Continuity and Change in the State-sponsored Information Warfare: Disinformation, Propaganda and Fake News

Devlet Destekli Enformasyon Savaşında Süreklilik ve Değişim: Dezenformasyon, Propaganda ve Yalan Haberler

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Abstract

"The power of a lie does not come from the weakness of the truth. The lie is organized; the truth is alone."
(Yaşar Kemal)

The strict regulations and state control over media, along with the utilization of media content for government propaganda, are not new phenomena, rather they appear as a recurring feature in Turkish politics. In the initial part of the article, by taking a historical perspective, I investigate the intricate relationship between the media industry and political actors to map out the government's attempts to control and deploy media throughout the history of modern Türkiye. In the second part, I describe the historical continuum in the utilization of propaganda strategies under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. Drawing on Althusser's notion of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and relying on the collective case study method, I delve into the emergent information warfare strategies of the government and pro-government media for the deployment of political disinformation as a form of state-sponsored communication policy to manipulate the national public. During Erdoğan's presidency, both the government's and pro-government media's information warfare and propaganda strategies have significantly transformed as the AKP sought to exert greater control over independent media and dissenting voices. I conclude that in addition to correspondences with previously dominant strategies of the propaganda for the strict control of the traditional media, under the AKP regime, leveraging and disseminating disinformation and manipulating content in media through fake news have become a prevalent and unofficially sanctioned strategic tool as well as a large-scale and centered institutionalized political activity in the information warfare.

Keywords: Information warfare, disinformation, fake news, propaganda strategies, the Turkish media and the government

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Öz

"Yalanın gücü doğrunun güçsüzlüğünden değildir. Yalan teşkilat kurmuş, doğru yalnızdır."
(Yaşar Kemal)

Türkiye'de devletin medyayı kontrol altına almaya çalışması, medya kuruluşları üzerindeki baskı ve medya içeriklerinin hükümet propagandası için kullanılması yeni bir olgu değildir. Aksine Türk siyasetinde tekrarlanan bir özellik olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı, Türkiye'ye de hükümetlerin medyayı kontrol etme yöntemlerini ve taraflı olarak kullanma girişimlerini analiz ederek medya endüstrisi ile siyasi aktörler arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiyi incelemektir. Makalenin ilk bölümü, tarihsel bir bakış açısıyla, değişen medya ve farklı siyasi iktidarlar arasındaki ilişkilere odaklanmaktadır. İkinci bölüm ise, AKP hükümetinin propaganda stratejilerinin tarihsel sürekliliğine bakmaktadır. Althusser'in İdeolojik Devlet Aygıtları (İDA) kavramından yola çıkarak ve kolektif vaka çalışması yöntemine dayanarak, ulusal kamuoyunu manipüle etmek için devlet destekli iletişim politikasının bir strateji biçimi olarak siyasi dezenformasyonun yayılmasında ve medyanın bilgi savaşlarında kullanılmasına odaklanmaktadır.Erdoğan'ın cumhurbaşkanlığı döneminde, hem hükümetin hem de hükümet yanlısı medyanın bilgi savaşları ve propaganda stratejileri, AKP'nin bağımsız medya ve muhalif sesler üzerinde daha fazla kontrol sağlamaya çalışmasıyla önemli ölçüde dönüşmüştür. AKP döneminde görülen geleneksel medyanın sıkı kontrolüne yönelik baskılar ve propaganda yöntemleri daha önceki hükümetlerin politikaları ile örtüşmektedir. Ancak AKP rejimi dezenformasyondan yararlanma, yanlış bilgi yayma ve yalan haber yoluyla medyadaki içeriği manipüle etmenin yaygın ve kabul edilen geçerli bir yöntem haline geldiği bir dönem olmuştur. Aynı zamanda bilgi savaşları geniş ölçekli, merkezi ve kurumsallaşmış bir politik faaliyete dönüşmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Enformasyon savaşı, dezenformasyon, yalan haber, propaganda stratejileri, Türk medyası ve hükümet

1. Introduction

French author and philosopher Guy Debord (1994) claimed that self-emancipation in our time is emancipation from the material bases of an "inverted truth". According to Debord (1994):

> "[the] historical mission to establish truth in the world can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but—only and always—by that class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes, subjecting all power to the desalinating form of a realized democracy—to councils in which

practical theory exercises control over itself and surveys its own action" (p. 154).

The examples we have seen in Turkish politics in recent years depict that we have moved far away from Debord's statement as the political authority departs from a functioning democracy and the government desists from regulating itself and monitoring its activities. In addition, the complexity of information warfare in media and the spread of disinformation practices with the help of artificial intelligence (AI) would achieve the unimaginable. Concurrently, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have deepened "the isolation of masses" and "atomized individuals" in Debord's (1994) terms, while facilitating unprecedented connections among individuals and fostering the formation of networks. In politics, media is realized both as the main source for circulating news and a means for controlling the flow of information. Therefore, throughout history, political authority has consistently endeavored to exert influence over and regulate the press and other forms of broadcast and electronic media. However, ICTs have eased the creation and dissemination of disinformation in new media. Accordingly, the exponential growth of media technologies and extensive public use of social media have transformed states' propaganda strategies and paved the way for new information warfare tactics.

