



# Platforms for populism? The affective issue crowd and its disconnections

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## Abstract

Focused on the case of Turkey, this article interrogates the relation between populist politics and affective mediations by social media platforms, or, more precisely, the disjunctions between them that result in weaknesses and reconfigurations of populism. It explores the uncertain interplay between the capillary micropolitics of affect mediated by online platforms and the macropolitics of populism as a political project of managing the body politic. Studying two Twitter campaigns, I look at what I call issue crowds that are assembled by hashtags and propagate through memetic, connective logics, but that also feature homophilic disconnections. It is such disconnections rather than the (over)connectedness of the affective crowd, as the liberal critique of populism has it, that endanger democratic possibility. By analysing connectedness and disconnection, this article captures the political possibilities and dangers of affective communication and the transindividual crowd, meanwhile rethinking the liberal critique of populism.

## Keywords

affect, hatred, hashtags, homophily, Justice and Development Party (AKP), memes, platforms, populism, Turkey, Twitter

## Introduction

‘Ben de varım’ (‘I’m in too’) was a hashtag campaign, reminiscent of a challenge meme, that travelled the Turkish internet in 2017. The campaign, launched by pro-government celebrities, had the initial aim to support constitutional change away from parliamentary democracy toward executive presidency. Social media users first declared their desire for

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constitutional change in a short video and then hailed a personal contact, inviting this contact to do the same. The key phrase that was reiterated was '[name of sender], I have received your message. For a big and strong Turkey, count me in. [Name of next addressee], are you in, too?' Videos were shot in intimate settings, in close-up frames, and some come across as the first self-recorded videos shared by these users. In one video, a middle-aged woman stands in front of a portrait of Turkey's long-standing leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. She reiterates the beginning of the phrase but then adds that her support is for the future of her children and the welfare of the country. Passion builds up throughout her performance, which ends in a scream on top of her voice: 'YES, YES, YES!' With every beat, she jumps into the air, breaking with whatever codes of modesty her conservative Muslim appearance might suggest.

Focused on the case of Turkey, this article explores the relation between populist politics and affective mediations on social media platforms, or, more precisely, the disjunctions between them. Social media platforms are often ascribed a natural affinity with, or implication in, populism. The emergence of so-called filter bubbles and echo chambers in social media seem to have been cotemporaneous with the latest global wave of populist politics (for a critique see, Chakravartty and Roy, 2017). In addition, the internet's attention economy thrives on 'simplification, emotionalization, and negativity' (Engesser et al., 2017: 1287), which also characterize populist communication styles. Moreover, the design of social media platforms often seems to support political ideologies such as people-centrism and anti-elitism (Baldwin Philippi, 2018). The problem is that when we only highlight the apparent affinity between social media platforms and populism, these media tend to be reduced to 'instruments' for populists, while online crowds tend to be taken as duped followers and homogeneous masses. The actual material dynamics of communication and mediations of affect remain ignored. Against this, the challenge I set myself is to focus as little as possible on the figure of the leader and his rhetoric, while highlighting the role of mediating technologies in combination with the agencies of affect. Baldwin Philippi (2018: 4) has argued that platforms and their material features 'play a constitutive role in constructing the very notion of populism' (see also Hoyng and Es, 2017). In similar vein, this article investigates the materially mediated formation of a social body. However, my contribution is intentionally one-sided in that it privileges inquiry into the unforeseen, unintended reconfigurations of populism and weaknesses undermining the populist project, borne by changing mediating platforms.

By way of illustration, we can turn to the oft-encountered assumption that Cambridge Analytica fed into populist politics because technologies of micro-targeting and neuro-marketing are instrumental to populist projects. However, the effectiveness of such techniques has been contested (Venturini, 2019). Besides neglecting audience reception, such an assumption overlooks the fact that neuro-marketing and micro-targeting work through a cascade of minute differences, constantly shifting and re-directing the multiple potentials and tendencies within the crowd (Obsolete Capitalism, 2014; O'Neil, 2016). Such fragmentation and multiplicity of the crowd hardly compare to a coherent message by the populist leadership that consolidates the body politic, that is, the 'body' of the population as a collective being. In the case of the alleged 50,000 versions of an ad created by the Trump campaign, 'the populist' spoke in many different voices and registers (Maly, 2018) to niche audiences with divergent interests, practically 'disassembling the people

into many audiences' (Baldwin Philippi, 2018: 16). If we want to investigate the potential to harm democracies, it is necessary to rethink our critique of populism, especially the figures of the 'leader' and the 'crowd'.

In this article, I do not attend to Cambridge Analytica per se but media situations pertinent to populism in Turkey. I focus in particular on two Twitter hashtag campaigns: #Bendevarım, the aforementioned campaign in support of the transition to executive presidency in 2017, and #ZeytinDalı, in support of Turkey's military intervention in Afrin, Syria, in 2018. I look at the formation of 'issue publics' (see also Bruns and Highfield, 2016; Milan, 2017), or, in order to avoid the connotation of rational-cognitive norms for political participation, affective *issue crowds* that are assembled by the hashtag and propagated through memes. My discussion overlaps somewhat with the work on activist deployments of hashtags, memes and virals (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). Yet, contrary to studies associating such practices with progressive or revolutionary politics, I explore them in relation to a brand of populism that draws on nationalism and shades into repressive politics (cf. Jutel, 2018). Throughout my analysis, I attend to the multiple potentials and discrepancies unfurling at the intersection of affective economies in issue crowds and populist political agendas.

