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**Gezi: the ultimate masterclass in government propaganda**

**Gezi: učna ura vladne propagande**

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## **Izvleček**

### **Gezi: učna ura vladne propagande**

Namen zaključnega dela je analiza propagandne kampanje, ki jo je izvajal režim turškega predsednika Erdogana v času protestov v istambulskem parku Gezi. Analiza bo temeljila na uporabi propagandnega modela Gartha S. Jowetta in Victorie O'Donnell, ki sta ga predstavila v knjigi *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Propaganda in prepričevanje). Izhajajoč iz družbeno zgodovinskega konteksta moderne Turčije, propagandisti Erdoganove vlade so razširjali izjemno učinkovito in dobro organizirano kampanjo dezinformiranja javnosti usmerjeno proti protestnikom. Pri tem so propagandisti tudi učinkovito uporabili prevladujoče kulturne kode v družbi utemeljene na že obstoječih in globoko zakoreninjenih prepričanjih in predsodkih. Učinki takšne propagandne kampanje so vidni pri preoblikovanju mišljenj ciljne skupine, ustvarjanju novih, s katerimi je možno manipulirati v cilju konsolidacije in utrjevanja obstoječega režima predsednika Erdogana.

**Ključne besede:** politika, propaganda, prepričevanje, Turčija, dezinformacije, protesti Gezi, Erdogan

## **Abstract**

### **Gezi: učna ura vladne propagande**

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the propaganda efforts of the Erdogan regime during the Gezi protests by using the propaganda model outlined by authors Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell in *Propaganda and Persuasion*. Using the socio-historical context of modern day Turkey, the press agents of the Erdogan government disseminated a well structured disinformation campaign against the protestors through the cultural rim, by tapping into the set of previously held societal beliefs and cognitions. The propaganda efforts then reshaped and restructured the cognitions of the populace, creating new perceptions that could be manipulated and maintained, thus solidifying the Erdogan regime in modern day Turkey.

**Key words:** politics, propaganda, Turkey, persuasion, disinformation, Gezi protests, Erdogan

## **IZJAVA O AVTORSTVU**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

On May 28, 2013, a group of 50 environmentalists began protesting against the demolition of one of the central parks of Istanbul. The municipality had planned to construct a shopping mall and mosque in its place, despite opposition from residents and civil society organizations.

What began as another fringe protest, evolved and erupted into a mass uprising that would once again ignite the tensions already existing in Turkish society, drawing lines strictly across ideological boundaries. The government thought it could use force to squash a handful of protestors. The use of disproportionate might resulted in tremendous backlash, with millions taking to the streets and instigating the biggest popular uprising in the history of the Turkish republic.

The government found itself in a precarious situation: should it listen to the masses and lose face, or continue to unleash state forces upon them? Picking the second route was one that required more than simple military might. It also required the use of significant propaganda techniques to justify the use of brutal force against everyday citizens. Having already instituted an authoritarian media regime, in which the sole proprietors of major media outlets were businessmen with contractual obligations to the government, the dissemination of information suddenly began flowing through major media outlets in an organized manner, painting a one-dimensional picture of the protestors.

This paper will attempt to analyze the propaganda techniques utilized during the protests, using the propaganda model outlined by authors Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell in *Propaganda and Persuasion*.

It will begin by providing the social-historical context of the uprising, then outline the various propaganda techniques listed in the book by providing contextual detail and examples.

Citing examples of how propaganda agents disseminated propaganda and how the arguments were placed within the predisposed prejudices, historical and cultural context, experiences, and myths of Turkish society through well-functioning agents and methods, the paper will make the argument that the Gezi protests could not have been overcome by the current regime without the use of intentional and well structured propaganda techniques.

The paper will make the case that Erdogan exploited the socio-historical context of society,

and manipulated his propaganda machinery to feed into the myths of the cultural rim. He then used institutions and propaganda agents in the form of well-controlled TV stations, print outlets and radio stations to repeat and accentuate his message. He attempted to squash counter-propaganda efforts, and excellently crafted and molded public predispositions and differences.

The propaganda efforts then reshaped and restructured the perspective of the populace, creating new perceptions that could be manipulated and maintained. Having established the framework for successful propaganda, the paper will conclude that the same techniques continue to be utilized to this day in modern day Turkey by Erdogan to solidify his rule and regime.

## **2. THE GEZI PROTESTS-AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROPAGANDA WARS**

The Gezi protests were one of the most defining moments in modern Turkish history. Not merely because it was an uprising that saw government forces and citizens clash in an urban setting every evening for up to thirty days, but because the real battle took place in the trenches of the media, where extensive propaganda and counter-propaganda efforts were made to sway public opinion. In this regard, the protests were treated like a political campaign by the government. In desperation, it utilized all tools at its disposal to convince the masses about its arguments while protestors and members of the Gezi uprising used rhetoric and humor to convince the public to sway their way.

Despite numerous brilliant campaigns being launched by the protestors, the government won the media wars in the long run. Due to its stronghold over the media and opinion leaders, the government managed to convince masses of its sanctity and virtue as a romanticized victim taking on global monsters hiding behind the veil of protestors. Then Prime Minister, current President Erdogan has even managed to link all issues facing the nation, from interest rates to economic problems and Turkey's overall growth rate to the effect of the Gezi protests, stating erroneously yet unequivocally: "Had it not been for the Gezi protests, Turkey would have been a Trillion dollar economy by now."<sup>1</sup> While creating such an image, it also managed to paint an

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<sup>1</sup> Zeynel Yaman, "Cumhurbaskani Erdogan: Trilyon dolarlik ulke olurduk" Sabah Newspaper Online, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/ekonomi/2016/12/11/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-trilyon-dolarlik-ulke-olurduk>, December 11, 2016)

extremely antagonizing and negative picture of the protestors. Even though this strategy alienated half the population, it did manage to consolidate the other half under Erdogans leadership, and influence his propaganda strategies thereafter. The government learned a valuable lesson on how to utilize propaganda methods to consolidate its base and how to appeal to the myths and predispositions of the populace. It also learned that this method would never work in appealing to the remaining half of the country, so it gave up all efforts in attempting to communicate with them thereafter.

