Internet Trolling in ‘Networked’ Authoritarianism: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Tweets by Regime Supporters and ‘Ak Trolls’ in July 2016

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Abstract
Social media are usually associated with democratic political changes in authoritarian countries. However, authoritarian regimes have also learned to control the use of social media platforms. Among the ways of controlling social media, Internet trolling has emerged as an important part of social media networks and strategies. After the Gezi protests in 2013, Turkey has employed trolls to spread official views and counter government critics on social media, and pro-government users have become much more active. The government’s Twitter network has been built, primarily, on so-called ‘Ak trolls’. These have gained more impact in political circumstances, and with the help of state of emergency rules after the coup attempt on 15 July 2016, they have reached a level in which they influence Turkish social, political and Twitter spheres both directly and indirectly. This paper focuses on the tweets of regime supporters and ‘Ak trolls’ in order to explore the characteristics of posts in July 2016, during the days leading up to the coup attempt and in the post-coup period. Our work contributes to existing knowledge of trolls and the social media networks of authoritarian regimes by providing information on their behavior in times of acute conflict and crisis like the coup attempt.

Keywords authoritarian regimes – Erdogan – social media – Twitter – internet trolls – coup

In recent years, Turkey’s media environment has changed fundamentally. Two key events have driven many of these changes: the Gezi protests in summer 2013, and the coup attempt of July 2016. While the nature of these events is vastly different, social media played a central role in shaping both of them. In the Gezi protests, social media, and Twitter in
particular, emerged as alternative media while mainstream media hesitated to broadcast popular protests; alternative media were also used as a networking tool (Akgul and Kirlidog 2015; Guner 2016). This brought to the forefront a ‘form of active citizenship’ that appealed for democracy in Turkey (Chrona and Bee 2017: 50). This alerted the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to the relatively low number of active social media users among their supporters; the party became more visible on Twitter after the Gezi protests. By the end of summer 2013, the party was recruiting an ‘army’ of 6,000 social media users charged with promoting a positive image of President Erdogan and his party (Albayrak and Parkinson 2013). Scholars studying anonymous pro-government Turkish users employ ‘Ak troll’ as a speculative term referring to these paid or voluntary social media users and bots that function in accordance with AKP policies in Turkey (Saka 2016; Hoyng and Es 2017). In this article, ‘Ak trolls’ also refer to the anonymous, paid or unpaid, pro-government social media users. We studied background information and the general characteristics of Ak troll accounts to distinguish them from real names and users.

The influence of pro-government social media has increased, as Twitter has become a political space (Bulut and Yoruk 2017). This cyber army has been used as a tool to control both intra-party rivals and political opponents (Saka 2018) and has impacted the language and structure of Turkish politics. A case in point is the infamous release of a Wordpress blog post (named after the film The Pelican Brief ) in May 2016; this release was promoted by Erdogan supporters and Ak trolls on social media. ‘The Pelican Brief’, which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Davutoglu, accused him of betraying the president during the negotiations with the European Union on migration (Yesil, Sözeri and Khazraee 2017; Saka 2018). The ‘Brief’ exposed how a social media troll group shifted the direction of Turkish politics via an anonymous blog post.

Against this polarized political background, on 15 July 2016 a coup attempt took place to overthrow Erdogan. The attempt went live around 10PM, when the army stopped traffic on the bridges of Istanbul. Air Force fighter jets bombed the parliament while the putschists launched raids to seize the headquarters of security agencies, airports, the public broadcasting station, national telecommunications and satellite systems. During the attempt, 246 people died and over 2,000 were injured.

According to research published by the Internet Policy Observatory, the coup attempt was the top-tweeted incident by pro-government users
since Gezi protests (Yesil, Sözeri and Khazraee 2017). Moreover, the attempt had a broad, long-lasting impact on the country’s social media landscape, as surveillance and censorship over media platforms and content increased from that point on (Yesil 2018; Yesil, Sözeri and Khazraee 2017). Our research contributes to the growing literature on the media aspects of this particular event by looking at details of the content of tweets posted by the pro-government Twitter network, which is composed of official identifiable and anonymous so-called Ak troll accounts. By comparing selected tweets prior to and following the coup attempt, we shed light not only on the increased number of tweets but also on the changes in themes and styles of the tweets. This analysis shows that strategic social media activity by that Ak troll network intensified throughout the event, and exposes how this network took on a more populist tone, in an attempt to interfere by expressing harsh religious and nationalist views.