The two campaigns I discuss, #Bendevarım and #ZeytinDalı, came at a time when the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) seemed both unshakeable and deeply contested. Having its roots in Islamist politics favoured by a constituency of Anatolian working-class migrants in major Turkish cities, AKP embraced neoliberalism in the 2000s. It promised to fuse Islam with liberal democracy, forming a society no longer dominated by secular, Kemalist elites (Tuğal, 2016). Yet the extraordinarily turbulent 2010s in Turkey saw multiple crises: the Gezi protests in 2013; a severe economic downturn; a coup attempt in 2016 by the Gülenist sect, followed by a two-year state of emergency during which civil freedoms crumbled and constitutional change towards an executive presidency was sealed through a controversial referendum; also the re-militarization of the Kurdish region of Turkey, ending the acknowledgement of the pro-Kurdish political movement and the search for political means to resolve the decades-long armed conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The military intervention in Afrin should be understood in the context of the latter conflict, as the Turkish government deemed the Syrian-Kurdish military and political organizations, the YPG and PYD, to be affiliated with the Turkish PKK. Several labels have been proposed for the latest turn in AKP governance, including authoritarian populism, corporate nationalism, and competitive authoritarianism (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016; Küçük and Özselçuk, 2019). Such terms grapple with the fact that, whereas electoral victory and a show of popular support are important as ever in Turkish politics, separation of powers, access to media for opposition parties, and civil liberties have been in decline (cf. Hall, 1979).

## Affective crowds

In a certain strand of academic literature, populism has been considered a 'thin-centered ideology' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2011) with only a few core characteristics. As such, it is often defined in terms of a list of symptomatic topoi, including the appeal to a

homogeneous and sovereign community of 'us' versus a 'them' threatening this community, along with variable other topoi such as the prevalent figure of the strong, charismatic leader, nativist identity politics, anti-elitism or anti-intellectualism, and emotionally charged rhetoric. By focusing strongly on the rhetoric and figure of the 'leader', what this framing of populism by and large leaves out are the wider cultural and material processes of mediation and communication. Moreover, as a normative concept, populism often denotes a deviation from 'healthy' liberal democracy, induced by the pathology of the crowd (cf. Mudde, 2010). According to a vision, which can be traced back to Le Bon and Freud, the crowd undermines the individual, autonomous liberal subject, and hence rational capacity, as 'any congregation of individuals will serve only to weaken the rationality of each of its constituent members, who will find themselves easily swayed either by random suggestions or by charismatic leadership' (Gilbert, 2014: 52). The image of its charismatic leader, who is the meta-individual, unifies individuals and constitutes the collective. Though some kind of meta-individual identification with a central figure or principle is necessary to overcome the Hobbesian state of nature (chaos), political liberalism also fears this as 'a permanent and even more dangerous threat to the individuality of the actual individual' than the state of nature (Gilbert, 2014: 70). Instead, social relations 'must be voluntary, limited and carefully regulated' and the private individual must be protected against interference by others (2014: 33).

Displacing the focus on the populist leader who assembles individuals into a collective, this article turns instead to affect and mediation to tease out social complexities and contradictions of populism. Mazzarella (2019: 50) defines populism as a 'mattering-forth of the collective flesh', which denotes 'the moments in which the affective and corporeal substance of social life makes itself felt as an intensification that exceeds or has fallen out of alignment with prevailing institutional mediations'. As such, populism maintains an ambivalent relation to the democratic promise of people's sovereignty (Laclau, 2005). The contestation of institutional representation is key to democratic struggle, following Laclau and Mouffe's view on radical democracy (for a discussion, see Gilbert, 2014). Yet such contestation can turn into anti-democratic politics and even authoritarian governance of the body politic when the mattering-forth of the flesh coincides with a deepening of belief in the homogeneity of 'the people' and their representation by the 'strong leader', who appears as *vox populi* (Arditi, 2007).

Faced with this double potential, the energies of the 'mattering-forth of the flesh' should be considered as politically undecided. The negative perception of the 'irrational' affective crowds was challenged by scholars, especially in cultural studies and communication, who hailed lateral, affective communication for transgressing the exclusive boundaries of the public sphere and holding transformative-revolutionary potential. These scholars have focused on networked media as enablers of the transgressive 'minor intimacies' that Berlant (1998) wrote about. Moreover, Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) widely cited work holds that participation in online campaigns and memes advances personally expressive content that is 'shared with, and recognized by, others who, in turn, repeat these networked sharing activities' (2012: 752). Bennett and Segerberg's notion of connective logics was demonstrated in campaigns revolving around intimate and touching stories about issues cast as 'private', such as poverty, illness, and gender and

sexuality. The emergent publicness allows for politicization of such issues and for lines of solidarity (Fraser, 1990).

Moreover, if we take networked laterality to an ontological level, social bodies such as crowds appear to be fluid compositions of psycho-social capacities to affect and be affected. Sampson (2012), referencing the sociologist Tarde, deems the social body to consist of micro-level behaviours of imitation and invention that result in a kind of togetherness that lacks homogeneity. The crowd comes into being through the capillary 'transmission of movement from one body to another' and forms a 'continuous, localized, and indirect epidemiological space where social inventions are always in passage, spreading out, contaminating, and varying in size' (Sampson, 2012: 21). In this regard, some theorists of networked media and affect have revived Simondon's idea of a 'transindividual' body. This is not a group of separate individuals now brought together as a collective (for instance, through the meta-individualist figure of the populist leader). Instead, it is a psycho-social transindividual formation, emerging from a common reservoir of affective potential – a 'general field of relations and potentialities' (Gilbert, 2014: 111). In Hardt and Negri's (2005) well-known trilogy, this transindividual being is referred to as the 'multitude' and ascribed a radical potential for transformative commonality that, contrary to the populist collective, does not impose an identity on its constituents.