### **3 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

#### **3.1 Sociohistorical context**

The Turkish republic was officially established on October 23, 1923, following World War I. The romanticized nationalist version of history taught in textbooks paints a picture of resistance, where Anatolian soil was conquered back from the allied forces thanks to the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and the backing of all of Anatolia. The Turkish parliament established thereafter was one that attempted to implement reforms, and bring the Turkish people onto a path of scientific and cultural enlightenment.

Well-known historians and experts on Turkish history such as Halil Inalcik and Ilber Ortayli tell a different tale however, and it is this version that could perhaps help lay the groundwork for what really happened during the Gezi protests. The first Turkish Parliament to assemble on April 23, 1923 in Ankara was one with a majority Molla (religious opinion leaders) representation. In fact, among the principles passed as defining the mission of the first parliament was that The Sultan and Caliph would be reinstated once they were free from captivity.<sup>2</sup> It would be impossible to implement the secular reforms Mustafa Kemal had in mind with this parliament, and he was well aware of this fact. Which is why it was dissolved by him only 15 days later, and replaced by a second and revised parliament, which declared the Turkish Republic as an entity, ending the Ottoman dynasty for good. Many Islamists such as Abdurrahman Dilipak claim that it was the first parliament that truly represented the people, and the second parliament was a treacherous one that instituted blasphemy, secularism and wholly un-Islamic values on a

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<sup>2</sup> "TBMM Birinci Dönem" *Vikipedi: Özgür Ansiklopedi*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. December 10, 2016. Web.

conservative and pious population.<sup>3</sup> This split was also what defined how Erdogan would be elected into power almost 80 years later.

### **3.2 Background to cognitions and belief systems**

Atatürk implemented many reforms, which didn't exactly receive the approval of the Anatolian masses. He changed the alphabet from Arabic to Latin, gave women the right to vote, instituted a harsh secularism, and created a new bourgeoisie that was committed to the purpose of the Turkish revolution. In time, this bourgeoisie class became the secular forbearers and system administrators of the republic, often times dismissing or discriminating against the conservative hinterland. They were mostly the educated elite living in the cities, while the rest of the population were living in the villages and small towns scattered across Anatolia. The class distinctions thus, also became loose ideological and economic divides, creating a distrust and animosity by the conservative majority. Since propaganda is shaped by "culture and historical context"<sup>4</sup> and in turn shapes culture and history itself, this background history is vital when analyzing The Erdogan government's propaganda efforts during the Gezi protests.

Erdogan managed to analyze and understand the values, beliefs, cognitions and group norms of the conservative rurally rooted new urban dwellers, and appealed to them en-masse. Part of this structure is also what the propaganda model describes as the *Cultural Rim*. The socio-historic context always works as a canal through which propaganda can be spread. "The cultural rim is the infrastructure that provides the material context in which messages are sent and received. How propaganda is developed, used, and received is culture specific. The elements of a culture—its ideologies, societal myths, government, economy, social practices, and specific events that take place—influence propaganda."<sup>5</sup>

And part of the socio-historic context was the absolute disconnect between the new and modern Turkey of Atatürk and the rurally rooted conservative masses. The discrepancy and conflict between the sides had begun exerting itself during and after the 80s, as mass

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<sup>3</sup> Abdurrahman Dilipak, "Anadolu'da kurulan ilk cumhuriyet mi dediniz?" Yeni Akit Newspaper Online, <http://www.yeniakit.com.tr/yazarlar/abdurrahman-dilipak/anadoluda-kurulan-ilk-cumhuriyet-mi-dediniz-16965.html>, October 28, 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion-5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Sage Publications Inc, 2012), p. 359

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 362



migration to the cities from the countryside took place, and the social structure had to either accommodate these new “villagers” or discriminate against them.

This class warfare had created distrust and grievances. The children of the Anatolian masses began to feel excluded. It was this distrust and animosity that Erdogan realized he could manipulate during the Gezi protests, and he did so with perfection. “Propaganda as a process is socially determined. The social-historical context provides a heritage that gives a propagandist motivation and even a “style” of communication. To understand how propaganda works, we must consider how the existing social-historical context allows it to work.”<sup>6</sup>

## **4 GEZI, ERDOGAN AND THE PROPAGANDA MODEL OF JOWETT AND O'DONNELL**

### **4.1 The description of propaganda**

The book describes Propaganda as: “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”<sup>7</sup>

Since, as described above, propaganda is shaped by cultural and historical context, it is essential to keep the historical context in mind in order to fully understand how perceptions were shaped and cognitions manipulated during the Gezi protests.

### **4.2 Propaganda agents**

But getting back to the point, how was it that the Erdogan regime succeeded and met their goals in their propaganda efforts? This is where the propaganda model outlined by Jowett and O'Donnell comes into play. One of the most important components of the model are propaganda agents. They are a crucial part of the network, helping feed information into the model. “Propaganda is a form of communication and therefore can be depicted as a process. A model of the propaganda process includes the social-historical context, a cultural rim made up of government, economy, events, ideology, and myths of society; the institution; propaganda

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 360

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7

agents; media methods; the social network; and the public.”<sup>8</sup>

One of Erdogans earliest acts, was to emulate the success of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in creating a bourgeoisie and intelligentsia that was attached to him directly. The creation of such a class loyal to him, helped him manipulate public opinion. To this extent, he managed to oust the old media patrons, take over their networks, and “auction it off” (ie: give it) to companies he supported and helped grow. The best example of this would be how Cem Uzan’s Star TV and Star newspaper was dismantled and turned over to companies sympathizing with the Erdogan regime. Uzan was opposed to AKP and Erdogan, and his media outlets often ran stories criticizing them. In 2003, the government seized 219 of his companies, including the Star Media Group.<sup>9</sup>

