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News-Sharing Repertoires on Social Media in the Context of Networked Authoritarianism: The Case of Turkey

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Social media has become a primary gateway for users to access news, especially in authoritarian states with strictly controlled media environments. In such contexts, it is crucial to understand the motivations that prompt users to share news on social media. Our qualitative multimethod study presents three patterns of news-sharing repertoires on social media: (1) refraining from sharing and/or self-censorship, (2) sharing overtly political news, and (3) sharing news with political implications in carefully crafted safe zones. In Turkey, these patterns are strongly influenced by the polarized and increasingly authoritarian setting. Our findings first contribute to the literature on news sharing and news repertoires through an in-depth study of news-sharing repertories that emphasize the role of social and political contexts. Second, we contribute to the literature on social media and authoritarianism by shedding light on a rather understudied group of users who do not completely self-censor and are not political activists but still share news with political implications online in a cautious and strategic way.

Keywords: social media, news repertoires, news sharing, networked authoritarianism, polarization, safe zones, qualitative research, Turkey

Taking up a repertoire-oriented perspective on news sharing, this study explores the contemporary dynamics of Turkish social media users' engagement with news by examining the following questions: What are the different patterns of news sharing in the context of increasing authoritarianism and polarization? How do social media users in Turkey create their news-sharing repertoires and make sense of their news-sharing practices in light of this sociopolitical context? With a dynamic and diverse online culture, a population of 80.8 million people (TÜİK, 2017), and high levels of social media use, Turkey offers a useful

context for exploring the complex dynamics of news sharing. Seventy-five percent of Turkey's population are Internet users (TÜİK, 2019), of which 87% are Facebook users and one third are Twitter users (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2018).

In Turkey, where the news media is under political pressure and is used as a tool of propaganda, producing and circulating news has become a politicized practice. We are especially interested in understanding how users share news on social media despite the increasing tendencies of polarization and "networked authoritarianism," in which governments "increasingly embrace and adjust to the inevitable changes brought by digital communications" (MacKinnon, 2011, p. 33). The AKP (Justice and Development Party) government also employs comprehensive strategies for controlling Internet content, varying from blocking websites to prosecuting social media users (Yeşil, Sözeri, & Khazraee, 2017). Derived from a combination of focus groups, media diaries, and semistructured in-depth interviews, our findings reveal that users routinely assess online information, media, and news sources and generate news-sharing repertoires that are based on their evaluations of the sociopolitical atmosphere and the control over online content.

The data were collected in Istanbul in March 2019 in the weeks leading up to the local elections on March 31. At this time, the public was highly engaged with the news on social media, and divisions in society across ideological, partisan, sectarian, and ethnic fault lines were sharpened (Çelik, Bilali, & Iqbal, 2017). We analyzed different patterns of news sharing that users developed in the face of increasing polarization and authoritarianism, thereby revealing the different strategies they came up with—especially in terms of engaging with political news in different ways. Through nuanced readings of the given context (Koçer, 2018), users tailored their news-sharing strategies based on two critical tactics: One entailed a complex assessment of diverse social media platforms in relation to each other, and the second involved a critical evaluation of news topics as a means of identifying, and then dealing with, overtly politicized issues in different ways. Users put both tactics to work to develop what we refer to as "news-sharing repertoires," which are distinct patterns of news circulation in social media.

Our analysis maps three different types of news-sharing repertoires among our participants. Those in the first group stated that they did not share any political news on social media because they were afraid of the consequences (e.g., being charged for insulting President Erdoğan or having conflicts with others in their networks). The second group of users consists of those who shared political news on social media as a form of political engagement, with the aim of "holding to a stance," "informing others," or "political change." Participants in the third group of users very strategically chose the ways in which they shared political news—avoiding party politics and overt criticism—and the platforms on which they shared them. Adopting such strategies, these users created *safe spaces* (cf. The Roestone Collective, 2014) in which the mechanisms of political power and social surveillance were presumably less able to intervene. Our analysis offers a detailed insight into users' perspectives for strategically choosing the tools, platforms, and information to share online.

News Users and News-Sharing Repertories

The concept of the "user" has become more prevalent in the field of media studies as the result of studies that investigate people's active presence in social media and Internet spaces, which involves the

entanglement of media production and consumption (Livingstone, 2003 Picone, 2016, 2017). While the evolution of the news user as an analytical category has been shaped by the realization that audiences are indeed active (Hall, 1980; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985), both concepts— audiences and activities—have been somewhat unclear and, at times, limiting (Picone, 2016). For instance, the term *activity*, as denoted in *active audiences*, can involve a reference to meaning-making during watching the news on television. It can also signify the act of commenting on the news on platforms such as Twitter. The concept of the audience, on the other hand, implies "an endpoint in the media infrastructure, the moment where the message is 'heard' and interpreted" (Picone, 2016, p. 129). This makes it difficult to incorporate the "productive" activities enabling audiences to generate and/or distribute content.

