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A Close-Knit Bunch: Political Concentration in Turkey's Anadolu Agency through Twitter Interactions

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ABSTRACT



Through the 13-year period of Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, the party has developed its own economic and social network, which has created a dominant-party system with hegemonic tendencies. The creation of a pro-government media has constituted the cultural aspect of this transformation, as many mainstream media outlets have been seized by the government and sold to pro-AKP business ventures. Moreover, the state-run media Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) and Anadolu Agency (AA) companies have been subsidized and restructured in line with the government agenda. These public news producers, especially during the most recent term of the AKP government, have been controlled by officials from a small network close to the party leadership. This study explores the political concentration in Turkey's public media by means of an analysis of the Twitter interactions of AA board members, between August 2011 and February 2015.

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KEYWORDS internet; media; politics; new media; social media

Introduction

This article examines “New Turkey,” a concept created by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and its media by focusing on the social networks constituted online within the state-run news agency Anadolu Agency (AA, *Anadolu Ajansı*). Differing from content-based analyses,¹ this study directly observes the interactions of real-life users (in this case, AA board members) and their web of communication on Twitter, hoping to deduce a conclusion on the level of political concentration in one of the biggest media organs of Turkey. The AA has been a political symbol of the Turkish Republic since its foundation in 1920 during the War of Independence.²

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In Turkey, after a decade of unstable coalition governments, a military intervention, and a major economic crisis, the Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) was founded in 2002. The AKP, led by former Istanbul mayor Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a young and ambitious Islamist, pursued a pro-liberty policy in the military-dominated country; defended Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU) and rapprochement with neighbors such as Cyprus, Greece, Syria, and Armenia; and prioritized civil liberties, including lifting the headscarf ban in the universities that had been enforced by the Kemalist rule. Erdoğan's party quickly gained support from the international community, thanks to its commitment to both the Copenhagen criteria required by the EU and the new economic principles prescribed by its biggest creditor, the International Monetary Fund. Within a few months, the AKP had achieved its first landslide election victory against the crumbling coalition parties; however, Erdoğan was barred from a seat in parliament because of a ban that had been levied after he had recited an Islamist poem in a political setting. After the AKP and the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) agreed on a constitutional change, he was allowed to become a deputy following a by-election held in the province of Siirt. After an eight-year period featuring landslide election victories, struggle with the weakening Kemalists, and a failed military memorandum in 2007, the AKP and Erdoğan triumphed over their rivals.

The 2010 Constitutional referendum put an end to all military influence on the justice system. With the 2011 legislative election victory, the AKP took over the entire state apparatus, proceeding to its own political agenda, which Erdoğan declared "The New Turkey." The New Turkey included the personality cult of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, referred to as the *Büyük Usta* (grand master) or *Reis* (captain); an Islamist education scheme prioritizing religious courses; establishing social and economic networks between millions of party members and allocating state funds by means of public-private ventures; countless giant construction projects; and the disappearance of checks and balances as well as the separation of powers.

As Erdoğan himself declared in 2010, "anyone not taking part in this will be defeated"³ by means of extreme police violence, politically motivated court cases, and Erdoğan's own brand of media empire, founded mainly by seizing and otherwise acquiring the assets of rival media moguls. In June 2013, approximately five million Turkish citizens poured into the streets in an unprecedented manner in Turkish history to protest against Erdoğan's escalating autocratic tendencies.⁴ The Gezi protests started over the governments' plan to turn a small urban park of the same name into a shopping mall under Erdoğan's direct order. The rally, which quickly came to represent the last hope of democratic consensus in the country, was crushed under the onslaught of police and armed vehicles with tear gas canisters. Erdoğan stated that the police, who had killed eight protesters, had acted under his direct orders.

Press–Party Parallelism in Turkey

The media, under a strong political power with hegemonic tendencies, needs to be analyzed in conjunction with the concept of “press–party parallelism.” This concept, introduced by Seymour-Ure,⁵ suggests that there is a historical association between the rise of political parties and the rise of newspapers. The press in a political system is implicitly or explicitly given a role connected to the party. He writes, “the functions of parties are highly compatible with the capabilities of newspapers.”⁶ These three assumptions result in the conclusion that the media and political parties have a relationship the extent of which could indicate the outline of a political system. In other words, press–party parallelism may be a benchmark of how the political system functions in a country. Hallin and Mancini,⁷ while conceptualizing three media models for different geographical regions, suggest that press–party parallelism or Polarized Pluralist Model, is observed at the highest rates in the Mediterranean region, specifically in France, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Van Kempen,⁸ introducing a model for calculating media–party parallelism in the print media and television, confirms this assumption by citing Greece, Italy, and Spain as the countries with the highest rates of parallelism among European nations.

Many scholars⁹ suggest that Turkey belongs to the Mediterranean model. Strong press–party parallelism existed especially in the early years of the Turkish Republic; however, after the 1980 coup d’état, this link weakened. According to Bayram,¹⁰ the press–party parallelism in the early Republican period (1923–1930) reached its peak at 93.3 percent, while it decreased to 31.0 percent during the ANAP governments after the 1980 coup. One of the primary reasons for this change is that the 1980 coup d’état aimed to impose an “approved” mainstream ideology, called “the Turk-Islam Synthesis.” Diversity of political views, and strong political organizations were perceived as dangerous. The other major reason is that after the coup, the neo-liberal policies employed by Turgut Özal, chief of economy during the junta period, later prime minister and president, helped create a new type of entertainment-based mainstream media, owned by non-journalist businessmen with ventures in other sectors.

This new type of media saw itself as above the governments. Employees pursued the interests of their bosses, and going so far as to raise up and push down the same politicians. Doğan Group and its owner, Aydın Doğan, along with their flagship daily *Hürriyet*, emerged as the archetype of this model. As there was no dominant-party system in Turkey between 1987 and 2002, and also because the military still had a decisive role in Turkish politics, this model proved useful for Doğan and other entrepreneurs active in the media. However, it should be underlined that this relative freedom of media conglomerates did not create a critical media scene as

the business interests of the media owners were in parallel with those of the system, even when it was in divergences with its among political actors occurred. Between the media owners and the political system, a consensus emerged that gave liberties to both camps, however limited. Christensen¹¹ mentions, “the rapid—and sometimes uncontrolled—spread of free-market policies and ideologies” and “the importance of the notion” among the key issues of Turkish media. Kaya and Çakmur¹² argue that, “pressures on the journalists in Turkey [were] heavily related, on one hand, to particularities of the political conjuncture, and, on the other hand, to the business dealings of the owner.” Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Yeldan¹³ also calls the mass media of the 1990s, as a contributor of “the detachment of political demands from appreciations of socio-economic conditions.”

