

### **The Online Tactics of the Turkish Government to Structure the Internet**

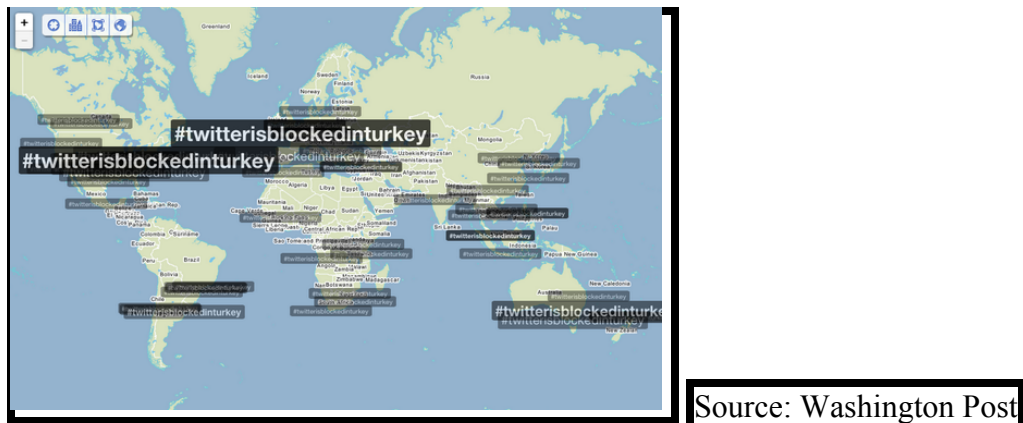
Various analyses have quickly developed since Turkey's recent social media bans, viewing it as an attack on free-flow information but there were actually deeper reasons behind the online acts of the government. Considering these, I argue that it is an indication of efforts made by the Turkish government to structure the non-hierarchical order of the Internet by incorporating its own rules and standards.

The censorship attempts of the Turkish government started with Twitter. Overnight on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, all social media accounts that I signed into, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, were all swarmed with the single message “#twitterisbannedinturkey and the storm of outrage raised by the Turkish Twitter users immediately got the attention of international society. This was the first time since the Gezi Parkı protests that Turkey has extensively occupied the international agenda. In reality, Turkey has been plagued by many political events over the past months. The audio recordings that asserted to implicate Turkey's prime minister in corruption have proliferated in social media since February. Moreover, the recent death of young Gezi victim Belkin Elvan enraged thousands of people in Turkey giving rise to new protests. Yet, none of these developments could manage to ruin the international reputation of the Prime Minister in the way the Twitter ban has. The ban drew heavy criticism from international society,<sup>1</sup> and this by all means signified the rising prominence of social media platforms as freedom of expression and transparency tools in the eyes of the international community.

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<sup>1</sup> Yanatma, S, 2014 “Turkey Silent as World Condemns Twitter Ban”, *Today Zaman*, Available at: <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-342930-turkey-silent-as-world-condemns-twitter-ban.html>

Here is a picture that illustrates how the hashtag #Twitterisblockedinturkey was trending worldwide:



Whilst the world turned its attention to Turkey, a cyber-war between the Turkish Twitter users and the government started to occur. Turkish Internet users have been familiar with DNS (Domain Name System) servers to a certain extent as access to YouTube had also been suspended in Turkey in 2007. At that time, in order to bypass the blockage, people used different DNS servers and this continued over two years. Seemingly, this experience had positive impacts on the ability of people to find ways around blocks and when Twitter was banned, the users shared the addresses of free and public DNS servers on Facebook and Instagram in no time. This was reflected in the statistics too<sup>2</sup>. The number of Twitter users did not fall the next day after the ban. Even the President of Turkey, Abdullah Gul, was among the Twitter users who bypassed the blockage and continued to send tweets. Pundits and scholars gladly observed the interaction in Twitter and claimed that the Turkish government's attempt to block Twitter backfired. However, the response of the government was not slow in coming. Just two days after the block, with the help of the new Internet law, the Internet service providers (ISPs) in the country started to block Google DNS servers and Twitter's IP addresses in an attempt to prevent citizens to work around state firewalls. This made the access of Twitter users to the platform more difficult but could not permanently block the platform, as users downloaded Virtual Private Networks (VPN) to access it. Briefly, VPN was making Turkish users appear to come from a different place outside Turkey to access Twitter.

