

Reading political clientelism and concentration through new media: The case of Anadolu Agency

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Justice and Development Party (AKP), which established a strong government after the landslide election victory in 2002 following a major economic crisis in Turkey, has reshaped the country according to its Islamic-conservative policies in the last 13 years. Notably after the 2010 constitutional referendum, which practically erased the ever-existent military off the political scene and gave the government both broad legislative power and popular support, AKP abolished the secular consensus between state and capital, and started to dominate almost all domains, including the cultural one. While forming its own economic and social networks, boosted by the Islamic Development Bank-funded growth, the party excluded practically anyone that did not belong to or abide by the new regime, baptized as “the New Turkey” by its iron-hand creator, former Prime Minister and now President of the Republic, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Inasmuch as country’s aggressive economic growth was mainly hailed

both in Turkey and abroad, the cultural field has become the peril point of any valid challenge against AKP governments. Notably, well-educated secularists have been ousted from high-ranking posts in the media and academy, and replaced by Erdoğan's in-breed cadre of loyal followers, who in most cases have had grave difficulties in handling the necessary task to convert AKP's popularity into a full-fledged cultural hegemony. In 2013, the Gezi protests, which was started by a dozen of environmentalists and turned into a movement of five million citizens despite overwhelming media censorship, were widespread by a clever and humorous use of online social networks, which led Erdoğan to a failed Twitter-ban attempt and also recruit 3,000 Twitter users of his own, infamously known as "AK Trolls."

Media concentration is often defined over the number of individuals or organizations controlling the majority shares of the mass media. As Baker (2007: 5) states, "the health of democracies depend on having a free press" which should have the "the widest possible dispersal of media ownership." McQuail (2010) claims that; media concentration can occur vertically (a conglomerate owning a chain of media outlets) and horizontally (geographically, e.g. a company or individual buying local media outlets), and/or in national and transnational level. Several scholars (Just: 2009, Horwitz: 2005, Kelly and others: 2003, Terzis and others: 2007) treat the issue in line with this market-based perception and define media concentration according to the direct media ownership. Insomuch as these works have a definite validity concerning Western free-market economies, the economically and politically hybrid periphery countries may necessitate a broader definition of media ownership. Hughes and Lawson (2004), in one of the few works addressing this issue, draw attention to this problem and define the relationship between the crony capitalism and the political bias of media networks in emerging democracies. Others (Fox: 1988, Faraone: 2002) also underline the discrepancies in the Latin American democracies. Also, Hallin and Mancini's

(2004) Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model, attempts to politically contextualise the media structure in the peripheral emerging democracy, according to the role of the state in the media and the parallelisms of media outlets to political systems.

Albeit these works are all helpful in creating a new context for the media in non-Western democracies, Turkish example has largely been out of their scope. The reason because is that, the media concentration concept heavily relies on the existence of a number free-market actors dominating the market, or a state directly owning or controlling the majority of the media. However, the political structure in Turkey during the AKP period mostly relied on a pan-Islamist crony capitalism based on party's own economic and social networks. This policy, in the early years of AKP reign, was interpreted as "opening door to the businessmen who fell outside the circle of Istanbul-based oligopolistic crony capitalists." (Patton, 2006: 522). However, as it happened in many other domains, Erdoğan's party renegotiated the closed circles of the post-coup secular consensus, in order to break it and to replace it with the ones of its own. The impressive work of Buğra and Savaşkan (2014, 88-89) shows that the ten most successful new entrepreneurs of the AKP era depend on the same pattern; "[their] business development has taken place in more than one sector, and each case includes at least one investment project in the generation and distribution of energy. In all of these cases, privatization, public tenders and public-private partnerships have been important for business development." Furthermore (2014, 94), they also state that "the government's use of invitations rather than open tenders in public bids for infrastructure projects has been particularly controversial. For example, the Kalyon Group, whose growth was based on public tenders, obtained many of these tenders by invitation, a method that, in principle, was reserved for exceptional cases such as natural disasters or epidemics." These methods prove that the AKP government used the state initiatives to create a crony capitalism of its own.