After the AKP came to power in 2002, this consensus began to erode. It should be noted that the relationship between the media and political power did not change overnight; however, it gradually altered in the favor of the latter. While pro-AKP networks were established and the economic capital was transferred to these networks through public–private ventures, this model first reinforced its own media and then started to acquire other actors, again through state agencies. Notably, the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund of Turkey (TMSF, *Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu*) became useful in this process, as it seized media companies on the grounds of financial irregularities, and then sold them to pro-government businessmen. As will be detailed later, many companies in the pro-government media were acquired by means of this sort of transaction.

It should be noted that “press–party parallelism” in media studies is mostly analyzed from an institutionalist perspective, seeking direct and institutional bonds between the media and political powers. In most Mediterranean countries, this sort of links can easily be observed. However, in Turkey, where traditional relationships continue to dominate the business and political domain, informal networks play a crucial role, often overshadowing formal ties. Therefore, any study on political tendencies in Turkish media, should take these networks (religious groups or fellow townsmanship, called *hemşehrilik*) into account, which often result in forms of crony capitalism. The AKP, which acts as an agent between the ever-present “center–periphery cleavage” in Turkish politics,¹⁴ has formalized these traditional networks by integrating them into the state organization, even replacing them with more modern agencies. Therefore, the media during the AKP governments cannot be fully understood without examining these networks. This work observes these networks’ reverberations on online social networks and links them to “press–party parallelism” by analyzing a state-run media company’s board members’ online interactions. It is intriguing that the network characteristics of Turkish social media have almost never been studied until now. The principal research question of this article is whether these networks

on online platforms overlap with the institutionalized and politicized informal networks of traditional Turkish society during the AKP governance.

The AKP: A Dominant Party?

Suttner defines a dominant-party system as a system “where one organization or party is so electorally powerful as to render it unlikely to be defeated in the foreseeable future.”¹⁵ According to Greene,¹⁶ in order to sustain a dominant-party system, elections must be “both meaningful and unfair.” This means that the opposition still theoretically should have the possibility to win; however, they are, in practice, constantly deprived of the means to materialize such victory. The Turkish electoral system, brought into order after the 1980 coup d’état, with its ten percent parliamentary threshold and financial aid allocation favoring parties with higher seat counts, has facilitated the emergence of a dominant-party system.

Regarding whether the AKP qualifies as a dominant-party or not, Keyman calls the AKP’s seven back-to-back landslide election victories an “electoral hegemony,” which “creates a societal and global perception that its opponents are weak and unlikely to win elections.”¹⁷ According to Öniş, “the problem in the Turkish context concerns the co-existence of an increasingly hegemonic party system with the absence of appropriate mechanisms of checks and balances.”¹⁸ Çarkoğlu and others,¹⁹ as well as Ayan-Musil,²⁰ refers to Sartori,²¹ who describes the AKP reign a “predominant party system,” mainly due to the longevity of the system. However, sociologically it can be argued that a political party in power creating its own hegemonic networks without suspending the electoral system can be qualified as a dominant-party system.

While the AKP’s cultural domination over Turkish society has been contested recently through the Gezi Park protests in 2013, and the ongoing dissidence on social media sites, it can be said that it has established its own economic and social capital networks which are decisive on who has or does not have access to Turkey’s resources. Buğra and Savaşkan²² state that during the AKP period, “the relations between the public and private sectors took a new form,” enabling businesspeople from similar Anatolian backgrounds to flourish, mainly thanks to public–private partnerships. Other works²³ also draw attention to these socio-economic networks. The aim of this study is to analyze the social networks constructed during the AKP reign in the media domain, not necessarily limited to business owners, but also among employees, notably journalists.

Meanwhile, it may be said that the party’s fall from the government in the 2015 general elections, after a successful election campaign by Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP, *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*) passing the ten percent electoral threshold and deprive AKP of an extra seventy deputies in the parliament, is in contradiction with these remarks, however it should be

noted that AKP remains to be the only party to decide a coalition government or an early election by 40.9 percent of votes and 258 MPs, while holding the interim government, not to mention the active support given by President Erdoğan to the party. They also continued to hold the economic and social networks that they have created in the last 13 years, and forced the country to another election in November 2015 to reclaim power.

The AKP's Shift from Pro-Liberty Muslim-Democrats to Autocratic Islamists

The AKP, which initially vowed to pursue a transparent democracy for both Turkey and the party itself, gradually broke this promise. Erdoğan, after his second election victory in 2007, parted ways with the other figures of party leadership, namely Abdüllatif Şener, Abdullah Gül, and temporarily Bülent Arınç, eventually achieving dominance of leadership that Lancaster states “Turkey has rarely ever seen.”²⁴ Notably, after the constitution referendum in 2010 that gave government authority to control the justice system and the landslide third legislative election victory in 2011, the AKP, leaning on Erdoğan’s personality cult, steadily transformed itself into a dominant-party regime based on what Keyman describes as “unprecedented polarization on all levels of Turkish society.”²⁵ Öniş²⁶ writes, “Erdoğan’s understanding of democracy, in turn, has been confined to a narrow vision of democracy based on an extreme understanding of majoritarianism.” Ayan-Musil²⁷ argues that Turkey may enter the persistence phase of a dominant-party system, as patronage is a common feature of party politics in Turkey.

Along with absolute control over the justice system and increasing police violence in the streets since 2010, media control has become a prime focus of Erdoğan and the AKP to consolidate power and intimidate the opposition. The creation of a well-disciplined pro-government media, referred to as the *yandaş medya* (supporter media) by the opposition, has been followed by the emergence of *havuz medyası* (pool media), which suggests the pro-government media are being financed by government agencies, constituting an obvious economic advantage over rivals as well as promising a powerful network to media owners, who traditionally make business in key sectors such as construction or energy in Turkey. In 2014, 69.3 percent of the total advertisement volume of 19 state-run firms was given to pro-government newspapers, generating an estimated 60 million Turkish liras (approx. 27 million USD) of revenue to these media outlets. Six state-run firms boycotted TV channels close to the religious group of Gülen, a former ally, even though the Gülenists had helped the AKP during the judicial war against the military and Kemalists, thanks to the hundreds of officials infiltrated into state organs, in feud with Erdoğan since 2013.²⁸

The mainstream media were affected by this strategy in a different manner. They were forced to remain silent on events such as the Gezi protests in June

2013 and the Roboski Massacre in December 2011. They also have faced severe tax penalties and politically motivated punishment from the Radio-Television High Council (RTÜK, *Radio Televizyon Üst Kurulu*).

