital media is abused by some actors, especially political and corporate actors, through the use of bots and trolls. Trolls and bots may behave like ordinary citizens on social media, yet they are "fake" citizens. For this reason, they are regarded as a persuasive and credible way to spread non-factual content.[32] The power of algorithms and their usage in our daily lives require increasing transparency and accountability to reduce the spread of false information.[33]

Algorithmic-driven social media platforms also facilitate the artificial bloat of problematic content via 'automated accounts' and 'cyborgs' (hybrid human/automated accounts).[34] Sophisticated 'deepfakes' in online circulation and faking techniques also foster the spread of disinformation.[35] The blurring of facts caused by the manipulation of images, sounds, and statements is now made not only by humans but also by artificial intelligence devices.[36]

[26] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). Turkey. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey

[27] Jayakumar, S. Anwar, N. D., & Ang, B. (2021). *Disinformation and fake news* (Jayakumar, N. D. Anwar, & B. Ang, Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5876-4

[28] Fallis, D. (2015). What Is Disinformation? *Library Trends*, 63(3), 401–426. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0014

[29] Calvano, E., & Polo, M. (2020). Market power, competition and innovation in digital markets: A survey. *Information Economics and Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoecopol.2020.100853

[30] Culloty, E., & Suiter, J. (2021). *Disinformation and manipulation in digital media: information pathologies*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003054252

[31] Ibid, p. (33).

[32] Hameleers, M. (2022). *Populist disinformation in fragmented information settings: understanding the nature and persuasiveness of populist and post-factual communication*. Routledge.

[33] Ananny, M., & Crawford, K. (2018). Seeing without knowing: Limitations of the transparency ideal and its application to algorithmic accountability. New Media & Society 20(3): 973–989. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816676645

[34] Cook, J., Ecker, U. & Lewandowsky, S. (2015). *Misinformation and how to correct it. Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0222

[35] Crilley, R. and Chatterje-Doody, P. N. (2021). Government disinformation in war and conflict. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (pp. 242–252).

[36] Salgado, S. (2021). Disputes over or against reality? In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (pp. 101–109).

3.   Türkiye's Disinformation Landscape in Media

The Turkish media system consists of dozens of national newspapers, new channels and boasts hundreds of local print and broadcast networks.[37] However, informal agreements underlie media operations in the country. Although the ruling elite has financially-backed the news media since the 1980s, the AKP era, starting in 2002, was marked by unprecedented levels of the suppression of critical voices and low journalistic standards. "Under the leadership of Erdogan, the AKP neutralized mainstream and oppositional media via legal and financial attacks, such as the prosecution of journalists, expropriation of critical outlets, and levying of tax penalties."[38]

Meanwhile, the AKP developed a series of partisan media conglomerates through distributing government advertising to loyal businessmen, cheap credits and privatization deals.[39] [40] The political, economic and diplomatic crises that the AKP faced caused the government to use the media as a government tool to a greater extent than before. For example, pro-AKP news channels copy wording from headlines of partisan newspapers and peddle conspiracy theories about the reasons for destabilization in Türkiye, demonstrating how traditional media gives rise to disinformation.[41]

Furthermore, Türkiye is not a safe environment for journalists, with press freedoms diminishing year after year. An Oxford-Reuters Institute report on Türkiye said that the country was ranked 153 out of 180 countries in press freedom by Reporters Without Borders.[42] Additionally, a separate report said that "Turkey is the world's largest jailer of journalists, ranking 157 of 180 countries in the press freedom index of the watchdog group Reporters Without Borders."[43]

Traditional Media

Before the digitalization era, traditional media, such as print newspapers, television, and radio, were used to disseminate information and to share narratives and world views.[44][45] Television remains the main news source for people over 35 in Türkiye, despite the shift toward new media among millennials and Generation Z. That's why control and manipulation of information in traditional media is still regarded as an effective way to gain political profit and support for the AKP government.[46]

[37] Yesil, B. (2021). Social media manipulation in Turkey: Actors, tactics, targets. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (p. 387).

[38] Ibid.

[39] Asker, M. and Baybars-Hawks, B. (2012). Media and democracy in Turkey: Toward a model of neo- liberal media autocracy. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 5(3): 302–321.

[40] Yesil, B. (2016). *Media in new Turkey: The origins of an authoritarian neoliberal state*. Urbana and Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

[41] Yesil, B. (2021). Social media manipulation in Turkey: Actors, tactics, targets. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (pp. 386–396).

[42] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). *Turkey*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey

[43] Lowen, M. (2018, November 15). *Fake news in Turkey: Hunting for truth in land of conspiracy*. BBC News. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46137139

[44] Sarts, J. (2020). Disinformation as a Threat to National Security. In *Disinformation and Fake News* (pp. 23–33). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5876-4_2

[45] Bühler, J., Murawski, M., Darvish, M., & Bick, M. (2020). Developing a Model to Measure Fake News Detection Literacy of Social Media Users. In *Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News in Social Media* (pp. 213–227). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42699-6_11

[46] Weise, Z. (2019, April 18). *Fact-checkers seek out grain of truth in Turkey's fake-news onslaught*. POLITICO. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-fact-checkers/

Traditional mainstream news media is greatly influenced by government-backed actors. According to a Reuters Special Report, a source revealed that Turkish officials intervene in the news, always to benefit president Erdogan.[47] In the report, a seasoned journalist said that "the mainstream media in Turkey serves the function of concealing the truth more than reporting the news".[48] For example, in 2020 Berat Albayrak – Erdogan's son-in-law and former minister of treasury and finance of Türkiye – announced his resignation via Instagram. While his resignation was reported by international and independent Turkish news sources, staff in dominant Turkish newsrooms waited and did not report on this issue for more than 24 hous until the government announced it.[49] They stayed "virtually silent about the most dramatic rift in Erdogan's inner circle in his nearly two decades in power."[50]

Türkiye's regulatory institutions for the media are widely blamed for abusing their authorities to punish media channels and sources criticizing the government.[51] Moreover, the Turkish media regulator (RTUK) – the Radio and Television Supreme Council – and the official Press Advertising Agency (BIK) have recently imposed various advertising and broadcast bans. For instance, "Olay TV, a TV channel created in November 2020, was closed by their main shareholder after just 26 days, a decision its journalists blamed on pressure from government officials unhappy with what they saw as favorable coverage of a pro-Kurdish opposition party."[52] In another example, "the RTUK issued 22 administrative penalties against several TV outlets" in the first half of 2021.[53] In 2020, newspapers criticizing the government suffered from 88% of all ad cuts and punishments imposed by BIK.[54] In October 2022, the RTUK blacked out the news channel TELE1 for three days over a critical comment about a governmental institution from a left-wing Workers' Party of Turkey politician. The RTUK justified their decision on the grounds of discrimination based on language, religion, and race.[55]

In addition, after the decree law was issued along with the state of emergency in 2016, 45 newspapers, 16 TV channels, 16 magazines, three news agencies, and 23 radio stations were shut down because the RTUK said they posed a threat to national unity and jeopardized national security [Figure 1-3].[56][57]In another example, approximately, 200 AKP supporters led by Abdurrahim Boynukalin, the AKP Istanbul Deputy and head of the youth branch of the AKP, attacked the building of Hurriyet newspaper, claiming that Erdogan's words were distorted on the newspaper's website. Private security guarding the building prevented the group from entering the building by locking doors. The attackers broke the revolving door and some windows of the building.[58] Then, the government, not wanting this incident to be widely

