

Mayor of Ankara: the diary of a troll

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Gezi protests started as a small, localised environmental protest against the destruction of one of the few remaining green spaces in central Istanbul. Though what made thousands join the protests has been the sheer police violence against the peaceful protesters in Gezi Park - just another sign of the government's attitude of 'anything goes, once you are elected democratically'.

Police violence accompanied and signified the ever-increasing authoritarianism with respect to freedom of speech, media and basic human rights of AKP rule over the last ten years. This authoritarianism has become even more marked in the course of the Government's inability to 'send the protesters back home'. The government, however, continues to disregard the fact that many protesters challenge this authoritarianism, and constantly repeat the mantra that in their rule, not only the economy, but also all civil rights flourish. This is despite the fact that Turkey has the highest number of journalists and students in jail, and ranks 148 among 178 countries with respect to freedom of the media, according to Human Rights Watch.

Perhaps one could argue that there is freedom of speech in Turkey as long as what you say is in line with what the government affirms: the media has freedom, as long as they publish what the government approves. Basic human rights such as the right to protest are also granted, as long as one attends the Prime Minister's rallies. The list continues.

Due to the media lockdown in the early days of the protests (and to a limited extent still), social media has provided a useful information resource for many. Twitter in particular, has been the main source of information. According to a report published by researchers from New York University, over the course of a week at least 2 million tweets mentioning the #direngeziparki (950,000), #occupygezi (170,000) and #geziparki (50,000) were sent by at least 15,000 users. No wonder Prime Minister Erdogan declared Twitter to be "a menace to society", as the information they tried to suppress by preventing media outlets from reporting the protests were disseminated thanks to Twitter.

Nevertheless, soon after PM Erdogan's comment on Twitter, detentions started for users who shared comments critical of the government or the police; and one after another, threats followed that the Government was 'watching' and that if you tweet, you should be ready to give an account of your tweets.

But what happens, if the person who is tweeting is from the government itself? The government holds liable those who tweet and treats tweets as evidence of crime. The Mayor of Ankara, Melih Gokcek, has sued so many people over their Twitter comments that now there is even a mock-website called '[Has Melih Gokcek sued me?](#)'. Although Mr. Gokcek is not the only person in the government who uses Twitter in this way, I would like to focus this argument on him specifically due to his recent Twitter campaign against the BBC Turkish service journalist Selin Girit, hence broadening his spectrum of threats and intimidations outside the country.

In an article published at the *Index on Censorship*, Whitney Phillips gives this profile of trolls. She says: "they self-identify as trolls, tend to be intelligent, are

playful and mischievous and wildly antagonistic. (...) In terms of behaviour, trolling ranges from the vaguely distasteful to the borderline illegal: trolls taunt unsuspecting targets with seemingly racist, seemingly sexist, and/or seemingly homophobic language; post shocking imagery, including pornography and gore, in order to derail conversation; and flood discussion threads with non sequiturs or grotesque distortions of other users' positions" (Phillips, 2011: 68-69).

Phillips also notes that trolls post deliberately and often excessively inflammatory, off-topic messages online, such as in an online forum, chat room, blog (or in this case Twitter) with the intention of provoking readers into an emotional response.

With this definition we might ask whether Melih Gokcek's excessive tweeting against the journalist Selin Girit counts as trolling.



Selin Girit was reporting from one of the forums she attended during her time in Istanbul. Her tweet reads:

"A suggestion from Yogurtcu Park Forum: Let's not be the standing man, but the man that stops. Let's stop the economy. Do not consume. Do not consume for six months. They will listen."

Under normal circumstances, and in a country where there is functioning [freedom of media](#), no one would take much note of this tweet. Ms. Girit is a journalist, she was just filing a report from a forum. Under normal circumstances and in a country where freedom of speech actually exists, some would agree, some would disagree, yes. That is essentially the gist of freedom of speech, after all. But in Turkey, a member of the ruling party and Mayor of the Capital instead used this as an opportunity to launch a defamation campaign.

Mr. Gokcek is renowned for his adoration of conspiracy theories. Last week, for instance, he published a photograph from his Twitter account of the ammunition the protesters were hiding in their tents at Gezi Park, oblivious to the fact that the photograph was actually fake and was published by a satire newspaper (*Zaytung*) to mock the government's continuous manufacture of facts about the protests. Hence, it is not completely improbable that he will start a conspiracy

theory about the journalist, Selin Girit. This is what he wrote on his Twitter account:

"They want to destroy our economy with an agent on behalf of England, who is in Turkey. They are dreaming of Turkey becoming 'sick man of Europe' again. This is the concrete evidence."

Mr. Gokcek after targeting Ms. Girit in person with the above comment, went on to urge his followers and supporters to tweet excessively with the hash tag #INGILTEREADINAAJANLIKYPAMASELINGIRIT which roughly translates as "Don't be an agent on behalf of England, Selin Girit". He tweeted numerous times for "all patriots" to continue tweeting on this hash tag, so that the BBC is taught a lesson and that the message is heard around the globe.

The Mayor constantly updated his followers that their hash tag was rising in the Turkish and global trends, and for a short time succeeded in becoming the top hashtag both in Turkey and globally. What was the message the Mayor wanted so much to get out there? That Ms. Girit is an agent? That it is not *okay* for journalists to report from the protesters' forums in Turkey? That as a journalist working for a foreign newspaper, it is not *okay* to come to Turkey and delve into Turkish matters? What was the lesson he was trying to teach the BBC? Do not report from Turkey?

Luckily, there are still sensible people in Turkey, and they happen to use Twitter, too. Gokcek's campaign caused huge indignation and the fightback received widespread support, with hash tags like #selingiritgazetecidir (Selin Girit is a journalist), #provokatormelihgokcek (Melih Gokcek is a provocateur) also rising in the Twitter Trends. These counter-tweets to Melih Gokcek not surprisingly infuriated him. The Mayor threatened to sue each and every one who tweets using the hash tag that called him a provocateur, and Girit a journalist.

So Mr. Gokcek's behaviour manifests several aspects of the troll profile, in his campaign against the BBC journalist, Selin Girit. He uses sexist enemy images (For instance, in one of his Tweets, the Mayor writes: "Yet another Tweet by this lady. Proves as to who she is servicing"). His call on 'all the patriots', 'all citizens', 'Turkey', 'Those who love their country' in fact 'everyone' to support his campaign, has the intention of provoking his followers and supporters into an emotional response. He is following up his campaign against Selin Girit with another Twitter hashtag campaign, this time against the CNN (#stoplyingCNN) for which he sent more than 60 Tweets over the course of three hours, urging everyone to join 'for the sake of Turkey'.

The kind of freedom of speech that exists in Turkey allows Melih Gokcek to troll about anything and everyone he pleases, be it the BBC, CNN, or an individual journalist or a protester. This freedom also allows him to openly threaten everyone who tweets in an anti-campaign to him, or against him. Although I believe Mr. Gokcek has every right to state his opinions on Twitter and even accuse journalists and protesters of treachery, I believe trolling should be treated differently.

The potential of trolling hate speech for incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence cannot be ignored. The government has already responded to the Gezi Protest with a divisive violent clampdown, beginning with the Prime Minister's constant refrain to the effect that he is having difficulty in holding the other 50% of the country in their homes and preventing them from attacking the protesters. Trolling becomes especially dangerous when the government in power also starts to use it as a political tool for 'correcting' those who do not share the government's views. Mr. Gokcek on his biographical information on Twitter says: "We need to discuss fearlessly but without insulting each other. This is what democracy is about". This statement should also include him and his party.



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