In 2013, leaked wiretappings revealed that Erdoğan himself and his consultants directly intervened into the operations of newspapers and TV channels, dictating their editorial line or sacking non-*yandaş* journalists. Journalists critical of state policies, especially on the Kurdish issue and the role of military, were put on trial, giving Turkey the infamous nickname, “World’s Biggest Prison for Journalists.” Equally, the AKP has given the country a bad reputation regarding Internet censorship, as more than 67,000 URLs have been blocked as of March 2015.²⁹ Notably after the Gezi Protests, during which the social media played a huge part in breaking the mainstream media blackout, Erdoğan launched a personal crusade against Twitter.com. The government blocked the micro blogging site for a few hours the day after he vowed to “eradicate Twitter” in an election rally in March 2014.

The AKP’s constant and heavy pressure on the media has been criticized frequently by EU Progress Reports, and NGOs such as Freedom House and Reporters without Borders. However, the frequency and severity of press freedom violations in Turkey overshadows the condition in which the state-run media, namely the radio-TV giant Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) and the news agency AA, is. These two media outlets have received heavy financing since the first AKP government and employ hundreds of journalists from the pro-government media pool. Programs on TRT regularly feature Erdoğan’s chief advisors, Yiğit Bulut or Yasin Aktay, as regular guests, or even as paid TV show hosts.

While the AKP’s “media pool,” TRT, and in many cases mainstream channels such as Habertürk or NTV leave no doubt that their editorial lines have shifted by the political agenda of country’s rulers, the editorial policies of AA, the exclusive broadcaster of many of the state functions,³⁰ has not received academic attention, despite being the most frequently cited news source by the print, broadcast, and Internet media in Turkey.

An Overview of AA Content under AKP Rule

In a recent study of the AA’s Twitter posts between February 1 and 20, 2015,³¹ it was revealed that 91.1 percent of all AA content was related to Erdoğan or the government, while the agency’s “live commentary” feature, which post politicians’ statements, has never featured an opposition politician although it has covered Prime Minister Davutoğlu’s rallies even in the AKP county branches.

In terms of subject, the AA posts also followed the government agenda, prioritizing Erdoğan’s personal feud with Fethullah Gülen, the AKP’s

proposed Homeland Security Bill curtailing civil liberties, and articles depicting the Islamophobic behavior of Western countries. Even in a general matter, such as the murder of a young woman following a rape attempt, 48 percent of all articles quoted government officials (Figure 1).

While the content of the AA is visibly AKP-oriented, the purpose of this article is to employ a more network-based approach to the Agency board. As the AKP’s modus operandi represents a network based on ideological camaraderie and personal relations reflected on business deals, this network should be examined in terms of both recruitment patterns and personal interactions.

From “Partisan Media” to “Media Pool”

The uniqueness of the AKP period in Turkish media history is that for the first time after the single-party regime of the 1930s, the government has its “own” media, the function of which is to support the political party in power at all costs.

The leading companies of the pro-government media in Turkey are:

- *Yeni Şafak*: acquired by Albayrak Holdings in 1997, one of the principal contractors of the Municipality of Istanbul during Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s term as mayor.

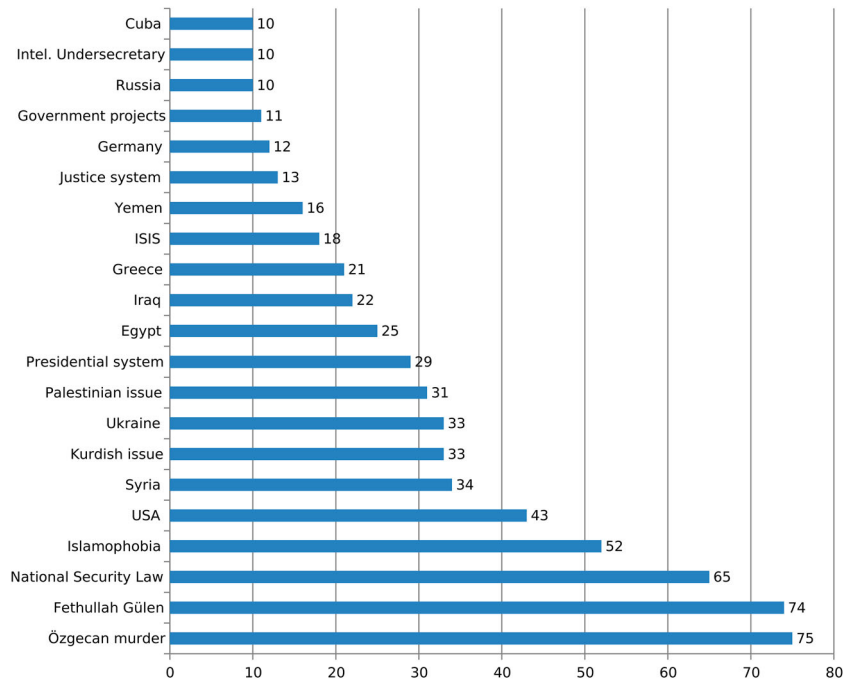


Figure 1. Breakdown of AA Twitter posts per keyword between 1–20 February, 2015.

- *Star*: seized by the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund of Turkey (TMSF, *Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu*) in 2004 and sold to Ali Özmen Safa, in a joint venture with Ethem Sancak, a businessman close to Erdoğan and later AKP ombudsman.
- *Akşam*: seized by the TMSF while under Çukurova Holdings ownership until 2013, and sold to Ethem Sancak.
- *Türkiye*: rebranded in 2013, with the slogan “New Turkey’s newspaper.”
- *Sabah*: seized by the TMSF in 2007 and sold in 2008, to Çalık Holdings, the CEO of which is Berat Albayrak, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s son-in-law.
- *Yeni Akit*: the radical Islamist and anti-semitic newspaper.

According to an AdEx report published by Nielsen in early 2015,³² 6 newspapers of the “pool media” (*Yeni Şafak*, *Akşam*, *Türkiye*, *Sabah*, *Yeni Akit*, *Takvim*) received 62.5 percent of printed media ads given by 16 government-run companies in the first half of 2014, generating an estimated revenue of 60 million Turkish Liras, although the circulation of these newspapers barely exceeds 25 percent of the total market share. Six anti-government newspapers, *Zaman*, *Bugün* (pro-Gülen), *Cumhuriyet*, *Sözcü*, *BirGün*, and *Evrensel* (left-wing) received only 2.2 percent of total ad revenues.