Recently with the introduction of AI-supported new media technologies including virtual or augmented reality, the semi-autocratic regimes such as Türkiye's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP)) government have drastically transformed their propaganda and information warfare strategies (Kaptan & Haridakis, 2025). Throughout President Erdoğan's tenure, the AKP government has tightened control over independent media and dissenting voices, while also using disinformation on new media platforms as a new propaganda tool in cyber battlefields. The government has acted to control and transform domestic media content in line with neo-Ottomanism (a political ideology based on the revival of Türkiye's influence in the international arena) and the conservative cultural policies of Erdoğan and the AKP (Sümer & Adaklı, 2010; Kaptan & Karanfil 2013; Sümer & Taş, 2020). Since its inception, the AKP government has employed the propaganda strategies that had been used and proven effective by previous governments such as censoring, shutting down, or purchasing opposition TV channels and newspapers, arresting journalists and media personalities, and imposing taxes and fines on particular media outlets. Furthermore, the 2017 Digital News Report (Yanatma, 2017) reveals the high number of removal or bans of content from oppositional news websites or social media accounts became an increasingly common tool used by the Turkish government. In the last decade, along with Erdoğan's political autocracy, AKP's control over the media gradually tightened. Put differently, under the AKP government, the media has undergone a significant transformation. One of the most comprehensive analyses of the media transformation in Türkiye is presented in Ayan's book, AKP Devrinde Medya Alemi (The Media Realm in the AKP Era). Ayan (2019) explores the

transformation of the media from a historical and political economy perspective by focusing on the simultaneous transformation of the economy, politics, civil society, the public sphere, and the state in AKP's Türkiye. Ayan propounds that the AKP's major interest in media and its transformation attempts center on permeating and controlling media institutions in pursuit of creating a new media order that aligns with the party's and the leader's ideology.

In this manuscript, I investigate how the media have operated as the Ideological State Apparatus throughout the history of modern Türkiye and if this situation has escalated and deteriorated in the last two decades under the AKP government due to the use of ICTs. To shed light on these questions, I employ the collective case study method and collect data from the archives of daily Turkish newspapers and online reporting websites. Following a brief discussion of Althusser's notion of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and the method of this study, I explain concepts of propaganda, information warfare, disinformation, misinformation, and fake news. I define propaganda as a communicative political device for persuading and controlling the masses and information warfare as using ICTs to prevent and disrupt the opponent's resources. I use disinformation as "the dissemination of deliberately false information" and misinformation as "accidental [or unintentional] falsehood" (Stahl 2006: 86). Conversely, fake news comprises misleading or false information crafted to resemble genuine news articles, aiming to influence public opinion. In the first section, I provide a historical overview of the fraught relationship between media and government in Türkiye by emphasizing the propaganda tactics employed by the government throughout the history of the Turkish Republic. In the second section, I analyze how pro-AKP media has manipulated the national public through propaganda methods. By delving into the AKP government's information warfare strategies and detailing the use of political disinformation, I argue that information warfare tactics, disinformation, and fake news have become an officially sanctioned communication approach of the government and gained formal and authorized endorsement as a communication strategy.

2. Theoretical Framework: An Althusserian Analysis of Media

Drawn to Marx, Althusser (1971) argues that the State is explicitly conceived as a repressive apparatus. Regarding the complexity of the state, Althusser introduced a new theoretical framework to the Marxist theory, the Ideological State Apparatuses. According to Althusser (1971), the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) which function by violence contain the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, and the Prisons while the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) such as the family, the church, political parties, the press, function through ideology (p. 142). These institutions may also use repression, when necessary, although it is often concealed as socialization, discipline, and censorship (Brennen, 2000). Althusser (1971) states that RSA belongs entirely to the public domain while the larger part of the Ideological State Apparatuses, including the communications ISA (press, radio, and television, etc.) are part of the private domain. However, the private

ownership of most newspapers and media outlets by enterprises and corporations does not guarantee the freedom, objectivity, or impartiality of the media. On the contrary, the common ideology of ISAs is to be in the service of the ruling class. According to Althusser (1971), in order to uphold the stability of the repressive state apparatus, it is imperative for the ruling class to retain a certain level of control over the ISAs. Therefore, Althusser (1971) claims that:

> It is unimportant whether the institutions in which they are realized are 'public' or 'private.' What matters is how they function. Private institutions can perfectly well 'function' as Ideological State Apparatuses. A reasonably thorough analysis of any one of the ISAs proves it. (p. 144)

Media are good examples of this statement. Despite being owned by private companies, as discussed in the next section, mass media might be controlled by the government and function as an ideological apparatus of the state. ISAs work primarily through ideology rather than force, repression, or coercion. Media, as a prominent ISA, are used to control the masses and to reproduce the capitalist system. In this article, drawing on Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatuses, I explore the complex interplay between the media and the government to illustrate how the media have operated as the Ideological State Apparatus throughout the history of modern Türkiye and under AKP's tenure.

