The persistence of race, violence, and state in a post-truth world

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ABSTRACT

Decentering presentist and technological explanations behind the global rise of post-truth regimes, we propose thinking about race not as an additive but a vital organizer of right-wing political projects and their post-truth information orders. We present two cases from Turkey. With Roboski massacre in 2011, we remind how information neutrality claimed by the state is a fantasy always loaded with rooted systems of racial inequalities. With the story of minority newspaper *Özgür Gündem* and state violence against journalism covering the Kurdish conflict in the 1990s, we address the problems of racialized whitewashing behind post-truth scholarship, showing how the racialized nature of news production and state violence is a historical reality. Overall, we underscore the persistence of the nation state in producing racialized regimes of truth and post-truth, involving violence derived from the creation of doubt, infliction of humiliation, and denials of dignity towards the racialized others. We call for scholars of disinformation to not only centralize race but also think in more transnational terms because imperial legacies are in the Global South both visibly and subtly enable the infliction of state violence on racialized minorities and their media producers.

Introduction

During a political rally organized about a week before the first round of Turkey's Presidential Elections on 14 May 2023, President Erdoğan showed his supporters a doctored video to tap into nationalist sentiments. This video included footage from both the opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign song (*Haydi*/Come on) and images from a video released ten months ago by PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party).[1] Using the doctored video, Erdoğan gave the clear message that the opposition leader Kılıçdaroğlu was a traitor collaborating with PKK leaders.

While many progressive reporters, politicians and activists blamed the government for lying and foregrounded the distinctiveness of this digital post-truth moment, a major political subject was missing in the fierce public debates and contestations around the video's authenticity. The overwhelming focus on the digitality of the video served to sideline how race as a major political fault line shaped this piece of propaganda. Simply put, although Kurds as the racialized other of the country have radically informed how state

propaganda historically works, that Kurdishness in the first place enabled the production of this propaganda video remained in the margins of these public discussions.

As the video's publicity was about to dwindle, pro-government figure Abdülkadir Selvi re-ignited the debates when he wanted Erdoğan in a live interview to comment on the video and clarify the fog around its authenticity. Erdoğan's response was vague. He first stuck to his claims about the video's authenticity but then confirmed the doctored nature of the video:

> "He (Kılıçdaroğlu) has footage with those (PKK leaders) in Qandil Mountain. *Whether edited or not …* They did record the video. PKK members supported the opposition with their own videos".[2]

While this new revelation preoccupied the nation, the debate took another direction when Murat Kurum, the former Minister of Environment and Urbanization, increased the fog around the video and exploited the political indeterminacy around it again in a live interview. He both suggested that the authenticity of the video *did not matter* and highlighted that they in fact *didn't know* whether the video was doctored or not.

> "It doesn't matter whether the footage is real or not. We already know what happened. What's the matter of controversy? We don't know whether it's doctored or not. That's what our President also said. We don't know whether it's doctored or not".[3]

Just like the U.S citizens under the Presidency of Donald Trump, citizens of Turkey were lectured by state officials who publicly declared that truth did not matter. After all, they already knew "what happened," while at the same time didn't know whether the video was "doctored or not." They were purposefully creating a political uncertainty to defend the strategic use of this videoclip.

Welcome to the latest episode in Turkey's long history of state propaganda, which now goes well beyond traditional forms of censorship and denial. Previously, even in the dark 1990s, there used to be somewhat a consensus around the existence of facts, which, according to state officials, at least had to be hid, censored or manipulated to serve the state's higher interests and protect state officials involved in illegal or unlawful acts against citizens.[4] Currently, state officials mobilize and enjoy the viral production and circulation of lies, fake news, and disinformation across social media platforms, while not bothering to hide the facts or entertain the possibility of a dialogue with the public. In this paper, we show that Turkey's current information order is better understood as a continuity with the past, especially considering that race and political violence have consistently shaped the production of information, criminality, and doubt in the country.