While this article only concerns Turkey, it is important to consider it as one case in the broader phenomenon of social media, censorship and trolling in authoritarian regimes. Thus, we first explore the burgeoning literature on this topic and show that our analysis can provide new insight into intense key moments of trolling in authoritarian regimes. Next, we introduce the coup attempt as a moment during which an extraordinary, often religiously framed, mobilization took place on Twitter. We then discuss the set-up and results of a qualitative content analysis of tweets in July 2016 by the pro-government social media network.

1 Internet Trolling and Social Media Networks in Authoritarian Regimes

Controlling internet traffic and the flow of information are crucial tools for the maintenance of power by authoritarian regimes. This control involves establishing a multitude of laws and technical measures to block citizens from accessing or publishing information online. In global practice, information controls have three levels of generational shifts: While first-generation controls prevent users from accessing forbidden content, second-generation controls create legal and technical frameworks, and third-generation controls use legal and technical means strategically, as we see in the social media policies of authoritarian countries (Zittrain and
Palfrey 2010). MacKinnon (2011) coined the term ‘networked authoritarianism’ to explain the proactive strategies of contemporary authoritarian states with regard to the control of internet and social networking sites (SNS). An ‘authoritarian regime embraces and adjusts to the inevitable changes brought by digital communications’ (MacKinnon 2011: 33), and social media use may be used to generate support for the regimes (Deibert 2019; Li, Lee and Li 2016).

SNS allow people to express their views on anti-democratic practices, to raise awareness of civil society, spread enthusiasm and share common strategies among protestors (Cammaerts 2015; Sheldon 2015). We can identify specific moments in which the democratic or revolutionary potential of SNS become clear, for instance in the context of uprisings. While Egyptians and Tunisians used Facebook to organize protests in 2011, the most visible use of Twitter was during the Occupy Wall Street and Gezi protests. In popular discourse as well as in academic literature, social media have often been associated with progressive or democratic political change, although scandals such as the one related to Cambridge Analytica have certainly caused a shift in this discourse.

However, authoritarian regimes have also learned to control the use of Twitter and other SNS. Initially this was primarily limited to the establishment of sophisticated legal and technical systems to block users from accessing or publishing information online. Regime controls involved a variety of tools to censor SNS which connect people and facilitate gatherings for democratic struggles (Gunitsky 2015; Bradshaw and Howard 2017). In so doing, regimes attempted to suppress the flow of communication by new methods known as the ‘negative control’ of online information. Increasingly, countries moved beyond these methods toward proactive strategies in which social media serve a regime’s aim to maintain and expand its political power by eliminating oppositional propaganda, curbing alternative information, mitigating dissidence and boosting national security (Gunitsky 2015; Howard, Agarwal and Hussain 2011; Pearce and Kendizor 2012). These strategies vary across regimes and have been interpreted in a variety of ways in the literature. For example, Iran perceives SNS as tools of US psychological warfare and manipulation (Michaelsen 2018), while Russia considers social media as an effective means to influence public opinion abroad. In China, the strategic objective is to distract and redirect public attention away from discussions with the potential for collective action (King, Pan and Roberts
Azerbaijan uses SNS to ‘create a young generation’ who can act in the information wars (Geybulla 2016). Saudis maintain an active presence online as a means of creating the illusion of popular support for its policies, while Venezuela uses it to disseminate pro-government messages (Freedom House 2017).

Autocratic governments deploy internet trolls as a new way of fourth generation information control (Deibert 2015; Maréchal 2017), and have benefited from trolling systems based mostly on skilled human resources (Li, Lee and Li 2016). Twitter’s structure and character limitation also facilitates trolling strategies, enables trolls to create new messages efficiently, and increases their visibility.

Troll characteristics have been the subject of intensive research in recent years. This literature covers everything from the definition of trolling to their behavior and methods. According to Donath, trolling is a ‘game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players’ (Donath 1999: 45). Their activities aim to harm or cause discomfort to others (Bergstrom 2011) and productively engage with political adversaries (Milner 2013: 68). To Bishop, it is the ‘posting of any content on the Internet which is provocative or offensive’; political discussion groups are some of the most prone to trolling, whether consensual or unwanted (Bishop 2014: 1). Various trolling strategies include provocation and deception that are geared toward the disruption of the community (Zelenkauskaitė and Brandon 2017).