One of the tapes that emerged following the voice recording leak scandals after the Gezi protests was one of Erdogan calling Fatih Sarac of Habertürk, a news station formerly owned by Uzan, and demanding that the main opposition leader and his quote be removed from the screen.<sup>10</sup>

Bugun TV was another TV station that was extremely critical of the Erdogan government. It’s founder Tuncay Ozkan was jailed for his dissidence, on the pretense of plotting a coupe to overthrow the government and the station, then named Kanaltürk, was “auctioned” to Koza Holding, a company that emerged miraculously as a major player in the energy industry with the rise of the AKP government.<sup>11</sup>

### 4.3 Shaping myths and gatekeepers

Erdogan knew quite well that the media played a crucial role in influencing the opinions of the masses. Not only that, but it also helps shape the ideology and myths of the society, especially in a country that Marshall McLuhan would describe as being a “cold” culture confronted with a “hot media” that is television. “The hot radio medium used in cool or

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 360

<sup>9</sup> News Report, “*Bir devrin sonu*” Sabah Newspaper Online, <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2004/02/15/eko101.html>, February 15, 2004)

<sup>10</sup> Haramzadeler, “*Alo Fatih*” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nu1teQ7UPEE>, 20 March 2014. Web, 1 January 2017.

<sup>11</sup> News Report, “*En ‘Ulusalci’ TV kanalini Bugün’ün sahibi Ipek aldı*” Hürriyet Newspaper Online, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/en-ulusalci-tv-kanalini-bugun-un-sahibi-ipek-aldi-8925628>, May 13, 2008)

non-literate cultures has a violent effect, quite unlike its effect, say in England or America, where radio is felt as entertainment. A cool or low literacy culture cannot accept hot media like movies or radio as entertainment. They are, at least, as radically upsetting for them as the cool TV medium has proved to be for our high literacy world.”<sup>12</sup>

Erdogan also instituted gatekeepers such as the above mentioned Fatih Sarac at Haberturk, a major 24 hour news station. These were high-level executives that functioned within the media group but acted as Erdogans representatives, carrying out his orders and agenda. They were placed oddly, with a single responsibility: to influence the station and be the Prime Minister’s mouthpiece. In fact, among the cassette leaks that broke on December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014, the “alo fatih” scandal was one of the most widely circulated recordings. In it, Erdogan giving him direct orders about which opinion leaders and academics to schedule into shows, which news to run and which not to run, were revealed.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4.4 Institutionalizing propaganda**

It wasn’t only the media that the Erdogan regime had managed to take over, manipulate and control over the course of a decade. There were serious restructuring efforts in the judicial system and hierarchy, the education system, and universities. This helped institutionalize propaganda. While declarations supporting the Gezi protests and the freedom of expression was signed by University Professors and Deans from the more established and respected universities with a history,<sup>14</sup> the counter declaration “against the Gezi protestors” was signed by the Deans and adjuncts of the new universities that had been opened during the AKP rule. Such counterpropaganda efforts, utilizing the newly created bourgeoisie, which owed the AKP regime a great deal for their existence, ensured the hyper saturation of constant propaganda.

As described in *Propaganda and Persuasion*: “The flow of propaganda from institution to public has several canals that feed into, or are fed by, the elements of the cultural rim, to

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<sup>12</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media, The Extensions of Man* (Gangko Press, 2013), p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> News Report, “*Alo Fatih! Sarigül’ü çok vermeyin*” Evrensel Newspaper Online, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/78660/alo-fatih-sarigulu-cok-vermeyin>. February 18, 2014

<sup>14</sup> News Report link from Evrensel newspaper, “*Evrensel: Akademisyenlerden tutuklu öğrencilere ‘Gezi’ desteği*” Everywheretaksim web portal, <http://everywheretaksim.net/tr/akademisyenlerden-tutuklu-ogrencilere-gezi-destegi/>, July 11, 2013)

and from the institution itself, to and from the media, and to and from the public. This flow indicates that, as propaganda occurs, it has a potential impact on the culture at any point during the process, and of course the culture has, in turn, an impact on the process of propaganda.”<sup>15</sup>

#### **4.5 Shaping perceptions**

Since propaganda can be described as a deliberate or systematic attempt to shape perceptions, one can claim that Erdogan went beyond the definition in its application. The term “systematic” is used by the authors as describing something that’s “precise and methodical, carrying out something with organized regularity.” They add that, “Governments and corporations establish departments or agencies specifically to create systematic propaganda. Political advertising campaigns, often very negative, are systematic before elections.”<sup>16</sup>

In the case of the Erdogan government, deliberated control to shape perceptions went beyond establishing departments or agencies. As explained above, it resulted in the infiltration and ownership of what was perceived as being independent media, through the use of the government apparatus in the form of takeovers, and relaying existing outlets to his own bourgeoisie class. As early as 2008, news reports were accusing the ruling AKP of re-staffing the TRT with hundreds of new sympathizers, restructuring the institution and shifting its autonomy. “Turkey's first and only official national public broadcaster, TRT, is currently facing a radical wave of internal appointments, a move accepted as aiming to shift TRT’s autonomies policy toward a more Islamic axis, the Turkish Daily News (TDN) wrote on Monday.” wrote the Hürriyet daily.<sup>17</sup> The move was so successful in dismantling the autonomous, objective approach the TRT had been defined with since it’s inception, that by the 2015 elections, the state run TRT was giving the ruling AKP party 59 hours of coverage over a course of 25 days, in contrast to only 5 hours to the main opposition party, and 18 minutes to the Kurdish minority party.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion-5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Sage Publications Inc, 2012), p. 360

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p.7

<sup>17</sup> News Report, “*AKP accused of Islamist staffing of Turkey's TRT*” Hürriyet online portal, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/akp-accused-of-islamist-staffing-of-turkeys-trt-10109682>, October 13, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> News Report, “*TRT tartışması devam ediyor: AKP ve Erdoğan'a 59 saat, CHP'ye 5 saat, MHP'ye 1 saat, HDP'ye 18 dakika!*” T24 News Outlet, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/trt-tartismasi->

The shaping of perceptions via these outlets, resulted in the manipulation of cognitions as well. Since “...once a belief or an attitude is formed, a persons perceptions are influenced by it. This does not happen in a vacuum. The formation of cognitions and attitudes is a complex process related to cultural and personal values and emotions.”<sup>19</sup>

Over a five-year period, a complete overhaul of the opinion leaders had taken place, with those appearing on news programs and debates (watching televised political debates is a Turkish favorite pastime) morphing into government mouthpieces, or liberals sympathetic to the AKP.