De-exceptionalizing post-truth through race and the state

The common term for our global order of informational malaise is "post-truth," whose symptoms include Donald Trump, Brexit, the global rise of "alt-right" communities and troll armies across the globe. For some, this post-truth information order is primarily enabled by digital technologies.[5] For instance, in his morbid explication on the relationship between information and the collapse of liberal democracy, Byul-Chung Han describes a regime of "new nihilism" in which "the belief in facticity is lost" and "the

distinction between truth and lie is undermined".[6] For him, the digital erodes the factual and "is directly opposed to the factuality".[7] It is not just critical theorists that ring the bells for the collapse of truth. Alarmist documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma* or television shows like *Black Mirror* have created a global popular forum, where the global rise of neo-fascisms, polarization, and social apathy are predominantly accounted by algorithms and ill-intentioned technology firms.

While right-wing politicians and movements surely exploit the internet, such technological explanations fail to highlight how race is a long-standing, structural but invisible and silent organizer of physical and symbolic violence through production, collection and circulation of information.[8] That is why the liberal Turkish citizens in Western Turkey were surprised and even felt insulted when the country's widely respected news channel CNNTürk broadcast a documentary about penguins rather than covering the Gezi Uprising and the police violence against activists in 2013. It was during Gezi that the privileged Turkish citizens living in Western Turkey first came to realize the uneven and racialized dynamics behind news production. Twitter was full of confessions by these citizens, who apologized for their past indifference to the political violence faced by Kurdish citizens in especially the 1990s. What they knew about Turkey's racialized others, they now realized, came from the same news media ecology, which they imagined to be objective until Gezi Uprising.

In this essay, we align with calls[9] to decenter technological and presentist explanations behind the global rise of post-truth regimes and propose thinking about race not as an additive but a vital organizer of right-wing political projects and their post-truth information orders at the national and global level. We present two cases from Turkey. The first one foregrounds Roboski massacre in 2011, a major political event targeting Kurdish citizens at the Iraq-Turkey border. To deflect political attention from this racially charged event with 34 casualties, the government intentionally circulated affective remarks that normalized the deaths of Kurds as Turkey's racialized others, while also igniting conspiratorial sentiments regarding the Turkish nation's future. Yet, rather than grasping the government's political communication during Roboski as a traditional form of propaganda or a strategic informational pollution, we consider the government's move as a continuous form of political violence against racialized communities. Aiming to keep the "Turkishness contract"[10] intact, the government's explanation of the massacre and the media's framing drew racial boundaries around what should circulate as legitimate information and what should not. In addition to its racialized logics, the informational order established around Roboski massacre shows how post-truth regimes are politically orchestrated by the state apparatus and its captured news media ecology.[11] Roboski is thus a reminder of how information neutrality claimed by the state – as well as liberals and even some scholars of public sphere and political economy to a certain extent – is a fantasy always loaded with rooted systems of ethnic and racial inequalities.[12]

Focusing on an earlier period, the second case concerns the story of a minority newspaper (*Özgür Gündem*) and its struggle to document truth and state violence against the Kurds and human rights activists in the 1990s. Shedding light on historical continuities regarding race, state violence and post-truth, we go back to the 1990s because the historical amnesia and racialized whitewashing behind the post-truth scholarship is at work in Turkey as it is across the globe.[13] Specifically, the nostalgia with respect to the "golden

age" of mainstream press before the current AKP government came to power in 2002 serves to marginalize the state's racialized forms of systemic violence in policing and maintaining a securitized information order.[14] Although the political-economic capture of media by the AKP is formidable, the racialized nature of news production and state violence is an ongoing and historical reality in Turkey.

Ultimately, foregrounding *Özgür Gündem* and the political violence this newspaper and its workers faced in the 1990s, we critique scholarship to associate post-truth only with the digital and the current AKP government and call for bringing back history and state into our analysis.[15] Following Paula Chakravartty's (interview in this issue) caution against "forgetting the colonial and racial preconditions of our capitalist digital economy" –in our case the cultural construction of reality through news – we remind how the state has long been at work in organizing and imposing the racialized dynamics of whom to believe, what to believe, and the consequences of not aligning with or believing the racialized truth of the state.[16] In other words, while journalists are increasingly facing trolling, political lynching, and mob violence across the globe,[17] Kurdish press and its workers have always faced violence before "the digital" and had to endure the state's never-ending tests of believability while simultaneously fighting against official lies and systematic manipulation of facts about state violence.