In this context, Turkish media concentration does not depend on free-market monopolies or heavy state ownership. It is rather a political oligopoly based on several different actors which are affiliated to the same network created by the government. The economic and social networks founded upon the same cultural and political codes (in AKP's case, Islamism), also contributed to the creation of a hybrid media oligopoly that includes semi-privatized state-run media giants, still vastly-financed by the government, and private media which are subsidized through the revenue coming from state-run advertisers (such as telecommunication monopoly Türk Telekom, or the national flag-carrier Turkish Airlines) as well as the National Advertisement Agency (Basın İlan Kurumu, BİK), the distributor of official and legal announcements. According to a 2014 report published by Nielsen Adex (Devlet yandaş medyayı reklamlarla zengin etti, 2015), 69,3% of the total advertisement volume of 19 state-run firms were given to pro-government newspapers, generating an estimated 60 million Turkish liras (approx. 27 million USD) of revenue to these media outlets.

Therefore, in Turkish case, what counts is not the ownership of the media per companies or individuals, but whether or not they belong to the government's social network. Therefore, whereas media concentration in Turkey is not visible, political concentration is the modus operandi of Turkish media. Nevertheless, as of February 2015 (09 Şubat 2015 - 15 Şubat 2015, 2015), the market share of pro-government newspapers does not exceed 25, 5%, while anti-government newspapers have 41, 8% of total newspaper sales. Hence, the mainstream media on the fringe of the AKP social networks, but which still try to keep hold of the economic networks (as most mainstream media belong to holdings active in many other vital sectors such as energy or construction) were forced to sack neutral or anti-government journalists and replace them with pro-government ones, sometimes with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's or his consultants' direct suggestions. The 2014

Freedom House report (FREEDOM ON THE WORLD: Turkey, 2014) classifying press in Turkey as “not free” underlines this situation by “In addition to punitive measures applied by law, systematic political pressure from the executive branch led to scores of journalists and media workers being fired in 2013 for critical reporting on the Erdoğan government.” Reporters without Borders’ June 2014 report (Reporters without Borders, 2014) also addressed to the same issue; “At least 22 journalists were fired during the protests and 37 were driven to resign. The conservative Turkish daily Sabah fired Yavuz Baydar as its ombudsman on 23 July 2014 after refusing to print a commentary he had written on the way some Turkish newspapers were denigrating the foreign media. A week later, the liberal daily Milliyet fired its columnist, Can Dündar, and then its editor, Derya Sazak. Other journalists reported that articles had been censored or owners had meddled in a heavy-handed fashion in editorial policies. Clandestine phone call recordings circulated in early 2014 (of which authenticity was never denied by the authorities) showed that these owners were often acting on direct government orders.”

In the cultural battle which remained decisive for AKP’s hegemony attempts, Erdoğan’s cadre took over a large portion of private media through pro-government businessmen. Meanwhile, the government also reshaped two state-owned media outlets, the radio-TV giant TRT and the news agency Anadolu (AA), in terms of structure, editorial staff and policy. These media outlets were spread to the Islamic world and former Ottoman territories, in line with the “strategic depth” policy of former Foreign Minister and now Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, which aimed to create an “area of influence” for Turkey in these regions, also by resuscitating the “Pax-Ottomana”. In this context, TRT and AA staff, especially the board members, was handpicked from other pro-government media and NGOs, forcing the employees already in place to leave or to retirement.

In Anadolu Agency, the acting director Hilmi Bengi retired in 2011 and Kemal Öztürk, a young Islamist known by his radical anti-secularist views penned under the nickname “Mir Mahmut Rıza”¹, took over the position. Öztürk formerly worked with Tayyip Erdoğan and AKP’s “number two” Bülent Arınç as a media consultant, two people who would turn out to be very influential in the other appointments to the agency. After Öztürk, other president, prime minister or minister consultants also were appointed to the AA board. Other members were generally chosen from media outlets close to the party. As seen in Table 1, the AA board members between 2011 and 2015 came from a very small network.

Board Member	Connection
Ahmet Tek	
Ali İhsan Sarkoca	Prime Minister’s Press Officer during 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 Küçükylmaz	President’s social media manager during Gül reign
	SETA specialist
	Former TRT consultant
Mustafa Özkaya	Former TV Net senior editor
	Former Al Jazeera Turk senior editor

¹ Milliyet, 8 January 2009.

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 Erdoğan period
Salih Melek	Bülent Arınç's former head consultant
Şenol Kazancı	Former TV Net editor-in-chief
	Prime Minister's head consultant during Erdoğan period
	President's head consultant during Erdoğan period

Table 1 – AA board members since 2011 and their connections.