3. Method

In this study, I employed the collective case study method for document analysis. The collective case study is a common method to do qualitative inquiry. It has been used in numerous instances to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of a specific subject and to analyze multiple cases to understand a phenomenon or issue from different perspectives (Crowe et. al., 2011; Stake, 1995). According to Bennet et al. (2012, p. 525), as a qualitative method, a collective case study is chosen as the best means to collect in-depth data. It is key to the design of a case that each case could be understood independently, but also that some comparisons could be across the cases (Bennet et al., 2012). The use of this method suggests that observations of individual cases generate subsequent meanings at the micro level by reflecting the complex interconnections among cases (Gilstrap, 2009). The collective case study method also insinuates the recursive integration of individual cases contributes to the understanding of complex structures and organizations at the macro level (Gilstrap, 2009). The primary focus of a collective case study is to explore the specificity of the cases and how their uniqueness contributes to further understanding (Stake, 1995, 2005).

Since collective case study method involves researching multiple cases, I collected data from the archives of daily Turkish newspapers such as Takvim, Yeni Şafak, Birgün, and Hürriyet Daily News and online reporting websites including Yetkin Report, Voice of

America, and the Committee to Protect Journalists. I selected these newspapers and websites due to their recurring appearance during my research. Additionally, I have incorporated historical instances sourced from both popular and academic literature, as well as scholarly publications that examine the history of Turkish media and media censorship. In the initial phase of the case selection process, I identified themes and subjects related to propaganda, censorship, misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Subsequently, I gathered cases from academic literature and popular sources, including articles, monographs, and books.

Furthermore, I utilized the Google search engine to collect extensive datasets from the internet and to access newspapers' archives and online reporting platforms. Later, I selected the cases by using purposeful sampling. After systematically aggregating individual cases, in the second step, I analyzed cases to define similarities and differences between them and explored existing research and published materials to designate the specificities as well as the commonalities of these cases. Thus, I drew conclusions about the continuity and change in the state's censorship tactics and ISA's disinformation and information warfare strategies.

4. Propaganda or Information Warfare? Disinformation, Misinformation and Fake News

In this section, I define a set of keywords used for data analysis including propaganda, information warfare, disinformation, misinformation, and fake news. Propaganda can be defined as a type of discourse (Walton, 1997), a communicative device for persuasive communication (Martin, 1971), and an attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and behavior (Huang, 2015). Huang proposes that propaganda often is not used for indoctrination of pro-regime values and attitudes, as is traditionally understood, but rather to signal the government's strength in maintaining social control and political order (2015, p. 20). To understand the relationship between power, dominance, and propaganda, Shabo (2008) offers a closer look at four important criteria in propaganda: persuasive function, sizeable target audience, representation of a specific group's agenda, and use of faulty reasoning and/or emotional appeals.

In comparison with propaganda, information warfare is a relatively new concept. It originated in the late 1980s and became popular in 1991 during the Gulf War (Hutchinson, 2006, p. 13). According to Taddeo (2012, p. 6), information warfare is characterized by the use of information and communication technologies that can pose several issues ranging from the military use of such technologies to its political implications or ethical problems engendered by this kind of warfare. Taddeo (2012) states that:

> Information warfare is the use of ICTs [information and communication technologies] with either offensive or defensive purposes to immediately intrude, disrupt, or control the opponent's resources. Put differently, information warfare is "the use of ICTs with an either offensive or defensive purpose to immediately intrude, disrupt, or control

the opponent's resources. (p. 6)

However, the offensive information warfare operations underscore the media's importance in the process (Denning, 1999).

Although many researchers deal either with propaganda or information warfare few scholars discuss both of these concepts in their scholarly work. For instance, Aro (2016) addresses information warfare and the political use of information and manipulation in post-Soviet Russia under Putin's regime. According to Aro (2016), Putin politically employs propaganda as a form of information warfare and mass media as a "weapon" for controlling traditional media to influence public opinion, disseminate vast amounts of false information, and target individual citizens through aggressive operations to serve his interests. Aro's research is significant in providing insights into how authoritarian regimes use disinformation as a persuasive strategy.

In addition to propaganda and information warfare, I also explore two confusing terms that are often incorrectly used as synonyms: misinformation and disinformation. Guess and Lyons (2020) briefly define misinformation as "constituting a claim that contradicts or distorts common understanding of verifiable facts" (p. 10). Although both misinformation and disinformation are false, the main difference between these concepts is "intentional deception" (Guess & Lyons, 2020, p. 10). Disinformation is meant "to deceive, while misinformation may be inadvertent or unintentional" (Guess & Lyons 2020, p. 11). Despite this difference, both concepts refer to the spread of misleading information through various channels, leading to deception and the formation of false beliefs in audiences.