While the pool media outlets, most of which were acquired by pro-AKP businessmen after having been seized by the TMSF, were financed by government-run companies’ advertisement, their mainstream rivals were roughed up by seizures, tax audits, and severe penalties. In 2009, the Doğan Group, which once enjoyed an advertising share of 58 percent in the printed media, was given a tax penalty of 825 million Turkish Liras, the group was forced to reduce its assets and shut down some of its media ventures. At Ciner Holdings, pro-government businessman Fatih Saraç was appointed to the position of Head of Media Group in 2012. In Doğu Group, the editorial leadership of the prestigious news channel NTV was handed to Nermin Yurteri, known as the “goddaughter of Bülent Arınç.” In December 2013, leaked wiretappings revealed that Saraç and Yurteri had taken direct orders from Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his consultants when handling even day-to-day operations.

Even though the “pool media” does not seem directly connected to the state-run media outlets TRT and the AA, the recruitment policies of these companies reveal that they belong to the AKP’s political networks. According to a report prepared by opposition MP Atilla Kart, dozens of pro-Gülen journalists from Samanyolu TV, *Zaman* newspaper, and Cihan News Agency were recruited to TRT. Among those, Ahmet Böken was promoted to editor-in-chief of the news channel TRT Haber; however, after the Gülen-Erdoğan feud began, he was expelled along with other pro-Gülen TRT employees.

While TRT recruited mostly Gülenists until the feud, high-ranking AA officials were generally chosen among the “media pool” or the consultants of Erdoğan and Arınç. The AA board members since the third term of AKP government and their connections reveal that the administrative level of the agency comes from a small network, from few media outlets that belong to the “pool media” and the circles close to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Bülent Arınç (Table 1).

AA’s Legal Status and the Agency under AKP Administration

The legal status of the AA constitutes a unique and complicated example among public media outlets in the world. The agency was founded in April 1920, before the Republic of Turkey existed, in order to diffuse news about the Turkish Independence Movement. Early on, the agency was first affiliated with the Turkish Grand Assembly, and then to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the de facto government. In 1925, two years after the republic was founded, the Agency was converted into incorporation and its shares distributed to agency employees.³³ However, 47.75 percent of these shares later were collected by the Treasury, which made the AA, in effect, a state venture.³⁴

This arrangement proved problematic, as the agency’s CEO, Kemal Öztürk, former consultant of both Arınç and Erdoğan, personally took over

Table 1. AA board members between August 2011 – February 2015 and their connections.

Board Member	Connection
Ahmet Tek	
Ali İhsan Sarıkoca	Prime Minister’s Press Officer during the Erdoğan period
Ebubekir Şahin	
Kemal Öztürk	Former press consultant of vice-PM Bülent Arınç
	Former press consultant of former-PM Tayyip Erdoğan
	Yeni Şafak columnist
Metin Mutanoğlu	Former Kanal 7 reporter
	Former Yeni Şafak foreign desk chief
	Former TV Net senior editor
	Former Al Jazeera Turk senior editor
Mücahit Küçükyılmaz	President’s social media manager during the Gül period
	SETA specialist
	Former TRT consultant
Mustafa Özkaya	Former TV Net senior editor
	Former Al Jazeera Turk senior editor
Nihat Erdoğan	Şehir University professor
Ömer Ekşi	Former Work and Social Security Ministry press officer
Refik Korkusuz	Medeniyet University professor
Reşat Yazak	Close friend of Bülent Arınç
Said Yüce	Barla Platform chairman, NGO close to Nur religious group
Salih Melek	Prime Minister’s Press Officer during the Erdoğan period
	Bülent Arınç’s former head consultant
Şenol Kazancı	Former TV Net editor-in-chief
	Prime Minister’s head consultant during the Erdoğan period
	President’s head consultant during the Erdoğan period

the unclaimed (due to deceased or unknown shareholders) 25.65 percent of the shares in 2013, after the AA went into capital augmentation.³⁵ This controversial move was later reversed in 2014, after Öztürk resigned from his position. Meanwhile, the AA board, led by Öztürk, refused to allow the agency to be audited by the Court of Auditors, claiming the “agency has the same legal status as any other private company.”³⁶ Although the state is not legally the controlling shareholder, the Treasury and the Prime Minister’s Directorate General of Press and Information (DGPI, *Basın-Yayın Enformasyon Genel Müdürlüğü*) have been meeting the operating costs of the agency.

According to the official Treasury reports, the agency’s 26.3 million Turkish Liras of operating losses in 2012³⁷ were more than quadrupled in 2013,³⁸ reaching 105.7 million liras. On the other hand, Vice-PM Bülent Arınç, in a response to a parliamentary question given by opposition MP Umut Oran, stated that AA had been allocated 113 million Turkish Liras in 2011 and 130 million liras in 2012 from the state budget.³⁹ Comparing this amount with 2004, the state budget allocated to the agency had increased 540 percent in 2012. Furthermore, between 2010 and 2014, the allocation to the agency by the DGPI increased 225 percent, reaching 144 million liras.⁴⁰ These figures effectively prove that AA, while legally not a state-owned company and therefore able to claim exemption from the jurisdiction of the Court of Auditors, has been financed as such during the third term of AKP government.

Methodology

While the recruitment policy of the agency clearly reflects the concentration in the agency, further data are needed in order to see whether this policy stems from a simple interpersonal network or from a complex political network that aims to establish cultural dominance over the country. While the recruitment network graph may hint at the political flavor in the concentration, a more powerful method to discover the political context of AA staffing is to analyze the board members’ daily social interactions. While this used to be a virtually impossible task, digital sociology now offers practical methods to observe the social interactions of a given group through online social networks. As especially since 2013, Twitter has been a battlefield for the struggle between the AKP and its opponents, it is relevant to observe these interactions in this particular form of media. Therefore, this study ascertains whether the Twitter interactions of AA board members between August 2011 and February 2015 have presented a concentrated pro-government network or a politically diverse profile, and to what degree.

Most of the recent studies on social media use in Turkey,⁴¹ notably during political protests, have depended on quantitative “big data,” such as number of tweets, or hash tags used. While the massive content produced by millions

of Twitter users, especially during the Gezi protests throughout the space of a couple of weeks, were enthusiastically analyzed, few studies⁴² have drawn attention to the role of influential opinion leaders during the constant flow of social media messages, even though Varol and others⁴³ clearly have showed that these users' content have been "heavily rebroadcast."

While methods to determine the influential users in an online social network (such as the Eigenvector centrality, inbetweenness centrality, and in-out-degree centralities) exist, the interaction patterns of small online networks have been largely ignored. Meanwhile, Larsson and Moe,⁴⁴ as well as Severo and Venturini⁴⁵ published articles about network-based research in Sweden and Italy, respectively. It is hoped that this study will contribute to filling the void in Turkey and help researchers from other countries as well.