## 5 CENSORSHIP AND SUPPRESSION OF INFORMATION

Such wide and extensive coverage also allowed for the suppression of information and knowledge, which is why the Gezi protestors labelled the media as being the “penguin media,” referring to the fact that the first few days of the protests were ignored by all media, and that CNN Turk infamously broadcasted a National Geographic documentary about penguins during the protests.

In fact, this suppression was closely monitored as if it was during wartime. Erdogan, upon returning from his trip to North Africa, stated that he was holding back vigilantes who would crush the protestors: “I can barely contain the other 50%.” he said<sup>20</sup> He instantly claimed this was a direct attack to overthrow the government, and declared wartime measures. It’s no wonder that the suppression of information also exceeded wartime practices. As authors Jowett and O’Donnell explain: “When conflict exists and security is required, it is not unusual for propagandists to try to contain information and responses to it in a specific area. Recipients of propaganda messages are discouraged from asking about anything outside the contained area”.<sup>21</sup>

Consequently, he created an apparatus that practices full control of the dissemination of

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devam-ediyor-akp-ve-erdogana-59-saat-chpye-5-saat-mhpye-1-saat-hdpye-18-dakika,314394, October 27, 2015

<sup>19</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion-5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Sage Publications Inc, 2012), p. 11

<sup>20</sup> News Report, “*Başbakan: Yüzde 50’yi evinde zor tutuyorum*” Hürriyet online portal, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/basbakan-yuzde-50-yi-evinde-zor-tutuyorum-23429709>, June 4, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion-5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Sage Publications Inc, 2012), p. 13

information, controls the gates, has its own media and agencies, and exercises control over opinion leaders. Such was the background leading up to the Gezi protests, one of the most significant and effective civilian uprisings in Turkish history.

## **6 TYPES OF PROPAGANDA**

The book describes various forms of propaganda, that can be utilized to shape cognitions and perceptions. Listing them as white, grey or black propaganda, it then goes onto to describe them.

### **6.1 Black Propaganda**

“Black propaganda is when the source is concealed or credited to a false authority and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions.”<sup>22</sup>

### **6.2 White Propaganda**

White propaganda comes from a source that is identified correctly, and the information in the message tends to be accurate. This is what one hears on RadioMoscow and VOA during peacetime. “Although what listeners hear is reasonably close to the truth, it is presented in a manner that attempts to convince the audience that the sender is the good guy with the best ideas and political ideology.”<sup>23</sup>

### **6.3 Gray Propaganda**

As can be guessed, Gray propaganda is “somewhere between white and gray propaganda”, with the accuracy of the information being uncertain. Oddly enough, as examples are given below, one can see that the Erdogan media outlets went on a full barrage of attack, utilizing especially black propaganda techniques to smear the protestors, ensure loss of credibility with the masses, and especially play into the pre-built beliefs and cognitions to ensure the majority of the previously rural, now city dwelling lower classes that were belittled by the Kemalist regime, continued to hold allegiance to Erdogan, the savior of the Anatolian conservative populations.

The rift created at the beginning of the Turkish republic had come back to be utilized fully by Erdogan this time, to his favor. He knew all the buttons to press to ensure the masses were swayed, and utilized the propaganda machinery at his disposal during the Gezi protests to

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17

accomplish just that.

## 7 DISINFORMATION

### 7.1 Definition of disinformation

Another term used to define propaganda efforts is *disinformation*. In the case of Erdogan and his propaganda efforts during the Gezi protests, this definition is a perfect fit. A form of black propaganda, disinformation is covert and utilizes purposefully fed wrong information. In this case, it's covert because it utilized manipulation through media outlets that were owned by companies close to Erdogan. The effect of utilizing what a majority of the population thought to be "objective" news and information outlets was tremendous, repeating the same rhetoric through the dissemination of information via the state run TRT, blatantly pro-government media outlets and Islamist broadcasters. Disinformation means "false, incomplete, or misleading information that is passed, fed, or confirmed to a targeted individual, group, or country."<sup>24</sup>

What's more, the process of propaganda, according to the book and the model, "takes the form of a message flow through a network system that includes propaganda agents, various media, and a social network..." including "...the social-historical context, a cultural rim made up of government, economy, events, ideology, and myths of society; the institution; propaganda agents; media methods; the social network; and the public."<sup>25</sup>

The social reality of his supporters, their historical experiences and narratives were open to be swayed, and he managed to convince them of the "truth" his media and he himself, was disseminating on a daily basis. They were restructuring old belief sets, using them as an anchor to build on them to create new mythologies that could be bought into. He knew that "The stronger the belief of a receiver, the more likely it is to influence the formation of a new belief"<sup>26</sup>

That's why the disinformation had to tap into a previously held set of beliefs and cognitions for it to be successful. Erdogan had to build on the group norms of his voters and society in general. He had already created these circles over the course of a decade through the grassroots structures of his party. The AKP had a youth organization, Erdogans son operated

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 23-24

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 360

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 35

numerous NGOs that provided scholarships and educational services to the youth via cash donations that were forcefully taken from businessmen that were handed government contracts, and the AKP local teams visited the poorest areas, providing people with municipal jobs, cash donations and food deliveries.