With the rise of the internet and the prevalent use of communication technologies, another concept associated with misinformation and disinformation appeared in media and communication studies: fake news. Fake news can be defined as false or misleading information made to look like a fact-based news story to influence public opinion (Nelson & Taneja, 2018). Thus, fake news may refer to the manipulation of information that can be carried out through the production of false information, or the distortion of true information (Aïmeur et. al., 2023, p. 2). Even though fake news is one of the major concerns in journalism and new media, Deuze (2018) claims that not the fake news or (online) disinformation, but the growing disconnects between different sections in a socio-culturally and economically divided society is the pressing problem. The real problem appears to be profound detachments and divisions between social classes that "benefitted from a globalized, technologized, fast-moving and constantly changing world, and those who struggle to hold on" (Deuze, 2018, para. 22). Therefore, Debord's (1994) claim about the significance of the establishment of the truth in the world can be carried out only and always by a class which can affect the dissolution of all classes, rather the isolated individual

or the atomized and manipulated masses come to the forefront once again.

5. Media, Political Power, and Propaganda in Türkiye: A Brief History (1900- late 1990s)

The relationship between political actors and media institutions has a long history in Türkiye, before the AKP government thoroughly utilized media as a "propaganda machine" to tighten its censorship and political control in society. The history of instrumentalization of the media for the oppression of oppositional voices, and the strict control and censorship of the dissemination of information dates back to the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman press was initially subjected to surveillance and censorship, followed by the regulation and control of broadcast media, namely radio and television in the Republican era.

5.1 Press and Political Control

In the Ottoman Empire, the first newspapers, owned by European diplomats or merchants, were published in French and English (Karaman, 2014). Although the Ottoman state did not directly interfere with the English- and French-language press, the Ottoman language newspapers— despite their low circulation due to low literacy among citizens—were published under strict state control and censorship to suppress any opposition to the Sultan and the state. Following World War I and after the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic, there was a vibrant national press in Türkiye. Raşit Kaya (2009) states that the function and structure of the press media can explain the dynamic press. Between the 1920s and 1940s, the Turkish press was attributed a new role as the vanguard of modernization and Westernization of the country. While opinion newspapers (fikir gazeteleri) such as Yunus Nadi Abalıoğlu's Cumhuriyet excelled as apparatuses of modernization, the socialist and leftist media which defended an alternative form of political system and developmentalism were suppressed harshly (Kaya, 2009, p. 237). Therefore, during that time, the mainstream press became an ally and propaganda tool of the party in power, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP) (The Republican People's Party) (Kaya, 2009). By the 1950s, upon recognizing the influence of media ownership, Turkish businessmen drove significant commercialization within the Turkish press by acquiring newspapers through large corporations. Due to mutual interests and close personal ties between politicians and businessmen, the relationship between the media and politics was further tangled. The Democrat Party, the political party that came to power in the multi-party system, supported particular newspapers and news agencies by providing advertising revenues or transferring money from the covered funds (Topuz, 2003). Prime Minister Adnan Menderes scheduled regular meetings with chief editors and owners of the newspapers to exert his control over content (Bulunmaz, 2012, p. 208). Nevertheless, he complained that despite his close personal relationship with media owners, his businessman friends could not establish strict control over journalists (Kaya, 2009; Topuz, 2003). The interference of prime ministers and the presidents with the content of the press has continued as a governmental habit until today (see Özvarış, 2020). In the 1950s, pejorative meanings such as "Besleme basın" (government-backed media) "naylon

gazete" (a plastic [fake] newspaper) appeared in the daily lexicon and popular culture to designate the propagandistic use of the press (Topuz, 2003). The 1960 coup d'état toppled the Menderes government. The 1961 constitution momentarily brought temporary freedom for journalists and relative autonomy for the press through the Intellectual Workers Law (Fikir İşçileri Kanunu), and the Press Advertisement Institution (Basın İlan Kurumu Kanunu) (Kaya, 2009). During the 1970s, along with a vibrant political climate, the press was divided into two camps: opinion newspapers and tabloid-style commercial press. The popular press has gained a competitive edge by utilizing advanced press technology, which has led to a significant increase in their readership. The opinion newspapers with opposing editorial lines against the government faced political pressure as they struggled to survive amidst low circulation. In the 1970s, the Turkish press was transformed by shifting from opinion journalism to tabloid journalism as many opinion newspapers were eliminated during that time (Yücedoğan, 2012). In the process of media restructuring that began in the 1980s, newspaper editors prioritized advertising, sales, and profits over content (Dinçer, 2022). In the 1990s, the mainstream newspapers began promotion campaigns and prioritized sales numbers rather than surveillance and correlation functions of media. Promotion wars started with cultural products such as books and encyclopedias but quickly evolved into fast-moving consumer goods and consumer products such as plates, detergents, television sets, and toothpaste. In 1997, the promotional battles that boosted newspaper sales were prohibited, restricting promotions to cultural products in line with the goals of periodical publishing. The advent of digital technologies, the consolidation of media ownership, and mainstream newspapers transitioning away from content production, enabled the government to exert greater control over news outlets.