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<sup>2</sup> Weisenthal, J 2014, "Turkey's attempt to Block Twitter is Backfiring Spectacularly", *Business Insider*, Available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/turkeys-twitter-block-fails-2014-3>

As Turkish users have successfully overcome the barriers of the state, an immense number of analyses praised this victory of Twitter users over the Turkish government. These analyses argued that the strategies of the Turkish government backfired. However, just after six days of Twitter ban, Turkish government took down YouTube and there are even rumours about a possible Facebook ban. The past examples of Egypt and Iran had previously showed that the only way to censor information coming from the Internet was either to slow down the Internet speed or to shut the Internet down completely, two risky solutions with damaging results for the economy. So, considering the social media users could circumvent the firewalls of the government, what was the necessity of introducing other bans? I believe there is a more sophisticated and organised aim behind this move of the government than only censoring the information on the Internet. The examples such as Syria and Iran also show the necessity of being careful about the online tactics of governments before coming to swift conclusions.

To understand the online strategies of the Turkish government, it is crucial to scrutinize the reasons behind both Twitter and YouTube ban. Since the Gezi Parki protests, when the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan defined Twitter as a menace to society, the relationship of the Prime Minister with social media platforms has never been recovered. Twitter was not only a tool for the mobilisation of anti-government protests but it was also used as a tool for the diffusion of the audio recordings exposed alleged government corruption. More importantly, Twitter has been a network public sphere<sup>3</sup> in Turkey where journalists, politicians, pro or anti-government supporters appropriate, shape and share themes to each other. In this interactive platform, the control of the connecting points between various strategic networks has been much more challenging<sup>4</sup>. In other words, Erdogan could not control the growing criticism towards him raised by the former members of his own party on Twitter and by the liberals who once fully supported him. Simply put, the Prime Minister could not easily direct the flow of information in social media platforms as he has done in the traditional media. While Twitter and Facebook were used to diffuse the news, YouTube was operated as a content provider. It soon became the main platform from which the audiotapes of alleged governmental corruption leaked live.

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<sup>3</sup> Tufekci, Z 2014, "The Day Turkish Government Banned itself From Twitter", in *Technology and Society*, Available at: <https://medium.com/technology-and-society/778b806e38e3>

<sup>4</sup> Castell, M, 2011 A Network Theory of Power, *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011), 773–787

Thus, social media accounts were more and more becoming a menace for the authority of Erdogan who was losing his decisive advantage in managing public information. Erdogan was aware of the menace and threatened social media accounts several times in his rallies. For example, a few hours before the Twitter ban, Prime Minister Erdogan was present at a rally in the western town of Bursa threatening Twitter by saying, "We will wipe out Twitter. I don't care what the international community says"<sup>5</sup>. Although the Twitter ban was presented as a legal case, part of a court order by the Telecommunication Presidency (TIB), one can't help but think about the statement made by Erdogan. On the other hand, YouTube ban was not based on a court order. Actually, it was the first disastrous outcome of the new Internet law that permitted TIB, a body directly linked to Erdogan's office, to personally decide which websites to censor without a court order. TIB decided to ban YouTube following a leak about four senior Turkish officials who were weighing reasons for a possible attack on Syria. According to Reuters news agency, this was the most damaging alleged leak so far as it gave details about a highly confidential and sensitive conversation<sup>6</sup>. Certainly, all this information on social media platforms was stirring up serious problems for Erdogan and his party, just before the local elections.

However, Erdogan and his cabinet know that the information on the Internet is not censorable by any social media bans. After all, although Twitter and YouTube are presently blocked, users are able to find ways to bypass the blockage, and they eventually did. So, what were the main reasons behind the ban? According to Turkish academic Zeynep Tüfekçi<sup>7</sup>, the real reason was that Erdogan aimed to demonize social media. For example, there were four legal cases behind the Twitter ban: 1) a poet who was impersonated, 2) a reportedly lost case because the court has been recently dissolved 3) a politician accused of corruption 4) a housewife whose name was used to start Twitter account circulating pornography supposedly of her but actually was not and. Tufekci argues that Erdogan focused on this story of housewife (whose reputation was damaged due to Twitter) in his rallies in order to explain to his supporters how Twitter can be a threat for their social life. The strategy of the Prime

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<sup>5</sup> Aljazeera, 2014 "Turkey's Erdogan threatens to ban Twitter", 20 March. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2014/03/turkey-erdogan-threatens-ban-twitter-2014320165956732467.html>

<sup>6</sup> BBC, "Turkey moves to block Youtube access after audio leak", 27 March, available AT:<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26773702>

<sup>7</sup> Tufekci, Z 2014 "Everyone is getting Turkey's Twitter Block Wrong", in *Technology and Society*, Available at: <https://medium.com/technology-and-society/cb596ce5f27>

Minister was to place “social media outside the sacred sphere, as a disruption of family, as a threat to unity, as an outside blade tearing at the fabric of society.” Although this can be one of the strategies of the government, it is hard to say that it explains all the government’s objectives behind the Twitter and Youtube ban.