Gökçe and others⁴⁶ propose that the Eigenvector centrality, the algorithm that determines how influential a user is in a network, may be used to detect the "opinion shapers" in a Twitter users' network. These users (or nodes, in network terms) are crucial not only in the interaction flow, but also are directly connected to other influential nodes. As stated by Shulman and others,⁴⁷ "the Eigenvector centrality accounts for the fact that a person can be influential with only a few friends who happen to be influential themselves." Therefore, this algorithm detects not only the central users in the debate, but also "hidden opinion shapers,"⁴⁸ who influence the conversation without too much visibility. In a small network, detecting these users may be crucial in order to understand how that particular network functions.

In this study, the Twitter interactions (mentions, received mentions, and re-tweets) of AA board members between August 2011 and February 2015 are analyzed using the Eigenvector centrality algorithm.⁴⁹ For this, the Twitter accounts of 13 (out of 14, as former legal consultant Refik Korkusuz did not use Twitter) AA former and current board members were examined. The last 200 tweets (the maximum number permitted by Twitter API) sent by each user (as of February 11, 2015) were collected, and grouped by clusters using the Clauset–Newman–Moore algorithm by NodeXL software.⁵⁰ Metrics processed by the software were exported to Gephi software,⁵¹ and visualized after an adjacency matrix was used by the software to find each node's Eigenvector centrality. In this way, the network graph that used in this article was constructed, defining major actors in the network and their adjacency of interactions with other users.

In this way, it will be possible to detect all of the members included in the interaction flow, and the most influential members of the network. In a small network such as selection under examination, hypothetically, it is expected that the selected users (board members) should be interconnected and they may be connected to same influential users, which make them even more important. It is assumed that the political identities of these users may be explicative of the extent of political concentration among AA board

number of interactions. Cluster no.3 (in yellow, 30.98 percent), no.2 (in blue, 28.92 percent), no.6 (in green, 21 percent), and no.5 (in red, 16.97 percent) give the following results when analyzed separately.

Cluster no.2, as seen in [Figure 3](#), is mainly formed around former editor-in-chief and board member Ömer Ekşi (@omer_eksi), while another board member, Nihat Erdoğan (@nihaterdogmus), constitutes a sub-cluster (at the center-right of the graph) with minor interactions. The most influential users in this cluster are @anadolujansi (Official Twitter account of AA), @firatyurdakul (Fırat Yurdakul, Editor of photography at AA), and @Sabah (Sabah newspaper). The Cluster no.2 is also connected to some important nodes in Cluster 3, such as *Yeni Şafak*'s account (@yenisafak), AA board member Ebubekir Şahin (@esahin54), and AA sports desk editor, Ersin Şiyan (@ersinsiyhan) ([Table 2](#)).

Cluster no.3 ([Figure 4](#)), despite not having the highest volume, is the widest spread cluster with the highest number of important nodes. This cluster includes two board members, Ebubekir Şahin (@esahin54) and former CEO Kemal Öztürk (@kemalozturk2020), who resigned in December 2014. One important note about this cluster is that the appearance of CNN Türk news channel (@cnnturkcom) and newscaster Şirin Payzın (@siring) is circumstantial as Payzın hosted Kemal Öztürk on her show on CNN Türk just before the data collection process. The most influential nodes of this cluster are @hilal_kaplan (Hilal Kaplan, *Yeni Şafak* columnist), Şahin, and Öztürk ([Table 3](#)).

The most notable features of this cluster are that it contains major executive actors from the presidency and the government (such as İbrahim Kalın, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's chief advisor and Serdar Cam, president for Prime Minister's Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, TİKA) and that the majority of the important actors also tweet in English. On the other hand, it contains much fewer AA journalists, compared to other major clusters.

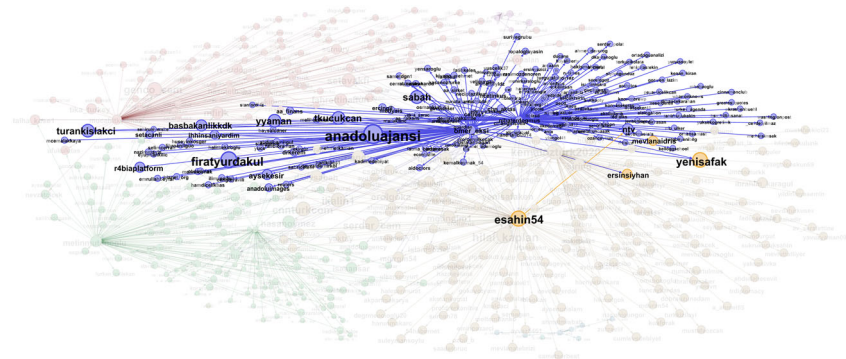


Figure 3. Twitter interaction graph of Cluster No.2.

Table 2 Most influential nodes of Cluster 2 (according to Eigenvector centrality calculations)

Node ID	Label	Eigenvector Centrality	
3	anadolujansi	1	Official Twitter account of AA
215	firatyurdakul	0.77365813	Fırat Yurdakul, Editor of photography at AA
239	Sabah	0.58047776	Sabah newspaper
213	turankislakci	0.56292303	Turan Kışlakçı, reporter, at AA's Arabic division
216	Yyaman	0.56292303	Yılmaz Yaman, director at AA
238	tkucukcan	0.56292303	Talip Küçükcan, director at pro-government NGO SETA.
212	basbakanlikdkd	0.45864917	Public Diplomacy division of Prime Minister's Office.
236	Ntv	0.45864917	NTV, mainstream news channel, protested during Gezi events due to its pro-government coverage.
221	r4biaplatform	0.38107617	Pro-Ikhwan NGO founded after the al-Sissi takeover in Egypt, mainly by AKP members.
231	aysekesir	0.38107617	Ayşe Keşir, AKP women's branch vice-president

Cluster no.6 (Figure 5) is the one with the fewest major nodes; however, it has a considerable number of small nodes. This cluster is formed around Metin Mutanoğlu (@metinmutanoglu), the newest member of the AA board, who started working for the agency as editor-in-chief in January 2015.

This cluster shows Mutanoğlu’s current position related to the executive AKP officials and AA journalists. Cluster no.6 has almost no connections with the AKP’s political elite; however, it includes a considerable number of pro-government journalists. The most influential nodes of this cluster are @hasanoymez (Hasan Öymez, reporter for AA), Mutanoğlu himself, and @isasansar (İsa Sansar, Adana regional director at AA) (Table 4).