The number of governments trying to control Twitter by forming troll groups has risen each year (Freedom House 2017). China and the Russian Federation appear to be the biggest troll supporters. The Russian government has seen the free flow of information through the internet as both a security threat and a foreign policy opportunity. In order to promote its narrative worldwide, the Kremlin trolls conduct local and international online operations based on political priorities, even as internet access is tightly controlled at home (Aro 2016; Sanovich, Stukal and Tucker 2018; Zelenkauskaitė and Brandon 2017). During the 2016 US presidential election, the total number of Kremlin trolls supposedly reached 50,000, some of whom were enthusiastic officials (Twitter 2017). Similarly, China employs a large group (estimated at between 300,000 and 2 million) called ‘50 Cent Party’, because they share approximately 448 million posts nationwide every year (King, Pan and Roberts 2017).
addition, countries such as Thailand and the Philippines manipulate cyber space to consolidate governmental power (Sombatpoonsiri 2018).

However, we need to look at the phenomenon in the particular context of authoritarian regimes, where trolling has become part of social media networks and strategies. Bradshaw and Howard (2017) describe social media armies as the ‘cyber troops’ of authoritarian countries. ‘Cyber troops’ may be composed of ‘public servants’ instructed to influence and control public opinion, ‘political party members’ acting in accordance with party strategy, ‘private contractors’ hired temporarily by regimes, ‘volunteer groups’ composed of youths, and ‘paid citizens’ recruited for prominent positions on SNS.

After the Gezi protests, Turkey joined this group of authoritarian regimes that employs trolls (so-called Ak trolls) to spread official views, drive particular agendas and counter government critics on social media. Since the Gezi protests, Ak trolls have become an important part of the regime’s social media network.

2 The 2016 Coup Attempt: A ‘Religious’ Resistance Coordinated on Social Media

Turkey’s founding elites, mostly former military cadres, wanted to maintain centralized power over religion; thus, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) was established in the wake of the abolition of Ottoman caliphate as a multifunctional apparatus to control ‘religion’ in the new secular state (Ozturk 2016). From 1960, competitive civilian politics were regularly interrupted by military coups to protect the secular character of the republic (Somer 2016), and the PRA became a significant tool in the hands of military rulers who sought to reshape society. According to Gozaydin (2008), since the 1920s, it has been used as a means of ‘securing’ the secular nature of the state.

In 2002, Turkey entered a new period of social, political and cultural transformation under Erdogan’s rule. The AKP rose to power in an atmosphere in which the role of the military amounted to a ‘virtual veto power’ over elected politicians. By the end of 2010, the party had empowered various social groups and pacified the military. However, this did not necessarily result in democratic consolidation and the AKP’s dominance has generated deeply politicized state institutions (Esen and
Gumuscu 2016). Similarly, the structure and activities of the PRA were increasingly synchronized with AKP policies (Ozturk 2016). President Erdogan benefited from its network, and the PRA, once the backbone of secular systems, became an ‘imposer’ of his ideology (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018: 11).

The new structure and network of the PRA played a central role in the resistance against the attempted coup on 15 July 2016, the latest in a series of military interventions in Turkey. While Prime Minister Yildirim spoke live on a mainstream news network at 11PM on July 15, President Erdogan appeared live on television (CNN Turk) just after midnight via Facetime to urge his supporters to take to the streets and rally in public squares and airports against ‘traitors’. Just before his appearance, AKP supporters started a social media campaign, then poured into the streets to fight for Erdogan. More than eighty-thousand mosques all around the country joined this call, as the call to prayer (‘salah’) was repeated via loudspeakers. PRA officials, imams and Islamist opinion leaders encouraged Erdogan supporters to protest by defining the resistance as a fight against infidels. According to Esen and Gumuscu (2017), mosques had never before played such a visible political role in Turkish history.