Scope, methodology and research questions

While all members of the Anadolu Agency since 2011 being closely connected to AKP and the government is a strong indicator of political concentration, the purpose of this research is to find out whether this concentration is reflected on the content produced by the agency. In this context, Agency's use of Twitter is particularly important as, aside its aforementioned political importance, this medium presents different opportunities, other than simply announcing URLs to news pieces published on the Anadolu Agency website. Therefore, in this research, we aimed to employ a hybrid problematic, which includes AA's use of Twitter as a particular medium and also the political tendencies in its general content announced on its Twitter account. Hence, we aim to find responses to these questions;

- Whether or not AA uses its Twitter account for diverse purposes,

- Whether or not AA's content posted on Twitter is political-ly-biased,
- Whether or not certain political actors (parties or politicians) are covered more frequently than others,
- Whether or not the topics chosen by AA editors overlap with the government agenda.

In order to answer these questions, we will employ content analysis of 1287 tweets posted by Anadolu Agency's primary Twitter account @anadolujansi², between February 1-20, 2015. While primarily tweets' content were analysed, in case the tweet only contains a news title, the news summary posted on AA's official website³ will also be taken into account.

The tweets and news pieces posted by @anadolujansi will be classified according to;

- Their category (domestic, international, sports, promotion)
- Their genre (politics, economy, daily news)
- Their subject
- The actors quoted and/or mentioned
- Whether they redirect to the AA website or they are Twitter-exclusive.

The tweets are recuperated manually, and classified by using Libreoffice Calc and PSPP software.

Results

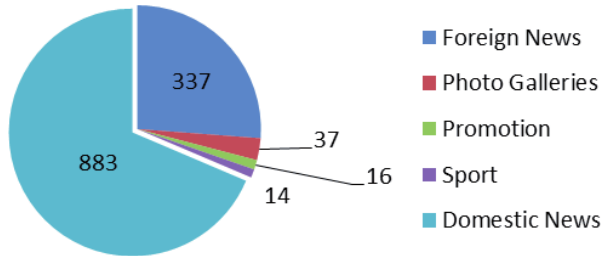
The vast majority of the 1287 tweets (nearly 68, 6%) posted by Anadolu Ajansı Twitter account were related to domestic news in different subjects. However, the number of foreign news posts (337 – 26, 1%) were also considerable. The rest of the tweets were

² <http://www.twitter.com/anadolujansi>

³ <http://www.aa.com.tr>

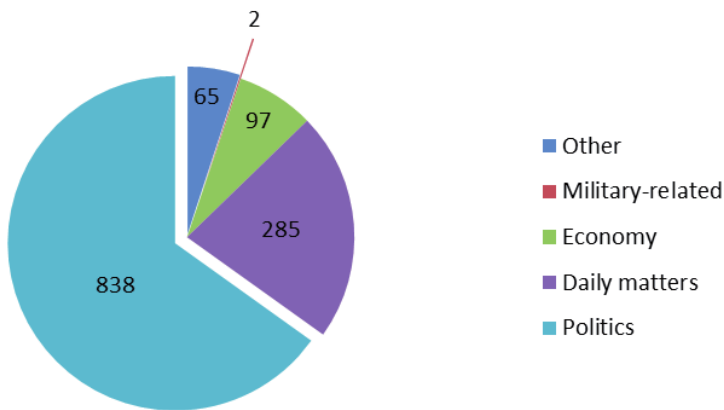
related to links to various photo galleries on the AA website, agency's promotion of its content and some brief sports updates, notably on Turkish Football Super League.

Figure 1. Breakdown of AA tweets between February 1-20.



These 1287 posts were predominantly (65,1%) focused on political matters, while around 22,1% were on daily matters and a 7,54% were on economic issues.

Figure 2. Breakdown of AA tweets between February 1-20, 2015 according to the subjects they cover.