Other terms, such as *produser*, have been suggested, emphasizing a paradigm shift "from industrial-style content production to what is here described as *produsage*: The collaborative, iterative, and user-led production of content by participants in a hybrid user-producer, or *produser* role" (Bruns, 2006, p. 1). The term *produser* overemphasizes the empowerment of users through distributed networks, creativity, and user-generated content; however, the media industry has been quite powerful in terms of disciplining the produsage activities of users (Bird, 2011). Furthermore, the term also ignores the large number of users who are not engaged in content creation (Bird, 2011). We employ the term *user* as a more encompassing and less linear term that relates to various types of interactions with media in today's converging media environments (Picone, 2017). Looking specifically at news, we adopt the term *news user*, which makes it possible to consider cross-device consumption and the different practices around news, including watching, reading, and listening to news, as well as sharing, commenting on, and posting about it (Picone, 2016).

A key concept in our study is "media repertoire," which offers an overarching perspective for understanding users' engagement with news across different media (Picone, 2016). Earlier studies that adopted a repertoire-based approach to media examined channel selection mechanisms among television users (Heeter, 1985) or the use of multiple media (print, radio, and television) for creating "information repertoires" (Reagan, Pinkleton, Chen, & Aaronson, 1995). Hasebrink and Popp (2006) explored "how media users combine different media contacts into a comprehensive pattern of exposure [and] how they integrate the increasing number of options into their everyday lives" (pp. 369–370). News users make choices from multiple devices and news sources, give meaning to them, and produce news across media platforms (Picone, 2016), and that repertoire approach led us to shift our focus on empirical studies from specific types of content or platforms to "patterns of selections" (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006, p. 372). By building on the concept of media repertoires, a number of scholars have explored the distinct methods that users employ to engage with news across a broad array of media platforms and content (cf. Edgerly, 2015; Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2017; Taneja, Webster, Malthouse, & Ksiazek, 2012; Yuan, 2011). While the existing studies on news repertoires illustrate the "complex interplay between the media and the content" (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006, p. 383) in users' constitution of news repertoires, insufficient attention has been paid to the social and political dynamics that shape research topics and settings. For instance, although research has been carried out in Germany (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006), China (Yuan, 2011), and the United States (Taneja et al., 2012), the historical and emergent contexts were not prioritized in those studies. Edgerly (2015) stands out as an exception; she considered sociodemocratic factors in identifying ideologically driven news repertoires among American users to a certain extent. For this study, we adopted a repertoire approach to news-sharing practices on social media because it enabled us to understand the patterns that emerge as

news users evaluate, select, arrange, comment on, and circulate news across different media platforms. We refer to those patterns as *news-sharing repertoires.*

From a broader historical perspective, news sharing, as Carlson (2016) notes, has always been ingrained in media practices of news users, who are both readers and disseminators of news in their social networks. With the advent of social media platforms, news sharing is now "a mediated activity carried out in public" (Carlson, 2016, p. 918) that seeks to reach out to larger audiences. Accordingly, media scholars have become increasingly interested in the dynamics of news sharing on social media platforms, especially focusing on the individual motivations of news users and predictors for sharing news content online (C. S. Lee & Ma, 2012; Picone, de Wolf, & Robijt, 2016; Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2017).

In a study that critically evaluates the literature for the years between 2004 and 2014, Kümpel, Karnowski, and Keyling (2015) identified the lack of contextualized attention circumscribing the research questions under discussion. They attributed this shortcoming to three issues, the first of which is the scarcity of qualitative and situation-based research in the sample that was reviewed. Only 4% of the 97 articles reviewed were based on qualitative research. Second is the lack of focus on content itself as something that is contextual and situational. Last, "news sharing research has primarily been developed in the United States and thus largely ignored other cultural contexts" (Kümpel et al., 2015, p. 10). Similarly, in their review of the news-sharing literature, Ihm and Kim (2018) argued that the existing literature on news sharing focuses more on informational aspects and fails to address individuals' motivations for circulating news. News users are aiming to "communicate with others" and "present themselves" in a way to "match their own self-image and their audience's expectations" (Ihm & Kim, 2018, p. 3) while circulating news. Ihm and Kim (2018) also concluded that users' motivations to circulate news cannot be considered in isolation from media platforms, news content, and users' imagined audiences, which are inseparable from their surrounding social and political contexts.