Even at the early stage of our research, it became clear that PRA officials and religious opinion leaders actively used Twitter to mobilize their followers. For instance, Ihsan Senocak, PRA officer in Samsun province, reacted to the attempt by describing putschists as ‘infidels’. Nureddin Yildiz, religious opinion leader and founder of Sosyal Doku Foundation, urged his followers to fight against ‘infidels’. Senocak defined the ‘falling of Turkey’ as ‘the falling of the Islamic Ummah’, and Bulent Yildirim, Head of Humanitarian Relief foundation (IHH), called Turkey the ‘last defense line of Islam’. These messages not only praised the resistance but also considered social media activities as a way of homeland defense (e.g.,

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1 Senocak, Yildiz, Yildirim and @deryaysha are among users who are selected for our research. Links of tweets mentioned in this part are indicated. However, we used a coding system to protect user identity.
2 https://twitter.com/ihsansenocak/status/754047188582428673.
3 https://twitter.com/nurettinyildiz/status/754135869276221440.
4 https://twitter.com/ihsansenocak/status/758683830127501312.
5 https://twitter.com/ihhinsaniyardim/status/754338622078418944.
tweet by @deryaysha). Since homeland defense was referred to in this phase as a type of Islamic jihad, the Ak Twitter network may have seen their performance in July 2016 as a new form of jihad.

Moreover, for the first time since Gezi protests, PRA officials and religious opinion leaders played a significant role in claiming control of physical and social media spaces for Erdogan supporters. As experienced in Cairo, Tehran and Gezi, Tierney (2013) underlines the transition of protests from SNS to the streets, and defines the online and offline possession of space and spatial presence as increasingly critical during uprisings. In addition to nationalist figures and posters, religious references dominated digital and non-digital spaces in July 2016. We argue that political and religious figures had an important role in binding online and offline spaces during anti-coup protests that were funded and led by the AKP. These figures created new channels and methods through which online and offline spaces could interact. While leading politicians motivated participants, demonstrations were often conceptualized through religious rituals. As illustrated in figure 1, opinion leaders and officials led prayers in the streets instead of mosques, and then tweeted images of their performance to depict political protests as semi-religious events. Religious adherence to a political figure was the main theme of these tweets, which were embellished by Islamic symbols such as martyrdom and sacrifice.

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figure 1 Tweets by Nureddin Yildiz: ‘The only way to win in the end is getting god’s help. And, god helps those who are sincere’; Ihsan Senocak: ‘We are performing our morning prayer on

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6 https://twitter.com/deryaysha/status/755206101705039872.
3 Post-coup Era: An Atmosphere of ‘Surveillance’

While Erdogan’s network increased its activity on Twitter with religious motives, critical voices were suppressed in the mass media. Most newspapers, including alternative media such as Sözcü and Cumhuriyet, articulated the official discourse in line with the government’s messages (Way, Karanfil and Ercifci 2018). However, unlike the Gezi protests, this atmosphere did not result in an increase of SNS use by critics of the regime.

The post-coup period clearly showed that a broad spectrum of efforts were used to limit internet freedom, and these reached far beyond calls to show support on social media or even the activities of a ‘cyber army’. For instance, the law against insulting the president/officials and the dissemination of terror propaganda via SNS was used as a tool to suppress users under the Turkish Penal Code (Article 299). Reuters Institute’s Digital News 2017 Report reveals decreasing statistics of SNS use among critics in Turkey. According to the report, the use of Facebook fell by ten percent, while the use of Twitter dropped by five percent. The report claims that the decline ‘may be related to fears of government surveillance’ (Yanatma 2018: 37). In addition to new regulations that provide authorities additional power to restrict freedoms, on 18 July 2016 the Turkish national police asked people to report any social media account praising the coup or expressing criminal intentions. We argue that the atmosphere created by this announcement and the state of emergency rules combined with the religious encouragement to fight the coup attempt encouraged—via social media—the pro-government Twitter network to intervene in the lives of Turkish citizens by accusing them of supporting coup plotters.

4 Qualitative Content Analysis of Tweets by Ak Trolls and Regime Supporters

SNS create communication spaces where networked users can react instantly to social issues (Marwick and Boyd 2011), and social media, especially Twitter, emerged as key sources by which to understand how various social issues are perceived (Bozdag and Smets 2017). According to
Bruns and Moe (2014: 16) Twitter provides a three-layered communication space in which the microlevel of interpersonal communication between Twitter users, the meso-level of follower-followee networks and the macro-level of hashtag-based exchanges are possible. Micro-meso-macro communication layers make Twitter an attractive platform that enables researchers to understand specific social events and ‘their resonance in the society’ (Bozdag and Smets 2017: 4051). The macro-level communication capacity and topical hashtags aid the ‘rapid assembly of ad hoc issue public’. In addition to hashtags, strong networking and coordination among members of certain social media groups also enable Twitter to create ad hoc publics around selected topics (Bruns and Moe 2014: 18). The analyses of these topics provide new opportunities to understand their roles and influence on politics and societies.