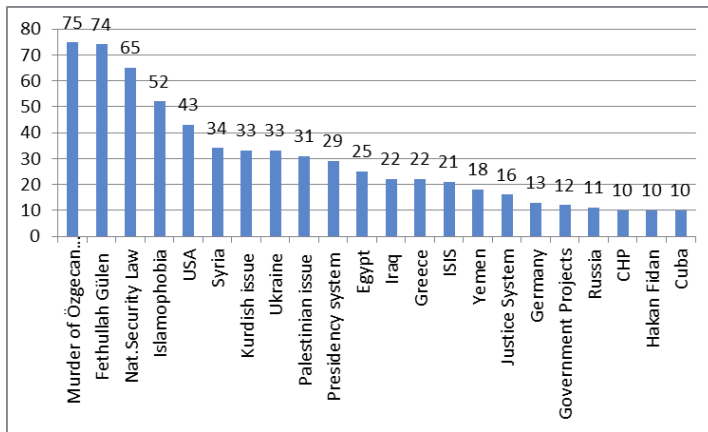
When keywords were attributed to the tweets according to their content, the brutal murder of a female university student, named Özgecan Aslan, and some other posts on violence against women rank first with 75 instances. However, it should be noted that this incident was quite exceptional and covered by all media during that specific period, and a considerable amount (36 instances – 48%) of this coverage belonged to government’s/president’s statements on the issue.

The second most covered issue was the government’s (and President Erdoğan’s) feud with religious leader Fethullah Gülen. Government’s take over of pro-Gülen banking institution Bank Asya, Gülenists taken into custody or being arrested, and government officials’ statement against Gülen were widely covered, employing the “parallel structure” expression used by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other AKP members, in AA tweets.

AKP’s proposal of the new Homeland Security Package, restricting constitutional liberties such as peaceful protests and giving police additional authority such as taking protesters into custody without court order or using firearms against them for non-self defense purposes, was covered in AA tweets in 65 instances. Among these instances, government officials and president Erdoğan were mentioned or quoted 46 times, while three opposition parties were mentioned or quoted only 9 times.

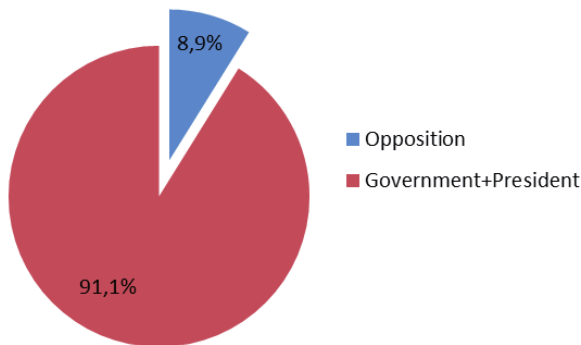
Islamophobia also appeared as a popular issue in AA coverage. While three Syrian university students having been murdered in the USA and the anti-Islam organization PEGIDA in Europe constituted the majority of the posts, government officials’ and Erdoğan’s statements on the issue and examples of Islamophobia in Western countries were widely covered.

Figure 3. Most popular keywords in news pieces covered Anadolu Agency Twitter feed. (per instances, some articles having more than one keyword)



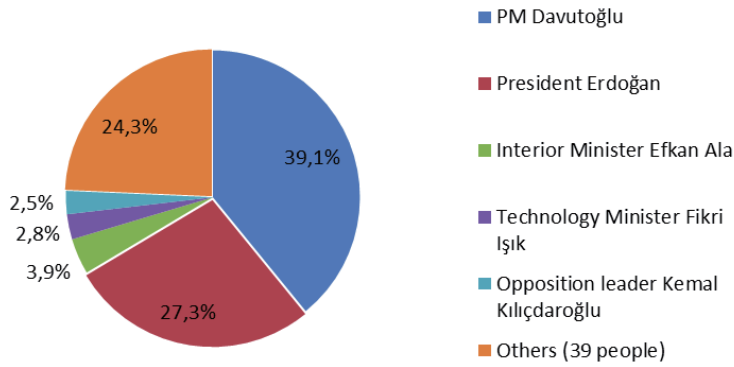
In domestic news, 440 instances either mentioned or quoted a Turkish political actor (some articles mentioned one than more actor). An overwhelming majority of these posts (91,1 %) contained President Erdoğan, a government official or an AKP member, as well as Erdoğan’s and PM Davutoğlu’s family members. Only 8,9% of the posts quoted an opposition political party or a politician.

