Eventocracy, Affective Supremacy and Resistance in Turkey’s Captured Media Ecology

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Abstract

The Turkish government has captured media to build ‘eventocracy’, a regime of ‘ruling by event’ to manage public attention and disrupt politics. Eventocracy strives for affective supremacy, a mode of political-emotional domination where the ruling AKP positions itself as the self-righteous national power. Through a chain of events, it casts the opposition’s grievances as national threats. Two specific events, the Roboski Massacre and the Kabataş Incident, demonstrate how the government has mobilized bitter arguments and sensational narratives with often sexist and ethnicist undertones of supremacy to affectively deplete the opposition. In response, narratives produced by citizens in low-budget street interviews and rap artists in songs contest this affective supremacy, revealing that institutional media capture remains fragile at best. Reframing media capture through affect helps us rethink the state as a key media producer and performer of political crises while questioning fact-checking as an oppositional style across authoritarian contexts.

Keywords

affect – authoritarianism – eventocracy – media capture – post-truth – resistance

1 Introduction

In late July 2021, wildfires lasting for seven days devastated southern Turkey, causing the death of eight people and destroying agricultural land, historical pine forests, olive groves and the livelihoods of local citizens. Without functioning firefighting planes, the government outraged citizens waiting for an
immediate response to the fires. The level of unpreparedness was such that people even used their hands and resources to extinguish the fires. One person speaking to The Guardian revealed the atmosphere of national outrage: ‘what we feel is we have found out that we are the state ourselves’ (McKernan 2021).

However, the pro-government media’s coverage of the wildfires revealed the image of a capable government. When A Haber (Anews) reported that Turkey’s wildfire response was more efficient than Europe and China, angry citizens admonished A Haber’s crew. The omission of certain stories in the pro-government media also enraged people. For instance, praising the government’s rebuilding efforts, a local official from the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) said others would wish their houses had burned too (HalkTV 2021). While inspecting the relief efforts, the Turkish President threw tea packets to survivors from his bus. Covering neither story, the pro-government media produced much political despair among many impacted people. It felt as though the pro-government media wanted to drain the opposition’s energy with their covered and concealed stories about wildfires.

At first glance, the mediation of these wildfires reveals that Turkey’s captured media represses the free flow of information (Yeşil 2018). However, there is more to media capture than institutional control and repression, which takes me to my two-layered argument. Firstly, media capture is not an outcome productive only of money and control but a continuous war targeting public affect through mediated images, narratives and shocking statements to overwhelm any response (El-Hibri 2021; Kraidy 2017; Terranova 2007). Economic and institutional control of media is insufficient. The government must constantly dominate the opposition’s affective worlds to the extent that citizens feel politically powerless and individually worthless.

When institutional media capture is complete, an affective war constructs ‘eventocracy’. Meaning rule by event, ‘eventocracy’ originally defines how India’s Narendra Modi government capitalizes on specific events to disrupt the routine flow of politics and manage public attention through spectacles and controversies (Kalyan 2020; Kumar 2016). ‘Any policy announcement has so many events that people have begun to believe in the arrival of an avatar’, writes Ravish Kumar to define eventocracy. The notion of an avatar is key because eventocratic politics is beyond the transmission of opinions and ideas but instead is performative (Moffitt 2015), involving symbolic actions, peculiar styles of speech, looks and body language (Corner and Pels 2003). Performance after performance and the ever-changing content of eventocracy leave the people ‘at a loss for what might come next’ (Kalyan 2020: 6).

Over the years, Turkey’s politicians have built an eventocracy with their performances in a highly-controlled media system. President Recep Tayyip Erdo-
ğan has constructed a political persona as if he were both a celebrity and an ordinary man. On numerous occasions, he invited citizens to his presidential palace, played soccer with celebrities and visited private homes for dinner with his authentic style, which includes holding a child, hugging, kissing or even calling a fiancée to facilitate a wedding (Yeşil 2020). Especially after the failed coup attempt in 2016, these performances shifted towards crisis and spectacle production with regional dimensions. Indeed, regional conflicts and the country’s aspirations animate Turkey’s eventocracy. Regional events—occasional cross-border operations and power struggles with countries, e.g., 1) Israel: ‘one-minute’ crisis with Shimon Peres in Davos, 2) Syria: conflict with the Assad regime, and 3) Egypt: the 2013 coup and toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood—enable state and non-state actors in their masculine, nationalist and religious performances. With narratives of crisis, nationalist glory and adversarial tones against regional powers, these actors aim to manage public attention (İşeri and Ersoy 2021; Yeşil 2021). Other than conflicts, the declaration of ‘good news’ (müjde), such as the discovery of oil reserves or the opening of new facilities heralding economic growth, also fuels the eventocratic performance repertoire.