[47] Spicer, J. (2022, August 31). *Insiders reveal how Erdogan Tamed Turkey's newsrooms*. Reuters. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-media/
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Tzabiras, M. (2021, August 17). *Turkey: One to five years in prison for spreading 'fake news' on social media?* IFEX. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://ifex.org/turkey-one-to-five-years-in-prison-for-spreading-fake-news-on-social-media/
[52] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). *Turkey*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey
[53] Tzabiras, M. (2021, August 17). *Turkey: One to five years in prison for spreading 'fake news' on social media?* IFEX. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://ifex.org/turkey-one-to-five-years-in-prison-for-spreading-fake-news-on-social-media/
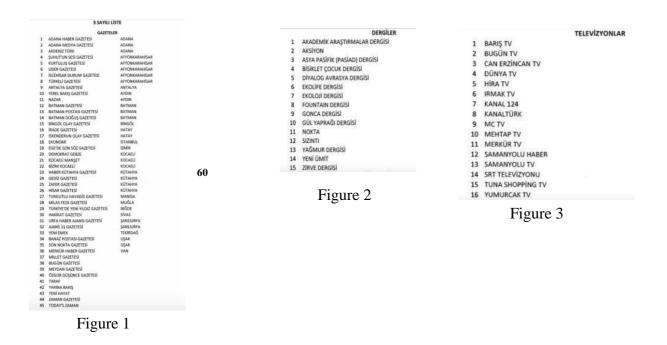[54] Ibid
[55] Önal, B. (2022, October 19). *Rtük Bir Skandala Daha imza attı! tele1 3 Gün Karartılıyor*. Tele1. Retrieved October 25, 2022, from https://tele1.com.tr/rtuk-bir-skandala-daha-imza-atti-tele1-3-gun-karartiliyor-720867/
[56] Cumhuriyet. (2016, July 27). *İşte kapatılan 45 gazete, 16 televizyon, 16 dergi, 3 haber ajansı ve 23 radyonun ismi*. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/iste-kapatilan-45-gazete-16-televizyon-16-dergi-3-haber-ajansi-ve-23-radyonun-ismi-575381
[57] Cumhuriyet . (2016, July 27). *İşte kapatılan 45 gazete, 16 televizyon, 16 dergi, 3 haber ajansı ve 23 radyonun ismi*. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/iste-kapatilan-45-gazete-16-televizyon-16-dergi-3-haber-ajansi-ve-23-radyonun-ismi-575381
[58] Cumhuriyet. (2015, September 8). *Madımak Usulü Gazete Baskını*. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/madimak-usulu-gazete-baskini-363291

publicized, imposed a broadcast ban and access block to news sources about the incident.[59] As a result of increasing oppression and threats, citizens are looking for alternative news sources.

3 SAYILI LİSTE

GAZETELER

1	ADANA HABER GAZETESİ	ADANA
2	ADANA MEDYA GAZETESİ	ADANA
3	AKDENİZ TÜRK	ADANA
4	ŞUHUT'UN SESİ GAZETESİ	AFYONKARAHİSAR
5	KURTULUŞ GAZETESİ	AFYONKARAHİSAR
6	LİDER GAZETESİ	AFYONKARAHİSAR
7	İSCEHİSAR DURUM GAZETESİ	AFYONKARAHİSAR
8	TÜRKELİ GAZETESİ	AFYONKARAHİSAR
9	ANTALYA GAZETESİ	ANTALYA
10	YEREL BAKIŞ GAZETESİ	AYDIN
11	NAZAR	AYDIN
12	BATMAN GAZETESİ	BATMAN
13	BATMAN POSTASI GAZETESİ	BATMAN
14	BATMAN DOĞUŞ GAZETESİ	BATMAN
15	BİNGÖL OLAY GAZETESİ	BİNGÖL
16	İRADE GAZETESİ	HATAY
17	İSKENDERUN OLAY GAZETESİ	HATAY
18	EKONOMİ	İSTANBUL
19	EGE'DE SON SÖZ GAZETESİ	İZMİR
20	DEMOKRAT GEBZE	KOCAELİ
21	KOCAELİ MANŞET	KOCAELİ
22	BİZİM KOCAELİ	KOCAELİ
23	HABER KÜTAHYA GAZETESİ	KÜTAHYA
24	GEDİZ GAZETESİ	KÜTAHYA
25	ZAFER GAZETESİ	KÜTAHYA
26	HİSAR GAZETESİ	KÜTAHYA
27	TURGUTLU HAVADİS GAZETESİ	MANİSA
28	MİLAS FEZA GAZETESİ	MUĞLA
29	TÜRKİYE'DE YENİ YILDIZ GAZETESİ	NİĞDE
30	HAKİKAT GAZETESİ	SİVAS
31	URFA HABER AJANSI GAZETESİ	ŞANLIURFA
32	AJANS 11 GAZETESİ	ŞANLIURFA
33	YENİ EMEK	TEKİRDAĞ
34	BANAZ POSTASI GAZETESİ	UŞAK
35	SON NOKTA GAZETESİ	UŞAK
36	MERKÜR HABER GAZETESİ	VAN
37	MİLLET GAZETESİ	
38	BUGÜN GAZETESİ	
39	MEYDAN GAZETESİ	
40	ÖZGÜR DÜŞÜNCE GAZETESİ	
41	TARAF	
42	YARINA BAKIŞ	
43	YENİ HAYAT	
44	ZAMAN GAZETESİ	
45	TODAY'S ZAMAN	

Figure 1

DERGİLER

1	AKADEMİK ARAŞTIRMALAR DERGİSİ
2	AKSİYON
3	ASYA PASİFİK (PASİAD) DERGİSİ
4	BİSİKLET ÇOCUK DERGİSİ
5	DİYALOG AVRASYA DERGİSİ
6	EKOLİFE DERGİSİ
7	EKOLOJİ DERGİSİ
8	FOUNTAIN DERGİSİ
9	GONCA DERGİSİ
10	GÜL YAPRAĞI DERGİSİ
11	NOKTA
12	SIZINTI
13	YAĞMUR DERGİSİ
14	YENİ ÜMİT
15	ZİRVE DERGİSİ

Figure 2

TELEVİZYONLAR

1	BARIŞ TV
2	BUGÜN TV
3	CAN ERZİNCAN TV
4	DÜNYA TV
5	HİRA TV
6	IRMAK TV
7	KANAL 124
8	KANALTÜRK
9	MC TV
10	MEHTAP TV
11	MERKÜR TV
12	SAMANYOLU HABER
13	SAMANYOLU TV
14	SRT TELEVİZYONU
15	TUNA SHOPPİNG TV
16	YUMURCAK TV

Figure 3

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Social Media, Trolls, and Algorithms

Digital media casts a wide net, due to its unprecedented ability to spread information rapidly, in a wide variety of formats. The existence of various forms of content types on digital platforms forces platforms to evolve quickly, and leads to the speedy consumption and production of information.[61] The rise of social media made possible the use of new journalist techniques in reporting and more engagement between the public and news sources.[62] As the use of digital media increases, people have been dependent on major online platforms to find entertainment or consume news.

On the one hand, digital platforms have the ability to reach larger audiences and enable these audiences to monitor cross-border content more easily than broadcast media and legacy print. Therefore, false information spread by the government and government supporters are increasingly challenged because of the widespread access to alternate sources and fact checking mechanisms.[63] On the other hand, the online sphere provides governments with a way to spread

[59] Yeşil Gazete. (2022, September 7). *Hürriyet Gazetesi'ni Basan Akp'li Boynukalın'la ilgili haberlere Erişim Engeli*. Haber Merkezi. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from https://yesilgazete.org/hurriyet-gazetesini-basan-akpli-boynukalinla-ilgili-haberlere-erisim-engeli/

[60] Cumhuriyet . (2016, July 27). *İşte kapatılan 45 gazete, 16 televizyon, 16 dergi, 3 haber ajansı ve 23 radyonun ismi*. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/iste-kapatilan-45-gazete-16-televizyon-16-dergi-3-haber-ajansi-ve-23-radyonun-ismi-575381

[61] Culloty, E., & Suiter, J. (2021). *Disinformation and manipulation in digital media: information pathologies*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003054252

[62] Starr, P. (2020). The Flooded Zone: How We Became More Vulnerable to Disinformation in the Digital Era. In *The Disinformation Age* (pp. 67–92). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628.003

[63] Bennet, W. L., and Livingston, S. (2020). A Brief History of the Disinformation Age: Information Wars and the Decline of Institutional Authority. In *The Disinformation Age* (pp. 3–40). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628.001

disinformation far more effectively.[64] For example, in order to have more control over digital media, the AKP passed the first national Internet Law in 2007.[65] Under this law, websites publishing so-called harmful content and curbing Kurdish political statements were banned because of threats to national unity. By the end of the 2000s, the number of blocked websites was over tens of thousands.[66]

The AKP's efforts to control digital media increased in the 2010s because politically engaged citizens criticizing the AKP government began to rely more on digital outlets for news sources.[67] That's why especially after the coup attempt in 2016, the government declared a state of emergency enabling the government to pass decree laws to intervene in social media and digital communications. Even more concerning is that social media users posting anti-state content began to be targeted by law enforcement.[68]

The Gezi protests in 2013 led AKP officials to recognize the importance of social media, which can serve as a space for organized protests. Therefore, the AKP began to build its own media team.[69] In the beginning, "a team of 6,000 'volunteers' was formed in order to promote the party perspective and monitor online discussions".[70] These 'volunteers' are called 'AK trolls'. The AK trolls consist of two major groups that are identifiable users (i.e. party members, cabinet members, political consultants, etc.) and anonymous trolls.[71]