News sharing also has a political dimension with actual consequences for users depending on their contexts. Sharing and commenting on critical news in countries with authoritarian regimes can be dangerous for users because it makes their political views visible (Pearce, Vitak, & Barta, 2018). By the same token, public issues ranging from the environment to animal rights can bear political implications, thereby rendering news sharing in and of itself a politicized activity. Self-censorship has accordingly become common practice for social media users in many countries (Hampton et al., 2014; Kwon, Moon, & Stefanone, 2015), especially in contexts that are marked by networked authoritarianism and polarization (MacKinnon, 2011; Pearce et al., 2018). There is a growing divide between users who are "do[ing] politics" every day on social media and others who adopt "more protective strategies" to avoid offense or misinterpretation (Thorson, 2014; see also Pearce et al., 2018). Although several studies have focused on politically active users in the context of networked authoritarianism (A. Lee, 2018; Parks, Goodwin, & Han, 2017; Pearce et al., 2018), users who adopt more protective strategies while discussing political/politicized issues on social media remain understudied. Our aim in this study is to understand how Turkish news users create and perform diverse news-sharing repertoires. A repertoire-based approach to news sharing provides us with the tools needed to conceptualize news sharing as a complex and multilayered practice in increasingly converged media environments and to develop a contextualized and in-depth study of news sharing in Turkey.

The Turkish Context: Media Crackdowns, Networked Authoritarianism, and Polarization

Research has shown that Turkey has increasingly turned into a "competitive authoritarian regime," meaning that although elections are still held and the government strives to maintain its grip on power, the opposition's capacity to organize and compete in elections has been undermined (Kaygusuz, 2018; Somer, 2016). Esen and Gümüşçü (2016) note that Turkey "no longer satisfies the minimal requirements of democracy" (p. 1592). The new authoritarianism of the ruling AKP relies on judicial and economic pressure to consolidate its power, but "the main instruments of authoritarianism now appear to have become the media [outlets] themselves" (Somer, 2016, p. 495) as a means of manipulating and instrumentalizing the media to construct public opinion.

The issues of limited press freedom and the politicization of news outlets are not novel in Turkey. The main characteristics delineating the limits of press freedom in Turkey have been clientelism, political parallelism, and a tradition of strong state intervention, as well as the concentration of ownership and conglomeration (Kaya & Çakmur, 2010; Yeşil, 2016). The current crises surrounding media freedom, political pressure, and censorship have been enabled by a network of legal and administrative structures and relationships that were established over the course of the past three decades.

Media freedom in Turkey deteriorated dramatically after the coup attempt on July 15, 2016. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, more than 150 media outlets were shut down by decree laws in a declared state of emergency, more than 2,700 journalists were forced to resign, and hundreds lost their press licenses. According to Reporters Without Borders (2020), 233 journalists have been imprisoned in Turkey, and many others have been laid off, prosecuted, and exiled. Likewise, Turkey's status was changed from "partially free" to "not free" by the Press Freedom House in 2018 (Freedom House, 2019).

Furthermore, mainstream Turkish newspapers and television channels are mostly concentrated in the hands of businessmen who are politically close to, and/or have close business relationships with, the government. Most recently, most of the media outlets of Doğan Group[2]—including the most watched/read mainstream media outlets, such as Hürriyet Newspaper, CNN Türk (news channel), and Kanal D (national channel), as well as the most important distribution network in Turkey, Yaysat—were sold to the progovernment Demirören Group. Many journalists and editors who were critical of the government were fired after the handover, and editorial freedom in newsrooms decreased even further.

Besides putting pressure on and controlling mainstream mass media, the Turkish state—like China, Russia, and other authoritarian regimes—has increasingly embraced the changes brought about by digital communications, and it has adopted second- and third-generation strategies for controlling Internet content and communications; MacKinnon (2011) refers to this situation as "networked authoritarianism." The

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[2] Doğan Group became the most powerful media group in the country and the third largest conglomerate in early 2000s. It was active in media, tourism, energy, insurance, and real estate. Before the buyout by Demirören, Doğan Group controlled more than 60% of advertising revenue in the media sector (Kaya & Çakmur, 2010). Demirören Group is active in the energy, real estate, tourism, education, digital, and media sectors and is known for its close relationships with the AKP government ("Turkish media group", 2018).

government "allow(s) citizens to express various viewpoints online about social and political issues, while tracking such expressions, competing against them, and thwarting opposition" (Parks et al., 2017, p. 576). Parks and colleagues argue that Turkish Internet users are quite aware of these strategies.