5.2 New media, same oppression: Radio, Television and Politics

In 1927, a new medium, the radio, was introduced to Turkish society. However, until 1938 it remained rudimentary. During the 1930s and 1940s, radio broadcasting, monopolized by the state, was systematically utilized for the dissemination of controlled messages of the government and the modernist ideology of the state (Kocabaşoğlu, 2010). During the 1940s and 1950s, radio was the official media of the state that promoted nation-building and modernization ideologies of the government as well as consumer culture. Thus, it was publicly criticized due to its partisan propagation (Macit & Altuncuoğlu, 2023). Despite radio's growing influence, the most significant development of the 1960s was the first broadcast of the national television channel and the establishment of the national public broadcaster, the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). Initially, TRT gained relative autonomy under the 1961 constitution (Serarslan, 2001). However, TRT, namely television, has been assigned responsibilities to drive the country's economic, social, and cultural development while remaining under state control. TRT followed a broadcasting tradition that was paternalistic designing programs according to what the state elite believed the public needed to create a Turkish cultural identity in conformity with the modern and

'official' image of the Republic (Karanfil, 2020). Throughout the 1980s, TV broadcasting had been state-dominated through the monopoly of the TRT. The governments and state officials exploited television's monopoly power to their advantage to circulate government-controlled information. Particularly, radio and television were systematically used for propaganda of the coup d'etat regime in the 1980s, in which the media's political control and censorship have increased unprecedentedly (Kaptan & Karanfil, 2013). Concurrently, a new medium, the Video Home System (VHS) has risen rapidly as an alternative to the state-controlled media in Türkiye. According to Kaya, "video, as a new entertainment medium found a propitious ground in the poor media environment of Türkiye and spread very rapidly" (1994, p. 391). Video cassettes became a form of oppositional mass media, keeping the military regime on its toes, as the coup regime was unable to directly control its content and dissemination. The VHS recordings of theatre groups such as Devekuşu Kabare which openly criticized the government were widely circulated both in big cities and small towns. The circulation of video cassettes in Türkiye during that time surpassed the video cassette consumption in Western Europe (Kaya, 2009, p. 242) as the VHS emerged as an alternative audio-visual medium to the state-controlled television channels. VHS consumption dominated the media scene in Türkiye until it was replaced by private television channels.

In the 1990s, the neo-liberalization policies and the privatization of public broadcasting transformed Türkiye's media environment and changed the relationship between politics and media. In 1990, the first commercial TV channel, Star 1 owned by Ahmet Özal, the elder son of then-President Turgut Özal, and Cem Uzan, a businessman, violated the media law and broke the monopoly of TRT by broadcasting to Türkiye from Germany. Due to the political power of the Özal family, despite TRT's losing its de facto monopoly on broadcasting, TRT and state officials ignored Star 1 as an illegal TV channel (Ogan, 1992). The newly established TV channel was initially perceived as an alternative to TRT's state-controlled programming; however, it was also utilized to bolster the influence of the ruling party (ANAP) during the leadership of Özal. Following the launch of STAR 1, unauthorized private television channels and unlicensed pirate radio stations began to broadcast by violating governing regulations. Accordingly, these TV and radio stations burgeoned and created a vibrant media environment of the country that could not be efficiently controlled and censored by the state in the 1990s. Back then, there were 3,500 newspapers and magazines (16 of them were national dailies) and the growth rate of the Turkish radio and TV industry in 1998 was 24.3% (Kaya, 2009, p. 243). Kaya (2009) states that after the amendment of the constitution in 1994 to legalize private radio and TV stations, there were 1150 radio stations (with more than 30 national radio stations), 261 TV channels (230 local, 15 regional, and 16 national TV channels) operating in Türkiye (p. 243). Based on the OECD report, the average growth rate of the Radio and Television industry for OECD countries was 3.4%. Türkiye's fragmented, decentralized, and "the fastest-growing media industry among the OECD countries" (Kaya, 2009, p. 243) has not only made Türkiye

a front-runner on a global scale but also created an environment that has been used to support the opposition and make the government control of media and propaganda more difficult. However, plurality has not always led to diversity of voices as seen in the case of digital platforms. In the 2000s, big conglomerates such as Doğan Holding, Çalık Holding, Doğuş Group, and Demirören Group began to launch digital platforms and purchased long-established newspapers and popular private TV channels to increase their profit and gain a competitive advantage in politics. One of the most prominent digital platforms in Türkiye was Digiturk, which was launched in 1999 by Çukurova Holding and offered sports (e.g. Lig TV), documentaries (e.g. National Geographic) and movies (e.g. MovieMax HD). Doğan Holding's D-Smart, was founded in 1999 and offered new television channels such as Discovery HD, Kanal D HD, Star TV HD and EuroSports HD. After the AKP came to power in 2002, these conglomerates have been subjected to and complied with the AKP government due to their substantial interest in different economic sectors (Adaklı, 2006).

In this section, by providing a historical overview of the relationship between media and politics, I have illustrated that the stringent regulation and control of media by the state and its utilization for government propaganda is not a new phenomenon in Türkiye, rather it is a recurring feature in the context of Turkish politics. In the next section, I scrutinize how the contemporary media's expansive reach, rapid digital information production and dissemination, and global scope of national media have significantly transformed and constricted the AKP government's information warfare and propaganda strategies.