In 2016, the International Press Institute found that journalists are the main targets of AK trolls. They are labeled as "traitor", "terrorist" or "terrorist supporter", as well as "kafir" (infidel)."[72] Additionally, AK trolls try to silence ordinary citizens, activists, and opposition party politicians through abusive language and threats of arrest.[73] AKP-backed functionaries count on bots to boost their hashtags to trending topics. Next, AKP officials and pro-government users retweet these tweets boosted by bots, which are then picked up by pro-AKP media to be spread as facts.[74]AKP-backed social media operatives also try to mobilize party supporters by spreading nationalist or populist content.[75] "They frame Turkey as the underdog victimized by the 'West' and Erdogan as the 'man of the people' who is under constant attack by internal and external enemies."[76] In June 2020, Twitter revealed that it cracked down on a web of 7,340 accounts made up of fake users and pro-AKP retweet loops. Stanford Internet Observatory found that this 'influence operation' is linked to the AKP's youth branches, which

[64] Oates, S. (2021). Rewired propaganda: Propaganda, misinformation, and populism in the digital age. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (pp. 71–79).
[65] Akdeniz, Y. and Altiparmak, K. (2008). *Internet restricted access: A critical assessment of Internet content regulation and censorship in Turkey.* Ankara, Turkey: Imaj Yayinevi.
[66] Kinikoglu, B. (2014). Evaluating the regulation of access to online content in Turkey in the context of freedom of speech. *Journal of International Commercial Law and Technology*, 9(1): 36–52.
[67] Parks, L., Goodwin, H., & Han, L. (2017). 'I have the government in my pocket': Social media users in Turkey, transmit-trap dynamics, and struggles over internet freedom. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 10(4): 574–592.
[68] Topak, O. (2017). The making of a totalitarian surveillance machine: Surveillance in Turkey under AKP rule. *Surveillance & Society*, 15(3/4): 535–542.
[69] Saka, E. (2019.) *Social media and politics in Turkey: A journey through citizen journalism, political trolling, and fake news*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
[70] Yesil, B. (2021). Social media manipulation in Turkey: Actors, tactics, targets. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (p. 388).
[71] Saka, E. (2019.) Social media and politics in Turkey: A journey through citizen journalism, political trolling, and fake news. *Lanham*, MD: Lexington Books.
[72] International Press Institute. (2016, September 13). *Turkey trolls' use of insults stifling reporting*. Available at https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/feature-turkey-trolls-use-of-insults-stifling-reporting/
[73] Karatas, D. and Saka, E. (2017). Online political trolling in the context of post- Gezi social media in Turkey. *International Journal of Digital Television*, 3(1): 383–401.
[74] Saka, E. (2019.) Social media and politics in Turkey: A journey through citizen journalism, political trolling, and fake news. *Lanham*, MD: Lexington Books.
[75] Yesil, B. (2021). Social media manipulation in Turkey: Actors, tactics, targets. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism,* (pp. 386–396).
[76] Ibid, p. 390

aim to increase the circulation of pro-government narratives and oppress opposition sides through these operations.[77]

While research on social media manipulation and disinformation in Türkiye often focuses on AK trolls, another major actor in this space is Bosphorus Global. The entity was founded by a pro-Erdogan pundit Hilal Kaplan and her husband. Although Bosphorus Global claims to be an independent NGO, leaked emails revealed that Bosphorus Global is funded by Berat Albayrak, Erdogan's son-in-law and the former minister of treasury and finance.[78] On behalf of Erdogan, Bosphorus Global runs websites and social media accounts to sway both domestic and international public opinion. While domestic accounts primarily use narratives targeting the PKK and Fethullah Gulen and his supporters, international accounts work to discredit negative news published in the Western media about Türkiye.

Additionally, 'cyber troops' are actors that seek to manipulate online users. A 2019 Oxford Internet Institute report found a team of 500 cyber troops operating in Türkiye that manipulate the online environment. The 'medium capacity team' consists of 500 'cyber troops,' or "government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online." These Turkish cyber troops are affiliated with a government agency; are greatly active on Facebook and Twitter; strive to suppress critical voices, spread pro-government disinformation and messages, and manipulate media with videos and memes.[79] By manipulating the algorithmic structure of social media, they have the ability to reach many users and spread disinformation.[80]

4. Media Challenges and Türkiye's Disinformation Law

In this news environment dominated by pro-AKP voices, citizens began to look for alternative voices and turned to online news outlets, social media, and messaging apps.[81] The shift from traditional media to new media sources has been accelerated by the popularization of digital media.[82]

Digital media enables three key groups – "journalists, election management bodies, and young people who are active on social media" – to reach wider audiences.[83] Digitalization and an increase in the use of social media were regarded as "a democratizing force that greatly expanded access to information and freedom of expression".[84] Yet, social media platforms

[77] Grossman, S., Akis, F. A., Alemdaroglu, A., Goldstein J. A., & Jonsson, K. (2020). *Political retweet rings and compromised accounts: A Twitter influence operation linked to the youth wing of Turkey's ruling party*. Stanford Internet Observatory, Stanford University. Available at: https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/20200611_turkey_report.pdf

[78] Sozeri, E. K. (2016). *Pelikan Dernegi: Berat Albayrak, Ahmet Davutoglu'nu neden* devirdi? Medium. Available at: https://medium.com/@efekerem/pelikan-derne%C4%9Fi-berat-albayrak-ahmet-davuto%C4%9Flunu-neden-devirdi-5fabad6dc7de

[79] Bradshaw, S. and Howard, P. N (2019). *The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organised social media manipulation*. Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford University (pp. 18-19). Available at: https://issuu.com/anselmolucio/docs/the_global_disinformation_order_2019

[80] Sanovich, S. & Stukal, D. (2018) *Strategies and tactics of spreading disinformation through online platforms*. In J. A. Tucker et al. (Eds.), Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature (pp. 30–39). Menlo Park, CA: William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3144139

[81] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). *Turkey*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey

[82] Tumber, H. and Waisbord, S. (2021). *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*. Taylor & Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003004431

[83] Deane, J. (2021). Responses to mis/disinformation: Practitioner experiences and approaches in low income settings. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (pp. 538–547).

[84] Culloty, E., & Suiter, J. (2021). *Disinformation and manipulation in digital media: information pathologies*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003054252

abound with fake accounts.[85] These fake accounts, especially bots, are used to spread disinformation operations and provide the illusion of grassroots advocacy. In this context, metrics can be manipulated by these actors to inflate the popularity of their content.[86] Nevertheless, social media allows people to share ideas, shape debates, and participate in organizations, while traditional mainstream media is restrictive in this sense.[87] Hence, the power of social media cannot be underestimated.

The freedom of expression fostered by social media can lead authoritarian states to silence critics and increase their domination over social media. For example, Hungary introduced emergency Covid-19 measures to prevent disinformation, which includes prison terms for spreading misinformation.[88] Likewise, social media users, such as journalists, have faced prosecutions due to their posts in Türkiye. In this sense, self-censorship on social media has been widespread among social media users.[89] Presidential Communications Director Fahrettin Altun had said that "the 'lie industry' has mobilized all…disinformation policies, making Türkiye the subject of disinformation campaigns in the process".[90] In this regard, in May 2022, the AKP government proposed a law aiming to fight media disinformation.[91][92]

In October 2022, Türkiye enacted its disinformation law.[93] Under the law, "anyone who publicly disseminates untrue information about the country's internal and external security, public order and public health with the intention of creating anxiety, fear or panic among the public in a way that is conducive to disrupting public peace" can be sentenced to imprisonment from one to three years.[94] The European Parliament said they are worried about the institution of more restrictions on online news sources and social media platforms. They also voiced concern over the vague wording in the definition of 'disinformation' and 'public order,' because this can lead to arbitrary prosecutions.[95] In parallel, the Council of Europe points out that the

[85] Fung, B. and Garcia, A. (2019). *Facebook has shut down 5.4 billion fake accounts this year*. CNN. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/13/tech/facebook-fake accounts/index.html#:~:text=So%20far%20this%20year%2C%20Facebook,removed%20in%20all%20of%202018.