In Turkey, in addition to Law No. 5651 (Regulation of Publications on the Internet and Suppression of Crimes Committed by Means of Such Publications), also known as "the Internet Law," other laws, such as the Anti-Terror Law, are used to control the Internet and limit freedom of speech online. As a result, several websites have been shut down (for example, Wikipedia was blocked between 2017 and 2019). At the same time, however, users have adopted various strategies, such as using VPN services and changing their DNS settings to circumvent Internet censorship (Bozdağ, 2016). After the Gezi protests and the corruption scandal in 2013, the government adopted broader strategies for controlling online content through content removals, throttling, and DNS poisoning after major events such as bombings and attacks, while also engaging in the surveillance and prosecution of users (Yeşil et al., 2017). One prominent tactic has been prosecuting social media users based on Article 299 of the Turkish Penal Code for insulting the president. Since Erdoğan took office as president in August 2014, the number of insult cases has skyrocketed. Of 17,406 cases launched between 2014 and 2018, 5,683 were settled with penalties (ranging from one to four years of imprisonment, often paid off as fines). The total number of cases between 1986 and 2018 stands at 19,122 (Yüksel, 2019). Similarly, the Anti-Terror Law is employed to criminalize online speech in relation to the Kurdish issue and minority rights (Yeşil et al., 2017).

Increasing political and social polarization also set the context of news use in Turkey. The political divides in Turkey have historical roots that run along three main fault lines: ethnic (mainly among Kurds and Turks), sectarian (mainly among Alevis and Sunnis), and ideological (increasingly between AKP supporters and AKP opponents) (Çelik et al., 2017). Especially following the Gezi protests, the AKP has adopted a very polarizing discourse to consolidate and mobilize support: The party presents a simplified framework of supporters and "foes" of the AKP and "New Turkey," a term the AKP uses to claim that Turkey, starting in 2002, has entered a new era of prosperity through AKP rule. This has led to even deeper divides along the existing fault lines in Turkey, crystallizing the separation between the government's supporters and its opponents (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018). A recent study on polarization in Turkey shows that not only political polarization, but also social distance, among the supporters of different political parties is increasing. People are increasingly reluctant to discuss contentious political matters with others in public spaces (e.g., neighborhood meetings), and only 25% of the people say that they would discuss critical issues on social media (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2018).

The Turkish Internet users' news repertoires have been influenced by these increasingly prevalent authoritarian tendencies and polarization. Although limited by its focus on urban centers, the Reuters Institute's 2018 Digital News Report indicates that Turkey ranks among the top countries in terms of distrust in the news media (Yanatma, 2018). Furthermore, the levels of overall trust (38%) and distrust (40%) in the Turkish news media are remarkably similar, which is an indicator of polarization (Yanatma, 2018). A recent report by Konda (2019) based on lifestyle surveys in the last 10 years shows that TV news consumption in Turkey has been influenced by polarization as news users increasingly prefer news sources that are closer to their lifestyles and political orientations.

Research Methods

In our study, we relied on a qualitative methodology to lay bare the multilayered influence of social and political contexts on individuals' complex decision-making processes in constructing news repertoires and circulation strategies. We used three research techniques: focus groups, media diaries, and semistructured interviews. The data were collected in the two weeks leading up to the local elections held in Turkey on March 31, 2019. The preelection period was marked by tensions between the supporters of the coalition between the ruling AKP and the nationalist-conservative MHP, and the supporters of the coalition between the secularist/social democrat CHP and the center-right İYİ Party, which positions itself in the center-right.[3] We held six focus groups, each of which had eight participants. Recruitment of the participants was carried out in consultation with a professional research company based in Istanbul. The sample of 48 people represented four major socioeconomic status groups (A, B, C1, C2) of six (including D and E) in Turkey.[4] Our study included samples of A (upper), B (upper middle), C1 (middle), and C2 (lower middle) groups. All participants were self-reported social media users who engaged with the news on the Internet on a daily basis. By default, this excluded the socioeconomic status groups of D and E (little to no education, little to no income, and unemployed). The ages of the participants ranged between 17 and 65 years. An equal number of men and women were present in all focus groups.

The focus group sessions took place in the observation rooms of the research company that recruited the participants, were moderated by the authors, and lasted between 1 1/2 and 2 hours. The sessions revolved around questions concerning use of social media and news in general, news assessment and sharing strategies, topics and platforms for news engagement and sharing, as well as motivation and social ends in terms of news use. Sound and video recordings were made of all the focus group sessions. At the end of each session, five of the eight participants were selected based on our immediate assessment of each individual's articulations about news repertoires during the focus group sessions and given media diaries. In particular, we tried to select individuals from different occupational backgrounds and with different ideological leanings and political orientations to obtain a diverse data set.

Scholars seeking to document self-reported qualitative data about media engagement have been using the media diary technique in innovative ways (Berg & Düvel, 2012). Because it hands over responsibility for describing media engagement to the informants themselves, the diary technique is

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[3] The tensions continued in the aftermath of the municipal elections on March 31, 2019. Although the joint candidate of CHP and İYİ Party, Ekrem İmamoğlu, won the Istanbul elections with a difference of 13,000 votes, which included the support of HDP (pro-Kurdish oppositional party) voters, the Supreme Committee of Elections decided to repeat the election in Istanbul. The second election campaign became a symbolic race between the supporters and opponents of AKP, increasing tensions in society even further. Ekrem İmamoğlu won the second election on June 23, 2019, with a difference of 806,000 votes.