Undoubtedly, eventocracy is not unique to Turkey and open to comparative analysis across the Middle East because such regional regimes sometimes have a ‘conversation’ in the form of media boycotts over popular cultural products (Kaptan and Kraidy 2021). Although not using eventocracy as a frame, Walter Armbrust (2019) attests to how political outsiders, namely Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, emerge as performative ‘tricksters’ and become authoritarian presidents through malleable alliances without necessarily displaying a core political ideology. In the Syrian context, Lisa Wedeen (1999) demonstrates how eventocracies rely on the everyday inundation of symbolisms to demand obedience, not by punishing citizens, but by disciplining them with their participation in state drama.

Similarly, as far as the relationship between spectacle and eventocracy is concerned, Turkey is not exceptional. Spectacle is pervasive across different contexts, but media ownership structures, highly-controllable media and the centrality of the state in the production of eventocratic performances make countries such as Turkey and India different. In Turkey, pro-government media broadcasts almost every presidential speech. Likewise, the Indian state has designed election battlefields with sudden policy announcements where the BJP was forewarned, whereas the opposition was taken by surprise. The state controls which party has access to what data for political mobilization (Roy 2021). Therefore, it’s easier for authoritarian regimes to rule by events due to distinct media ownership structures and the state’s historical role in media regulation.
Recognizing the centrality of positive and negative performances to eventocracies, I will examine two events when the government replaced facts with fiction and weaponized bitter arguments to drain the political energy of dissidents. In each case, the goal has been to mobilize disinformation campaigns, defamation and sensational lies to both preoccupy the people and affectively deplete the political opponents through affective supremacy. Affective supremacy here refers to a racialized and gendered form of domination where the AKP positions itself as the self-righteous national power. It marginalizes and criminalizes opposition grievances through historical and contemporary resentments, casting them as foils threatening the nation. To construct and consolidate affective supremacy, the government regularly attacks the opposition using every distinct event. On the one hand, historical victimhood embedded in Turkey’s long and conflictual history of secular Westernization and the ongoing fear of religious minorities to undermine the nation energizes the AKP’s affective supremacy. On the other, the AKP’s affective supremacy is currently fueled by traditional news media, social media trolls and neo-Ottomanist dramas (Bulut and İleri 2019).

My second argument is that media capture as a form of institutional control is without guarantees because both the eventocratic regime and affective supremacy remain contested. For instance, women challenge the government with ‘feminist night walks’. College students organize campus protests to defend freedom of speech. Religious minorities, LGBTQ+ communities and other marginalized groups regularly protest the eventocratic regime. I am interested in the affective impact and meaning of these dispersed acts of resistance, and therefore, examine how rappers deconstruct eventocracy and invite citizens to resist affective supremacy by disengaging from the AKP’s media apparatus. I also foreground how citizens in low-budget ‘street interviews’ produced by local journalists challenge eventocracy’s erasure of memory and meaning in a captured media zone. This focus on low-budget citizen journalism intentionally disregards oppositional news media because while important, their traditional journalism mostly repeats oppositional arguments and follows the style of fact-checking. Some of the debate shows on oppositional news channels remediate and discuss the tweets of oppositional figures for hours. Despite their extensive viewership and good intentions, these outlets partly fuel the eventocratic regime with what one may call rituals of rightfulness, where dissidents question how the government gets away with its actions despite facts and evidence proving government policies wrong. Nonetheless, street interviews and pop culture open a creative agora affectively moving the masses and their bodies.

Ultimately, I propose rethinking the state as a key media producer and performer of political crises across the Middle East because eventocracies cannot
survive solely with institutional media capture. The production, circulation and control of affect to deplete political rivals and perpetuate national crises is a key role of authoritarian states with their highly-controlled media systems. While the truth is devalued to the level of lies in eventocratic regimes, artists and citizens as critical media producers, interpreters and performers challenge authoritarian governments’ racialized and gendered regimes of affective supremacy and radically reimagine democratic politics. As a result, this affective lens on media capture reveals how eternal authoritarian regimes look and how fragile they can be.