[86] Shao C, Ciampaglia G.L., Varol O., et al. (2018). The spread of low-credibility content by social bots. *Nature Communications* 9(1): 4787. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-06930-7

[87] Benkler, Y. (2020). A Political Economy of the Origins of Asymmetric Propaganda in American Media. In *The Disinformation Age* (pp. 43–66). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628.002

[88] Walker, S. (2020). Hungary passes law that will let Orbán rule by decree. *The Guardian*, 30 March. Available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/hungary-jail-for-coronavirus-misinformation-viktor-orban.

[89] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). *Turkey*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey

[90] Daily Sabah. (2021, December 26). *Turkey most exposed country to fake news globally: Altun*. Daily Sabah. Retrieved October 14, 2022, from https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkey-most-exposed-country-to-fake-news-globally-altun/news

[91] Spicer, J. (2022, August 31). *Insiders reveal how Erdogan Tamed Turkey's newsrooms*. Reuters. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-media/

[92] As an example and indication of the first use of the law of disinformation, a Turkish court arrested 16 Kurdish journalists and media staff on June 16, 2022, on charges of "spreading terrorist propaganda". The European and International Federation of Journalists (EFJ-IFJ) and its four affiliates in Turkey strongly condemn these mass detentions of journalists. The authorities have refused to provide comment on the legal justification for the arrests because the investigation has been officially declared secret. "The massive arrests comes a few weeks after the governing alliance of Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) submitted to the Parliament a bill on 'disinformation and fake news'. "EFJ General Secretary **Ricardo Gutiérrez** condemned the latest attempts to muzzle the press: "European journalists who met in Izmir earlier this week expressed their full solidarity with jailed and prosecuted journalists in Turkey. Your struggle is our struggle and together we can resist censorship and repression." European Federation of Journalists. (2022, June 17). *Turkey: 16 Kurdish journalists behind bars pending trial over terrorism charges*. European Federation of Journalists. Retrieved March 1, 2023, from https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2022/06/17/turkey-16-kurdish-journalists-behind-bars-pending-trialover-terrorism-charges/

[93] Sayın, A. (2022, October 13). *'Dezenformasyon' Yasası Muhalefetin Itirazlarına Karşın meclis'ten Geçti*. BBC News Türkçe. Retrieved October 14, 2022, from https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/crgz0vnq0ewo

[94] Euronews. (2022, October 13). *Dezenformasyon Yasasının TBMM'den geçen Maddelerinde Neler Var?* Euronews. Retrieved October 14, 2022, from https://tr.euronews.com/2022/10/13/dezenformasyon-yasasinin-tartismali-29uncu-ve-meclisten-gecen-diger-maddeleri-ne-ongoruyor

[95] European Parliament. (2022, October 14). *Türkiye: New legislation leaves door open for arbitrary prosecutions, WARN MEPS: News: European parliament*. Türkiye: New legislation leaves door open for arbitrary prosecutions, warn MEPs | News | European Parliament. Retrieved October 14, 2022, from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221014IPR43221/turkiye-new-legislation-leaves-door-open-for-arbitrary-prosecutions-warn-meps

law provision "constitutes an interference with the freedom of expression".[96] Additionally, the timing of the legislation, ahead of the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in Türkiye in May, has aroused suspicion about the government's attempt to silence dissenting voices and promote self-censorship.[97] In this regard, the UN the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) expressed their growing concern. They wrote that the amendments "risk opening new avenues for repression of journalists, human rights defenders and incentivising self-censorship" because "the laws were drafted and adopted without meaningful consultation with civil society and media representatives".[98] The disinformation law is a stark threat to freedom of expression, freedom of thought, and democracy in Türkiye.

State Intervention in Traditional and Digital Media

Turkish traditional mainstream media is mainly controlled by allies of President Erdogan. Therefore, disinformation has been unavoidable because much of the media goes uncontested.[99] Especially since the AKP came to power, newspapers have had less diverse voices and are ideologically biased.[100] The dismissal of opposition journalists and the deepening of self-censorship increased the vulnerability of mainstream media outlets and officials.[101] Independent media outlets and news organizations have been under constant political and financial pressure and editorial threats. In this environment, fake news is disseminated like a virus.[102]

Additionally, the state has enormous power over news organizations through regulatory infrastructure and oppressive provisions. "Though commercial pressures and self-censorship are significant factors that undermine press freedoms, the state nonetheless plays a central role".[103] According to a former journalist at the Hurriyet newspaper, "journalistic concerns have been replaced by efforts to get along well with the ruling party and realize their wishes".[104] Further, "the party gives instructions to determine the agenda".[105] Instructions mostly come from officials in the Directorate of Communications, whose president is Fahrettin Altun.[106]

The BIK, an affiliate of the Directorate of Communications created to prevent disinformation, rejected claims that it is used as a means of punishment and censorship against dissents. However, Türkiye's Constitutional Court decided that "BIK violated freedom of expression and freedom of the press", and "BIK's actions went further than the aim of regulating the ethical values of the press and have turned into a tool of punishment".[107] Despite

[96] Council of Europe. (2022, October 10). *Türkiye: Draft criminal provision on "false or misleading information" interferes with freedom of expression says Venice Commission - portal - publi.coe.int*. Portal. Retrieved January 8, 2023, from https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/turkiye-draft-criminal-provision-on-false-or-misleading-information-interferes-with-freedom-of-expression-says-venice-commission

[97] European Parliament. (2022, October 14). *Türkiye: New legislation leaves door open for arbitrary prosecutions, WARN MEPS: News: European parliament*. Türkiye: New legislation leaves door open for arbitrary prosecutions, warn MEPs | News | European Parliament. Retrieved October 14, 2022, from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221014IPR43221/turkiye-new-legislation-leaves-door-open-for-arbitrary-prosecutions-warn-meps

[98] United Nations News. (2022, October 14). *Türkiye: Concern mounts over human rights implications of 'disinformation bill' | UN news*. United Nations. Retrieved January 8, 2023, from https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129567

[99] Weise, Z. (2019, April 18). *Fact-checkers seek out grain of truth in Turkey's fake-news onslaught*. POLITICO. Retrieved October 14, 2022, from https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-fact-checkers/

[100] Carkoglu, A., & Yavuz, G. (2010). Press–party parallelism in Turkey: An individual level interpretation. *Turkish Studies*, 11(4), 613–624.

[101] Yesil, B. (2014). Press Censorship in Turkey: Networks of State Power, Commercial Pressures, and Self-Censorship: Press Censorship in Turkey. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 7(2), 154–173. https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12049

[102] Tandoc Jr, E.C. (2021). Fake News. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, (pp. 110-117)

[103] Yesil, B. (2014). Press Censorship in Turkey: Networks of State Power, Commercial Pressures, and Self-Censorship: Press Censorship in Turkey. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 7(2), p. 159. https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12049

[104] Spicer, J. (2022, August 31). *Insiders reveal how Erdogan Tamed Turkey's newsrooms*. Reuters. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-media/

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

the fact that the BIK acts as a kind of Turkish strategic communication department and is responsible for tackling disinformation, it prevents actual information when it does not suit the government's narrative.

5.   Manipulation Techniques: State, Business, and Private Partnerships

State-Owned Media

A deterioration in news quality and political information, an increase in fragmentation and polarization among people, and growing relativism in public debates lead media ownership to become more concentrated.[108] For example, Joseph Goebbels, the minister of propaganda in the Nazi party, formed a massive media infrastructure that played "the most important role in creating an atmosphere in Germany that made it possible for the Nazis to commit terrible atrocities against Jews, homosexuals, and other minorities".[109] With this power of media, they demonized the 'other,' through perception management.