Authors hailing lateral, affective communication consider the democratic, or even transformative-revolutionary, potential of communication that challenges the modes, sites, and recognized agents of established, institutionalized democracy. Such visions are helpful in underscoring the political possibilities of contemporary mediated communication. However, recent social media developments, as referred to in the introduction, bring back theories centred on the manipulation of affective contagions, along with the fear of the irrational, impressionable crowd. What Terranova (2012) characterized as the 'attention economy' encompasses an economic model in digital media that degrades the micro-forces of affect by capturing and channelling them, rendering the capacity to be affected into a vulnerability to 'capture by external forces quantified by measurement of diffusion of behaviours such as liking, following, etc,' (2012: 13). Yet it should be remembered that the social media platforms composing the attention economy are designed to benefit the business models of their owners primarily (Harsin, 2015), rather than a particular populist project in governing the body politic. Pointing to limitations of instrumentalization, I highlight the discrepancies between populism as conventionally understood and affective mediations in issue crowds on social media platforms.

Moreover, by considering the affective crowd as politically undecided, I reject the aforementioned liberal narrative's presumption that emotionality and loss of individuality form the problematic aspects of populism, sustaining 'irrational crowds'. But, I also do not consider lateral networks only in terms of 'the accidents and spontaneity' (Sampson, 2012: 6) of affect and desire, as forces that are hard to control. Rather, affect can be visceral but also lends intensity to definitive emotions that are marked in discourse and cultural memory (Ahmed, 2004; Grossberg, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015). Affect exists in encounters between bodies, whereby certain affects, say hatred or disgust, stick more to certain bodies than others, producing sedimentations resonating with historically produced identities and ideologies, such as racist and nationalist ones.

Hence, affect forms ‘an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities’ (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 1). Building on these insights, this article explores the uncertain interplay between the capillary micropolitics of affect mediated by online platforms and the macropolitics of populism as a political project of managing the body politic.

## Methodology

Data for this article was gathered manually at the times of the campaigns as well as in retrospect via Tweetdeck’s search function. Both allowed for historical search and present texts and images/videos in integrated manner, which facilitates multimodal analysis, combining text, visuals, and platform affordances (Rose, 2016). This practice helped me conceive initial codes and themes for analysis of the two hashtags. Furthermore, I derived data via Trackmyhashtag. This dataset consisted of 9249 posts pertaining to #Bendevarım for the period between 25 January and 20 April 2017, and 9223 posts pertaining to #ZeytinDalı for the period between 20 January and 1 April 2018. All posts, or tweets, were in Turkish, contained either image or video, and excluded reposts. Further selection of items for analysis was determined by my intention to analyse original, user-generated content in which users showed themselves and the communities they belong to within the context of populist politics. Whereas for #Bendevarım I sampled one in ten user-generated videos ( $N=3286$ ), for #ZeytinDalı I sampled one in ten images ( $N=10,509$ ). I focused on discursive *practices* (Fairclough, 1992; Khosravini, 2017), namely micro-interactions and user practices, such as affective self-expression and performativity of the self or community, memetic appropriations of styles and phrases as well as the addressivities and interpellations that manifest themselves in hailing by name, or the use of social media affordances such as the address key (@) and hash key (#). Next to such mediated participatory practices, I analysed representation and the production of meaning, drawing on social semiotics, which attends to articulation of signs, polysemy, intertextuality, and connotation (Rose, 2016).

Beyond this qualitative analysis, the large, machine-readable Trackmyhashtag dataset allowed me to obtain a basic quantitative overview of the overall scope of posts assembled by the respective hashtags; of co-hashtags that were used alongside the respective main hashtags; and of word frequency or, just as important, absence. My visualizations of co-hashtag frequencies show proportional usage of certain hashtags in combination with the respective main hashtags, along with smaller meaning-producing clusters, which were qualitatively interpreted and contextualized. A mixed-method analysis combining theoretically informed, qualitative analysis and computer-mediated quantitative means has been experimented with by Papacharissi (2015: 40–2). Furthermore, Richard Rogers (2013) has done much to integrate digital methods into critical research traditions. In this study, critical, qualitative analysis is still predominant without being rendered subservient to quantitative analysis. Instead, the two coexist as different, and not entirely congruent, methodological lenses onto the dataset (Flick, 2018).

A shortcoming of this article is that I only use Twitter data and no Facebook data, which is still the most popular platform in Turkey, followed by Twitter.<sup>1</sup> As others have