2 Media Capture, Affective Warfare and Eventocracy

Media capture defines how powerful economic groups run media institutions without political accountability, ultimately shaping citizenship, information manipulation, political advertising, news coverage and voting (Besley and Prat 2006; Schiffrin 2018). Informal arrangements have always existed between the ruling parties and the Turkish elite but these have deepened due to the AKP’s non-coercive and coercive technologies of governance (Yeşil 2018). Now that the state is the largest advertiser, advertising revenues are unevenly distributed towards pro-government media (Yanatma 2021). Perhaps nothing illustrates the extent of media capture better than how the former finance minister, Berat Albayrak—also the president’s son-in-law—resigned on Instagram in November 2020. None of the pro-government media dared to cover the resignation. Consider the 6th Media Awards of Anatolia organized in September 2021. The Turkish president gave the annual communication award to his head of communications and distributed the other awards to pro-government columnists, writers, and the state’s news agency.

These examples necessitate considering affect as a lens to grasp contemporary hegemony wars. When the hegemonic battlefield concerns perception, the goal of powerful groups is not simply propaganda but ‘psychic harm’ geared towards the degradation of the adversaries, capacity for understanding their own circumstances, and their capacity to make any effective use of whatever correct understanding they might achieve’ (Terranova 2007: 132). Conspiracy theories and rumor bombs (Bratich 2008; Harsin 2015) across digital platforms inflict this ‘psychic harm’ on political rivals through flaming memes, provocative hashtags and nationalist discourses (Yeşil 2019; Yildiz and Smets 2019). Affective performances and normalized extreme speech targeting opponents and marginalized communities inundate politics across diverse geographies (Hall, Goldstein and Ingram 2016; Govil and Baishya 2018).
dominate public speech around major developments such as the arrest of dissi-
dent Kurdish politicians or the devaluation of Turkish lira, the AKP’s troll armies
and pro-government citizens form ‘affective issue crowds’ which fluidly con-
nect crowds ‘from a common reservoir of affective potential’ (Hoyng 2020: 988).

However, tapping into the ‘common reservoir’ and mobilizing support for
eventocracy necessitates ‘affective media capital’ (Jutel 2019: 178), and crises
are particularly productive. Especially following the 2013 Gezi Uprising, the
government has used numerous crises, e.g., an ongoing economic recession,
a failed coup attempt, corruption scandals, the intensification of the Kurdish
conflict, natural disasters, recurring crises with Russia and the United States
and environmental calamities, to consolidate its eventocracy and empower its
supporters while targeting opponents. Although concealing facts or distract-
ing the public with competing affective narratives becomes key during crises,
aggrandizing development projects for branding and demeaning the opposi-
tion as incapable of ruling has proven functional during times of political suc-
cess.

In Turkey’s eventocracy, today’s political statements can be refuted tomor-
row and allies instantly become enemies. With spectacular events, perfor-
mances and statements in an ever-changing context, ‘periodic bursts’ of affect
are common (Sundaram 2020). A major consequence of these outbursts is
‘parallel realities’ (Hoyng and Es 2017) where pro- and anti-government pop-
ulations dwell in different affective worlds. Because the captured media medi-
ate narratives of foreign countries supposedly envying and conspiring against
Turkey, the dominant affects among pro-government people are pride and
resentment (Tokdoğan 2020). Among anti-government populations, political
fatigue and outrage and indifference prevail. At the same time, these affects
vary and reverberate through time. As the government currently struggles to
maintain hegemony among its supporters, anti-government groups resist event-
tocracy in ordinary and creative ways.