Although TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) is officially the only channel controlled by the state[110], a number of acquisitions of major media groups over more than a decade have caused these groups in Türkiye to be under the command of companies and people close to the AKP government and Erdogan.[111] The acquisition process began with purchases by the Turkuvaz Media Group[112], a pro-government organization. The CEO of Turkuvaz Media Group is Serhat Albayrak, the brother of Erdogan's son-in-law, Berat Albayrak. The Turkuvaz Media Group bought the Sabah newspaper and ATV broadcaster. "Those outlets are now among the government's most strident defenders".[113]

State control over media groups tightened after the coup attempt in 2016.[114] By using emergency powers, the AKP government closed down around 150 media outlets; many of them have alleged ties to the Hizmet movement (affiliated to owners close to Gulen's ideas).[115] [116] Just before the AKP government closed the outlets, the government had appointed trustees to Zaman newspaper and Samanyolu TV.[117] The buildings of these media outlets were raided by the police forces.[118] Police forces attacked protestors who were against the decision.[119]

[108] Bennett, W. L. and Pfetsch, B. (2018). Rethinking political communication in a time of disrupted public spheres. *Journal of Communication* 68(2): 243–253. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx017

[109] Open Culture. (2017, January 24). *Hannah Arendt explains how propaganda uses lies to erode all truth & morality: Insights from the origins of Totalitarianism.* Open Culture. Retrieved October 15, 2022, from https://www.openculture.com/2017/01/hannah-arendt-explains-how-propaganda-uses-lies-to-erode-all-truth-morality.html

[110] OECD. (2013). *Competition issues in television and Broadcasting - OECD*. Retrieved October 15, 2022, from https://www.oecd.org/daf/competition/TV-and-broadcasting2013.pdf

[111] Spicer, J. (2022, August 31). *Insiders reveal how Erdogan Tamed Turkey's newsrooms*. Reuters. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-media/

[112] On December 5, 2007, Ahmet Çalık bought the Merkez Media Group, formerly part of Ciner Holding, for $1.1 billion in a tender held by the TMSF. As a result, the television channels ATV, ATV Avrupa, Yeni Asır TV, the radio stations Radyo Turkuvaz and Romantik Radyo, and the newspapers Sabah, Takvim, Yeni Asır and Fotomaç were transferred to Turkuvaz A.Ş. with all their rights and assets. In December 2013, Orhan Cemal Kalyoncu bought Turkuvaz Media Group from Ahmet Çalık. (https://www.wikiwand.com/tr/Turkuvaz_Medya_Grubu)

[113] Ibid.

[114] Yesil, B. (2021). Social media manipulation in Turkey: Actors, tactics, targets. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, (pp. 386–396).

[115] Spicer, J. (2022, August 31). *Insiders reveal how Erdogan Tamed Turkey's newsrooms*. Reuters. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-media/

[116] The Gülen movement (Hizmet in Turkish) is a worldwide civic initiative rooted in the spiritual and humanistic tradition of Islam and inspired by the ideas and activism of Mr. Fethullah Gülen.

[117] Euronews. (2016, March 5). *Zaman Gazetesi Binasına Polis Baskını*. euronews. Retrieved October 15, 2022, from https://tr.euronews.com/2016/03/05/zaman-gazetesi-binasina-polis-baskini

[118] Oda TV. (2016, April 12). *Samanyolu TV'ye polis baskını*. ODATV. Retrieved October 15, 2022, from https://www.odatv4.com/guncel/samanyolu-tvye-polis-baskini-1204161200-92678

[119] Euronews. (2016, March 5). *Zaman Gazetesi Binasına Polis Baskını*. euronews. Retrieved October 15, 2022, from https://tr.euronews.com/2016/03/05/zaman-gazetesi-binasina-polis-baskini

Additionally, the assets of channels closed down by the decree law, such as Feza Samanyolu, Bugün Tv, Samanyolu Tv, Kanal 35, Jiyan Tv, Azadi TV, Tv 10, Mehtap Tv, Yumurcak Tv and Kocaeli Manşet, were put up for sale by the state.[120] This situation shows how harsh the AKP government is to any opposing news sources.

The last major media takeover was in 2018. Aydin Dogan, who had been an opponent of Erdogan, sold Hurriyet and his other news media outlets to the pro-government Turkish conglomerate company Demiroren Group.[121] After the purchase of CNN Turk in 2019 by a pro-Erdogan group, there are no critical television outlets left.[122] Although there are still some independent news outlets, such as Medyascope, dokuz8news, or Duvar, which have a large number of social media followers and provide alternative news,[123] "television is Turkey's most influential medium".[124] According to a Politico article, "all social media combined is still less dangerous than what TV channels are spreading"[125] because it has the ability to reach more people. [126] Due to the fact that it is difficult to find data for verification, especially on sensitive issues like military operations,[127] people do not realize which information is factual or which information is false. For this reason, they rely on information shared by government sources.

The Directorate of Communications[128] is tasked with coordinating government communication. Its annual budget is around 38 million dollars.[129] In the beginning, its main role was giving press cards to journalists, but its responsibilities are now much greater.[130] According to the Reuters report, decisions in the directorate are made by Altun and his deputies.[131] When important news breaks that cast Erdogan and the AKP government in a negative light, Altun routinely contacts officials in the newsrooms to formulate a coverage plan. For example, in February 2020, an airstrike in northwest Syria carried out by Russian jets killed more than 30 Turkish soldiers. It was one of the deadliest attacks in the history of the Republic of Türkiye. Yet, the coverage of the attack was limited to official statements from the government with the command of the Directorate and Altun.[132] All of these cases indicate the exposure of Turkish news media to the manipulation and disinformation campaigns conducted by the government and its close components.

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[120] Evrensel Gazetesi. (2017, September 5). *TMSF, KHK Ile Kapatılan Kanalların Mallarını satışa çıkardı*. Evrensel.net. Retrieved October 15, 2022, from https://www.evrensel.net/haber/331502/tmsf-khk-ile-kapatilan-kanallarin-mallarini-satisa-cikardi

[121] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). *Turkey*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey

[122] Weise, Z. (2019, April 18). *Fact-checkers seek out grain of truth in Turkey's fake-news onslaught*. POLITICO. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-fact-checkers/

[123] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). *Turkey*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey

[124] Weise, Z. (2019, April 18). *Fact-checkers seek out grain of truth in Turkey's fake-news onslaught*. POLITICO. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-fact-checkers/

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid.

[127] Ibid.

[128] In 1949, it was renamed the "Directorate of Press, Publications and Tourism". In 1957, the Directorate General was affiliated with the Ministry of Press, Publications and Tourism under the name of "General Directorate of Press and Publications," and in 1963 it was incorporated into the newly established Ministry of Tourism and Promotion. The General Directorate, which continued its activities under different names and under different ministries in the following periods, was organized under the name of "General Directorate of Press and Information" under the Prime Ministry under the Decree Law No. 231 published on 18 June 1984. Finally, the Presidential Decree No. 14 on the Organization of the Presidency of Communications was published in the Official Gazette dated July 24, 2018 and numbered 30488. Under the decree, the General Directorate of Press and Information was abolished and the Presidency of Communications, which was established under the Presidency with a new vision that includes the fields of public diplomacy and strategic communication, continues its activities. According to the 2022 Central Government Budget Law Proposal, the 2022 budget of the Presidential Directorate of Communications is projected to be ,680,127,000TL. Thus, the budget of the Directorate of Communication, whose initial appropriation for 2021 was 422,754,000 TL, is projected to increase by nearly 61 percent in 2022.

[129] Spicer, J. (2022, August 31). *Insiders reveal how Erdogan Tamed Turkey's newsrooms*. Reuters. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-media/

[130] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). *Turkey*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

Public-Private Partnerships

Reliable information depends on the ability and capacity of the media to disseminate news and on the commitment of truth-seeking procedures. Media degradation can result in a decline in any of these aspects.[133] Populism, "a set of ideas centered on the notion that 'the people' are opposed to 'the elite'",[134] regards the media as a necessary political instrument to garner support and reaffirm divisions within society. In this regard, populist leaders and parties have close ties with public and private media, and confront and threaten critical media outlets. Having unopposed media access is a significant force to spread messages tailored to the views of leaders and their supporters. With the goal of populist leaders and parties in mind, media outlets support populism on the basis of ideological alignment, economic interests, and political considerations.[135] The current media environment in Türkiye explains this phenomenon well.

Since 2014, Türkiye's critical media outlets have either been shut down or bought up by pro-government businessmen.[136] "The government strategy is to make everyone see, hear and read only the government line".[137] With the acquisition of Dogan Media Group by Demiroren Media Group, the traditional mainstream media's shift behind Erdogan was completed.

In Türkiye, partisan media organizations are called "Havuz media," or "pool media".[138] The Havuz media was first used to refer to raising money from pro-government businessmen for the takeover of media institutions.[139] Ethem Sancak is a very well-known pro-government businessman. Sancak, a longtime AKP executive, has received 166 public tenders in the last 10 years with just two of his companies.[140] Previously, he had said, "I fell in love when I saw Erdogan, such divine love can happen between two men".[141] Sancak had a media group called ES Media and was the owner of Star Newspaper, TV 360, and Kanal 24, all of which are part of the Havuz media. Then, he sold his media group to another partisan businessman, Hasan Yesildag, who had a relationship with Erdogan while he was imprisoned.[142] These complex relations between partisan businessmen of Türkiye indicate that even if the owner of these partisan media groups change, their ideological and political alignment are very similar to each other - mainly nationalist, far-right and populist political ideologies.