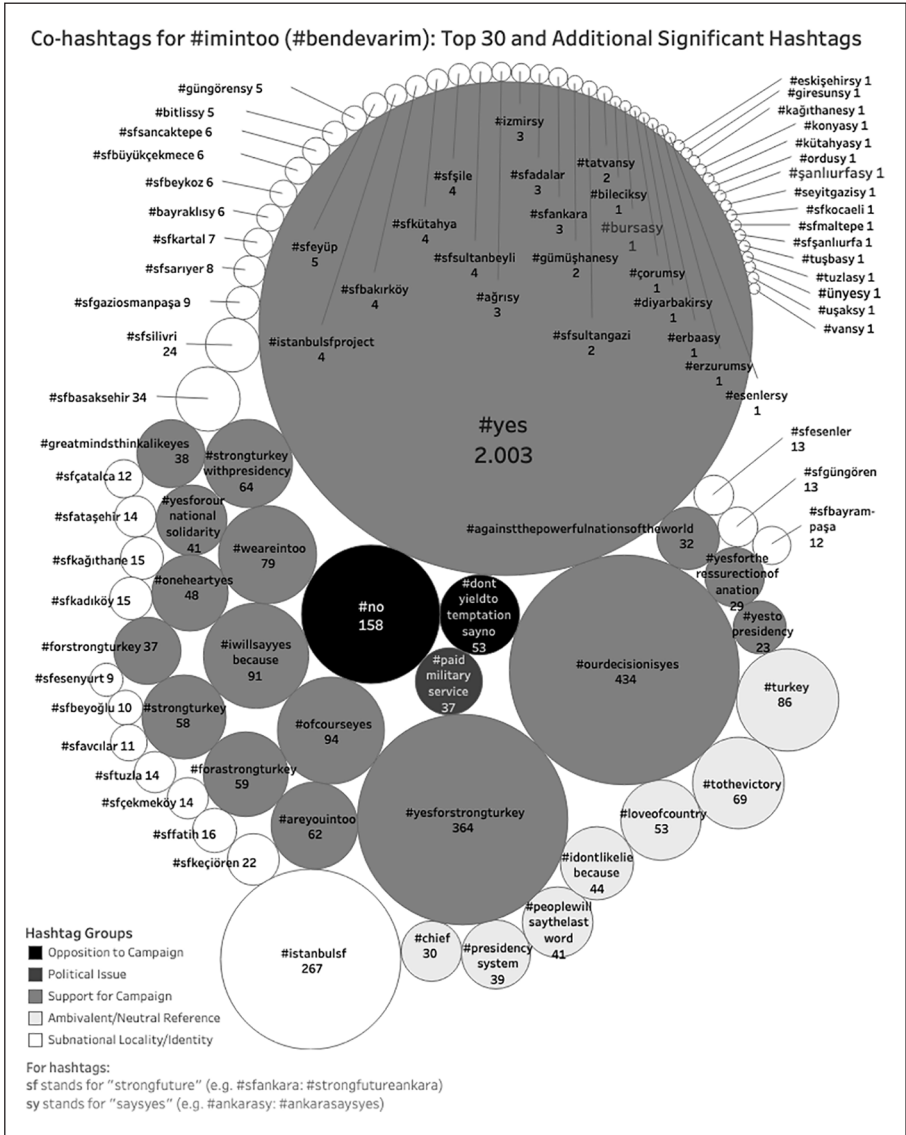


argued, broadcast media also play an important role in populism in Turkey (Özçetin, 2019), but this article sets out to analyse populism's specific dynamics as mediated by social media. It pays attention to other media only insofar as their content interacted with, or provided a context for, the Twitter campaigns.

## Imitation and invention

Featuring recognizable memes, hashtags, and the @-function to address fellow users, campaigns frequently travel the Turkish internet, as was the case with the 'Ben de varım' ('I'm in too') campaign in support of constitutional change towards an executive presidency. Taking the *Bendevarım* hashtag as infrastructure for the formation of an issue crowd, ideological framing within this crowd was not particularly rich or diverse (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Added co-hashtags remained by and large restricted to pro-government and nationalist slogans such as 'for a strong Turkey' and, with reference to the referendum, 'our choice is yes'. Co-hashtags opposing constitutional change occurred at the 8th, 10th and 19th rank in the list of hashtag frequencies, though advocates of the campaign also appropriated the hashtag #no to disparage their political opponents. The sole articulation of another, distinctive political issue through co-hashtag use pertained to demands for instituting paid military service (in Turkey military service is compulsory for all adult men). The ideological and semantic proximity in the co-hashtags of the #*Bendevarım* campaign suggests relative homogeneity compared to the heterogeneity and diversity of the social media campaigns supporting the Gezi protests in 2013 (Hoyng, 2016). In that case, co-hashtags appealed to a wide variety of issues and concerns, starting with objections to the urban renewal project for Gezi Park in central Istanbul, but soon including objections against urban renewal elsewhere, critiques of the government and police brutality, defences of secular lifestyles, support for ethnic-religious and sexual minorities, as well as anti-capitalism.

However, it is remarkable that locality appeared in the co-hashtags, invoking the powerful future not of Turkey but of certain cities and even local districts (see Figure 1). In some #*Bendevarım* videos, participants exchanged the expression of support for Turkey overall for a sense of pride in, and belonging to, particular city districts and hometowns. In others, the phrasing incorporated the health and prosperity of family members. Furthermore, it is remarkable that, among male participants, often the addressee's social position is explicitly mentioned. The term 'başkan' (chief) is used profusely and rather loosely for anyone in a position of leadership or authority in the local community or simply enjoying status. That is to say, rather than focused on President Erdoğan solely, a sense of leadership and hierarchical relations was replicated, dispersed, and reversed in local, social relations. Last but not least, beyond performing social relations, #*Bendevarım* videos created opportunities for performing identity and claiming presence by being visible on social media in ways that most participants were usually not. Participants presented themselves in the videos with crafted care, but also nervous stuttering and faltering, or subdued laughs. Especially, videos by women and clips featuring children were theatrical to the point that the slogan 'I'm in too', with its evocation of participatory ideology typical of social media, seemed about not much more than facilitating a gesture of self-display. Joy and hilarity emanated from those videos in which a group of elderly



**Figure I.** Top 30 hashtags for #iamintoo (#Bendevarim)

Note: Translations from Turkish to English are my own.

peasants or housewives coordinated their performance to participate via social media platforms, where they generally only have a marginal presence.