To study the SNS activities of the pro-government Twitter network in July 2016 and their reaction to the coup attempt, we conducted a qualitative and comparative content analysis. Our study is exploratory and interpretative in nature and few guiding examples exist for conducting such research on Twitter. Therefore, we adopted the research design that has been tested successfully during in-depth analyses of selected Twitter users (Bozdag and Smets: 2017), and followed its methodological steps as seen in figure 2.

Following this research design, we started our analysis by searching popular anonymous users, journalists, members of parliament, local politicians, bureaucrats and officials. To this end, we used Twitter’s advanced search function to define main groups by using the keywords of the selected time period: ‘darbe (coup)’, ‘FETO’7 ‘milli irade (national will)’, ‘reis (chief)’, ‘meydan (square)’, ‘kefen’8 (burial shroud), ‘idam (death penalty)’ and ‘hain (traitor)’. Popular hashtags such as ‘#Darbeyehayır (no to the coup)’, ‘#İdamİstiyorum (I want death penalty)’, ‘#MilletTarihYazıyor (nation makes history)’, ‘#Nöbetteyiz (on guard)’, ‘#ÖlümüneReisleyiz (with chief, until death)’, ‘#gameoverUSA’ and

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7 An acronym of ‘Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization’ used by the AKP government to refer to the Gülen movement.
8 Erdogan supporters were spotted at AKP rallies wearing white burial shrouds. ‘Kefen’ symbolizes being ready to die for President Erdogan.
‘#TerroristGulen’ were also explored. In this step, we collected background information about users, who shared these hashtags, such as the follower/followee numbers, bio/profile descriptions, the most retweeted posts on the coup attempt, the intensity of the account’s posting activity and when it was created.

The research of Hafiza Kolektifi (2015) illustrates the wide Twitter network of regime supporters. This mapping helped us understand the web connections between pro-Erdogan trolls and AKP cadres. The mapping revealed two distinct groups: ‘real accounts’ and ‘anonymous trolls’. According to the mapping, Mustafa Varank (minister of industry and technology, former chief advisor to Erdogan) was located at the center of this network and acted as a bridge among pro-Erdogan trolls and AKP politicians and columnists. On the basis of our preliminary search and observation, we introduced a new framework to classify Erdogan’s Twitter network into three groups: ‘identifiable’, ‘official’ and ‘anonymous’ accounts. While ‘anonymous accounts’ contain internet trolls, ‘identifiable accounts’ are composed of social media celebrities (journalists, businessmen, representatives of the AKP linked/launched associations and institutions) with original names and photos. Members
of parliament, local politicians, bureaucrats and other officials are grouped under ‘official accounts’.

In the second step, users in each category were selected as samples representing specific sub-categories, such as journalists, members of parliament, religious figures, NGO representatives, popular trolls, etc. That selection was aimed at maximum variation in terms of discursive positions and the user’s

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<td>Subcategories</td>
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<td>Account and tweet information</td>
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profession, popularity or role in online and offline spaces, the user’s relation to the coup attempt and its activity level. We selected seven typical users for each category until maximum variation and saturation seemed to occur. The analysis examined a period of two weeks before and two weeks after the coup, in order to allow some kind of evolution or comparison in the analysis.

Once the actors were identified, we searched all their tweets in July 2016 and their related tweets and copied these links to separate dossiers. We analyzed 4,292 tweets (945 from identifiable accounts, 768 from official accounts, 2,579 from anonymous accounts) more systematically by using inductive and deductive codes. We defined ten informative and descriptive categories and their subcategories. These categories, descriptions and corresponding numbers of tweets are shown above.