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[133] Starr, P. (2020). The Flooded Zone: How We Became More Vulnerable to Disinformation in the Digital Era. In *The Disinformation Age* (pp. 67–92). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628.003

[134] Mudde, C. (2021). Populism in Europe: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism (The Government and Opposition/Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2019). *Government and Opposition (London),* 56(4), (p. 578). https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.15

[135] Tumber, H. and Waisbord, S. (2021). Media, disinformation, and populism: Problems and responses. In T*he Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (pp. 13–25).

[136] Weise, Z. (2019, April 18). *Fact-checkers seek out grain of truth in Turkey's fake-news onslaught*. POLITICO. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-fact-checkers/

[137] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). *Turkey*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey

[138] Dokuz8haber. (2021, September 9). *Kılıçdaroğlu: Havuz medyası Millet İttifakı'nın içine nasıl nifak Sokabiliriz diye çabalıyor.* Dokuz8 Haber. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.dokuz8haber.net/kilicdaroglu-havuz-medyasi-millet-ittifakinin-icine-nasil-nifak-sokabiliriz-diye-cabaliyor

[139] Sözcü Gazetesi. (2015, June 13). *Havuz Medyasına 'Havuz Medyası' demek...* Sözcü Gazetesi. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2015/gundem/havuz-medyasina-havuz-medyasi-demek-858717/

[140] Yeni Çağ Gazetesi. (2022, July 25). *Ethem sancak'ın Aldığı ihalelerin Toplamı Ortaya çıktı. "Erdoğan'a Aşığım" Demişti*. Yeni Çağ Gazetesi. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/erdogana-asigim-diyen-ethem-sancakin-aldigi-ihalelerin-toplami-ortaya-cikti-564020h.htm

[141] T24. (2015, May 15). *Ethem Sancak: Erdoğan'ı Gördükçe Aşık Oldum, Böyle Bir Ilahi Aşk Iki Erkek Arasında Olabiliyor*. T24. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://t24.com.tr/haber/ethem-sancak-erdogani-gordukce-asik-oldum-boyle-bir-ilahi-ask-iki-erkek-arasinda-olabiliyor,296777

[142] Sözcü Gazetesi. (2017, August 17). *Ethem Sancak medya grubu'nu kime sattı? İşte Grubun Yeni Sahibi!* Sözcü Gazetesi. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2017/gundem/ethem-sancak-medya-grubunu-kime-satti-iste-grubun-yeni-sahibi-1977093/

Ihlas Holding, which owns TGRT and Türkiye Gazetesi, is a partisan media group.[143] The relationship between the AKP and Ihlas Holding is based on the personal relations between Erdogan and Enver Oren, the founder of Ihlas Holding. Erdogan published a message full of praise on the 4th anniversary of the death of Enver Oren.[144] The CEO of Ihlas Holding, Rasim Kaan Aytogu[145], became the AKP's candidate for Izmir 2nd region deputy candidate.[146] Cem Kucuk is another person related to Ihlas Holding, who is a TV presenter on TGRT. He is also known as a partisan journalist participating in a variety of programs as a guest speaker in partisan media channels.[147] Kucuk has suddenly appeared as the AKP government's mouthpiece in media channels, carrying out their orders to instill fear among Turkish media workers.[148] Cem Kucuk also threatened veteran journalist Bulent Kenes, the former editor-in-chief of Today's Zaman, who, like dozens of other media workers, is facing arrest on trumped-up charges.[149] Kucuk, who has connections with the Turkish intelligence service, said that Keneş and others like him will be taken from where they are and brought to Türkiye through secret operations.[150]

The media outlets of Ihlas Holding and other partisan media groups are not expected to be critical of the government and Erdogan because they make their profits thanks to their partisan media activities. The Reuters report found that state advertising revenues are funneled to pro-government publications, or Havuz media. On the other hand, government-appointed regulators impose penalties on "independent or opposition news providers" for violating Türkiye's media law. RTUK issued 22 penalties worth 5 million TL ($570,000 at the time) to independent channels in the first half of 2021. Ebubekir Sahin, who leads RTUK, described RTUK in the Reuters report as "dependent on...instructions from the ruling party and the Palace." Yet, within this period, no pro-government channels were fined.[151]

Manipulation Techniques: Türkiye and Global Disinformation

The toolbox of disinformation campaigns is greatly diverse. Disinformation campaigns can include and influence television, radio and newspapers, and contain the use of networks' influence agents, organized trolling, and digital media algorithms.[152] Manipulation techniques can be classified under two overarching subheadings: the capacity to create virtual fakes and exploiting the media system using disinformation through "a web of outlets and amplifiers".[153] The former concept includes fake accounts and bots, which aim to promote disinformation narratives. The latter concept is when disinformation narratives are formed on alternative or fringe platforms like Chan sites, but are then transported to mainstream platforms like

[143] Ihlas Holding. (2021, August 25). *İhlas yayın holding - ihlas holding A.Ş.* İhlas Holding A.Ş. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.ihlas.com.tr/ihlas-yayin-holding
[144] Oda TV. (2017, February 23). *Tayyip Erdoğan'ı Televizyonumda Görmek istemiyorum*. ODATV. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.odatv4.com/guncel/tayyip-erdogani-televizyonumda-gormek-istemiyorum-2302171200-110333
[145] Aytogu is also known for an alleged video, which was shared by Sedat Peker who is a very famous mafia leader in Türkiye, of him having sexual relations with 2 men, which is very much at odds with his own rhetoric, religious belief, and institution in which he works. (https://www.internethaber.com/esin-aytogu-kimdir-ihlas-holding-ceosu-rasim-kaan-aytogu-esi-ne-is-yapiyor-2257921h.htm)
[146] Internet Haber. (2022, June 27). *Esin Aytoğu Kimdir ihlas holding ceo'su Rasim Kaan Aytoğu Eşi Ne İş Yapıyor?* Internet Haber. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.internethaber.com/esin-aytogu-kimdir-ihlas-holding-ceosu-rasim-kaan-aytogu-esi-ne-is-yapiyor-2257921h.htm
[147] Cumhuriyet. (2022, August 1). *Yandaş Cem küçük'ten Akp'ye Ekonomi Uyarısı: 'artık son düzlükteyiz'.* Cumhuriyet. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/yandas-cem-kucukten-akpye-ekonomi-uyarisi-artik-son-duzlukteyiz-1964144
[148] Bozkurt, A. (2016, November 5). *Erdoğan's spies plan abductions, murders of critics abroad*. Turkish Minute. Retrieved January 6, 2023, from https://www.turkishminute.com/2016/11/04/erdogans-spies-plan-abductions-murders-critics-abroad/
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Spicer, J. (2022, August 31). *Insiders reveal how Erdogan Tamed Turkey's newsrooms*. Reuters. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-media/
[152] Sarts, J. (2020). Disinformation as a Threat to National Security. In *Disinformation and Fake News,* (pp. 23–33). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5876-4_2
[153] Culloty, E. and Suiter, J. (2021). *Disinformation and manipulation in digital media: information pathologies*. Routledge, (pp. 16-18). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003054252

YouTube, Twitter or partisan media by sympathetic content creators. This creates the facade that the story is legitimate because it has been referenced in a circular way. Then, prominent people within the disinformation ecosystem cite these "sources without making any false claims themselves."[154] In the context of Turkiye, these are mostly pro-government actors and famous public figures who have thousands of followers.[155]

In Türkiye, the information environment is polarized and manipulated by the accelerated process of state intervention through legal instruments, as well as informal or illegal collaborations between state and non-state actors. "Turkey's newspapers, news channels, and social media sites constitute fertile ground for dis/misinformation operations, especially given a prevailing political culture premised on 'us versus them' cleavages."[156]

Governments conduct disinformation operations when they feel threatened by geopolitical insecurity. For example, Türkiye has used disinformation as part of its competition with the EU in the Western Balkans. According to an EU Parliament report fake news and disinformation in the region, the Turkish government conveys messages to the region and tries to manipulate some of the public debate[157]. The TRT has provided web content in local languages that directly support Türkiye's official position on international and Balkan politics. Additionally, in some Albanian-speaking parts of the Western Balkans, more visible disinformation efforts can be found on social media targeting Islamic communities. This kind of content often promotes president Erdogan's cult and Türkiye 's role in the world as the leader of Muslim countries.[158]

Another manipulation technique used by the government is restricting digital media.[159] Digital media is dominated by a small number of companies such as Google, Facebook and Amazon. Although these businesses launched with niche focuses, such as online shopping, social networking, and web search, they have become gigantic structures on which all sectors of economic and social life depend. Thanks to their ability to collect data from users who access content for free, these companies also began to dominate online advertising.[160] These types of business models are called "surveillance capitalist" models.[161] Within this model, users are provided with free access to content while platforms collect users' personal data, often without their knowledge, and earn income through personalized advertising and other data-based services.[162] Therefore, countries that use these applications are important for these digital media companies.