By consequence, #Bendevarim did not just consolidate a singular ‘people’ at the national level, which only exists thanks to the identification with the meta-individualist leader. Instead, the spread of the campaign revolved around local identities, social



networks, and circles of friends and family. Moreover, although in numerous videos the original slogan was simply reiterated, in the above examples, the articulation of local to national scales of belonging was in question. Lateral and local social relations animated the campaign, at least in part. Dynamics of imitation/invention were at work, allowing for tiny adjustments, personalization and creative appropriation. This enabled further spreading into yet more and more settings, geographies, and social contexts, touching and affecting more and more bodies. While discussions of populism often emphasize the stability of identities and ideological beliefs, the #Bendevarım issue crowd thrived on affective transmission from one locale to the next. Surely, dynamics of imitation/invention did not register as ideological diversity, but neither did the campaign propagate shared ideological conviction per se. Rather, as Papacharissi (2015: 54) argues, the reiteration of hashtags and performed gestures set up a ‘refrain’, building up affect as ‘intensity that provides the pulse for a growing movement’. Intersubjective (or, with reference to the aforementioned terminology, transindividual) connections expanded via ‘self-expression, self-affirmation, and association with others through gestures of belonging’ (Papacharissi, 2015: 56).

I do not imply that the #Bendevarım issue crowd was not populist, or that ‘leaders’ do not exist. Instead, macropolitics is composed of micropolitics, which, among others, requires modulating the affective contagions of digital culture so that they start to form more definitive, stable structures of feelings, beliefs and identifications. By means of a strategy for such modulation, governmental officials, as well as television show hosts on pro-government channels, made a spectacle out of taking their personal #Bendevarım videos with their own smartphones, in front of the television cameras recording for national broadcast networks. Appropriation and co-optation of the lateral energies and cultural forms of expression occurred again in the instance of youth branches of local AKP municipalities, which were set up as bridges between the party and the local community, producing #Bendevarım campaign videos. Moreover, in the absence of extensive data-driven, micro-targeting techniques, one prominent attempted technique for managing moods has been via so-called trolls and bots. In Turkish context, ‘trolls’ refers to social media users who are allegedly paid to promote government actions and boast support for Erdoğan. They also are believed to *en masse* attack opposition and dissident voices online (Bulut and Yörük, 2017; Saka, 2018). Bots, as non-human actors have been used to generate trends on Twitter by adding volume to hashtags and to boost ideological content. Allegedly, they were deployed to present the controversial result in the presidential referendum as a major victory (Binark, 2017: 23). Both trolls and bots exert what Gehl (2014: 23) calls noopower, namely the creation of atmospheres that work ‘to shape, modulate, and attenuate the attention and memory of subjects’.

Nonetheless, networked affect remains an unreliable resource for populist politics. As Sampson (2012) explains, what political marketers seek to do is to capture the micro-flows of desire and attention and organize them as sets of more stable feelings and beliefs: ‘small flows can be cultivated into becoming significant waves’ (2012: 171). Sampson raises the question of how much of the accidental nature of capillary affective movement can come under organizational control in the production of social order. In other words, ‘how much of the happenstance of desire-events can be captured? How can beliefs be stabilized, ordered, fixed, or kept in one place?’ (2012: 6).

Forming a potential threat to the populist project, when the affective and intimate is invited into the public sphere, the gate is open to the excessive, the 'indecent' and the taboo. YouTube videos prepared by secularists, who are continuing rather than transcending the old societal binaries that fed AKP's populism, eagerly pointed this out in order to expose the supposed pathology of AKP supporters. Uploaded to YouTube and circulated on Twitter, there have been videos in which a man imagines Erdoğan sleeping with his mom; a woman saying 'we are hair on Erdoğan's bottom'; and an AKP supporter saying he would like to 'bite and lick' his beloved leader. Some of such cases have become widely known. Furthermore, #Bendevarım opened the door to the private in the sense of the commercial. The campaign was initiated by a famous football commentator who hailed a football player. The slogan and hashtag were appropriated by aspiring social media influencers and advertisers. After the referendum effectuated constitutional change, the slogan was repurposed for various charity campaigns.

Most threatening to the populist project, however, is the fact that a transindividual body receptive of affective exchange, once in place, can be appropriated by new campaigns. In response to the economic crisis and increasing costs, an electricity bill campaign took off, in which self-identified government supporters vented anger about the steep rise in prices. Affiliated videos typically were recorded in the private space of the living room in the presence of family members. Some demonstrated the 'outrageous' length of the bill, for instance by measuring the physical paper against their own limbs in front of the cellphone camera, or they went through each and every item listed on the bill, with their wrath and consternation building up in the process. Participants were eager to prove that they were 'common people' who were being wronged – and not trolls or paid actors – by detailing hardships they lived through, their job history, and financial situation, at times even disclosing identifying details. Here, people who were rather sure of themselves that they counted as *the* people who belonged and were entitled, vented their anger and frustration, even going so far as to curse President Erdoğan, which has resulted in prosecution in other instances.

The imitating and inventing crowd, consisting of lateral relations and affective transmissions, reconfigures populism by displacing its key tenet of meta-individualism. Though networked affect can be a potent political resource, it cannot easily be reined in and invites slippages of scale. The question is: when and how do local-communal ties become so prevalent that they detract from the weight of the sense of national belonging? Furthermore, the taboo is to be reckoned with as a potentially disruptive force. This is especially so since platforms tend to monetize attention, yet rather than persuasion or any kind of deep attention, their business model profits from superficial attention, or *inattention* (Sampson, 2012) towards content that gets quick clicks, such as the sensational and shocking (Venturini, 2019). Last, while populism as a political project may seek to mobilize and exploit active and affective participation from supporters, a transindividual body inscribed initially by certain common, consolidating affective dispositions and ideological orientations may change in 'unfavourable' ways.