In the following text, I first analyze how spectacular images, sensational
narratives and bitter argumentation during two crisis moments work to build
Turkey’s eventocracy. The first case is the Roboski-Uludere massacre (2011), an
event animated by regional and ethnic conflicts. Here, the government aimed
at deflecting attention away from the killing of Kurdish civilians to an anti-
abortion campaign. The second is the Kabataş Incident (2013) where the pro-
government media replaced facts with sensational fiction to demonize the Gezi
protestors. Given that a decade has passed since these two events, a clarifica-
tion and historicization is needed. Why analyze events from the early 2010s
and foreground resistance to eventocracy from the late 2010s and the early
2020s?
Between 2002 and 2013, media capture relied on coercive strategies including the expropriation of media companies, their transfer to pro-government groups and imposing heavy tax penalties on media groups critical of the government. The AKP government also exerted legal suppression on oppositional journalists and thinkers. Non-coercive strategies entailed the distribution of privatization deals and advertising revenues to pro-government media. In 2015, pro-Kurdish HDP (People’s Democratic Party) representatives appeared on national television, which is no longer the case because the mainstream media died after the Doğan Media Group was almost completely sold to pro-government Turkuvaz Media and the Demirören family in 2018. Especially in the aftermath of the Gezi Uprising, the corruption scandals in 2013 and the failed coup attempt in 2016, the AKP’s coercive capture strategies have expanded towards the regulation of international news agencies, the Internet, social media and streaming platforms. In late 2022, the government passed a new ‘disinformation law’ to silence the oppositional voices prior to the 2023 elections. Consequently, the long death of mainstream media from 2002–2018 and the relative vibrancy of social media and arts since the Gezi Uprising, but especially post-2018, explain my focus on street interviews and popular culture as venues for resistance.

Eventocracy has only solidified since the Gezi Uprising and numerous additional events could have been selected, e.g., the failed coup in 2016, diplomatic crises with Western countries or the reopening of Hagia Sophia as a mosque in 2020. Why then examine Roboski and Kabataş? Roboski and Kabataş have been analyzed for two reasons. Firstly, these crises concern demographic groups (feminists and Kurds) that have long resisted the current regime. They constitute two primary political targets of the eventocratic regime with events that carry racialized and gendered dimensions enabling the government to tap into an affective reservoir and trigger constituent anxieties. Secondly, these two events reincarnate in different moments, even to date in the Kabataş case. With their afterlives, they can still produce confusion, debates, images and narratives aiming to secure ‘a virtual plurality that suffices to keep the spectacle going’ (Kalyan 2020: 20) and enlivening resentments. While the alternative events I could have chosen took place only once, the cases I examine have been mobilized multiple times to boost affective supremacy.
The Roboski Massacre: Getting under the Skin and Normalizing Death with Weaponized Speech

On 28 December 2011 between 9:37 PM and 10:24 PM, Turkish jets bombarded a group of 38 cross-border couriers moving from Iraq into Turkey via Roboski, a borderland village in the province of Şırnak. Although footage from drones and thermal cameras made military intelligence officers believe that the people were PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) members, they were Kurdish civilians. The bombardment killed 34, and 19 were children. The media was completely silent. On 29 December 2011 at 11 AM, almost twelve hours after the incident, the seasoned journalist Ayşenur Arslan was hosting her show on CNNTürk and announced they had some terrible reports to share with the audience. The channel’s executive editor immediately entered the control room and yelled into Arslan’s ears that the network would not cover Roboski without official confirmation. The editor even sent Arslan a note that Roboski was a red line. Interviewed about this confrontational moment two years later, Arslan said:

the massacre was already on the web. There was a note from the state’s Anatolian News Agency. [The] Şırnak governor confirmed it and I said as much in the show. It was like doomsday. I was told CNNTürk was not supposed to cover the event. I said ‘the governor confirmed it’ but apparently the official statement was expected from the Chief of Staff.

OdaTV 2013

While officials expressed regret, they emphasized that an official apology was not to be expected. Families of the deceased refused the government’s compensation. The report of a sub-commission in the Turkish Parliament concluded that identification based on drone footage was not technically possible and the massacre was unintentional. The military prosecutor also concluded that five officers involved in the event were conducting legal duties and involved in an ‘unavoidable mistake’ (kaçınılmaz hata). As a result, there was no legal ground for public prosecution (BBC Türkçe 2017). Addressing the demands for a public apology in a press conference, the then prime minister Erdoğan said:

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

BIANET 2012
Media capture had produced silence and intimidation. The news reports downgraded the bombardment as an ‘event on the Iraq border’ with no contextualization for civilian deaths (Ruhavioglu 2015). They had just simply died. Yet, the affective charge of this event radically shifted when the prime minister spoke at the Third Congress of the AKP Women’s Branch (TRTHaber 2012): ‘I consider abortion to be murder. And I am talking to media professionals who disagree with this. You endlessly bring the issue of Uludere and I say every abortion is an Uludere incident. Tell me, what is the difference between killing a baby before or after birth?’. For Erdoğan, framing abortion as a matter of women’s rights and choice was a ‘sinister plan to wipe out the Turkish nation from the world stage’ (TRTHaber 2012). A few days later, the then health minister, Recep Akdağ, evoked rape when he spoke to defend the prime minister: ‘there are concerns if the baby is conceived from a bad experience of the mother. If necessary, the state can take care of the baby’ (Hürriyet 2012).

The gendered dimension of the government’s response to Roboski cannot be overstated. Gender is not a subsidiary issue to deflect attention from a ‘real’ one (Korkman 2016; Mutluer 2019b), and rather than deflecting attention away from the agenda, these speeches construct a bitter argument. If ‘to speak and argue in public is to affect others’ (Martin 2019: 9), these governmental speeches especially get under the skin of feminists, shape the boundaries of politics and activate and manage public desires (Martin 2019). Uttering abortion, murder and Uludere in the same sentence, the prime minister starts an argument with media professionals and critics. His weaponized speech not only assembles the public’s attitudes and feelings but also defines a feminist and international conspiracy allegedly obstructing Turkey’s socio-economic flourishing and aiming to wipe out the Turkish nation. As a bodily practice, weaponized and controversial speech circulated in Turkey’s captured media should be thought less as the transmission of cognition but ‘a medium to adjust and coordinate our perceptual and emotional responses to the world’ (Martin 2019: 25). Their argumentative speeches work ‘to incarnate a world, activating layers of corporeality’, thereby both touching others and enabling connections and disconnections (Martin 2019: 26). How the captured media enables their speeches to get under one’s skin reveals the affective productivity of weaponized arguments in disqualifying women’s bodies and demonizing feminist politics.

Nonetheless, these bitter arguments also put women’s bodies in motion. Women targeted by the government proudly mobilized their bodies to respond to the prime minister’s vituperation. Members of Women’s Platforms in twenty-two cities simultaneously protested him and circulated their counter-speech with slogans of ‘abortion is a right, Roboski a massacre’, ‘AKP, take your hands off our bodies’, ‘ban on abortion enables femicide’ (Karakuş 2012). Centering
body and consent in their slogans, protestors emphasized that the right to abortion was not open to debate. They observed how the prime minister aimed to entice women in an argument and refused to indulge the invitation, which as a speech act, was not just an expression of thoughts but an affective weapon to constrain, control and suppress speeches of political rivals. Women also turned Twitter into a counter-public sphere (#MyBodyMyDecision) to both resist plans to illegalize abortion and refuse to engage with secular-Islamist divides favored by the government and its captured media (Emre and Şener 2018). For women, it was not a matter of a secular or Islamist state but simply the state itself that was to be refused in negotiating reproductive rights. While the bitter speech following the Uludere massacre normalized civilian death and rape, the Kabataş incident reveals how rape can be trivially instrumentalized to criminalize the Gezi Uprising and boost affective supremacy.

4 Kabataş Incident: Fiction Replaces Facts

The Gezi Uprising in the summer of 2013 remains a useful repertoire of polar- ization, victimhood claims and demonization of an entire opposition through frames such as ‘terrorists’ and ‘traitors’. One incident is illustrative of how the captured media fabricated and weaponized ‘an event’ supposedly occurring nearby Kabataş, a neighborhood not far from Taksim Square, the center of the Gezi Uprising. The weaponization of Kabataş as a fabricated event began on 7 June 2013, when the then prime minister Erdoğan told members of his party that Gezi protestors dragged ‘the bride of a close friend’ on the streets of Kabataş. On 13 June 2013, the pro-government *Star* interviewed the woman in question (Zehra Develioğlu) and quoted her:

> in a second, I was in the middle of 70–100 men, naked above their waist, wearing leather gloves and black bandanas. Some of them started assaulting me and my baby. They said they would do a revolution and execute the prime minister. When I regained my consciousness, my clothes smelt like urine.