These companies can be more vulnerable to enforcement imposed by these countries that they benefit and profit from the most. For example, Türkiye is a big country with a

[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Yesil, B. (2021). Social media manipulation in Turkey: Actors, tactics, targets. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, (p. 393).
[157] Greene, S., Asmolov, G., Fagan, A., Fridman, O., & Gjuzelov, B. (2021). *Mapping fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans and identifying ways to effectively counter them*. European Parliament.
[158] Ibid.
[159] United Nations the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2021). *Countering disinformation on social media - The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*. Retrieved December 8, 2022, from https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Expression/disinformation/2-Civil-society-organisations/Association-europeenne-pour-la-defense-des-droits-et-de.pdf
[160] Culloty, E., & Suiter, J. (2021). *Disinformation and manipulation in digital media: information pathologies*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003054252
[161] Zuboff, S. (2019). Surveillance Capitalism and the Challenge of Collective Action. *New Labor Forum*, 28(1), 10–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/1095796018819461
[162] Culloty, E., & Suiter, J. (2021). *Disinformation and manipulation in digital media: information pathologies*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003054252

population of 84.7 million people.[163] It has 34.4 million active Facebook users, and has the 14th most users in the world.[164] Therefore, it is a huge market for digital media companies. The AKP government exploits this situation and abuses their business-related economic interests by forcing these companies to give concessions to Türkiye. In the second half of 2020, the government "amended existing internet laws (mainly Law no. 5651) to require popular social media platforms to have a legal base in Türkiye with an in-country representative to respond to content removal requests".[165] If these platforms do not comply with these regulations, the government will impose a fine on these companies.[166] Although the AKP government argues that these regulations are for the protection of citizen rights,[167] these digital media companies have to accept any regulation or enforcement imposed on them to protect their profits in Türkiye and not pay fines.

6.   Strategies to Combat Disinformation

Fact-checking

Fact-checking has become one of the leading methods of responding to disinformation globally.[168] It involves monitoring, detecting, and debunking disinformation during an infodemic period.[169] As a response to hybrid threats, the development of fact-checking mechanisms is significant.[170] Fact-checking tools, such as monitorization, detection, attribution, and response are tools to fight against disinformation. In addition, collaboration with think tanks and fact-checking networks are useful ways to increase the effectiveness of the fact-checking strategy.[171]

However, if fact-checking is not used or managed properly, tackling disinformation through fact-checking can be a tool to spread disinformation. For example, if information is falsely verified, this situation both serves to further disinformation and requires re-verification.[172] Sayyara Mammadova, a research assistant at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, said that "attempts to spread disinformation and propaganda under the facade of [legitimate] fact-checking service[s]" pose a new challenge for reliable organizations."[173] Yet, avoiding repetition of mis/disinformation, releasing corrections,

[163]   The   World   Bank.   (2021).   *Population,   total   -   Turkiye*.   Retrieved   January   12,   2023,   from https://data.worldbank.org/indicators/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=TR.
[164]   Dixon, S. (2022, July 26). *Facebook users by country 2022*. Statista. Retrieved October 18, 2022, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/
[165] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). *Turkey*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey
[166] Congar, K. (2020, February 14). *Rekabet Kurumu'ndan google'a 98 Milyon tl'lik Rekor Ceza*. euronews. Retrieved December 8, 2022, from https://tr.euronews.com/2020/02/14/rekabet-kurumu-ndan-google-a-98-milyon-tl-lik-rekor-ceza-turkiye-haksiz-rekabet-tekel
[167] Newman, N. (2021, June 23). *Turkey*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/turkey
[168] Greene, S., Asmolov, G., Fagan, A., Fridman, O., & Gjuzelov, B. (2021). *Mapping fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans and identifying ways to effectively counter them*. European Parliament.
[169] Pérez-Escolar, M., Ordóñez-Olmedo, E., & Alcaide-Pulido, P. (2021). *Fact-Checking Skills And Project-Based Learning About Infodemic And Disinformation*. Thinking Skills and Creativity, 41, 100887–. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2021.100887
[170] Pataki, Z. G., & Mavrona, K. (2021, April 28). *Countering hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns*. Epthinktank. Retrieved December 8, 2022, from https://epthinktank.eu/2021/04/29/countering-hybrid-threats-and-disinformation-campaigns/
[171] Greene, S., Asmolov, G., Fagan, A., Fridman, O., & Gjuzelov, B. (2021). *Mapping fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans and identifying ways to effectively counter them*. European Parliament.
[172] Tompkins, A. (2020, October 12). *Is fact-checking effective? A critical review of what works – and what doesn't*. Deutsche Welle - DW.COM. Retrieved December 8, 2022, from https://akademie.dw.com/en/is-fact-checking-effective-a-critical-review-of-what-works-and-what-doesnt/a-55248257
[173] Interview via e-mail with Sayyara Mammadova on 28 January, 2023.

avoiding negativism, reducing ideological and partisan tones, citing reliable sources, and using graphics can increase efficiency.[174]

Forming effective fact-checks is resource intensive. The fragmented nature of the online environment makes fact-checking difficult for corrections to those exposed to misinformation/disinformation; on average, it takes 10 to 20 hours for problematic content to be fact-checked.[175] Access to data is another challenge for fact-checkers. Mammadova said fact-checkers who work under "strict methodology cannot debunk the claims without at least two reliable open sources. Sometimes this lack of sources prevents research from being published."[176] However, fact-checking organizations are adopting more holistic approaches, "in which strategies are not limited to 'checking,' but also spreading awareness in society in terms of critical thinking."[177]

In Türkiye, the verification website Teyit, "confirmation," is a fact-checking organization founded after a terrorist attack in Türkiye. After the attack, news outlets started publishing pictures of the terrorists. However, Teyit debunked some of the images by identifying the men in the pictures. Currently, Teyit faces 25-30 suspect news items, rumors, images, or videos.[178] According to the editor-in-chief, viral content, like during crisis situations that exacerbate inter-communal tensions, are the most common type of news they encounter.[179]

Although these kinds of fact-checking organizations were founded to introduce fact-driven discourse and help the media cover issues accurately, the change in the attitude of the Turkish mainstream media from challenging politicians' statements to being sympathetic to the government makes Teyit's job harder. Therefore, fact-checkers in Türkiye also have to contend with mainstream media actors that actively contribute to the spread of mis/disinformation.

Civic Capacity Building

Another recommendation is to strengthen civic capacity in the fight against disinformation and provide consistent funding for initiatives and projects. Civil society initiatives and organizations are progressively being utilized worldwide to combat disinformation, often through an emphasis on human rights and bolstering democratic capacity at the local level.[180] One initative called "Check," a product by the not-for-profit technology organization Meedan, helps newsrooms identify misinformation and automates responses, and can be used for elections, open-source investigations, research on misinformation and translations.[181] There are also several country-specific initiatives, such as AfricaCheck, a non-profit fact-checking organization created in 2012 that analyzes politicians' statements and supports media accuracy across Africa.[182] While it may not be possible to pursue civic

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[174] Nyhan, B. and Reifler, J. (2012). *Misinformation and fact-checking: Research findings from social science*. New America Foundation Media Policy Initiative Research Paper. Retrieved October 20, 2022, from https://davidamerland.com/images/pdf/Misinformation_and_Fact-checking.pdf

[175] Shao, C., Ciampaglia, G. L., Flammini, A., & Menczer, F. (2016). Hoaxy: A Platform for Tracking Online Misinformation. *arXiv.org*. https://doi.org/10.1145/2872518.2890098

[176] Interview via e-mail with Sayyara Mammadova on 28 January, 2023.

[177] Interview via e-mail with Sayyara Mammadova on 28 January, 2023.

[178] Weise, Z. (2019, April 18). Fact-checkers seek out grain of truth in Turkey's fake-news onslaught. POLITICO. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-fact-checkers/

[179] Ibid.