The government's social system was purposefully demolished to ensure masses saw that it was the AKP structure that was assisting them, and identified with them. So much so that AKP voters were given the nickname "macaroni-ists" by opposition supporters, a noun that implies the aid poor disenfranchised workers received from AKP grass roots organizations in the form of potatoes, macaroni and wheat. As a result of these aids, the incentive to conform to group norms thus, had already been established and the groundwork had already been laid. In fact, as stated at the beginning of this paper, the groundwork for group norms and beliefs had already been laid since the establishment of the Turkish republic, and it was Erdogan who capitalized on this to become elected into power. He is known to be an extremely pragmatic politician, and has managed to mobilize the masses by appealing to the same set of beliefs and attitudes.

## **7.2 Examples of disinformation and smear campaigns**

Utilizing these foundations, the press immediately began its disinformation process on the protest and protestors, engaging in a black propaganda campaign in unison, as if having received orders from a single headquarters. Smeared across the front pages of all major papers were usually the same exact headlines, down to the wording.

The arguments brought forward by them were numerous, and helped created the recursive cycle of propaganda strengthened with media methods, opinion leaders, ideologies, cultural traits, socio-historic context and societal myths.

### **7.2.1 "The protestors are anarchists"**

One early smear campaign example was the claim that they (the protestors) were anarchists. This codification was strong, and had a direct impact because of the structure of societal myths and cultural codes, in short almost all of what the diagram defines as the "cultural rim". The Social ramifications of such labels were immense, and the propagators were well aware of this. Anarchist had a negative connotation in the psyche of Turkish society because it had always been equated with lawlessness, disobedience, an anti-state & anti-government stance.



Anarchist had been the term used to describe all dissidents throughout the history of the Turkish Republic. It stirred up images of the PKK and terrorism; the bloody street fights prior to the 1980 military coupe and the riots and protests of the 60s. Each of these historical periods were marked by strong economic collapse, societal upheaval and uncertainty, all negative triggers for people who had to live with the economic and social problems caused by them. Of course, due to the class structure mentioned above, all dissidents were also mostly secular and relatively well educated, with the masses feeling a disconnect from them. Consequently, deep down, the term also represented the sides of the same class struggle that had emerged with the closure of the first Turkish Parliament. Of course, Erdogan pounced upon the heavy tradition of this term to utilize the same class distinction already inbred into the cultural psyche of the people, to his favor. He called them Vandals, honorless anarchists, sold out foreign agents, in contrast to his description to the other 50%: “This nation is honest. They’re not... Why are they protesting? Because they’re environmentalists? Vandalizing property is not environmentalism.”<sup>27</sup> Papers immediately began analyzing the amount of damage vandalism was costing the nation. One government portal, Haber7, claimed that the Gezi protests cost the economy 139 Million Turkish Liras.<sup>28</sup>

### **7.2.2 “The isolated and misunderstood nation, foreign foes, local traitors”**

Isolationist rhetoric at home had been the staple of the Turkish government for decades. Down to primary school books, the concept of the Turk being lonely and misunderstood, not being liked by “foreigners” and being discriminated against had been impressed upon the psyche of school children. Generations had been brought up with the concept that foreigners cannot be trusted, because they always served against the interests of the Turks and the Turkish state. A well-known line taught in Turkish classrooms was: “Turks cannot trust anyone but other Turks.”

That’s why, the socio-historical connotation to the next propagated argument was to be even more significant: that the protestors were backed by foreign interests. Everything from the CIA to the German secret service was behind the demonstrators. That CNN and BBC were

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<sup>27</sup> News Report, “*Başbakan: Yüzde 50’yi evinde zor tutuyorum*” Sabah online, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2013/6/16/basbakan-erdogan-kazlicesmede-konusuyor>, June 16, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> News Report, “*Geziciler eylemde kaç milyonluk zarar verdiler*” Haber7 online, <http://www.haber7.com/guncel/haber/1098655-geziciler-eylemde-kac-milyonluk-zarar-verdiler>, June 16, 2013.

broadcasting the protests live were further utilized as evidence of this theory. After all, why would foreign TV stations have such interest in the protests when Turkish stations had been avoiding coverage? Erdogan himself stated in his speech during the protests: “Come on BBC, CNN, Reuters, try to hide this too... For days you have been writing lies about Turkey, showing it different than it really is to the world. Now, your lies have been caught. This nation is not like how you’ve been introducing them to the world.”<sup>29</sup>

Government supported media was immediately on the case, using this argument as well, to discredit the protests. The irony is that a majority of the mainstream media had refused to report about the protests until 4 days in, and it couldn’t be contained anymore. An authority figure, practicing such strict and tight control over his media was accusing foreign media outlets of being disingenuous. One paper took it as far as claiming that certain journalists were collaborating with foreign press outlets, feeding them lies and thus engaging in treason. The title read: “The vultures of Gezi,”<sup>30</sup> claiming that headlines were portraying it as if there was an internal war taking place in Turkey, and this was deliberate manipulation. An interview with “Turkish Writers Association” (another government supported NGO) board member Ahmet Fidan, quoted him as saying: “Europe is jealous of the progress Turkey has shown over the last 10 years. They can’t handle this fact so they are attacking us in an attempt to instigate us. A saying says it all: ‘Europeans can never be our friends, just like pigskin can never be used to make a jacket out of.’”<sup>31</sup> The quoted saying makes more sense in Turkish as it rhymes, and hatred of swine has a socio-cultural context. Turkish papers were filled with fuming commentary about the treacherous foreign press, their erroneous coverage of the Gezi protests, and lists of names working with the foreign press to undermine stability and progress in Turkey, a fact which the ‘foreigners’ obviously couldn’t stand and decided to act against by destabilizing Turkey and blocking its progress.