Our research is not a classical network analysis like quantitative studies or network analyses, and has some limitations. We had difficulties collecting background information about the anonymous accounts. Another limitation of the study became apparent: we were unable to retrieve deleted posts; therefore, the study is not absolutely representative of the entire period of investigation. Moreover, the sensitivity of the selected time period may have increased the social media engagement (numbers of posts, time spent in SNS) of the users we examined and the importance that they attached to the SNS, as the coup attempt proved to be a dramatic episode in recent Turkish politics for many. Despite these limitations, we have assembled a rich set of tweets and analyzed them step by step in order to demonstrate how the...

| Themes of the coup related tweets developments | 116 | 138 | 490 |
| Supporting purge against Erdogan critics | 214 | 35 | 1,191 |
| Calling for protests | 92 | 121 | 133 |
| Praising Erdogan and Turkishness | 87 | 126 | 239 |

| Dominant rhetoric of the users (numbers of accounts) | Pro-democracy and rule of law | Pro-Erdogan |
| | 7 | 7 | 7 |

| Users tweeting individually or collectively | Individual tweets | Collective tweets |
| | 7 | 7 | 7 |
momentum of the coup had an impact on the pro-Erdogan Twitter network.

5 Findings

We describe the overall patterns and evolutions in the sample of twenty-one core accounts, their activity, the content of the tweets, the main themes and rhetoric of the coup-related posts and collective group action, and then we look at groups and their main characteristics in more depth.

Identifiable users include three journalists/columnists (IAJ1-2-3), the head of humanitarian relief organization (IAH), a religious opinion leader (IAO) and two representatives of AKP-linked organizations based in Europe (IAE1–2). Similarly, official users are composed of four members of parliament (OAMP1-2-34), a PRA official (OAPRA), a high-level bureaucrat in the presidency (OAB), and head of a party youth organization (OAY). The users in our study do not realize that researchers make use of their tweets, and their posts were examined in a critical, qualitative and comparative way that they would likely not consent to.

![Figure 3: Content and characteristics of tweets in July 2016](image)

Therefore, besides the anonymous Ak troll accounts (AA1–7), we anonymized the identities of ‘real’ users, and created a coding method to define users by acronyms.
5.1 Overall Patterns and Evolutions

During important political events or upheavals, internet trolls in networked authoritarian states become particularly active in comparison to real users (Al-Ravi 2019; Darwish et al. 2017; Rysaliev, Tokbaeva and Olimova 2012). For instance, a study on Egypt during the latest political crisis shows that more than half of the tweets about the crisis were posted by pro-government trolls (Darwish et al. 2017). Our analysis revealed that 1,031 tweets were posted before the coup attempt and 3,261 were shared after the military action. While the average social media activity of all users increased by 216 percent in the aftermath of 15 July 2016, the increase of anonymous Ak trolls’ Twitter use reached 450 percent, which is the highest of the three categories. The distribution of tweets across informative and descriptive subcategories is shown in figure 3.

The material characteristics of tweets did not change significantly; text messages were the dominant tweeting style of anonymous accounts (82 percent) like those of Russian and Iranian trolls. However, visual content was most preferred among ‘official’ users who shared Erdogan’s images and photos of themselves taken at anti-coup demonstrations.

From 15 July on, the AKP-controlled media only released materials selectively leaked by the government and circulated official statements hinting that foreign powers and their collaborators were behind the attempt (Taş 2018). The same arguments reverberated throughout social media and after 15 July the failed coup was the main topic of discussion by the selected users. The vast majority of posts in the first half of July were related to personal issues (80 percent); by contrast, almost all tweets in the post-coup era focused on the failed attempt (91.4 percent). The initial findings of our research underline the shift in focus from the personal to the overtly political and public.

We observed that the pro-government Twitter network promoted the official discourse to ‘manipulate public opinion’ (Li, Lee and Li 2016) in the wake of the coup attempt. The thematic analysis of the coup-related posts revealed four specific themes: support for the ongoing purge against Gülen movement members and Erdogan critics; reports of the latest developments (often eyewitness reports) to keep their followers up to

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9 According to the Twitter statistics, 80 percent of 10 million tweets from Russian and Iranian troll accounts connected with political campaigns dating back to 2009 were text messages (Twitter 2018).
date; calls for anti-coup protests and posts of images from anti-coup demonstrations; and praise for Erdogan and expressions of Turkish nationalism. While half the tweets sent by identifiable and anonymous accounts had content supportive of the purge, and included verbal abuse, accusations and leaked official documents about vast arrests, the most popular themes in the tweets of official users were reports of the latest developments and praise for Erdogan.