[4] These socioeconomic status groups are determined by the Turkish Consumer Research Foundation (TÜAD) based on individuals' education, vocations, and income. Group A consists of college graduates (30% with higher graduate degrees), including specialists with higher income levels. Group B is mainly composed of officers and merchants, 60% of whom have college degrees. Groups C1 and C2 are mainly workers who hold high and middle school diplomas and have limited savings (TÜAD, 2012).

advantageous in terms of viability, even if it only generates self-reported data that may possibly be biased depending on participants' perceptions of the research encounter. Such a bias can also emerge with focus groups and interviews. In this study, we used media diaries not only to generate self-reported notes about news use, but especially to deepen an ongoing conversation with the research participants. Based on 30 participants' weeklong diary notes about their news consumption and sharing practices specifically, we conducted semistructured interviews with each participant. The interviews, which took 20–45 minutes each, were conducted with the aim of clarifying the diary entries and carrying out further dialogue concerning participants' news use. Moreover, the diaries opened up a critical space for the participants to self-reflect on their engagement with the news. The transcribed interviews and focus group data, as well as the media diaries, were analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis facilitated by Atlas.ti software for structuring, coding, and patterning of the material. For the analysis, a thematic coding scheme was developed based on this study's conceptual model and the existing literature that was surveyed. The themes included the users' reflection on the context, platforms, topics, and sharing practices.

News-Sharing Repertoires in Turkey

Different factors, such as ideological orientations, trust or distrust in news organizations, and the attributed characteristics of the various platforms, play a role in the choices of Turkish users as they constitute and justify their news repertoires. Within this context, understanding what types of news are shared by news users on social media—and grasping their motivations—is critical. Our study presents three different patterns of news-sharing repertoires on social media: (1) refraining from news sharing and employing self-censorship; (2) sharing news as political engagement, identification, and activism; and (3) sharing news in "safe zones" created through topics and platforms. These patterns emerged around a particular category of news stories, namely "political news" (*siyasi haber*), as proclaimed by the participants while they described their news-sharing practices. Based on the participants' assertions, we identify "political news" within the context of this study as news stories that are directly or identifiably related to party politics, to Erdoğan and his family, or to such historical fault lines of identity politics in Turkey as Islamism, secularism, and the Kurdish movement.

Refrainment and Self-Censorship

The polarized social and political climate in Turkey and the increasingly comprehensive strategies employed to control online content—including online snitching and trolling practices, as well as prosecution of individuals on a broader scale—have a strong influence on users' news-sharing behavior on social media. Recent research documents that social media users in Turkey have become direct targets of government surveillance (for example, Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). Accordingly, a widely shared culture of fear seems to reign when it comes to sharing critical opinions and political matters online. Another reason for such refrainment is anticipated social isolation.

Some users were mainly disengaged from politics and avoided "writing any comments, especially about politics," such as Nurhan[5] (F, 21) from the upper middle socioeconomic status group (B); "because it is disturbing. . . [I am] not interested in it, so [I] do not engage with it." However, a considerable number

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[5] All names are pseudonyms.

of participants (17 of 48) noted explicitly that they would not share political news on social media under any circumstances, especially on Twitter, which they perceive as completely public and thus possibly under direct surveillance from the authorities. All these participants admitted that they follow news on social media, but avoid sharing political news.

The practice of self-censorship in terms of sharing political news among these participants cut across age, gender, and socioeconomic groups, as well as political leanings and voting behavior. However, the participants' justification for this practice was twofold: fear of social isolation and fear of political profiling. Although a number of participants noted that they abstained from political news sharing to maintain their social relationships with friends and relatives "from the other side," others set forth anticipation of certain negative outcomes, such as political profiling and being reported to CİMER (the Presidency Communication Center) for prosecution, as the grounds for their reluctance. The dynamic underlying this difference transpired as participants' political identifications and the attributes of particular news content and platforms. For instance, Ayşe, a 24-year-old conservative woman from the lower middle socioeconomic group (C2) and a self-proclaimed AKP voter, noted that she would never share news content in relation to party politics. She explained her views as follows:

> Friendships end because of politics. People say, "You vote for this and that party and I don't want to be friends with you" . . . I vote for the AKP. There was a school friend of mine from the CHP. She cut off her friendship with me. She blocked me [on social media] just like that.