Figure 4. Coverage of opposition and government officials in AA posts between February 1-20, 2015. (440 instances, some posts having more than one actors)



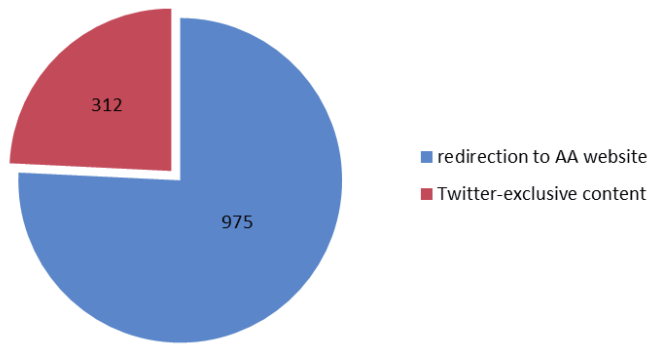
432 of the 440 instances with political actors mentioned or quoted a politician, while the rest of the instances were on political parties. Among the politicians covered, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu ranked first by 39,1% and 169 instances. President Erdoğan was covered in 118 instances (27,3%). The other government officials covered were Interior Minister Efkan Ala, and Science and Technology Minister Fikri Işık, both were hosted by AA's "Editor's desk" section. Opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was mentioned 11 times but he was never hosted or covered in live commentary. No other government official or opposition politician were mentioned in more than ten instances.

Figure 5. Domestic political actors covered in AA posts between February 1-20, 2015.



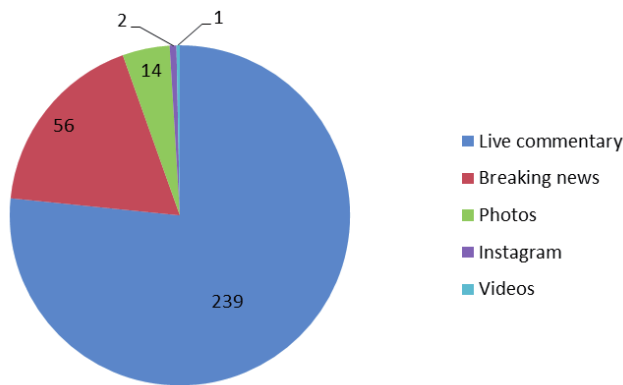
In terms of content exclusivity on Twitter, AA posts predominantly (75,8 %) contained links to the agency website. Less than a quarter of the posts were exclusive to Twitter, and contained live commentary and photos (which were later posted on the website and their links were reposted on Twitter).

Figure 6. Breakdown of AA Twitter posts between February 1-21, 2015, according to their Twitter-exclusivity.



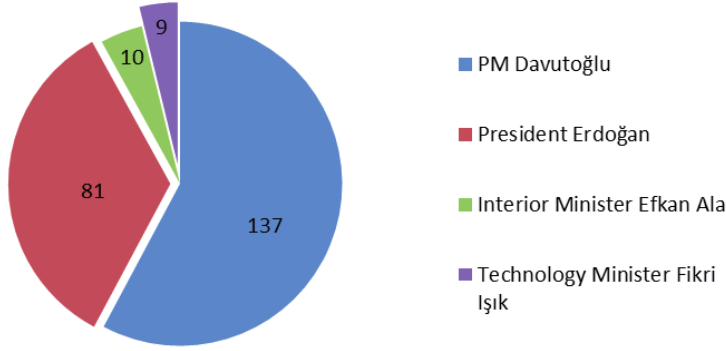
The vast majority (76,6 %) of AA posts not redirecting to the agency website were live commentary posts. These posts contained statements made by politicians during their press conferences or rallies, a feature also used by other news institutions' social media departments in Turkey. AA also used its Twitter account to post breaking news and interesting photos taken by AA photographers. Few posts contained links to AA's Instagram and Youtube accounts.

Figure 7. Breakdown of AA's Twitter-exclusive content between February 1-21, 2015.



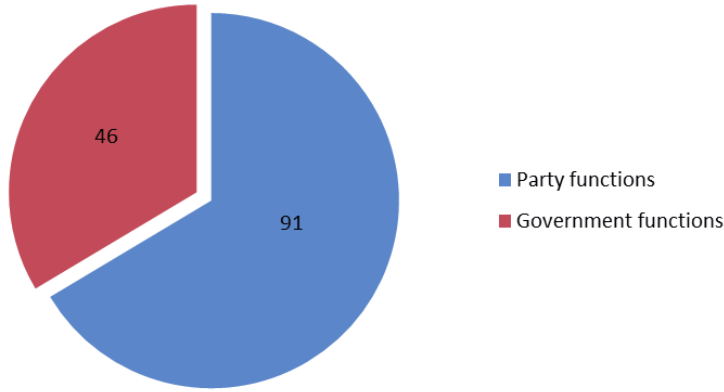
As it was in domestic coverage, the majority of live commentary made by AA's Twitter feed were about Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (57,3%) and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (33,8 %). Interior Minister Efkan Ala and Technology Minister Fikri Işık were given live commentary only when they were hosted by AA's "Editor's Desk" section. Therefore, it becomes evident that AA's live commentary feature is almost exclusive to Davutoğlu and Erdoğan.