## Populist disconnections

I will now turn to the social media campaign that was held in support of the military operation Zeytin Dalı (Olive Branch) in Afrin, in northern Syria close to the Turkish border,

during the first three months of 2018. The operation aimed to displace the Syrian-Kurdish YPG militia, which Turkey deems to be a branch of the outlawed PKK. While the war was very visible in the media and on social media, it was also beyond discussion. Democratic, public debate was subdued by censorship and relocated to semi-private media platforms: critical journalists and public commentators voiced critiques in Whatsapp groups and personal social media accounts rather than in newspapers and on national television channels. Further, hosts of a television show went through social media accounts of celebrities in order to shame those who did not post supportive messages about the war effort in Afrin and failed publicly to testify their love for the nation. Hence, along with silencing, the #ZeytinDalı (#OliveBranch) campaign on social media implied pressure to speak out, but to do so in a certain way and on certain terms (Koch, 2013). Affective performances and displays of intimacy, which are quintessential to digital confessional culture in general (Bauman and Lyon, 2013), appeared surprisingly prevalent in a context of speech restrictions. Digital intimacy involved not just self-expression, but the display of one's 'entire' soul in order to show (to oneself, one's audiences and the state) that one's inner beliefs and emotions are fully aligned with the body politic.

However, despite the pressure that especially celebrities faced, the campaign does not need to be considered solely in coercive and repressive terms. Instead, what is striking is, again, situated social relations, lateral connections, and the dynamics of imitation and invention animating the campaign. Though a minority compared to the number of posts containing prefabricated images of national flags and military equipment (some of which are likely the work of bots and so-called paid trolls), other posts represented offline initiatives by local communities. There were groups of women or female students knitting gloves for soldiers at the front, food fairs in support of them, and the collective planting of trees in commemoration of martyrs. Neighbours in high-rises coordinated to light up a pattern of select windows, creating a bright sign of support for #ZeytinDalı in the dark night – a stunt designed for sharing on Twitter. Another type of post revolved around the remediation of letters written by school children to soldiers at the front, who, upon reception, posed with the letters and sent their thanks back via Twitter. Such exchanges on Twitter might be better than any war propaganda in sustaining a national body politic: more than anything they animated the trope of the nation and the feeling that these soldiers were the very 'sons of the nation' consisting of 'you and me and everyone else like us' (especially given that military service is compulsory in Turkey). The idea that the war effort involved the entire body of the population was reflected most clearly in the popular stunt of collectively organizing participants' bodies so that they formed a nationalist symbol, such as the Turkish star and crescent that adorn the national flag, with the aim of sharing this on social media.

By participating in the issue crowd of #ZeytinDalı, local communities could imagine themselves as agents in a national event. A user could get a sense of belonging to a national body and feel 'its pulse' in all the tagged posts. Nonetheless, along with national belonging, at stake were again slippages of scale akin to those in the #Bendevarım campaign, in which the intimate becomes the private or personal in yet other senses. An important component of the campaign was the sharing of pictures of scribbles on the Howitzer shells deployed by the Turkish military to target Afrin (a stunt likely imitated from American soldiers in previous wars in the Middle East). These shells themselves

emerged as fetish objects because they were allegedly produced 100% locally and nationally. However, the scribbles on the shells included personal messages such as greetings: to the local mayor (always good to have personal connections . . .), to somebody's professor at a university in Çanakkale, to an entire cohort of engineering students, to a primary school, to named friends and family friends ('with love'), to one's brother, and to a woman, perhaps a girlfriend or fiancé. In another bid for presence and visibility, sometimes only the sender's name was noted down, along with his hometown or place of residence. Yet other messages contained promotions for private businesses, for instance for a family restaurant or a bike shop, or celebrations of soldiers' favourite football teams.

But these bomb scribbles make something else clear, too. Intimate, social exchange among 'us' happened in conjuncture with disconnection and erasure of a 'them'. The bomb shells manifested the combination of connection and erasure in a rather crude way: though technologies of annihilation, they functioned as media of connection! In general, the #ZeytinDalı issue crowd assembled a rather baffling mixture of performances of communal relations of *love* among 'us' and expressions of *hatred* and disgust regarding 'them' (for a study of these emotions, see Ahmed, 2004). It is precisely the disconnected 'other', who was absent and/or abject, who inspired the campaign and thereby connected and consolidated the community of 'us'. This 'other' elevated local and situated communal relations to the level of an (imagined) national body. Primarily, Kurdish fighters, the abject 'other,' appeared in the shape (or shapelessness) of torn corpses, mutilated bodies, and defaced portraits of leaders. Less graphic and more symbolic, cartoons and photoshopped images depicted the 'other' as animal or pest, such as a dog, tick, or rat. Fighters were ridiculed through cartoons or captions feminizing or sexualizing them, or they were likened to weak, fearful children. The recurring trope of 'penetration' positioned the enemy either as a woman or a gay man, who submits to domination. Such abjection goes hand in hand with absence and erasure. Though there were some photos of imprisoned Kurdish fighters, alleged female suicide bombers and fighters feigning to be civilians, an oppositional or pro-Kurdish political voice was missing. Remarkable is that rallying cries of those opposing war, namely 'barış' ('peace') and 'savaşahayır' ('notowar'), did not once occur in the Twitter dataset, nor was there another prominent co-hashtag that expressed a pro-Kurdish political stance (see Figure 2). Meanwhile, visual representation in the #ZeytinDalı dataset overwhelmingly focused on symbols of 'us': Turkish military equipment, Turkish troops, Turkish flags and symbols. Likely stemming in some degree from so-called troll accounts and bot accounts, such imagery accompanied the multiple co-hashtags containing Turkish nationalist references (see Figure 2: grey hashtags) as well as the more neutral co-hashtags. Yet this focus was even extended in posts with co-hashtags explicitly referring to Kurdish forces, namely #YPG, #PYD, #PKK. These co-hashtags appeared respectively at the 10th, 23rd and 13th positions in the co-hashtag ranking (see Figure 2: hashtags in black). Without adding particular signification, these co-hashtags occurred as part of strings of multiple hashtags, some of which seem to have been automatically recommended by Twitter.