The claim that Gezi portestors were collaborating with foreign intelligence agencies was another argument that had, of course, achieved significant impact. One author close to the

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<sup>29</sup> News Report, “*Başbakan: Yüzde 50’yi evinde zor tutuyorum*” Sabah online, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2013/6/16/basbakan-erdogan-kazlicesmede-konusuyor>, June 16, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> News Report, “*Gezi’deki les kargalari*” Milat news portal online, <http://www.milatgazetesi.com/gezi-deki-les-kargalari-haber-43966>, June 15, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

government put forth the claim that the organizers had funneled 2 million dollars and handed it out to the protestors as payment.<sup>32</sup>

Within a week, this had become the main argument of all propaganda agents, opinion leaders, and had fed the cultural rim with such a strong predisposition that it resulted in confidence for Erdogan, and more votes. The disinformation was immense, powerful and repetitive. As depicted in the chart, public dispositions fed the cultural rim, meshed with the myths of society, while also feeding the cycle of propaganda even more. That's why Erdogan began stating that he could barely contain the other 50%, as quoted above.

### **7.2.3 The “us vs. them” argument and cementing the divide**

This was a powerful message, one that cemented the divide. Prior to this statement, no one had even come close to assuming he had 50% support. But this was bold, and Erdogan was well aware of the cultural references and reactions of society.

### **7.2.4 The Kabatas incident as successful black propaganda**

When it came down to a battle of “us vs. them”, of “godless anarchists” that would go as far as to “attack a headscarved woman while wearing leather sado-masochist outfits and pee on her afterwards,”<sup>33</sup> he knew the public would side with him and believe him. This was another major black propaganda attempt that achieved a response or a reaction from an audience that furthered the desired intent of the propagandist. It was later on branded as the infamous “Kabatas incident.” At the time, little was known about Zehra Develioglu, who claimed she was attacked by a group consisting of over 70 leather pant wearing, gloved and topless men who were drunk and attacked her and her child in a baby crib for about a minute, pissing on her afterwards and leaving her there as they chanted “down with Erdogan” and left the vicinity.<sup>34</sup> Erdogan made a statement in the AKP group meeting of June 7, 2013, stating that “they dragged the daughter in law of a very close friend of mine along the pavement”<sup>35</sup>

This incident was picked up by all newspapers as the top story of the day. Even opinion

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<sup>32</sup> Hasan Karakaya, “*Polis Beni Dövdü*” Yeni Akit newspaper, quoted on the gazetevatan news portal , <http://www.gazetevatan.com/akil-insandan-kufurlu-yazi--550477-medya/>, June 2, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> News Report, “*Darp edilen genç annenin 6 aylık bebeği süttten kesildi*” Zaman Newspaper, [http://web.archive.org/web/20150512072954/http://www.zaman.com.tr:80/gundem\\_darp-edilen-genc-annenin-6-aylik-bebegi-sutten-kesildi\\_2100407.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20150512072954/http://www.zaman.com.tr:80/gundem_darp-edilen-genc-annenin-6-aylik-bebegi-sutten-kesildi_2100407.html), June 14, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

leaders who had garnered respect as left-leaning objective columnists such as Ismet Berkan claimed to have seen the “tapes”, the recording from traffic cameras that proved the lady’s testimony. No solid evidence was ever brought forth, but this propaganda at the time worked perfectly to solidify the sides. Propagandists and opinion leaders who appeared on daily political commentary programs and discussions such as Balcicek Ilter (an anchor and host for Haberturk TV), Nihal Bengisu Karaca, Sevilay Yükselir etc. all kept on repeating this incident and how it occurred, as evidence of the bad intentions of the Gezi protestors, and swayed public opinion Erdogan’s way. Ismet Berkan and Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed to have, in their possession, a tape recording of the incident, and Erdogan kept on threatening to reveal the tape as evidence. He later stated that it would cause an uproar and backlash, which is why they’ve never been revealed.

Subsequent research and legal cases on the matter, including police investigations have found no evidence of the validity of the claims of Develioglu, nor have they been able to find a single witness to an event that supposedly took place in broad daylight next to one of the busiest boat docks of the European side. Nine months later, a television station managed to get a hold of the camera recordings. It showed a Zehra Develioglu walking by a small group of protestors, who don’t appear to do anything to her, other than simply walking by. In fact, it was only two years later that the lawyer to columnist Elif Cakir, who had been one of the most vocal proponents of the concocted story, later came out and admitted that the whole incident had been made-up to sway public opinion.<sup>36</sup> In a facebook message, Develioglu’s lawyer also made the following statement: “The truth is that everybody believed this statement. But the person who exaggerated what transpired is the daughter in law. Others simply blew it out of proportion by adding more lies.”<sup>37</sup>

All major newspapers then used the incident as evidence that the Gezi protestors were anarchists who would commit any sort of violence to achieve their means. The homo-erotic

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<sup>36</sup> News Report, “*Elif Çakır'ın avukatından 'Kabataş' itirafı: Kabataş'taki o hadise düzmece*” Zaman Newspaper, [http://web.archive.org/web/20150808031950/http://www.zaman.com.tr/gundem\\_elif-cakirin-avukatindan-kabatas-itirafi-kabatastaki-o-hadise-duzmece\\_2280326.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20150808031950/http://www.zaman.com.tr/gundem_elif-cakirin-avukatindan-kabatas-itirafi-kabatastaki-o-hadise-duzmece_2280326.html), February 27, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> News Report, “*Zehra Hanım' şimdi konuşsun*” Hürriyet Daily, <http://web.archive.org/web/20150904070043/http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/25813257.asp>, February 15, 2015.

association of the outfits in the description by Develiooglu is one that needs to be analyzed in the future, in terms of the subliminal effect it might have had on the intended target of the propaganda attempt. Such statements, regardless of accuracy, helped Erdogan shape the future of Turkish politics. The gezi protests was a battle Erdogan was determined to win, even if it meant creating huge rifts in society and division along dangerous fault lines. The division had been created, and any imagery that would feed the myths of society was unquestionably swallowed down by the masses. Erdogan's propaganda industry had succeeded with the cycle of propaganda, and it was garnering more support, the frenzy was increasing with even harsher language used by the outlets and agents, thus creating an even harsher stance by the public. The propaganda cycle was complete, with all aspects directly involved.