6. Media politics, propaganda, and censorship under the AKP government

The AKP ascended to power in 2002 through the unification of nationalist, conservative, liberal, and Islamist factions. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the leader of the AKP and seized political power first as the prime minister (2003-2014), and later as the president (2014-present). In the first term of the AKP government, media outlets were not under strict pressure or explicit censorship. After Erdoğan became the president in 2014, the party ostensibly became semi-autocratic and Islamist. As I explain later, in the last twenty years, the AKP has gradually tightened its repressive measures and extended its control over the media.

In the early years of the AKP regime, Türkiye witnessed a relatively democratic media environment for Islamist and minority media. Although TRT has continued to function as the propaganda machine of the government, the privately owned newspapers and TV channels experienced freedom to some extent. For instance, before the 1990s, Islamic TV channels were unheard of in the Turkish media. In the 1990s, businesspeople were known for their alignment with Islamist ideologies and their economic and political ties with the government invested in the television industry. A brief history of two TV channels, Türkiye Gazetesi Radyo ve Televizyonu (TGRT) and Samanyolu TV (STV), exemplifies the

AKP's approach to media as a cultural battleground to promote the party's propaganda and Islamist capitalist ideology as well as how the government eradicates the traditional media outlets when they defy the government.

TGRT, the first Islamist-conservative TV channel in Türkiye, was launched in 1993. The channel broadcasted TV series, reality shows, and news with conservative-religious content and became popular during the early 2000s. Until News Corporation purchased the broadcasting rights of TGRT in 2006, the channel was on good terms with the AKP government and the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK)—the state agency that regulates radio and TV broadcasts and online content. After being acquired by News Corporation, TGRT was then restructured and continued broadcasting as FOX TV Turkey. Until it was sold to the Walt Disney Company in 2024, the channel remained one of the major opposition TV channels. Therefore, unlike TGRT, Fox TV Turkey was heavily penalized, frequently fined, and issued broadcast suspension several times by RTÜK. In 2023, FOX TV was subject to the most substantial financial penalty among television stations (Yetkin Report, 2023).

Following TGRT, another Islamic television channel, Samanyolu TV (STV), was launched in 1994. This channel was affiliated with the Gülen community—a controversial Islamist movement (cemaat in Turkish). By 2010, although the Gülen community had six TV channels reaching 114 countries, terrestrially in Türkiye and through cable and satellite abroad, STV remained their main channel until 2016. These channels became famous for making propaganda for the Gülen community around the world. In April 2016, Samanyolu TV's license was revoked by RTÜK, and the channel was closed because of publicly accelerating conflict between the AKP government and the Gülen community. After the coup d'état attempt by the Gülenists in 2016, the oppositional TV channels of the Gülen movement have ceased completely.

The Kurdish media outlets shared a fate akin to that of the oppositional Islamic media. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Turkish state denied Kurdish broadcasting rights and banned broadcasting in the Kurdish language. Before the AKP government took office, Türkiye began legalizing music, radio, and television broadcasts in Kurdish in 2001 as part of its efforts to join the European Union. The AKP eased the implementation of the reforms in 2003. However, in addition to applying for a Kurdish language license from RTÜK, Kurdish songs, for instance, were required pre-approval for airing on radio and TV channels (Algan, 2004). The media reform allowed the broadcasting of Kurdish songs if they were pre-approved for airing and required the radio and TV channels to apply for a Kurdish language license from RTÜK. In 2006, there were only two television stations in Türkiye (Gün TV and Söz TV in Diyarbakır) that were given a Kurdish broadcasting license. In 2009, TRT established a Kurdish language station called TRT 6 (also known as TRT Kurdî).

All the local media stations in Diyarbakır considered the cultural and political capital of the Kurdish population in eastern Türkiye, were issued a Kurdish language broadcasting license that enabled bilingual broadcasts to begin in 2010. However, in the late 2010s, the AKP government began targeting Kurdish media outlets. The Kurdish media has faced political control, coercion, intimidation, and censorship. After the failed 2016 coup d'état attempt, the government shut down 180 media organizations following the state of emergency decrees (Algan, 2020), including pro-Kurdish opposition television stations such as IMC TV, Gün TV and Kurdish television channel Zarok TV over "terror propaganda." Local media outlets in the region, including broadcast channels, were issued fines, and Kurdish journalists and broadcasters faced arrest and incarceration on charges of "terror" and "espionage." Although numbers vary according to different sources, Türkiye set new records for the highest number of journalists arrested worldwide and over 40 journalists were jailed in 2022 (Hacaloğlu & Kamiloğlu, 2022), the majority of whom are Kurdish journalists. To build a controlled media environment and to facilitate censorship, the AKP government has used the imprisonment of journalists, more than half of whom were Kurdish journalists (The Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023), and shut down media outlets under broadly and vaguely defined anti-terrorism laws.