Roboski Massacre: Normalizing the death of Kurds as racialized others

In the night of 28 December 2011, Turkish jets' bombardment killed 34 cross-border couriers moving towards Turkey through the Iraqi border. Although there was much public discussion on social media throughout the night, mainstream news media did not cover the immediate loss of 34 couriers until the official statement by the Chief of Staff at 11:50 a.m. the next morning. Once Chief of Staff gave media the green light about coverage, journalists started covering the massacre but only with carefully chosen frames. According to mainstream Turkish media, an "event" (*olay*) had happened on the Iraqi border. In their stories, the perpetrators and targets of the event as well as the ethnic dimensions of this "event" remained obscure. One could not know why 34 people had died and who they were. In time, an even more ideological form of commentary emerged. Accordingly, extensive media coverage of the "event" was not useful but in fact benefiting the PKK.[18] The then Prime Minister Erdoğan soon adopted this discourse, standing harshly against political demands for a public apology:[19]

> We paid compensation well above the legal limits and sent the money to the families' accounts … Demands about declaring an apology and all that. That apology has been uttered with the steps we have taken … It is the terrorist organization and its extensions that want to put this on national agenda … Nobody including the media should exploit this issue.

Implying that the blood money should be enough, Erdoğan's remarks remind one of Frantz Fanon's comparison between the lives of the colonizer and the colonized, where the latter are worthless and even lesser humans. That is why "compensation well above the legal limits" should have been enough to stop relatives of the deceased from making political demands. Speaking at the Third Congress of the AKP Women's Branch, Erdoğan further kept criticizing the media and uttered the following

controversial words, which galvanized the public: "I consider abortion to be murder … I say every abortion is Uludere."[20]

Suddenly, the focus had shifted from the massacre to a national abortion debate. There are ways to interpret Erdoğan's intervention. On the one hand, one could be tempted to see these remarks as attempts to deflect attention from a massacre. On the other hand, stating that "every abortion is Uludere," Erdoğan and other figures in the government were constructing a "bitter argument" to manage national politics and public desires along the lines of race, ethnicity, and gender.[21] Specifically, suggesting that being bombarded by military jets is the same as having abortion worked to relativize and normalize racialized death through comparison, in fact a comparison with women who fiercely struggle to take political decisions with respect to their own bodies in Turkey's authoritarian setting.[22] Erdoğan's affective remarks and bitter arguments worked to simultaneously put the bodies of Kurds and women into motion.

After all, the report of a sub-commission in the Turkish parliament concluded that the massacre was unintentional because based on drone footage, it was technically impossible to identify the citizens on the border. There was no legal ground for public prosecution because according to the prosecutor, the officers on trial were involved in an "unavoidable mistake" (*kaçınılmaz hata*). "Unavoidable mistake" was again a useful frame for the news media to conclude "the event" on the Iraq-Turkey border. Yet, the conclusion didn't work for families and activists, whose questions persist to this date. Under what conditions and for which racial groups are "unavoidable mistakes" acceptable? What are the consequences of these mistakes with respect to mourning? If "compensation well above the limits" was enough for the death of certain racial groups, then the racialized dynamics undergirding sovereignty and life, whose lives are worth mourning and whose deaths can easily be normalized through varying moral justifications, modes of killing, and even rational calculations that determine the market equivalence of one's life remained unanswered.[23]

As police violence against people of color in and beyond the USA has historically confirmed, race sharply undergirds "unavoidable mistakes" and how these mistakes or "accidents" are framed (or rendered completely invisible) in the media. But there is more than just the media. The luxury to conduct unavoidable mistakes with deadly consequences - albeit without any accountability - is already monopolized by the sovereign across different domains of social life (i.e. education, housing, public policy) and consolidated in a public sphere structured by racial inequalities.[24] That is how the mainstream press easily trivialized Roboski by either framing it as an "event" or representing the condolence visits of officials and their spouses to the families of the deceased as "operation of affection," once again implying a hierarchical relationship between the state and its racialized subjects.[25] For instance, one year after the massacre, *Akşam* newspaper published a piece that branded the Turkish state as a benevolent one and framed the local population in Roboski as citizens that *appreciated* (*takdir etmek*) the state's aid. Accordingly, the piece mentioned that the state had invested 12 million Turkish liras in 36 projects, and the local people ultimately "made peace with the state."