Figure 8. Breakdown of live commentary posts on AA Twitter feed between February 1-21, 2015.



In order to define whether Davutoğlu and Erdoğan were given such an exclusive medium because of their official posts or their political influence over Anadolu Agency, the live commentary on Ahmet Davutoğlu was thoroughly analyzed, according to the functions he held during the statements covered in live commentary. In 91 instances (66,4 %) of AA's live commentary of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Prime Minister spoke as the AKP president and not the Prime Minister. This number included party's weekly parliamentary group meetings, public rallies and statement delivered in different AKP branches. Only 46 posts covered Davutoğlu speaking as the Prime Minister

Figure 9. Breakdown of AA's live commentary on Ahmet Davutoğlu between February 1-20, 2015, according the function he was holding during the statement.



Conclusion

The content analysis on Anadolu Agency's Twitter feed clearly shows that the content covered by the agency is in line with the government agenda. The agency, while thoroughly covering AKP's feud with Fethullah Gülen group, also stayed focus in the government agenda featuring Islamophobia, Kurdish issue talks, Presidency system and Homeland Security Package. In these matters, or in any other issue, the opposition parties were very seldom quoted, while news about Gülen group were exclusively covered through the AKP-government-Erdoğan perspective. Among the very few posts mentioning the opposition parties, either parties' internal problems (such as CHP members resigning) or matters that they agreed with the government (HDP on Kurdish talks or MHP-CHP on Özgecan Aslan murder) were selected. For instance, AKP parliamentary deputy group chair Mustafa Elitaş was quoted twice after the allegations against opposition MPs in the parliament, while the accusing MPs were not given the floor.

While Anadolu Agency's coverage was evidently AKP-centred, only very few party members were covered by the agency. Live commentaries were almost exclusive to Davutoğlu and Erdoğan. Except two ministers (Ala and Işık, for special occasions), no ministers or AKP MPs were quoted more than ten times in 1287 posts. Therefore, AA coverage was not only politically biased, but also vertically segregated.

Anadolu Agency occasionally used its Twitter feed for posting exclusive content. The majority of this content featured live commentary, which was also limited to government officials, and no one else than Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, except a few instances. Davutoğlu's party rallies were covered even more frequently than his ministerial functions, posing evidence to the fact that this special treatment was not exclusive to his post in the government, but rather to himself and the party he is leading.

For conclusion, Anadolu Agency during the last AKP government has functioned as a state agency covering only the government agenda and the few most powerful political actors. Horizontally and vertically, it has failed to present a democratically balanced coverage; instead it has positioned itself at the very core of the political power. The personally exclusive treatment to Davutoğlu and Erdoğan exceeds press-party parallelism theory of Ure (1974) which is based "on the ownership of the mass media by political parties, the editorial choices of the news organizations, and the party affiliation of the readers" (Mancini, 2008); or the political parallelism defined by Hallin and Mancini (2004, 28) as "[reflection of] distinct political orientations in their news and current affairs reporting, and sometimes also their entertainment content." While these theories establish an institutionalized bond between political parties and media, the Turkish example is rather some sort of crony capitalism based on personal and ideological networks, rather than institutional agents. The recruitment patterns of AA board members and the content the agency produces in their supervision confirm these personal ties.

Regarding new media, our research shows that AA's Twitter-exclusive content does not differentiate from its aforementioned policy on promoting key political actors. On the contrary, while 66,4% of AA's domestic political content was devoted to Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, an overwhelming 91,2% of Twitter-exclusive live commentary content featured these two political actors. Therefore, it can be said that Anadolu Agency has not used the opportunities provided by new media in order to broaden its spectrum of coverage, but rather has used it in order to give extra airtime to Erdoğan and Davutoğlu. This concludes that, new media tools are not always necessarily used to democratize the media, and its manipulated use to reinforce political and cultural hegemonies may exceed mere political pressure or ownership issues, and involve with politically-charged personal networks. Especially in the works on countries like Turkey, these personal networks should be carefully examined, in order to better understand how new (or old) media can function in establishing hegemonic power.

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