In Erdoğan's New Türkiye, not only minority and ethnic media but also mainstream media conglomerates that are critical of the AKP government are subjected to government control and the loss of autonomy, even the ownership of the media outlet. The case of Doğan Media Group illuminates the oppressive strategies employed by the AKP when media conglomerates refuse to comply with the government. In 2008, after a public conflict arose between Erdoğan and Aydın Doğan, the owner of the Doğan Media Group, Erdoğan publicly urged the people to boycott newspapers and television channels linked to the conglomerate (Kaptan & Haridakis, 2025). Immediately after this clash, the government brought tax charges against the Doğan Holding. Erdoğan also undertook measures to malign and discredit journalists associated with this media conglomerate which became a rhetorical propaganda strategy (Kaptan & Haridakis, 2025). The dispute escalated in 2015 as well as the political pressure on the Doğan Media Group. In 2018, the newspapers (e.g. Hürriyet, Posta, and Fanatik) and TV channels (e.g. CNN Türk and Kanal D) of the conglomerate were acquired by Demirören Group, a pro-government conglomerate. Hence, Erdoğan and the AKP government have silenced yet another critical media outlet and taken it under political control by changing hands.

In the AKP era, forcing oppositional media outlets to pay large fines, shutting down the TV stations, or suspending broadcasts of TV channels for a few days has become a widely used strategy for controlling media. Under Erdoğan's leadership, RTÜK has fined independent news media whereas pro-government media outlets have not received fines. For example, in the 2023 national elections, RTÜK announced that it was investigating

six opposition TV channels such as Fox TV, Halk TV, Tele 1, and Flash TV for "insulting the public" through coverage of the presidential election runoff. RTÜK said viewers had complained about election coverage but did not provide specific examples. Meanwhile, RTÜK has dismissed criticism of how it operates (RTÜK'ten FOX TV, 2023). Put differently, in the last decade, in addition to traditional oppression strategies, such as censoring media content, shutting down TV stations, acquisition of opposition TV channels and newspapers by pro-AKP conglomerates, arresting journalists, imposing fines on media outlets that are noncompliance with the government, and using taxes levied by a state against particular media holdings, the AKP government has implemented a series of regulations to limit social media use, while enhancing the authority of RTÜK in monitoring television content (Algan & Kaptan, 2023) as well as social media and digital platforms.

7. Disinformation and fake news as informally sanctioned political strategies

In the last two decades, pro-government daily Turkish newspapers, online reporting websites, and broadcast media have tended to spin news stories in ways that could discursively raise the fear of either the government or the opposing parties (Akser, 2018; Akser & Baybars, 2022). Hence, the Turkish public has experienced intense disinformation and the circulation of fake news. The widespread use of fake news has evolved into an informally accepted political strategy of the government, as no substantial measures have been taken to counter it. Thus, the government-friendly media have utilized fake news for propaganda to manipulate and deceive the public.

7.1. Fake News, Disinformation and Global Celebrities

As the use of fake news has become a part of post-truth politics, (Saka, 2020, p. 76), the public in Türkiye has been exposed to an increasing number of fake news generated and circulated by the pro-government media. According to Saka, "While social media seems to be the primary culprit in disseminating misinformation and disinformation in the United States and Western European countries, mainstream media, and authorities become the source in Turkey" (2020, p. 73). My findings are consistent with this argument, which underlines that the pro-government media are the major sources for the circulation of disinformation and fake news. Therefore, the discourse used in both traditional and online editions of newspapers serves as an example of how the mainstream media, under the control of the AKP government, contributes to advancing the political agenda of the dominant group, thus effectively fulfilling "the persuasive function of propaganda" (Shabo 2008).

Turkish society has experienced intensification of disinformation and acceleration of fake news as a propaganda tool particularly during the Gezi protests— civil unrest that unfolded in Istanbul's Gezi Park and swelled into thousands of people protesting the AKP government all over the country. The newspapers aligned with the AKP government, such as Takvim and Yeni Şafak, have published either fictitious "interviews" or manipulated

segments of genuine interviews conducted with renowned global journalists and scholars. In June 2013, a pro-government newspaper Takvim published a "fake interview" with CNN International's famous anchorwoman Christine Amanpour, titled "Dirty Confession" (Fung 2013). The news appeared on the first page of the newspaper and quoted Amanpour as if she said CNN had covered the recent protests in Türkiye on behalf of business interests that wanted to hurt the country's economy. Amanpour refuted on Twitter (currently X) that she conducted an interview revealing that CNN had hoped to "destabilize" Turkey through its reporting of the recent uprising (Fung, 2013). After public outcry and harsh reactions from the international press, Takvim admitted that it was a fake interview. As a disinformation tactic, this fake interview serves as an example of the manipulation of symbolic communication of how fake news can be utilized to shape and govern public discourse and emotions per the interests of the government. This targeted approach was aimed at national audiences, epitomizing the significance of strategic control of dissemination of disinformation.

Not only during the Gezi Park protests but also after the protests ended, the mainstream media have continued to disseminate disinformation through fake news. According to Bilgiç (2018):

> There were two discursive attempts, whose accuracy was later discredited. One was Erdoğan's claim that the protesters drank alcohol in a mosque after entering it without removing their shoes. Another, also endorsed by Erdoğan, was that a woman [wearing] a headscarf and with her baby had been beaten and urinated on by scores of men who were half-naked and wore leather masks and trousers. These 'alternative facts', fabricated by the ruling elite as an 'othering' performance, aimed to appeal to the conservative segments of society that had already been disciplined through the Turkish–Islamic synthesis and neo-Ottomanism in the last three decades (p. 271).