In sum, the seemingly arbitrary association of abortion with Roboski was not simply a strategy to deflect attention from the massacre. Rather, with this political move accompanied by a distinct media coverage, a massacre was trivialized and the death of Kurds as the racialized others were normalized while undermining and criminalizing

women's control over their bodies. It could be tempting to depict such controversial remarks by right-wing politicians[26] as aberrations from rational politics. Nostalgia suddenly emerges with respect to how former politicians made more sense. Yet, the politician's freedom to create controversy and the media's complicity in not questioning and further circulating controversial remarks reveals how proliferation of right-wing controversy is not an abnormality of an emergent post-truth information order but rather structurally informed by a racial contract that should be kept intact. Without considering how nation states mobilize race to maintain their information orders, invocations of a less contaminated, more rational and equitable public sphere unfortunately will remain a fantasy.

Minority newspapers as sites of racialized violence before post-truth

Public eulogies for the crisis and death of print journalism may be justified but they largely suffer from a liberal investment in journalism as the arbiter of objective truth. In reality, journalism is a site of political antagonisms, involving racialized forms of state intervention. For instance, in 2001, Turkish General Directorate for Security sent a "terminology dictionary" to state-run TRT, dictating and securitizing the language to be used by media workers with respect to covering the Kurdish conflict.[27] While such state interventions are mostly expected in developmentalist media contexts such as Turkey, newspapers, particularly those produced by racialized minorities in their quest for radical democracy and human rights, have continuously had to deal with varying forms of state intervention and violence. Depending on the form of their encounters with the state, journalists, writers, photographers, and distributors working for minority newspapers have faced erasure, censorship, and physical violence including assassination. While journalists in the global context of right-wing populism all have to deal with both bully-like politicians and opaque algorithms to communicate their voices, journalists and workers employed at minority-media institutions have long faced physical and symbolic violence that targeted their bodies and calling their expertise into question.

Kurdish news media has not been an exception. Well before the age of deepfakes and doctored videos, Kurdish news workers or Turkish journalists covering the Kurdish regions had to navigate an intense site of racialized violence and state-rebuttals of truth. The hardly visible but immensely important documentary *Witnesses of the War*[28] reflects the professional challenges and political violence faced by journalists covering the Kurdish conflict in the 1990s. A wide range of media workers including elite journalists, columnists and photojournalists faced jail sentences or brute violence during those years. For journalists, security checkpoints in the region were major sites of encounters with the state, where they heard slurs from security forces or arbitrary power displays.

A few examples could be even more explanatory. While preparing a special dossier on the connection between counter guerilla violence and the deep state, journalist Ahmet Sümbül wrote a piece about how the state was involved in training counter guerilla. Soon, he and his colleagues received phone calls threatening them. While they were used to such threats, his colleague was one day found dead in the office while Mr. Sümbül was briefly out. Then, Mr. Sümbül was taken into custody and tortured to accept that he was behind his colleague's death. Ahmet Akkaya of *Özgür Gündem*, an iconic newspaper in the history of news media in Turkey, took a photograph of a

Kurdish citizen tied to a military tank. He was intimidated on the ground and feared for his life. As he begged the reporters from the state-run Anadolu News Agency to take him when they prepared to leave the region, he was not allowed in the car. Soon, Special Force Soldiers took him to the police department, beat him and threw him in a dumpster. These and other testimonials from *Witnesses of the War* reveal the racialized dynamics of news production in the context of racialized political violence much earlier than contemporary post-truth alarmism. They also point to the contested subtleties of whose journalistic work is believable had long been a feature of public life before the post-truth crisis hit us.