#ZeytinDalı's combination of love and hatred can be understood in terms of Chun's (2018) argument regarding social clustering, or homophily, which literally means 'love of the same'. Such clustering is key to social media, because the network science at their core operates on the basis of assumptions about affinity and it effectuates

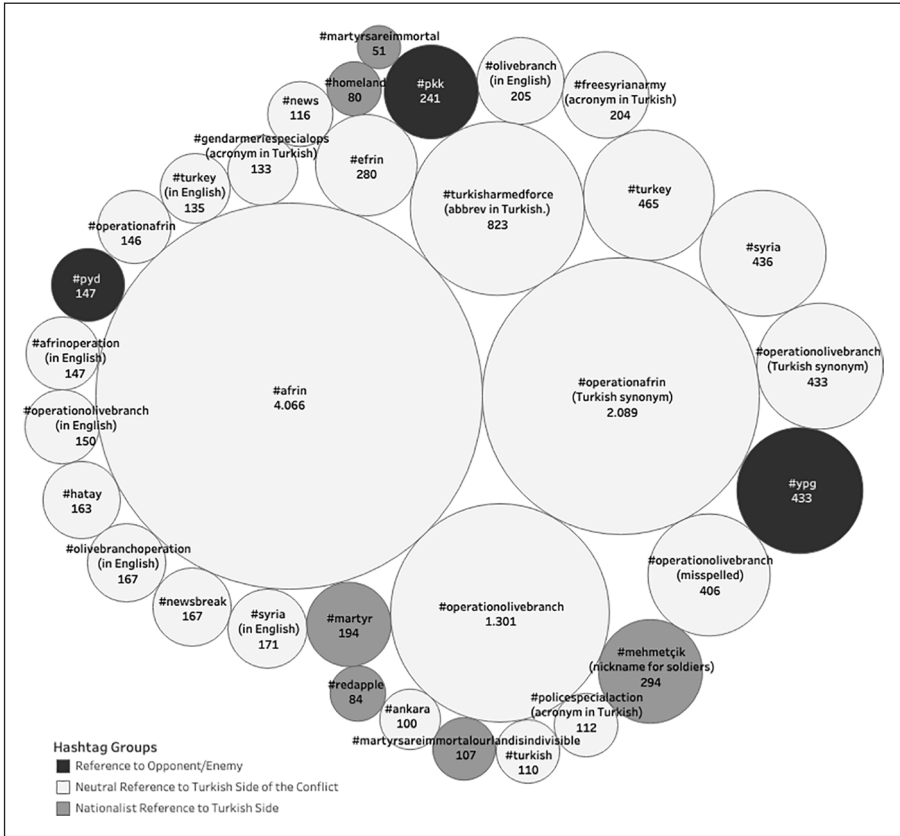


Figure 2. Co-hashtags for #olivebranch (#zeytin dali): top 30 and additional significant hashtags Note: Translations from Turkish to English are my own.

affiliations between those who are deemed alike through recommendation and relevance algorithms. But such patterns of affinity and connection are especially telling in terms of what they exclude. Chun (2018) underscores the extent to which patterns of affinity are grounded in social histories of exclusion, antagonism, and hatred of others. So homophily reproduced through social media ‘launders hate into collective love’ (Chun, 2018: 62).

Yet to what extent does such hatred-as-collective love on social media aid populism as a political project? The zealous participation in the #ZeytinDali campaign constituted affective economies of hatred and love, travelling laterally from one point of contact to the next (see Ahmed, 2004). Though open to manipulation and exploitation in the context of populist politics, affective economies in social media remain, nonetheless, unwieldy and semantically ambiguous. Hatred diffused exactly because of continuous sliding and displacement (Ahmed, 2004). Yet, by consequence, the ‘other’ appeared overdetermined. Besides animals, pests, women, children and gay men, otherness in #ZeytinDali associated an open-ended list of internal and external enemies: the PKK, YPG and PYD;

pro-Kurdish politicians; treacherous Gülenists; leftists and socialists; Armenians, Christians, Freemasons; Israel; Green Euro-parliamentarians; and American imperialists. Hence ‘enemies’ in #ZeytinDalı multiplied fast, even more so than declarations of antagonism in Turkey’s already heated state politics. Yet there may be a point when the displacements of the ‘other’ become so elusive that they allow hatred to circulate without being fixed on an identified antagonist in line with the political agenda. And, there may be a point at which the hatred becomes so overwhelming, and the paranoia about ‘others amidst us’ and ‘around us’ so predominant, that it inhibits a narrative of communal love.

Both of these points seemed to have been reached recently in Turkey. In the wake of the 2016 coup attempt, the state intended to exploit the lateral relations among the crowd, not just for campaigns in support of Erdoğan or more general populist identity politics, but for crowdsourced intelligence in an attempt at surveilling the popular body ever more intimately. The Turkish Intelligence Agency’s website for reporting of suspicious fellow citizens was visited over 1 million times in 2017 and the daily number of incriminating calls stood at 181.<sup>3</sup> However, the participatory surveillance of fellow citizens, including for instance screenshots of social media posts or messages, was laden with inefficiencies and irrationalities. The police force were overwhelmed by irrelevant information provided by informant-citizens who were driven by overzealousness or paranoia. Moreover, the lateral organization of peer-to-peer surveillance easily slid into the personal and private once more: snitching has served settling private matters, including marriage conflicts and personal feuds.