Whereas Ayşe's reasoning for not sharing political news was based on immediate social outcomes, such as ending friendships, many secular and Kurdish participants expressed their reasoning for self-censorship in terms of their anticipation of dire political outcomes, such as political profiling and/or prosecution. Several users admitted that they engaged in self-censoring because they were afraid of being labeled, being prosecuted, losing their jobs (or their loved ones losing their jobs), and even going to prison as a result of their social media posts. A 41-year-old secular Kurdish participant, Özkan (M), an accountant from the lower middle socioeconomic status group (C2), said he was afraid of sharing political content: "I [would share] something and then they [would] come to [my] door and take [me] away." Ebru (F), a 41-year-old housewife and a participant in the same focus group, elaborated on Özkan's stance with details from her life: "I have a son in college. I have concerns about him being investigated in the future and not being able to find a job."

The following excerpt from Dilek (F, 32), a bank employee and a self-proclaimed HDP voter from the upper middle socioeconomic status group (B), and Polat (M, 26), a photographer who identifies as secular, also from the upper middle group (B), expressed a similar fear of political profiling and prosecution:

> Polat: I had Twitter, [but] I deactivated it two months ago.
> Moderator: Why?
> Polat: You can get yourself in trouble with the things you write [on Twitter].
> Dilek: I had to deactivate it as well. Because of the country we live in, we cannot speak out or criticize anything. We can get punished just because of a tweet. I had to find a job, and I closed my Twitter accounts.

The participants who noted such fear in their narratives based their stances on multiple references to acquaintances and friends of friends who had been tried and convicted because of critical posts or who lost their jobs because of the comments they posted online. While the actual numbers of prosecutions for social media posts have skyrocketed since 2014 (Yüksel, 2019), it is the circulation of these narratives that is contributing to the establishment of a culture of fear, which in turn drives users to self-censor or seek out safer ways of sharing news content. In a subsequent interview, Dilek (F, 32) justified her self-censorship in terms of news coverage about Erdoğan's message regarding the Newroz celebration in Kurdish. She was critical of Erdoğan, who she thought was dishonest in regard to Kurds and the Kurdish language:

> Dilek: I know that this is insincere of me but I have not shared anything about this. Because it was dangerous.
> Interviewer: Why do you think sharing this news as dangerous?
> Dilek: I mean, anything I say on this issue can get me prosecuted for insulting Erdoğan. An old woman sat on a piece of newspaper the other day and she was taken into custody because there was a photograph of the president on the newspaper. These things happen.

Dilek's and several others' avoidance of news sharing on the basis of political fear and potential social isolation echoed participants' dominant perceptions of the news in general as ineffective and even counterproductive in democratic processes.

Sharing News as Political Identification and Activism

Five of the 48 participants in our study declared that they shared political news on social media. Their common trait in news sharing was that each considered social media to be a venue for political identification and activism, as well as a venue for social networking. Ahmet (M), a 35-year-old hairdresser from the middle socioeconomic status group (C1), noted that he deliberately shared news related to Ekrem İmamoğlu, the oppositional mayor candidate (from the CHP, the secular oppositional party) in the 2019 local elections for Istanbul: "I share politics on Facebook frequently. I share things about İmamoğlu. I want him to be elected from the bottom of my heart. . . I put emphasis on politics on social media." In response to Büşra (F, 28), a health professional who interjected by saying, "I do not share politics because there is this side and there is that side [on social media]," in reference to the polarized national atmosphere, Ahmet continued, "It has been 15 years [since the AKP has been in power]; I share it away at this point." For Ahmet, Facebook provided a space for raising a political voice and gaining visibility, especially during the preelection period, when the stakes were higher than other times. Yeliz (F, 31, purchasing expert), a secular participant, explained that she shares "[her] opinions [openly on social media] and is not bothered by this." Everyone in her neighborhood already knows that she is not an "AKP supporter." She added, "I am not afraid of anything. Whatever will happen, can happen."

Orhan (M, 37), a sales representative from the lower socioeconomic status group (C2) and an AKP supporter, noted in our interview that he shared news in conjunction with his views on politics. One of the examples he gave in his media diary was related to three exiled antigovernment media figures:

> Interviewer: You shared a piece of news titled "Fugitives got together in Germany." What was it about?
>
> Orhan: The news was about Mehmet Ali Alabora, Deniz Yücel, and Can Dündar. These people who are abroad are wanted by the government here. The photo showed them together in the obvious country [Germany]. I trusted the news source [A Haber, a progovernment TV channel] and shared it on Twitter. I wanted to inform people who held similar opinions to mine. Those fugitives were posting that photo basically to show off. They are known to have ties with FETÖ [the organization allegedly responsible for the 2016 coup attempt].

For Orhan, sharing such news was a performance of political identification; the same applied to Selin (F, 24), an unemployed Kurdish participant from the middle socioeconomic status group (C1) who shared news about the day marking the Halepçe massacre (caused by a chemical attack on Kurds instigated by Saddam Hussein in 1988, a historical moment that became an identity marker for Kurds also in Turkey) on her Twitter account as a performance of her Kurdish identity: "Turks would not share this. And it would not be broadcast on TV. This is of interest to Kurds . . . I shared the news of Halepçe with a note: 'The apple smell is in the air.'" While for Orhan, a pro-AKP user, sharing political news was intended to inform others who thought alike and to consolidate a political stance, for antigovernment users, such as Ahmet and Selin, the aim of sharing political news was not only to highlight their political identifications, but also to counter the mainstream media's silence and censorship in relation to oppositional voices, different identities, and varying experiences.