A moment of political crisis in networked authoritarian regimes can lead social media users to explore the boundaries of rhetoric and style, and transform their social media language into harsh tones. The recent diplomatic crisis between Qatar and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, for instance, was expressed on Twitter, where leaders of these countries were defined by rival troll groups as ‘terrorists’ and ‘traitors’ (Al-Ravi 2019). In the Turkish case, nationalist and religious signs and symbols, and new styles that can be characterized as threatening, intimidating and humiliating were observed in many posts. Rather than supporting democracy and the rule of law against those plotting the coup, the common characteristics of posts were expressions of ‘religious devotion’ to Erdogan. Furthermore, ‘national will’, ‘leader of nation’, ‘hope of the Ummah’, ‘wearing death shrouds’, ‘traitor’, ‘kafir (infidel)’ and ‘FETO’ were the most commonly preferred concepts and phrases. We also observed that Erdogan was often referred to as ‘reis (chief/mastermind)’ and ‘caliph’ in parallel with Akyol’s (2016) arguments. Akyol states that Erdogan and his supporters repeatedly use slogans following ‘a dictionary written by President Erdogan’; he describes this new ideology as one that is ‘centered around a cult of personality’: Erdoganism. In line with his definition, we argue that Erdoganism was the dominant discourse of the user groups.

Research on the Arabic Twitter-sphere reveals that states funded users/accounts to promote human rights abuses (Darwish et al. 2017) and silenced critical voices. During the 2011 protests in Bahrain, the regime used social media to legitimate the government response to the protestors and encouraged Bahrainis to identify demonstrators via online photographs. The pictures were marked off as individuals were identified and arrested (Gunitsky 2015). Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was also the main target of troll accounts in the Arabic Twitter space before his murder in Istanbul (Benner et al. 2018). In Turkey, in addition to anonymous users, identifiable and official users contributed, in different
tones, to the normalization and spread of torture by sharing images of targeted people. Messages included revanchist sentiments and personal information (names, addresses, locations, etc.) of targeted journalists (Nazlı Ilıcak, Ahmet Altan and Mehmet Altan), politicians (Selahattin Demirtaş and Meral Akşener), artists and officials. In some cases, security and judiciary authorities were criticized and even threatened via Twitter for ‘delaying’ the arrests of well-known critics. ‘AA4’ defined the developments as ‘hunting’, while ‘AA7’ urged authorities ‘not to show mercy to traitors’, and ‘IAJ2’ insisted on increasing the severity of mistreatment. ‘OAPRA’ simply asked security authorities to ‘behead traitors’.

Our findings on anonymous users/Ak trolls support the arguments made by previous researchers focusing on troll groups in networked authoritarian regimes. Moreover, our research includes an additional part of the pro-government Twitter network, namely, ‘identifiable’ and ‘official’ users, and provides an opportunity to compare these account categories. Below we discuss some of the key findings.

5.2 Official Accounts
We observed that official accounts (OAMP1-2-3-4, OAPRA, OAB and OAY) used Twitter as a tool to coordinate political campaigning, and that their social media characteristics differed from identifiable and anonymous groups on some issues. The Twitter activity of selected officials increased by 41.5 percent; however, this activity remained behind the performances of other categories. Officials mostly shared posts reporting the latest developments after the coup. Official users attended anti-coup events, and posted messages containing visual images and videos of themselves. Links of news and articles referring to their messages also appeared in messages.

Unlike other categories, idolizing Erdogan and expressing Turkish nationalism was the second most popular theme among official users. Their messages referred to religious-nationalist concepts and symbols and emphasized their devotion to Erdogan. They described him as the chief commander of the whole nation, and defined Turks as people ‘who stopped a military coup for the first time in history’ (OAB), as the ‘sons of conquerors of Istanbul and Jerusalem’ (OAPRA), and as ‘blessed people saluted by angels’ (OAPRA). Support for the purge against critics constituted another noteworthy difference. While official users tweeted
only 35 times on the government’s practices, this was the main theme of coup-related tweets by identifiable and anonymous users.