Meanwhile, Cluster no.5 (Figure 6) is more connected to some major actors in other clusters, mainly to executive officials. This cluster is formed around Mühacit Küçükylmaz (@mucahitkyilmaz), former director of Presidency Social Media team and member of SETA and consultant at

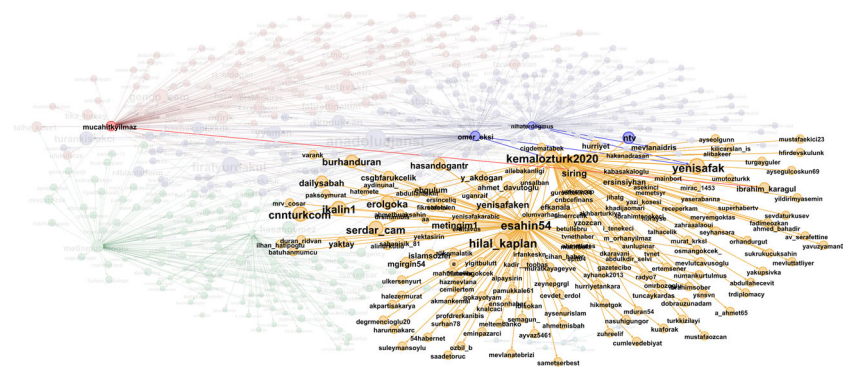


Figure 4. Twitter interaction graph of Cluster No.3.

Table 3 Most influential nodes of Cluster 3 (according to Eigenvector centrality calculations)

Node ID	Label	Eigenvector Centrality	
229	hilar_kaplan	0.74459761	Yeni Şafak columnist
227	esahin54	0.73136688	Ebubekir Şahin, AA board member
209	kemalozturk2020	0.70034201	Kemal Öztürk, former AA editor-in-chief
211	yenisafak	0.70034201	Pro-government Yeni Şafak newspaper
237	ikalin1	0.65379389	İbrahim Kalın, Tayyip Erdoğan’s chief advisor.
313	serdar_cam	0.62276901	Serdar Cam, president for Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), a division of Prime Minister’s Office.
219	erolgoka	0.56292303	Erol Göka, Yeni Şafak columnist
318	burhanduran	0.53196529	SETA general coordinator
495	yenisafaken	0.50094041	Yeni Şafak English account
499	metingim1	0.50094041	Metin Gim, columnist for pro-Islamic Milli Gazete

TRT. It is possible to see these connections in this cluster. The most influential nodes are @genco_cem (Cem Genco, photojournalist at AA), @setavakfi (SETA official account), and @mfirik (Mehmet Kemal Firik, reporter at AA) (Table 5).

Ego Networks

While the clusters reveal the influential users in the network, they do not give much information about the interconnectedness of each cluster and each board member. Therefore, the “ego networks”⁵² of key board members in major clusters, in other words, their connections with nodes from different clusters, also should be analyzed. The networks of Ebubekir Şahin, Kemal Öztürk, and Metin Mutanoğlu were selected for this task, as they are the board members who figure among the top 50 users with the highest value of Eigenvector centrality in our network.

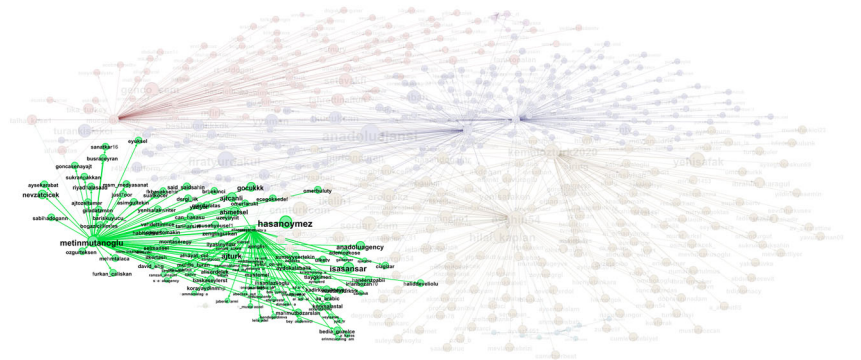


Figure 5. Twitter interaction graph of Cluster No.6.

Table 4 Most influential nodes of Cluster 6 (according to Eigenvector centrality calculations)

Node ID	Label	Eigenvector Centrality	
218	hasanoymez	0.51441055	Hasan Öymez, reporter for AA.
368	metinmutanoglu	0.42360683	Metin Mutanoğlu, AA editor-in-chief
519	isasansar	0.41013669	İsa Sansar, Adana regional director at AA
222	ajturk	0.36376085	Al Jazeera Turkish version, Mutanoğlu's former employer.
307	ajtcnli	0.28618785	Al Jazeera Turkish version, live commentary account.
214	ahmetsel	0.27271771	Ahmet Sel, AA visual director
223	gocukkk	0.27271771	Murat Yılmaz, Islamist NGO IHH official
226	anadoluagency	0.27271771	Anadolu Agency official account
314	nevzatcicek	0.27271771	Nevzat Çiçek, Editor-in-chief at pro-government timeturk.com website.
367	aliserdelek	0.16435926	Alişer Delek, reporter at Al Jazeera Turkish version

Kemal Öztürk’s ego network (Figure 7), consisting of 90 users (nodes), features 77 users from Cluster 3, Öztürk’s own cluster. It contains seven users from Cluster 2, five users from Cluster 5, and one user from Cluster 6. It should be noted that five of Öztürk’s connections from Cluster 2 feature in the ten most influential user list of that cluster. Furthermore, all five users from Cluster 5 are among the most influential of that cluster, and also the user from Cluster 6 is equally among the user with highest Eigenvector centrality. This means that Kemal Öztürk’s ego network, while containing few users from other clusters, includes the most influential users from them.

Ebubekir Şahin’s ego network (Figure 8) of 117 users contains 100 users from Şahin’s own cluster, 9 users from Cluster 2, 6 users from Cluster 5, and 2 users from Cluster 6. As in Kemal Öztürk’s network, Şahin is also connected to the most influential users from other clusters. Similarly, Metin Mutanoğlu’s ego network (Figure 9) of 117 users contains 3, 5, and 5 users from Clusters 2, 3, and 5, respectively. Eight of Metin Mutanoğlu’s ego

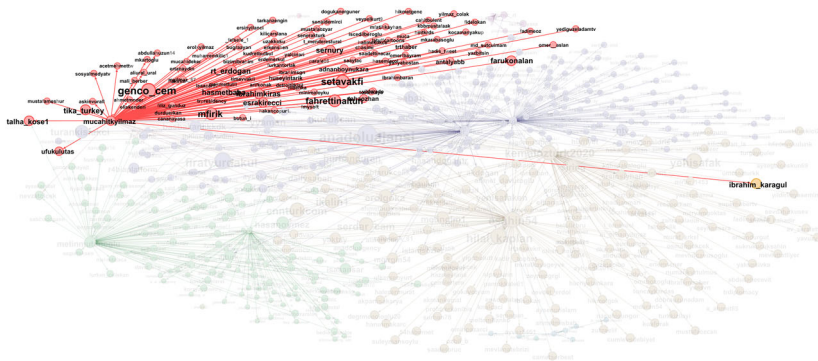


Figure 6. Twitter interaction graph of Cluster No.5.