Sharing News in Safe Zones

The majority of participants in our study, from varying socioeconomic and age groups, stated that they either completely avoided sharing political content on public social media platforms such as Twitter based on their fear of social isolation and political profiling, or they were very careful about the content that they shared. A total of 28 of 48 participants noted that they shared news but not "political" (*siyasi*) news on social media. Users in this category tailored their news-sharing strategies via two critical tactics: namely, a complex assessment of divergent social media platforms in relation to each other, and a critical evaluation of news topics as a means of identifying and then circumventing overtly politicized issues. Both tactics were put to work by users as part of a larger strategy that had the aim of creating topical and/or online spaces in which news could be safely shared.

The strategic selection of platforms was largely based on relative audiences and publicness of each platform. Users selected and shared news depending on the attributed characteristics of platforms and the imagined audiences therein. For example, Zeynep (F, 49), a housewife from the middle socioeconomic status group (C1), mentioned that she wanted to share a recent news article about one of the oppositional alliance municipal candidates but was afraid to do so on Facebook:

> Knowing this [the possibility of her husband losing his job as the result of critical social media posts], we try not to comment too much. For instance, there was a recent news story about Mansur Yavaş (the opposition candidate for mayor in Ankara) that I really wanted to share, but I could not share it on Facebook or on another [public] platform. I only shared it with my friends on WhatsApp to say, "Look, this is the way it is," at least with my closer circle [of friends].

Zeynep opted to share such critical news with her "closer circle" of friends via WhatsApp rather than on Facebook. For many users, WhatsApp is considered a safe, closed environment that is sometimes used to share news with friends and family members—in other words, audiences who are familiar and trustworthy. Facebook and Twitter, on the other hand, are considered public and therefore unsafe because they can be accessed by a diverse group of people, some of whom might be involved in snitching practices, and postings might be seen by employers or government officials. For that reason, users often avoid posting political news and critical comments on such platforms. Similarly, Ahmet (M, 35), who declared in the focus group that he shared political news on social media, conceded in our interview that he would share news related to Ekrem İmamoğlu on his Facebook page or with his WhatsApp groups, but not on Twitter; he perceived Twitter to be more prone to surveillance than WhatsApp or Facebook.

In addition to their decisions about platforms based on their attributed characteristics, users were also very careful and selective about the news topics that they shared. Several participants in the study stated that they generally shared news about a limited number of topics, which they described as being "important for society," "relating to common values," and pertaining to "common concerns," including environmental issues, animal rights, violence against women, and patriotism (especially in relation to martyrs and terror attacks). Although these issues are also politicized in the broader sense, the participants' emphasis on "common concern" implied that they are perceived beyond party lines and less risky to share. Mehmet (M, 34), a sales representative from the middle socioeconomic status group (C1), noted in the focus group discussion,

> I don't share political things—we have all kinds of friends—in order to maintain my friendships with some of them. . . . If it is a very serious thing, then I share it. If it is something that is of concern to society, then I share it to raise awareness among friends.

Taha (M, 38), a ticketing clerk from the low socioeconomic status group (C2) and a self-declared Erdoğan supporter, exemplified these significant, commonly valued topics as follows: "We have common values, our honor [*namus*], children, old people. . . . We should try to talk about these things [rather than others on social media]." For Taha, social media should function as a space of unity rather than an arena of division actualized by party politics. One issue Taha considered as uniting was national pride and patriotism. In his diary, Taha mentioned the day of commemoration for the battle of Çanakkale, held on March 18 every year, as a topic that was worth sharing on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter because it is about "unity and solidarity" (Figure 1).
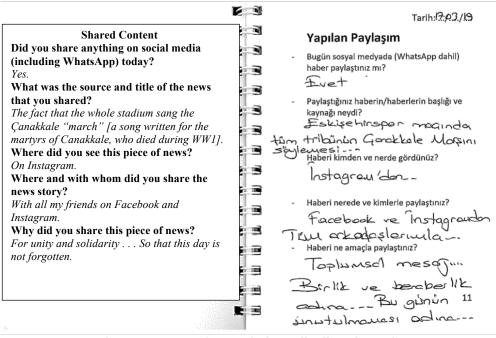
Figure 1. Excerpt from Taha's media diary (M, 38).

Taha extended his narrative about common values by another safe topic, namely the environment:

> I would share news about doing harm to nature, and I would do so regardless of which political party or administration is responsible. My latest post is about the garbage recycling facility that simply ruined nature in Giresun, where my village is.