5.3 **Identifiable Accounts**

In the period preceding the coup attempt, the vast majority of posts by identifiable accounts (IAJ1-2-3, IAH, IAO and IAE1-2) were personal in nature, and included leisure activities, interactions with followers on non-political topics and daily programs; however, in the second half of July 2016, most tweets (509 of 699 tweets) focused on the coup attempt. Supporting the government’s purge against critics was by far the main theme in these tweets. As mentioned, journalists (IAJ1-2-3) criticized security authorities for not arresting the journalist Ilicak. In addition, Erdogan was depicted as the leader of the nation (IAJ2), as the awaited caliph of the umma (IAO) and a person who supporters were ready to die for (IAE1).

Our research also explored different types of tweets that encouraged people to take part in anti-coup demonstrations. These tweets included anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric which is popular among Erdogan supporters; furthermore, they accused the United States and Israel of supporting the coup attempt. For instance, ‘IAH’ alleged that they stopped a military tank in which American and Israeli soldiers were found. Such claims show a significant gap between reality and the perceptions of identifiable users.

As witnessed during Gezi protests (Giglou, d’Haenens and Ogan, 2017), the Turkish diaspora’s attachment to Turkey increased during this political crisis. ‘IAE1’ and ‘IAE2’, who live in Europe, focused on Turkey’s social media agenda during the time period under study; they mentioned Metin Küllünk, the former member of parliament and organizer of party activities in Europe, occasionally in their posts. ‘IAE1’ stated that they ‘are ready to die for Erdogan’. Interestingly, their tweets did not differ from the posts of other selected users.

5.4 **Anonymous Accounts/Ak Trolls**

The coup attempt had a clear impact on the social media activity of Ak trolls. Compared to other users, the number of Ak troll tweets was higher and the emotions they expressed in their posts were intensified. Our research indicates that Ak trolls shared similarities with identifiable accounts on some issues, such as informative characteristics and their
dominant theme (i.e., coup related tweets). We examined 2,579 tweets of anonymous accounts, and like the identifiable category, 75 percent were formulated as text messages. Whereas the vast majority of posts were related to personal issues in the first half of July, during and following the coup attempt, almost all the posts focused on the failed attempt.

Our thematic analysis showed that the messages supporting the government’s purge predominated. Moreover, distinctions between ‘Us’ and the ‘Other’ was a particular group characteristic among Ak trolls, and the Gezi protests were an integral part of the identity of the ‘Other’. Some of these tweets targeted media institutions, politicians, academics, journalists and international media correspondents working in Turkey. For instance, ‘AA2’ described correspondents as foreign agents and accused them of starting provocations in Alawi neighborhoods. In some cases, they went even further and threatened society as a whole: ‘Nobody is beheaded. Liar! If you take to street again [referring to Gezi protests], we will see what happens to you (AA4)’. We also observed that anonymous accounts, unlike the first two groups, revealed the minutes of high-level meetings, police testimonies and official reports on nationwide police operations and the next steps of the purge (tweets of ‘AA2’ and ‘AA3’).

6 Conclusion

Our work contributes to the existing knowledge about trolls and authoritarian regimes’ social media networks by looking into their Twitter activity in times of acute conflict and crisis like the 2016 coup attempt. These findings have significant implications for our understanding of how the messages of trolls and ‘real’ accounts are aligned during such a situation. Despite significant differences in the tone of the rhetoric and the intensity of Twitter usage, the tweets of three groups, produced as a reaction to the coup attempt, had particular similarities. However, these groups also had diverse styles and focused on different content before this political crisis in Turkey.

We observed that religious and nationalist references dominated messages and that its online and offline symbolism was structured around the coup attempt. While official and identifiable users adopted religious concepts, symbolic figures and heroic stories to praise Erdogan and express Turkish nationalist sentiments in general, anonymous accounts
mostly legitimized the government’s anti-democratic practices. Moreover, unlike the approach of official and identifiable users that focused on specific personalities or a group, anonymous users targeted the ‘Other’ part of society. This Other, oppositional side of the spectrum, was often identified in relation to the Gezi protesters.

As suggested by previous research, anonymous trolls charged by authoritarian states serve the political ambitions of the regimes, and their characteristics are shaped by the fundamental components of the regime’s ideology and policies which may change according to the circumstances (Bishop 2014; Maréchal 2017; Zelenkauskaite and Brandon 2017). Our findings reveal that religion, nationalism and a feeling of hatred and desire for retaliation against the ‘Other’ are the main components of Ak troll activities on Twitter.

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