Table 5. Most influential nodes of Cluster 5 (according to Eigenvector centrality calculations)

Node ID	Label	Eigenvector Centrality	
220	genco_cem	0.653793887	Cem Genco, photojournalist at AA.
235	setavakfi	0.580477764	SETA official account.
311	mfirik	0.514410554	Mehmet Kemal Firik, reporter at AA.
234	Fahrettinaltun	0.502904771	Fahrettin Altun, general coordinator at SETA.
312	tika_turkey	0.381076172	TİKA official account.
317	rt_erdogan	0.381076172	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's official account.
308	hasmetbaba	0.363521437	Haşmet Babaoğlu, pro-government columnist at Sabah.
309	sernury	0.363521437	<i>Sernur Yassıkaya, Columnist at Yeni Şafak.</i>
310	ibrahimkiras	0.363521437	<i>İbrahim Kiras, columnist at Vatan.</i>
315	farukonalan	0.363521437	Pro-government blogger.

network’s 20 most influential users are from other clusters and they appear among the most influential in their own clusters. Indeed, this interconnectedness contributes to the influence of those users, as they act as “bridges”⁵³ between clusters. For instance, along with the Agency’s official Twitter account, Firat Yurdakul (@firatyurdakul), the photo editor of AA, appears to be an important bridge among major clusters.

Conclusion

The network graphs of AA board members' Twitter interactions prove that the state-run agency's officials have virtually no contact whatsoever with anti-government or even neutral Twitter users. The clusters in the graph are defined according to the popularity of board members, political positions,

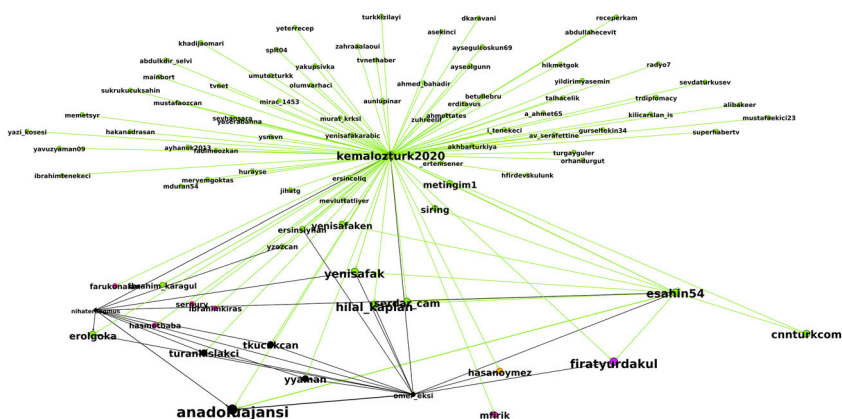


Figure 7. Twitter ego network of Kemal Öztürk.

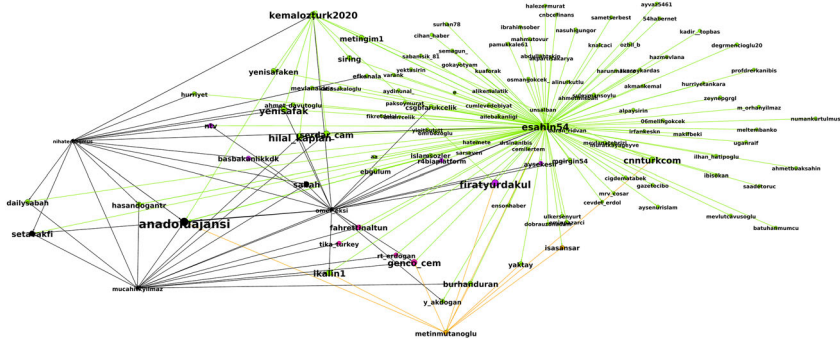


Figure 8. Twitter ego network of Ebubekir Şahin.

career backgrounds, and in some cases, language skills; however, politically there is no observable difference between any of these clusters. Even interactions with non-aligned Twitter users are rare, while interconnection between clusters is clearly visible. This picture shows that AA board members share a similar political background, which is unquestionably close to the AKP-line. According to the Twitter interactions, there has not been a single AA board member since 2011 who comes from a different political tendency or even a different journalistic environment. This overlaps with the recruitment patterns and the editorial choices of the agency.

As pointed out by Gunnarsson-Lorentzen,⁵⁴ visualization of Twitter networks, as used in the current study, may function as a useful tool of depicting

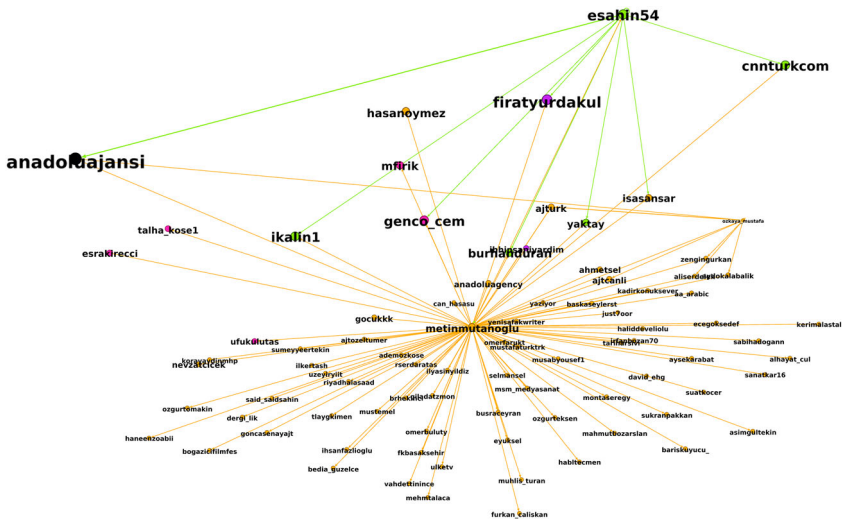


Figure 9. Twitter ego network of Metin Mutanoğlu.