The facility Taha referred to is located in Çavuşlu, with local governance by MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) at the time of its launch. Despite the negative environmental reports about the project and the objections by the local governance and public, the national authorities pushed forward the contentious project to actualization in 2017 (Karadeniz İsyandadır, 2017). By sharing recent news about the facility framed as relating to "our common values," Taha created a safe zone for discussing a highly contentious and politicized issue.

The topics that are perceived as "common concerns to society" are volatile and can turn into overtly politicized issues. Violence against women, a topic framed as nonpolitical by a number of participants, has also been a highly contested issue and a significant axis of polarization during AKP rule. While the number of femicides skyrocketed, in 2020, the AKP government put forward an agenda to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, a 2011 Council of Europe convention to protect victims and effectively prosecute offenders in gender-based and domestic violence. Women protesting femicides and the potential withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention faced further police violence (McKernan, 2020).

Nevertheless, many study participants referred to violence against women as "a common concern to society," downplaying the popular contestations over the issue. One way to craft the issue as a safe zone was to share celebrity news that attracted mass media's attention. Selin (F, 24) referred to national headlines in October 2018 about Sıla, a famous pop singer who went public with the domestic violence she suffered, as a sensitive issue: "If the news is about a very sensitive issue, for example Sıla or violence against women . . . I share it with my own comments. I don't share just the news [link] directly." Selin used the popularity of the Sıla case, which attracted mainstream media's attention, to circulate her commentary in a safe zone about violence against women. Sıla's fame functioned as a safeguard for Selin to post commentary about an increasingly critical issue, violence against women—one that is mainly discussed along the fault line of Islamism and secularism and the AKP policies.

Conclusion

Relying on a multimethod qualitative study, we established three different news-sharing repertoires among Turkish social media users. The first concerns refraining from sharing political news on social media for fear of potential social and political consequences. The second is about sharing political news as a form of political engagement. The third deals with strategically choosing news to share and the platforms on which to share them, thereby creating safe spaces (cf. The Roestone Collective, 2014) in which the mechanisms of political power and social surveillance are presumably less able to intervene. All three groups of users were found to be influenced by the context of the increasing networked authoritarianism in Turkey; they were constantly assessing the risks of sharing political news and critical comments on social media, and they developed their news-sharing strategies accordingly. Furthermore, we identified political and social polarization as an influence on users' news-sharing practices in the Turkish context. This study's participants took their social networks into consideration by not sharing news on social media to avoid conflicts or by carefully choosing the news topics and the platforms.

Our analysis demonstrated that on nuanced readings of the existing context, users in the third category tapped on two critical tactics: a complex assessment of divergent social media platforms in relation to each other, and a critical evaluation of news topics as a means of identifying and then circumventing overtly politicized issues. Users put both tactics to work as part of a larger strategy that had the aim of creating topical and/or online spaces in which news could be safely shared. We argue that this pattern of creating safe zones on social media has at least two implications for the visibility of political news on social media, especially in authoritarian contexts. First, because this group of users identified specific topics, such as "martyrs," "animal rights" and "the environment," as those of "common concern" for society and thus felt safe to share and comment on news related to these political/politicized issues, such topics became overrepresented on social media. In comparison with these topics, news related to party politics and critical topics—such as freedom of expression or the biased media landscape—which proved to be of concern for the focus group participants as they revealed in the focus group discussions, were not discussed or shared on social media. Second, our study also shows that there is a growing divide between users who are "do[ing] politics" every day on social media and others who engage in "more protective strategies" (Thorson, 2014, p. 213) to protect themselves, avoid offense, or prevent misinterpretation (see also Pearce et al., 2018). This can lead to higher visibility and more risk for those users who share critical news content and political

comments on social media; they will be increasingly singled out as more and more social media users decide to refrain from sharing political news or share news in carefully curated safe zones.

The findings in this study highlight the strength of a qualitative and triangulated research methodology in revealing "users' perspectives on their media repertoires and about the subjective meaning linked with certain behaviors" (Hasebrink & Domeyer 2012, p. 764) against a backdrop of increased political pressure and social surveillance. News use is a social practice (Picone, 2016), and news users are strategic agents who create repertoires with the aim of performing critical reflection on media platforms and sociopolitical contexts. The complex ways in which subjects evaluate the contexts of news, constitute news repertoires, and craft sharing strategies become accessible in discourses that emerge through the research encounter itself. Based on discourses that are situated between the research interlocutors and the research team, this study provides insights concerning individuals' perceptions and experiences of news engagement. Qualitative research has its own specific limitations, and it does not allow for generalizations and macro-level comparisons. Studies employing multiple methods that combine qualitative and quantitative research techniques would have the potential to enrich the literature on news sharing and engagement in social media.

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