*Hürriyet* 2015a; *Hürriyet* 2015b

The pro-government *Sabah* later published a photoshopped image of what it described as ‘Kabataş abuse’, claiming the police confirmed the incident. Kabataş became a weapon especially after self-proclaimed liberal journalists asserted to have viewed the footage. Government officials soon deployed gendered claims of victimhood regarding the headscarf. Nine months later, main-
stream Kanal D—critical of the government until the entire Doğan Media Group had to sell its assets to pro-government Demirören and Turkuvaz Media Groups in 2018—released CCTV footage of the area where Z.D. claimed to have been attacked. The footage had nothing close to Z.D.'s claims.

As time passed, even the lawyer for the journalist who interviewed Z.D. declared that Kabataş was fictional. Nevertheless, the journalist did not apologize and held others responsible for proving that the event was fabricated. She said that everyone, and especially her, needed to know the ones behind this fabrication (Bildirici 2021). Still, even two years after the ‘Kabataş incident’, fifteen columnists in various pro-government newspapers used the identical title for their op-eds (‘Diliniz kaba, vicdanınız taş’ or ‘Your language is rude, your conscience is like a stone’) when the Kabataş incident ignited heated discussions in a televised debate show (Diken 2015).

The affective capital of Kabataş has proven to be almost infinite. Speaking at the Women Workers Congress of Metal Workers’ Union in 2015, President Erdoğan recalled the incident as if it were true and implicitly attacked the feminist movement with the following words: ‘so, didn’t we assume that the assaulted woman’s testimony was valid?’ (Evrensel 2015). These remarks instrumentalized the political emphasis on the validity of a woman’s testimony in cases of sexual assault, challenging feminists and enraging this political group that has for decades struggled for the legal recognition of women’s testimony.

Utilizing binary categories around gender and religion (Mutluer 2019a), the Kabataş incident has sporadically energized Turkey’s eventocratic regime, especially during major political crises. Consuming the public attention for years, Kabataş has ignited polarization by investing in political Islamists’ long-term resentments against secularism and AKP supporters’ ontological insecurities such as Western hegemony, the headscarf ban, the return of the Kemalist establishment, the undermining of the nation by ethnic and religious others and the eradication of Islam by the Republican People’s Party as well as the pro-Kurdish HDP or Armenian and Jewish minorities (Kinnvall 2019; Tokdoğan 2020). This prolonged consumption of public attention to boost affective supremacy is a long-term strategy rooted in history.

The strategy first hit Gezi supporters by creating clouds of doubt around their peaceful intentions. The captured media apparatus mobilized Kabataş to degrade Gezi’s democratic truth-claims, reducing it to an event of vandalism. At this very moment, the Kabataş incident—with its affective economy, narrative and the legal cases it generates—emerges as a violent act harming the notion of truth. After all, despite the lack of verification, the fiction is integrated into the AKP’s broader affective reservoir of victimhood and adds to its ‘affective media capital’ (Jutel 2019). The kind of fabrication and persistent lying in the Kabataş
incident has become the new normal inside and outside Turkey. Without any political consequences, the violence of lies in public life has been normalized. As if operating under an ‘affective structure of impunity’ (Kuntsman 2020: 75), journalists who confirmed the incident kept finding jobs, whereas the link to the original interview no longer appears in the *Star* newspaper’s archives. Truth has become irrelevant because pro-government columnists and government officials have proven to be indifferent, not to the idea of knowing reality, but the existence of reality itself (McIntyre 2018: 10). The important question remains: what does the narrative (a baby, bandana, execution, gloves, naked men, a pious woman and revolution) in the Kabataş incident, arguably an icon in Turkey’s post-truth archive, tell us?

The strange collapse of reality may provoke us to test the validity of the incident and keep us trapped in the realm of representation and truth. However, rather than a question of accuracy and reality, the power of the Kabataş incident as a looming moment within the broader eventocratic regime resides in the Turkish media’s ability to capture affect and virally target the public’s attention for almost a decade. Kabataş illustrates that media capture is not simply about content but rather affective warfare cutting through the noise machine during Gezi and moving people (Ahmed 2004). The captured media invests in the production of an epistemic crisis through information warfare (Boler and Davis 2021), rendering facts subordinate to the AKP’s resentments.