polarization in (online) political environments. In this example, a pre-defined selection is used (namely AA board members) and their interactions with users from different backgrounds, different opinions, and different affiliations were sought. However, in the web of networks, of 13 central users and 716 nodes, almost no meaningful contact with non-AKP supporters was observed. Furthermore, the vast majority of interactions featured influential people from the core state (or party) organization, which hinted at the emergence of an elite “inner-circle” of a few, within millions of AKP members. Hence, the network analyzed suggested not only the lack of dialogue that cannot be found in less than a dominant-party system, but also a low level of inner-party democracy within the AKP, which was supposed to be “voice of the voiceless.” In this study, according to the results reached, the voiceless continued to be voiceless, at least on the Twitter networks. Obviously, it would be a valid claim that Twitter use is not the sole indicator of the inner-party democracy, however as Massicard argues,⁵⁵ the local branches of Turkish political parties are heavily fragmented and vertically hierarchized. Bearing in mind that Twitter has become an important democratic political tool in Turkey,⁵⁶ the lack of inner-party dialogue between AKP elites and the lower ranking members is still interesting.

While the Twitter interactions of AA board members give hints about Turkish politics, the level of political concentration in Turkey’s leading news producer is unprecedented. AA, like its sister TRT, has always had a displayed a pro-government editorial line and political clientelism; however, 90 percent of content being devoted to the AKP, board members being former consultants of Arınç and Erdoğan or columnists of the “pool media,” and the cozy relationship founded on Twitter with other influential “New Turkey” supporters do not depict a healthy picture for the Turkish media or the country’s democracy. In a country where 2.5 million people sent 224 million tweets in the first half of June 2013 during the Gezi protests, the major news producer only taking a small and cautiously selected people into account on Twitter shows that democracy may be a luxury to which only “inner-party members” have access in Erdoğan’s “New Turkey.”

This research functions as a harbinger of network-based approaches on social media research, notably on countries like Turkey where informal interpersonal relationships are prioritized over contractual relationship. The findings of this work reveal that the entire state organization reshaped during the AKP governments actually operates as a network based on informal (but political) comradeships. The approach of this work may be useful for other countries of the region. Bearing in mind the recent political importance of online social networks in the Middle East, research based on similar methodologies would certainly widen the scope of media studies discipline.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Polat and Tokgöz, "Twitter User Behaviors in Turkey"; Bayraktutan et al., "The Use of Facebook"; Small, "What The Hashtag?"; and Gilles, "Tout oiseau aime à s'entendre chanter" among others.
2. Şahin, "Siyasal İletişimde Anadolu Ajansı'nın rolü," 116.
3. Ozel, "Is It None of Their Business?" 1082.
4. Arsu, "After Protests, Forums Sprout in Turkey's Parks"; Traynor, "Erdoğan's Split Personality"
5. Seymour-Ure, "The Political Impact of Mass Media," 156–76.
6. Ibid., 158–9.
7. Hallin and Mancini, "Comparing Media Systems," 67
8. Van Kempen, "Media-Party Parallelism and Its Effects," 310.
9. Papathanassopoulos, "The Mediterranean/Polarized Pluralist Media Model Countries"; Kaya and Çakmur, "Politics and the Mass Media in Turkey"; and Hafez, "How liberal is."
10. Bayram, "Political Parallelism in the Turkish Press," 588–9.
11. Christensen, "Concentration of Ownership," 182.
12. Kaya and Çakmur, "Politics and the Mass Media in Turkey," 529.
13. Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Yeldan, "Politics, Society and Financial Liberalization," 503.
14. Mardin, "Center-Periphery Relations."
15. Suttner, "Party Dominance 'Theory'," 278.
16. Greene, "Why Dominant Parties Lose," 12.
17. Keyman, "The AK Party," 23–24.
18. Öniş, "Monopolizing the Center," 6.
19. Çarkoğlu et al., "Press-Party Parallelism and Polarization," 296.
20. Ayan-Musil, "Emergence of a Dominant Party," 73.
21. Sartori, "Parties and Party Systems."
22. Buğra and Savaşkan, "New Capitalism in Turkey," 88–89.
23. Sayarı, "Interdisciplinary Approaches," 665; Özkan, "Turkey's Choice," 35; Atlı, "Business Associations," 180–1.
24. Lancaster, "The Iron Law," 1680.
25. Keyman, "The AK Party," 19.
26. Öniş, "Monopolizing the Center," 8.
27. Ayan-Musil, "Emergence of a Dominant Party," 88–89.
28. "Devlet yandaş medyayı reklamla zengin etti."
29. "İstatistikler—Erişime Engellenen Siteler."
30. Şahin, "Ajans Gazeteciliği," 199.
31. Irak, "Reading Political Clientelism."
32. "Devlet yandaş medyayı reklamla zengin etti."
33. Türk, "Anadolu Ajansı Sorunu," 61–63.
34. Bengi, "Tarihsel süreç içinde," 312.
35. "AA'da yasaya dayanmadan satış."
36. "Anadolu Ajansı Sayıştay denetimine tabi değil."
37. RoT Undersecretariat of Treasury, "2013 Kamu İşletmeleri," 146.

38. RoT Undersecretariat of Treasury, "2012 Kamu İşletmeleri," 143.
39. Turkish Vice Prime Minister's Office, "Response to Parliamentary."
40. Directorate General of Press and Information, "2013 Faaliyet Raporu."
41. Varol et al., "Evolution of Online"; New York University Social Media and Political Participation Lab, "A Breakout Role"; Demirhan, "Social Media Effects"; Metzger et al., "Dynamics of Influence."
42. Such as Gökçe et al., "Twitter and Politics."
43. Varol et al., "Evolution of Online," 87.
44. Larsson and Moe, "Studying Political Microblogging."
45. Severo and Venturini, "Intangible Cultural Heritage."
46. Gökçe et al., "Twitter and Politics," 679–680.
47. Shulman et al., "Leveraging the Power," 181.
48. Gökçe et al., "Twitter and Politics," 680.
49. Blondel et al., "Fast Unfolding."
50. Smith et al., "NodeXL: A Free."
51. Bastian et al., "Gephi: An Open."
52. Hanneman and Riddle, "Introduction to Social."
53. Greve, "Networks and Entrepreneurship," 6–7.
54. Gunnarsson-Lorentzen, "Polarisation in Political."
55. Massicard, "The Uses of Team Rivalry," 58–59.
56. Sobaci and Karkin, "The Use of Twitter"; Sancar, "Political Public Relations 2.0"; Bayraktutan et al., "The Role of Social Media"; Demirhan, "Relationship Between Social Media."

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