That the documentary repeatedly mentions the name *Özgür Gündem* is telling because it was this newspaper that rendered visible what the mainstream media chose not to cover or simply cover along the dictates of the state in the 1990s. Founded in 1992, this daily newspaper documented the state's extralegal and paramilitary practices against Kurdish minorities in the intensely conflictual context of Turkey in the 1990s. This was not without consequences. In the first nine months after its foundation, nine journalists from the paper were murdered, its distributors were targeted, and its readers were taken into custody.[29] In fact, in 1994, the then Prime Minister Tansu Çiller sent a secret note to security forces of the country. This note specifically mentioned the newspaper, underlining that it was operating against the sovereignty of the Turkish state, and should therefore be immediately made "ineffective," particularly because the legal precautions were too slow to function.[30] Four days after this notice was sent to relevant authorities, the building of the paper was bombed. This extensive violence inflicted upon Kurdish media workers shows that the state formation of a regime of truth is always already racialized.[31] While media and big-tech corporations, their products and technologies, and right-wing politicians are major threats to democracy, the politics of who can write and distribute news and whose newspapers are worthy of circulating is not independent from political violence and race. Well before commercialism degrades journalism and contaminates the public sphere, race and violence are historically at work in setting the boundaries and conditions of journalism that is acceptable by the state.[32]

As Bayram writes in his work on *Özgür Gündem*, the "sensory topography of the nation state"[33] is racially maintained and kept intact through "cultural anesthesia," a term anthropologist Allen Feldman reaches via Adorno. Accordingly, in this state of cultural anesthesia produced by the mainstream press, the racialized other's pain is rendered "inadmissible to public discourse and culture".[34] That is why, as Bayram ethnographically shows, liberal mainstream news media inevitably produces violence precisely because of its unquestioned claims of objectivity and the supposed neutrality of the state. At the same time, there is an ambivalent dimension to the productivity of Özgür Gündem as a target of racialized state violence. This newspaper also emerged as an object and space of intimacy and joy because as a collective of news workers, it provided stories of dignity, narratives of truth, and ultimately transforming Kurdish citizens into "perceptible and sensible" human beings with histories and faces.[35]

Conclusion

So what? We ask ourselves, as some journal reviewers or audience members in international conference rooms would do. Why bother with these stories from Turkey? First, these stories reveal the persistence of the nation state in producing and

reproducing racialized regimes of truth and post-truth, involving violence derived from the creation of doubt, infliction of humiliation, as well as denials of dignity towards the racialized others. Although knowledge production systems and practices have become more complex and fluid in our current context (read as algorithmic, networked, viral, hard to verify), the state has long been at work in producing and instituting racialized forms of knowledge. That is, accounts of post-truth will remain lacking without considering the state and its racialized forms of knowledge production, attention mobilization, and violence. Second, at a superficial glance, these stories might read like a classical aberration of human rights and disproportionate state intervention in the Global South. But it is high time to go beyond methodological nationalism in our discipline and start considering how racial logics of information orders are not independent from global relations of power.[36] If "race as understood within national boundaries such as the U.S. is also situated within conditions of empire and transnational contexts"[37], then Kurdishness in the boundaries of Turkey or other countries such as Syria, Iraq and Iran is not independent from relations of imperial legacies and power. Simply put, without considering the imperial linkages between the superpowers of the world and their allies in and beyond the Middle East, dialectically grasping how governments across the Global South can exert violence against their racial communities remains an Intellectually and nationally limited endeavor. In that regard, scholars of disinformation would do good to not only centralize race in their work but also think in more transnational terms in terms of how imperial legacies are at times visibly and at times subtly at work in the Global South in terms of how racialized minorities and their media producers face state violence.