5 Street Interviews: Ordinary Citizens Contest Affective Supremacy

When the AKP lost the 2019 local elections in major metropolitan areas, an emergent media genre—street interviews (*sokak röportajları*)—disrupted the everyday flow of news in Turkey. Local journalists without an institutional affiliation but with a basic camera and a microphone started conducting street interviews to ask citizens across the political spectrum their opinions about a recent development or nationally critical issues. Broadcast on social media platforms, these interviews often turned into heated debates and even fights. Some immediately become viral. For instance, explaining why he would vote against the AKP, a fifteen-year-old citizen speaking to Yurtaş TV (357,000 YouTube subscribers) shares intimate life details in a video with more than 50,000 views:

if I cannot regularly eat meat, if I have to use my own allowances to buy my notebook, if I cannot have a cup of coffee with my friend at the weekend, it’s the government’s fault … my mom is 37 and has two kids. She lives
with my grandma. I am sick of expecting things from my grandma … even if I attend college, I won’t be anything.¹

The youth’s undermined capacity to aspire is striking. Even though captured media preaches bright futures for youth, this citizen declares his hopelessness. In another interview (30,000 views) with Sokak Kedisi (39,000 YouTube subscribers), a 21-year-old citizen shows his trembling hands as proof of depression. A graduate of dental prosthesis, this person works as an electrician in a construction site. Describing his generation’s hopelessness, he says: ‘if you go ahead and organize Squid Game now, everyone will participate. Everyone. My life is worthless’.² Highlighting how the lack of healthy information deskills and depresses people, he deconstructs captured media’s dominant message about how young people are unemployed because they are too selective about jobs: ‘I’ve worked hard to educate myself. And then I will work as a waiter? This is not job selection. This is self-respect’.

In another interview (126,000 views) with Objektif Medya (YouTube subscription number unavailable), a young girl cries as she budgets what an ordinary student needs for the nationwide college entrance exams.³ In this interview, we see four other young people patiently explaining to an AKP supporter how youth are in dire need of socio-economic opportunities. Although young citizens are typically represented as disinterested in politics, these and other interviews reveal what captured media hide: political anger and deliberation. In a further viral video, a citizen wittily critiques the government and then emphasizes how she finds oppositional parties’ responses to the AKP eventocracy inadequate. ‘If somebody calls you impudent (edepsiz), saying “you are impudent” as a response is not really an answer … they are a bit weak on the ring’,⁴ she says, suggesting that politics has turned into a boxing match.

Fearlessly naming names, critiquing corruption and targeting economic recession, citizens in street interviews contest eventocracy with their political demands and performative styles. Despite political fatigue, they struggle to retain sanity by holding onto personal stories, facts and historical memory. With their visibility and viral power, these street interviews can be regarded as bottom-up production and circulation of ‘affective media capital’ (Jutel 2019) disrupting eventocracy. Through intimate stories and observations, they

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMxrSERycDg.
³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzXsi_efY5w.
⁴ https://twitter.com/Kubi__22/status/1485989585440190472?t=1MK7XVBa41c7-kzOethQZA&s=08.
move audiences and contest affective supremacy, which is evidenced by some local journalists placed under house arrest (Gazete Duvar 2021). As the online views surpass even the most popular video (200,000) of the government’s highly funded and networked Communication Directorate (27,000 YouTube subscribers), these interviews reveal that hope exists no matter how overwhelming eventocracy might be.

6 Olay (Event): Rapping against Eventocracy, Reclaiming Time and Meaning

Despite the AKP’s institutional media capture, a significant affective leak occurred on 6 September 2019 when the rapper Ezhel, 2021’s most-listened-to-artist on Turkey’s Spotify, released his music video Olay, literally meaning ‘event’ or ‘incident’. Opening with lyrics saying ‘everyday brings a new event’, Olay uses the fast-cutting technique to produce a collage of traumatic events within and beyond Turkey. Now having more than 10 million views on YouTube, Ezhel criticizes how captured media as the spectacle machine of eventocracy normalizes traumatic events, causing a loss of control over time and meaning: ‘the same news everyday, again some rape or abuse, tabloid press wants events … breaking news, breaking news, paparazzi, like, tweet, virtual worlds, ego, this is our thing’.