However, if we look at claims made by Turkish journalist Sinan Tartanoglu<sup>8</sup>, reasons behind the blockages are more profoundly explained. Tartanoglu claims that the government did not only ask Twitter to remove these requested four links but also for information about the links spreading audio recordings about the governmental corruption as well. He also adds that the officials requested information about anonymous links from Youtube as well. While these claims have been recently discussed in the Turkish media, Twitter published a statement<sup>9</sup> and said that it is committed to defending the privacy of their users in Turkey and will not betray their trust.

Based on this, Turkish government preferred to take wiser steps than Egypt under Mubarak which shut down the Internet completely. Instead, TIB arranged meetings with the officials of YouTube and Twitter. What Turkish government actually expected from these meetings was to suppress the sources that spread the information on governmental corruption and control the social interaction on the platforms. This demonstrates that the main aim of Turkish government was not to restrict its citizens to access to Twitter or YouTube but to put the pressure on these platforms in order to gain access to their private data of their users who spread the audiotapes about governmental corruption.

Until now many countries, such as Iran and Syria, have tried to use the social media platforms to gather information about users. During the Green movement protests in 2009, the Iranian government knew that it was not able to completely block Twitter because of its "open-ended design". Thereby, instead of blocking Twitter, the regime started to use the platform for its own benefits<sup>10</sup>. It monitored the social media accounts of arrested protesters and caught the friends of these dissidents by tracking the data coming from the social media

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<sup>8</sup>Tartanoglu, S 2014, TIB Bu Hesapların Pesinde, Youtube’a da basvurdular”, Cumhuriyet Gazetesi, Available at: [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/53287/TiB\\_bu\\_hesaplarin\\_pesinde\\_\\_YouTube\\_a\\_da\\_basvurdular.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/53287/TiB_bu_hesaplarin_pesinde__YouTube_a_da_basvurdular.html)

<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/search?src=typd&q=policy>

<sup>10</sup> El-Nawawy M, Khamis, S 2012, ‘Political Activism 2.0: Comparing the Role of Social Media in Egypt’s “Facebook Revolution” and Iran’s “Twitter Uprising”’, *CyberOrient*, Vol. 6, Iss. 1, Available at: <http://www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=7439>

accounts. However, the situation is more complex for Turkish government as the only source that can provide the information it wants are the social media accounts. Privacy of users is a crucial feature of Twitter and YouTube, and the only authority of this platform that can use and share the information is the officials of these platforms. Turkish government wounded by anonymous accounts in Twitter and YouTube realized the necessity to structure the platform in a way that it enabled them to also be an authority, deciding whom to include or exclude. The government is clearly trying to enhance its gate keeping capacities, acquire the power to apply its own rules and standard in the platform. It knows that it can only do this by applying pressure on the officials of social media platforms. This rendered the Twitter and YouTube ban an inevitability and shows that Facebook might be censored very soon.

Apart from accessing all kind of data that it wants, the government clearly wants to filter and determine the boundaries of the information on the Internet. A good evidence of this argument is the request of the Turkish government from Twitter. Previously, Twitter mentioned in a statement that the Turkish government requested from Twitter to delete the account that accused a politician of corruption<sup>11</sup>. By considering it as a threat to political expression, Twitter refused to remove the account. Although government request was declined, this example was enough to show the possible threat posed by the governments on the structure of the Internet. By filtering and framing the contents, Turkish government wants to determine the rules of communication in the social media platforms. Thereby, what we have seen so far in Turkey is not a cyber-war between the Turkish Twitter users and the government but rather a challenge between the government and social media platforms. During this toe to toe contest, the Internet structure of Turkey is more and more transforming to a national information network<sup>12</sup> whose boundaries are designed by the government.

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<sup>11</sup> Armbruster, B 2014, "Twitter says Turkey wanted an account deleted for political speech", ThinkProgress, [http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=youtube+twitter+ban+turkey&client=safari&rls=en&source=lnms&tbn=ish&sa=X&ei=LaM0U-XgO8qRhQeLmYG4Cw&ved=0CAkQ\\_AUoAg&biw=1277&bih=680](http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=youtube+twitter+ban+turkey&client=safari&rls=en&source=lnms&tbn=ish&sa=X&ei=LaM0U-XgO8qRhQeLmYG4Cw&ved=0CAkQ_AUoAg&biw=1277&bih=680)

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, C 2011, "The Hidden internet of Iran", Available at: <http://arxiv.org/pdf/1209.6398v1.pdf>

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<sup>11</sup>Armbruster, B 2014, “Twitter says Turkey wanted an account deleted for political speech”, ThinkProgress,  
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<sup>12</sup>Anderson, C 2011, “The Hidden internet of Iran”, Available at:  
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