Erdoğan himself also reiterated this fake news and a false claim concerning holding video recordings of protesters drinking beer in the mosque in his 2013 and 2022 speeches despite the lack of videos or evidence (Kaptan & Haridakis, 2025). Yet, these false claims and disinformation have been widely circulated through mainstream and social media networks that broadcast Erdoğan's speeches.

Correspondingly, Yeni Şafak —a pro-Islamic newspaper—published a partially fabricated interview with globally renowned scholar and activist Noam Chomsky. A front-page article headlined "The Arab Spring Has Now Found Its True Spirit", a so-called quotation from Chomsky, created a controversy in Egypt. According to Yeni Şafak, in the interview, Chomsky admitted that if the Middle East is peaceful and everything is in order, Western countries start to panic and make plans. Later, the Daily removed the bogus

interview and apologized (Turkish Daily apologizes for , 2013). Through "the distribution or dissemination of false, mistaken, or misleading information in an intentional, deliberate, or purposeful effort to mislead, deceive or confuse" (Fetzer, 2004, p. 231), these dailies not only challenged the notion of objective media and public service journalism, but also evolved into identifiable, yet officially approved, channels for disseminating disinformation and fake news with implicit endorsement from the government.

Today, newspapers, TV channels, and internet portals were acquired by AKP-friendly businesses through questionable funds and processes, known as "Yandaş Medya" (Slanted Media) or "Havuz Medyası" (Pool Media) continue their heavy pro-government propaganda. All these fake news examples demonstrate the fourth function of propaganda which is the "use of faulty reasoning and/or emotional appeals" (Shabo, 2008). Pro-AKP media endeavor to solidify conservative and nationalist factions by perpetuating polarization within society through the publication of sensational yet deceptive news, particularly during pivotal periods such as the Gezi Protests. For the pro-AKP media, the political function of fake news is to polarize society and set a political agenda to control public discussions. Fake news becomes a "noise" in the news media milieu to manipulate audiences by creating confusion and driving their sentiments.

8. Conclusion

Since Marxist scholar Althusser (1971) criticized media in the 1970s as ideological state apparatuses, the media and communication technologies have become more powerful and more influential in many aspects of life, including politics. Correspondingly, the "inverted truth" that Debord warned us about has become more widespread in national and global politics (see Aïmeur et. al., 2023; Tandoc, 2021; Saka, 2020; Deuze, 2018; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). Recent examples in Turkish media illustrate that we have strayed significantly from Debord's assertion, as the political authority has not only drifted from a functioning democracy but also orchestrated the dissemination of disinformation. In other words, contrary to Debord's argument, the Turkish government has ceased regulating and monitoring its activities. By taking an authoritarian turn, AKP's efforts are concentrated on controlling the media and utilizing disinformation for political gain.

In this article, I discussed the Turkish media landscape to indicate that the instrumentalization of media for government propaganda and information warfare is a longstanding practice in Turkish politics. In Türkiye, the relationship between media and politics has always been disclosed as a historical predicament since the early years of the Republic. Through the lens of historical analysis, I indicated that the government's rigorous oversight of the media and the utilization of national media as a means of disseminating governmental propaganda in the context of information warfare is a well-established practice in Turkish political history. However, despite the historical continuity of political

strategies for monitoring, surveilling, and censoring media, the widening breadth of the media landscape, the rapid dissemination of information through information and communication technologies, and its global reach have prompted a notable transformation in government propaganda strategies in the last two decades (Kaptan & Haridakis, 2025). Under the AKP government, the relationship between media and politics has been determined by the government's overwhelming oppression and hegemony over the media as well as the spread of disinformation. The ethnic, minority, and opposition media have suffered from political pressures as the AKP government strived to secure the status quo. In the meantime, the pro-government media have infiltrated the media content to control the dissemination of information. The deployment of new propaganda strategies such as the distribution of fake news, false content creation, and publicizing disinformation resulted in the utilization of mainstream media for the manipulation of the public while strengthening the control of media by the state. Therefore, despite fundamental correspondences with previous governments' strategies, under the AKP regime, media institutions have been deployed to build a propaganda machine by instrumentalizing disinformation, misinformation, and fake news which became prevalent and unofficially sanctioned strategic tools as well as manipulation strategies to dominate information warfare. As Ayan (2019) states, the AKP government gradually, yet radically restructured the media by controlling media conglomerates, directing media owners and journalists, capturing and orchestrating media outlets, micro-managing the media structure, and changing press and broadcasting policies including the principles of journalism. Therefore, more than ever before, the Turkish media have complied with the political objectives and discourses of AKP's ideology.

In conclusion, the AKP regime has utilized media institutions as ideological apparatuses of the state to establish a propaganda machine through the strategic deployment of disinformation, and the dissemination of false information, commonly known as fake news. Despite bearing a resemblance to strategies of previous governments, the AKP government has taken a more centralized approach to assert dominance in information warfare in the current media landscape in Türkiye. Thus, disinformation and fake news have been employed by government-friendly media to influence and deceive the public while they have become unofficially sanctioned and prevalent political strategies.

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