As such, black propaganda techniques and smear campaigns worked perfectly to aid Erdogan's cause. Throughout the Gezi protests, he was giving live speeches a few times a day, all broadcast live on almost every single major TV outlet. He consistently brought up such propaganda efforts throughout his speeches. Their repetition by opinion leaders, the head of the government, media outlets, and in public or private discussions made them believable, no matter how questionable they might have been.

#### **7.2.5 The Dolmabahce Mosque incident and the shaping of perceptions**

Another such black propaganda attempt, which played on the ideology and cultural disposition of the public, was the claim made by an Islamist newspaper on June 3, 2013. Also known as the Dolmabahce Mosque incident, it involves an article claiming that protesters had raided the Bezmi Alem Valide Sultan mosque, walked on the carpet with their shoes and drank beer inside.<sup>38</sup>

All are sacrilegious acts in Islam, with guaranteed backlash from society. This propaganda effort was one of immense deception and consciously applied ill intent. The photograph below was published on the front page of Yeni Safak newspaper.

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<sup>38</sup> News Report, “*Camide icki ictiler*” Yeni Safak Daily, <http://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/sigindiklari-camide-icki-ictiler-529113>, June 3, 2013.



Yeni Safak newspaper, June 3, 2013

In it, the shoes and cans people are holding in their hands are highlighted. What the story failed to explain was that a makeshift infirmary and treatment center was established inside the mosque, thanks to the permission granted by the Mosque's attendant Fuat Yildirim. People had no time to leave their shoes out, as they were receiving treatment following the injuries inflicted on them by the government's own forces. The supposed beer bottles, as it came out later, weren't beer cans but soft drink cans. In an interview conducted by Radikal newspaper with Emre Ozturk, the person in the red sweater supposedly drinking alcohol inside the mosque, he claimed that it was only a 330 ml. coke can.<sup>39</sup>

Erdogan of course, pounced on the opportunity and began repeating the argument that they drank beer and "fornicated" inside a mosque in his speeches the very next day.<sup>40</sup>

Once again, media outlets and opinion leaders began repeating the same line of reasoning, with no research being conducted into the truth. One opposition outlet did print an interview with the mosque's attendant, Fuat Yildirim. In it, Yildirim stated that he gave permission for people to be treated because he couldn't turn back wounded people from the house of God. Following the clarification, the attendant was removed from his post at the Dolmabahce mosque and reassigned

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<sup>39</sup> News Report, "Camide icki ictiler" Radikal Newspaper, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/camide-icki-icti-denilen-ozturk-konustu-hayatim-karardi-1138468/>, June 21, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*

elsewhere.<sup>41</sup>

Such propaganda attempts not only played on the beliefs and values of society, but deeply entrenched attitudes as well. As stated in the book: “An attitude is a relatively enduring predisposition to respond; therefore, it already resides in the minds of audience members and can be used as an anchor. As people form beliefs about an object, idea, or person, they automatically and simultaneously acquire attitudes toward it.”<sup>42</sup>

## 8 RESULTS OF PROPAGANDA AND RESHAPING COGNITIONS

Turkish society had already been automatically coded to react against lawlessness, godlessness and religious sacrilege. The psychological triggers of isolationism and a mistrust of foreign interests had been utilized by the propaganda agents as well as the institutions themselves, as black propaganda techniques. And it worked. Within a few weeks, we saw a host of columnists, opinion propagators and so-called opposition leaders making the same statement: “I had also supported Gezi during the first week, but the movement was confiscated by foreign interests, godless anarchists and extreme leftist terrorists afterwards.” This line of reasoning was repeated constantly on Television programs and newspapers and a barrage of famous actors, performers, personalities etc. came forward to confess to their mistakes and atone for their sins.<sup>43</sup> They claimed that they had all been duped.

Erdogan’s arguments had achieved a direct resonance with the public, and played perfectly into their myths and ideologies. As expressed in the book, “...the uses and methods by which propaganda emerges differ from society to society. The propagandist is influenced by past models through allusions to historical figures, methods, and impulses for current propagandistic

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<sup>41</sup> News Report, “*Camide icki ictiler*” Hürriyet Daily, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dolmabahce-camisinin-imam-ve-muezzini-gitti-24756039>, September 21, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion-5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Sage Publications Inc, 2012), p. 37

<sup>43</sup> Haluk Kalafat, “*İlk Haftasında Gezi’yi Ben de Destekledim Ama... ” Diyenlere Hatırlatma*” Bianet Online Portal, <http://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/160516-ilk-haftasinda-gezi-yi-ben-de-destekledim-ama-diyenlere-hatirlatma>, December 4, 2014.

activity.”<sup>44</sup> That would explain why taking control of the major media outlets and traditional media did the trick for the Erdogan government. The Turkish youth might’ve been well connected, but a majority of the population didn’t receive their news from twitter or social media, they looked at classical opinion leaders and television news to establish an opinion. That’s why, even though every single black propaganda attempt was refuted via the social media, these rebuttals did not trickle down to the 50% that Erdogan held at bay.