[180] Colomina, C., Sánchez Margalef, H., Youngs, Richard. (2021). The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world. *European Parliament*. Retrieved January 19, 2023, from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf.

[181] Ibid.

[182] Ibid.

initiatives in repressive regimes, this type of support has been effective in contexts such as the EU, and should not be overlooked. [183]

Rita Jonusaite, advocacy coordinator at EU DisinfoLab, an NGO focused on researching and tackling disinformation campaigns targeting the EU and its member states, said that financial support for civil society countering disinformation has been fragmented and mainly project based. Jonusaite said that during investigations, organizations like theirs must often pay lawyers to ensure that they are protected from possible legal issues following publications and defend themselves against lawsuits by bad actors. They also need to boost cyber resilience, none of which is usually covered by project funding.[184] Therefore, continuous and core funding for civil society is vital.

Media and Information Literacy

Media and information literacy is another mechanism to fight disinformation. EU DisinfoLab's Research Coordinator Maria Giovanna Sessa said in an interview that beyond digital content producers, television journalists and producers also hold a lot of responsibility in combating falsehoods. "When we speak about disinformation, we usually exclusively focus on online means of communication, but false and inaccurate content also circulates on television, with little possibility of being flagged as misleading or fact-checked. Moreover, the use of biased language and stereotypes perpetuates and consolidates negative narratives at the expense of minority groups."[185] Sessa added that the most effective approach is through digital training. The responsibility is on "these individuals who are the middleman between the people and the information."[186]

Additionally, a human-focused approach could be cheaper to implement than technology-focused solutions and provide long-term benefits. A RAND Corporation report shows how information and media literacy boosts critical thinking, the desire to consume quality news, and awareness of media bias - key factors in curbing misinformation.[187] Even small levels of exposure to media literacy training can improve consumers' responses to disinformation or propaganda, as well as better understand news credibility.[188] Although these types of training may take a long time to implement, the long-term efficacy outweighs the challenges. It is important to invest in these programs, while pursuing technological solutions.

Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is one way to combat disinformation.[189] It is defined by "the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals".[190] The main characteristics of strategic communication are: it is conducted according to a predetermined and systematic plan, not just as a reaction to current incidents; it includes activities at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels; and it

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[183] Ibid.

[184] Interview with Rita Jonusaite on January 4, 2023.

[185] Emailed response from Maria Giovanna Sessa on January 26, 2023.

[186] Interview with Maria Giovanna Sessa on January 4, 2023.

[187] Huguet, J., Kavanagh, J., Baker, G., Blumenthal, M. (2019). *Exploring Media Literacy Education as a Tool for Mitigating Truth Decay.* RAND Corporation. Retrieved on January 19, 2023, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3050.html.

[188] Lord, K., Vogt, K. (March 2021). *Strengthen Media Literacy to Win the Fight Against Misinformation.* Stanford Social Innovation Review. Retrieved on January 19, 2023, from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/strengthen_media_literacy_to_win_the_fight_against_misinformation.

[189] Ibid.

[190] Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H., & Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), (p. 493). https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485

necessitates the specific definition of the targeted segments.[191] The head of Strategic Communications at European External Action Service Lutz Gullner explains this process briefly. The first step to identify and expose, to bring light into the darkness. The second is to strengthen our own societal resilience as well as that of our partners within the EU, through supporting activities in the field of media literacy, improving journalism and training. The third is to work closely with social media platforms to better understand how falsehoods spread.[192]

Strategic communication targets multiple groups and its main purpose is to promote specific policy goals. In contrast to non-strategic communication, it adopts characteristic communication means according to the receiver, rather than adopting a generalist approach.[193] In this context, the EU has improved cooperation and information sharing between its member states and EU institutions to detect disinformation and respond jointly. It has mobilized the private sector (technology providers, digital platforms, social networks, advertisers, and the advertising industry) to combat disinformation. It supported high quality information by empowering journalists and fact-checkers to recognize and fight against disinformation, and raised awareness among citizens.[194]

According to the EU Parliament, efforts in strategic communication to deal with disinformation should grow in two directions: debunking disinformation and detecting disinformation sources and transmission tools to identify and tag contents and alert users to their suspicious origin.[195] Close cooperation among major stakeholders, including states, experts, and the public is also important.

Government Responsibility

Disinformation operations can influence all sectors of society. Coordinated attacks can exploit vulnerabilities across the government, like cybersecurity, media oversight, health systems, social security systems, and public transportation systems[196]. Governments must be held responsible for fighting disinformation, as it is a grave threat to democracy. Foremost, the coordination of government institutions to counter disinformation is required. Risk assessment processes to detect and analyze influence operations and vulnerabilities are the responsibilities of governments. Hence, capability development against disinformation is essential.

Governments must fund programs that track organized disinformation. [197] They must also have experts that can understand, respond, and have the technical means to react against any disinformation activities, in every department - not just a few. "A comprehensive and coordinated response to disinformation-centric attacks has proven to be one of the most effective antidotes to the problem."[198]

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[191] European Parliament. (2021, March). *Strategic Communications as a Key Factor in Countering Hybrid Threats*. European Parliamentary Research Service. Retrieved October 19, 2022, from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/656323/EPRS_STU(2021)656323_EN.pdf

[192] Diplomatisches Magazin. (2022, April 7). *How democracies are manipulated*. Diplomatisches Magazin. Retrieved November 9, 2022, from https://www.diplomatisches-magazin.de/en/article/how-democracies-are-manipulated/

[193] European Parliament. (2021, March). *Strategic Communications as a Key Factor in Countering Hybrid Threats*. European Parliamentary Research Service. Retrieved October 19, 2022, from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/656323/EPRS_STU(2021)656323_EN.pdf

[194] Ibid.

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7.   Conclusion

Disinformation is a key tool of the ruling party in Türkiye. Moreover, the AKP government benefits from and fuels disinformation, and the media has become increasingly partisan. The integration of traditional media into the government as a supportive tool facilitated the spread of disinformation. The increase in pro-AKP and pro-Erdogan narratives, the manipulation of media, neutralizing oppositional media and prosecution of journalists to silence critical voices signals that the ruling party is not interested in democracy, but rather authoritarianism.

As international media reports and academic articles have revealed, Turkish mainstream media serves to conceal the truth rather than revealing the truth because it is constantly vulnerable to state intervention. The major communications institution, the Directorate of Communications, intervenes in the news in support of the AKP government and Erdogan. Additionally, Türkiye's regulatory institutions for the media abuse their authority to punish media outlets that criticize the AKP government.

The rise of fragmentation in society and deterioration in news quality led media ownership to be more concentrated in Türkiye. The government misled international and domestic public opinion, and ensured cultural deterioration through psychological warfare tactics in the media. Although TRT is officially the only channel directly controlled by the state, the acquisition of major media outlets by people close to the ruling government signalled the end of pluralism in media activities.

Digital media is also under the threat of disinformation efforts by the government. Although digital media is considered a challenge against authoritarian governments, digital media also ensures these governments spread disinformation more effectively. In Türkiye, AK trolls and Turkish cyber troops seek to influence public opinion online in favor of the government. Bosphorus Global also targets Kurdish activists, journalists sometimes linked to leftist groups or PKK and Fethullah Gulen and his supporters. By manipulating the algorithmic structure of social media, labeling people criticizing the government as terrorists, and making pro-government hashtags and issues trending topics, bad actors endeavor to suppress critical voices and spread disinformation.

In order to tighten its grip on digital media more strictly, the AKP government passed decree laws to be able to intervene in social media. Recently, it has enacted a new disinformation law. Under the law, anyone can be sentenced to imprisonment for one to three years for disrupting public peace by sharing any post, or message criticizing the government. Although the AKP claims that the law prevents disinformation, the law serves nothing but for silencing and frightening people.

The AKP government uses disinformation not only in the domestic sphere, but also in the international sphere. In order to compete with the EU in the Western Balkans, Türkiye manipulates some public debates by conveying messages through web content in local languages. It promotes Erdogan's cult and Türkiye's role as the leader of Muslim countries.

Disinformation's threat to democracy and ability to foster authoritarianism in Türkiye demonstrates that disinformation must be tackled systematically and swiftly. The ruling party abuses its power and spreads disinformation to its own benefit. The international community

must continue to condemn the recent disinformation bill and advocate for the public's rights of freedom of expression, especially ahead of the elections this spring. While Türkiye continues to promote digital censorship and crack down on the flow of information, the international community must keep sanctions on the table to restrict bad actors' disinformation activities.