Notes

1. A terrorist organization according to Turkey and the USA, PKK has waged a war for independence and political autonomy since the 1980s. While the intensity of war has decreased, more than 40,000 died.
2. Cumhuriyet, "Erdoğan'ın 'montaj' itirafına neden olmuştu ... Abdulkadir Selvi 'gereğini yapma' telaşına düştü."
3. Gazete Duvar, "Bakan Kurum'dan 'montaj' yorumu."
4. Can, *Forensic Fantasies: Doctors, Documents and the Limits of Truth in Turkey*.
5. Bradshaw and Howard, "Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation"; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*.
6. Han, *Infocracy: Digitalization and the Crisis of Democracy*, 79–81.
7. Han, 89.
8. Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan, "White Lies."
9. Kuo and Marwick, "Critical Disinformation Studies"; Chakravartty and Roy, "Mediatized Populisms: Inter-Asian Lineages."
10. Ünlü, *Türklük Sözleşmesi*.
11. Bulut, "Eventocracy, Affective Supremacy and Resistance in Turkey's Captured Media Ecology."; Yanatma, "Advertising and Media Capture in Turkey"; Yesil, "Authoritarian Turn or Continuity? Governance of Media through Capture and Discipline in the AKP Era."
12. For an insightful critique of how race and racial domination has been sidelined in both Frankfurt School scholarship and political economy of media research informed by the former, see Mukherjee, "Of Experts and Tokens."
13. Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan, "White Lies."

14. For exceptions, see Arsan, "Savaşı ve Barışı Çerçevelemek: Türk ve Kürt Basınında 'Öteki Acının' Tanıklığı"; Karaca, *Ape Musa'nın Küçük Generalleri*; Odabaşı, *Güneydoğu'da Gazeteci Olmak*; Yücel, *Kürt Basın Tarihi: Tekzip*.
15. Earlier, one of us critiqued the nostalgia for a "more objective" news media environment and argued how the death of mainstream news media in Turkey was not a deviance but a logical outcome of neoliberal deregulation in the field of journalism. Bulut, "Could Turkey Just Be OK Again? Media and the Drift Towards Authoritarianism." For similar and excellent critiques that problematize the relationship between liberal markets, objectivity, censorship and current discussions of post-truth, see also Yesil, *Media in New Turkey*; Roudakova, *Losing Pravda: Ethics and the Press in Post-Truth Russia*.
16. Banet-Weiser and Higgins, *Believability: Sexual Violence, Media, and the Politics of Doubt*.
17. Waisbord, "Mob Censorship"; Bulut and Can, "Networked Misogyny beyond the Digital."
18. Ruhavioğlu, "Dersim ve Roboskî Katliamları Karşısında Medyanın Tutumu."
19. Bianet, "Erdoğan Roboski Katliamı Hakkında Konuştu."
20. TRTHaber, "Başbakan."
21. Martin, *Psychopolitics of Speech: Uncivil Discourse and the Excess of Desire*.
22. Bakıner, "'These Are Ordinary Things': Regulation of Death under the AKP Regime."
23. Mbembe, "Necropolitics"; Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*
24. Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond*.
25. Ruhavioğlu, "Dersim ve Roboskî Katliamları Karşısında Medyanın Tutumu."
26. Examples abound from Turkey to the US, Brazil, Phillipines, Hungary and India.
27. Ruhavioğlu, "Dersim ve Roboskî Katliamları Karşısında Medyanın Tutumu."
28. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t34J3Xg5roc
29. Bayram, "Another Story of the Daily Circulation of Özgür Gündem: Affective Materiality."
30. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mSHVqiDMB4
31. Bayram, "Another Story of the Daily Circulation of Özgür Gündem: Affective Materiality."
32. Beyond journalism, similar mechanisms of who is to believe have permeated various contested realms including human rights struggles and the documentation of state violence. See Can, "The Criminalization of Physicians and the Delegitimization of Violence in Turkey"; Can, "Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and State Violence: Medical Documentation of Torture in Turkey"
33. Bayram, "Another Story of the Daily Circulation of Özgür Gündem: Affective Materiality," 27.
34. Feldman, "On Cultural Anesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King," 406.
35. Bayram, "Another Story of the Daily Circulation of Özgür Gündem: Affective Materiality," 32.
36. Chakravartty, "#CommunicationSoWhite in the Age of Ultra-Nationalisms."
37. Nguyễn et al., "Studying Mis- and Disinformation in Asian Diasporic Communities."

Disclosure Statement

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