## **9 THE COUNTER PROPAGANDA WARS**

### **9.1 Social Media, the threat**

One major factor during the Gezi protests was the counter-propaganda efforts. They were so powerful that the government instantly realized the reach of social media. In a television interview, an AKP minister had expressly stated that support for the ruling party increased as education levels decreased. Given that the social media in Turkey is utilized more by educated or better off segments of society, the ramifications of which kind of information flowed to which parts or segments of society is obvious. The educated and higher income circles were receiving alternative news through internet sites, and the masses were being spoon-fed direct propaganda from traditional media outlets. The power of the social media caused a problem for the government. The counter-propaganda efforts of the protestors, though they might not have originated as part of a master plan coming out of a single source like the government’s efforts, had a wider reach and struck a chord with foreign citizens and news outlets. This, in the end, was a direct threat for Erdogan and his efforts, because there was no way to quash the influence of the humor and universal appeal social media postings from the protestors and their supporters had. In short, Erdogan had the majority of the Turkish voting base under his influence, but was suffering tremendously against the more educated classes and external sources. The only solution he could come up with was to implement instant oppression to silence them, and practice outright censorship on mainstream media.

This reality didn’t diminish the influence of counter propaganda efforts by protestors however, especially both in the younger population as well as it’s influence abroad in the foreign

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<sup>44</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion-5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Sage Publications Inc, 2012), p. 360



media. Erdogan was confronted with a unique enemy this time, one he couldn't possibly influence or control. The social media had become the counter propaganda underground base: As stated in *Propaganda and Persuasion*: "Where the media are completely controlled, counter propaganda can be found underground. Underground counter propaganda may take as many media forms as the propaganda itself. Some forms of underground counter propaganda, such as handbills and graffiti, are obvious, but other important forms of counter propaganda are theater, literature, video, film, and websites."<sup>45</sup>

The effect of the social media was so great, that on June 2, 2013, Erdogan stated "we have a problem (a curse, a cancer) called twitter."<sup>46</sup> Realizing the reach of social media and its influence, the government implemented instant measures and precautions to dissuade its use as counter propaganda efforts. It raided homes and social settings of twitter posters that supported the Gezi protestors with the pretense that they were "inciting violence and social upheaval." One significant such case was a video of the Turkish police dragging high school kids by their hair and beating them up. The homes of teenagers who shared this video was raided and they were taken into custody.<sup>47</sup>

## 9.2 Restricting access to social media

But another method quickly emerged. If they couldn't stop the social media flow, they surely could restrict access to it. The government had recently privatized the major and previously publicly owned Turkish telecommunications provider, Turk Telekom. Exerting its influence on the new owners, it managed to ensure they reduced access to twitter and facebook, thus limiting the amount of information being leaked to the populace and outside world in regards to what was really happening on the ground. But the image of the red dressed girl standing up against a water cannon firing a gush of water from the top of a riot control tank, images of smoke flooding the streets, photographs of injured protestors still couldn't be suppressed. Citizens shared networks, made their wireless routers available throughout Taksim

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<sup>45</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion-5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Sage Publications Inc, 2012), p. 305

<sup>46</sup> News Report, "Erdogan: Twitter denilen bir bela var" NTV News, <http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/erdogan-twitter-denilen-bir-bela-var,nNAKG2OAMUewglwLKFVNfA>, June 2, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Altug Akin "İzmir'deki Twitter gözetlileri: Kaç Tweet'ten alındın?" BBC Turkish, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2013/07/130731\\_altug\\_twitter](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2013/07/130731_altug_twitter), June 2, 2013.

and the protest areas, and used VPN programs to bypass the restrictions. Overnight, the most unlikely internet users had become technologically savvy and had learned methods of bypassing government limitations. In retrospect, this move cost the government not only more determination by the protestors, but also any inkling of sympathy it might have been able to garner from foreign media outlets.

### **9.3 Using famous personalities for counter-propaganda**

In a counter-propaganda effort, something interesting began to emerge. Using another propaganda agent, major media outlets began publishing statements from popular singers, actors, media personalities. One of the most infamous of which was the statement of Necati Sasmaz, the leading role on a major Turkish mafia-crime series, airing successfully for over a decade. He claimed this was all a result of misfortune and a huge misunderstanding. Needless to say, his speech spurred off numerous memes and knock-offs, and aided the humorous undertakings of the protestors. His credibility was shot. This didn't dissuade the government in continuing to utilize well-known names in an effort to create counter propaganda however, and some of these efforts had major impact on the already consolidated base of Erdogan, with little influence over the rest of the country.

### **9.4 The Kazlicesme meeting**

More important however, was the “kazlicesme” meeting. Erdogan had always claimed that the Gezi protestors were a minority of “vandals” and that he represented the “true people”. This distinction helped solidify his supporter base and create a crisp divide which has since been irreconcilable. On June 16, 2013, Erdogan held a massive rally at Kazlicesme, a square newly constructed to hold millions. People were brought in by the busloads, all financed by the government, offered free food for the whole day as well as other incentives, to take part in the rally. The tour de force was intended to send a message, not only to the protestors, but to the foreign press as well. It was a well-choreographed meeting, culminating in a speech delivered by Erdogan. Coverage of this event was limited in the foreign press, which poked fun at the image of hundreds of thousands gathering, claiming it was reminiscent of a Hitler rally more than a democratic display.

## **10 CONCLUSION**

Closer inspection into the techniques and methods utilized by the Erdogan regime, with relevant examples as evidence, displays how the efficient propaganda machine worked in persuading masses and providing them with a foundation to practice cognitive dissonance.

The propaganda model put forth by authors Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell serves as a perfect outline for analyzing how the Erdogan and AKP propaganda machine functioned.

Erdogan, knowingly or unwittingly, managed to create an ideology, borrowing from myths of society and the cultural rim. He then used institutions and propaganda agents in the form of well-controlled TV stations, print outlets and radio stations to repeat and accentuate his message. He attempted to squash counter-propaganda efforts, and excellently crafted and molded public predispositions and differences.

This in turn, ensured that the arguments put forth by the protestors fell on deaf ears. In this regard, the propaganda methods used by the government during the protests were successful, and paved the way for Erdogan's future political arguments and strategies. The end result is that, while Erdogan has since continued to utilize the same methods to keep his support base, the Gezi protests, for now, are a small page of dissent in history annals during the -so far- 15 year AKP reign.

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