Whereas the exploitation of suspicion and hatred was not working as smoothly for surveillance purposes and control of the body politic, their instigation prompted a counter-reaction during Turkey’s municipal elections of 2019 in Istanbul. Resentment towards ‘others’, fear, paranoia, and conspiratorial thinking had been dominating the emotional orientation of AKP and pro-government media (Hoyng and Es, 2017; Yılmaz, 2017). The opposition’s candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, explicitly took a stance against the populist exploitation of hatred, fear and paranoia. He lamented the extent to which society had become divided and held in the grasp of such negative emotions. In stark contrast to Erdoğan’s belligerent style, which extended into all levels of politics, İmamoğlu first and foremost campaigned on an agenda of love and inclusion, with a ‘hand heart’ on his campaign poster – ready to be imitated and spread by his supporters through their social networks.<sup>4</sup> During this election, Istanbul went to the opposition for the first time since 2004.

## Conclusion

Social media platforms do not offer simply instruments that afford political expediency for populist leaders or that neatly align with conventions of statecraft and state command of (authoritarian) populism as political project. Rather, we need to consider the potential weaknesses and reconfigurations of populism in this context. My analysis suggests that it is helpful to distinguish between *affective formations* of love and hatred that (potentially) support populist articulations of ‘us’/‘them’, and populism *as a political project*, executed as an institutional agenda and concerted effort. This distinction creates room to inquire into economies of affect as lateral and constituent forces, and to interrogate their



articulation with the authoritarian populist project of governing and controlling the body politic. As I have shown, affective contagion is unwieldy, and dynamics of imitation/invention introduce slippages and semantic ambiguities. Rather than assembling the crowd via the figure of the populist leader, the populist project has to modulate and tap into affective formations and lateral relations, for instance by means of bots, so-called trolls, and youth branches, which help create atmospheres as an indirect way to shape memory and attention (noopower) and stabilize feelings and beliefs (Gehl, 2014). Yet whereas the figure of the meta-individualist leader proves to be less central to the crowd than is presumed in theories of populism, lateral, affective communication can produce local, situated instead of national belonging or – more threatening – alternative ideological formations. Moreover, it is true that a commonly held ‘them’ threatening the community of ‘us’ can reinvigorate the national imaginary. Yet open-ended circulations of hatred and suspicion may nonetheless prove unsettling to the populist project and ultimately undermine social trust to such an extent that it incapacitates the narrative of communal love.

My analysis provides an opportunity to rethink the liberal critique of populism and assess its ability to capture both the dangers and political possibilities of networked, affective communication. On the one hand, the intersection of such communication and populism requires a different critique than one that emphasizes the crowd’s submission to meta-individualism and forces of affect per se. Building on Chun’s (2018) argument, I propose that the danger is not that ‘the crowd’ is excessively connected (i.e. undermining liberal ‘rational’ individualism), but rather that it is not connected enough (i.e. homophilic in Chun’s sense)! This is so because online networks play a role in sustaining disconnections and erasures, undergirded by larger histories of othering, exclusion and antagonism that – I would suggest – in the Turkish context often boil down to the Kurdish issue. Gilbert (2014: 129) argues that ‘What distinguishes a democratic politics from any other is the fact that it does not try to regulate the inherent complexity of human relations’, which Arendt calls boundless action and refers to as infinite relationality. Rather than making social relations simpler, democratic politics ‘strives to give expression to their full complexity and the creative possibilities which this entails’ (Gilbert, 2014: 130). Social media’s networked crowds do not constitute forces of democracy unless connectedness and affective relations can be rethought – as well as redesigned – and the disconnections and erasures of the issue crowd can be addressed.

On the other hand, the liberal conception of privacy may need to be rethought in relation to connected being rather than abandoned. The always-already connected transindividual crowd does not cultivate autonomous individual subjects with private selves that in some ways are excluded from public performance but also held sacrosanct in the name of privacy. Yet the lack of exclusions, vacuoles and boundaries forms a danger too. To turn to Arendt again, there is a need for boundaries, lest totalitarianism prevail. As she writes, ‘Tyranny is like a desert; under conditions of tyranny one moves in an unknown, vast open space, where the will of the tyrant occasionally befalls one like the sandstorm overtaking the desert traveler. Totalitarianism has no spatial topology’ (Arendt, 1979: 466). For Arendt, this appreciation of boundaries as a defence against totalitarianism connects to the ability to resist external judgement that determines one’s identity in a

singular and non-negotiable manner. Arendt's vision can inform a non-liberal approach to privacy that centres on the ability to reject fixating determination of one's identity in the context of technologies of surveillance and profiling on social media platforms (Matzner, 2017), whether in support of the attention economy or populist projects. The challenge, however, is to rethink privacy in terms of boundaries that protect social media users and citizens from non-negotiable determination without falling back on exclusive liberal notions of individuality and autonomy, or denying the democratic potential of affective connectedness.

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### Notes

1. See: <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/turkey>. Last accessed, January 2020.
2. I provide these rankings, realizing the limitations of quantitative hashtag counts, which do not reflect the array of meanings given by users. Usage of hashtags can involve contrary, ironic and opportunistic citation.
3. See: <https://www.toplumsal.com.tr/gundem/mit-istatistikleri-yayinlandi-h12531.html> (accessed February 2018).
4. For an interview with İmamoğlu's campaign manager in which the campaign strategy of 'love' is discussed, see: <https://medyascope.tv/2019/04/25/chp-yerel-secimlerde-neden-ve-nasil-basarili-oldu-kampanya-baskani-ates-ilyas-bassoy-ile-soylesi/> (accessed January 2019).

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