Olay is a visual and acoustic counter-attack against captured media’s drowning silence. I extend Kenan Behzat Sharpe’s (2019) and Lisel Hintz’s (2021) work here on Olay and another rap song (Susamam or I Can’t Stay Silent) to highlight how Olay reclaims time and meaning from the affective supremacy of Turkey’s eventocratic regime. The cinematographic fast cutting technique of what Hintz describes as ‘rapid-fire images’ (2021: 8) disturbingly brings together scenes and stories of corruption, assassination of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, victims of police brutality, military memorandum, the 2016 coup, diplomacy crises with Israel, sex scandals of politicians, the massacre of young citizens in Suruç, the Gezi Uprising, imprisonment of Kurdish politicians, unemployment figures, Jamal Khashoggi and the assassination of Russia’s ambassador to Turkey. These are followed by the names and annual numbers of femicide victims in Turkey written in red colors on dark background.

In Turkey’s ever-accelerative political logic of eventocracy, citizens become ‘spaced out’ in two major ways (Calvet and Kodmani 2019). Firstly, because too many events happen, one’s very sense of time is obliterated. Secondly, the skills of narrative creating and meaning making are targeted in eventocracy. Olay politically restores our relationship with time and meaning. If we
were witnessing some of the events in the clip, the police would urge us to look away and move on. Then, at one level, attempting to preserve Turkey’s political-emotional archives, the clip forces us to witness and continue looking at our screens, repeating the word ‘olay’ throughout the song. The song invites the audience to be caring and no longer remain ‘indifferent’ to the affective supremacy of the eventocratic regime where citizens ‘believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true’ (Arendt 1976: 382). At another level, we cannot help but look away as the scenes are disturbing. Still, Ezhel strategically weaponizes images where we look away from the screens of the captured media apparatus (Mirzoeff 2011). Ezhel aims to politicize our ‘indifference’ and mobilize it against the captured media rather than one another as fellow citizens. As a reminder that truth matters, the music video is a political response to captured media’s function to inflict intense psychic harm, causing further loss of control over time and meaning: ‘everyday is an event, then let’s implement state of emergency, your people are guinea pigs, there is no reason not to be a psychopath’.

Discussing the AKP regime without a consideration of media and affect, Hamit Bozarslan suggests that the AKP’s primary strategy is to eliminate rationality where one loses sense of time (İlgün 2020). Following Hannah Arendt, he suggests that the AKP government has instituted ‘a regime of movement’ (hareket rejimi) simply because it cannot survive outside this logic of movement. In eventocracy, citizens become precarious subjects of time and narrative since the ruling elite dispossess them of the ability to control time and meaning. With its distinctly violent aesthetic and lyrics, Olay aims to disrupt the affective regulation of time and loss of meaning by Turkey’s captured media. As the song critiques the normalization of a state of emergency (ohal) to domesticate dissent, it re-emphasizes people’s ability to ask questions despite the affective intensity of the regime: ‘they want to stir events across us ... who are we? Where did we come from? Everyone wants to make sense, but the real deal is euro, lira, and dollar, events erupt, shedding blood is easier than getting along, a bullet will wither cheaper than a flower’.

In summation, Olay targets the AKP’s temporal template of populism that relies on eternal victimhood and nostalgia (Taş 2020) and makes a chronopolitical demand to break away from eventocracy. An affective goal is to cultivate solidarities from below by restoring the capacity to care in a context where language, meaning and truth no longer seem to matter (Yılmaz 2021). Refusing the ‘paralysis of history and memory’ (Debord 1983: 90) caused by a non-stop affect factory, Olay is a political invitation to look not at the screens of captured media but in each other’s eyes and faces for solidarity. It doesn’t preach politics with a capital ‘P’ but rather a different form from below and needs
spaces of autonomy and communication outside the visual regimes of Turkey’s captured media (Mirzoeff 2011).

7 Conclusion: The Limits of Eventocracy and Affective Supremacy?

Addressing the AKP members in June 2022 around the anniversary of the Gezi Uprising, the president used insults and gendered swearwords to describe protestors, who he claimed, acted disrespectfully by drinking beer in a nearby mosque during protests (Bianet 2022). Although these claims were refuted by that mosque’s cleric years ago, the president not only recycled the same sensational claims but used even more bitter language to demean Gezi protestors. Facing criticism upon his choice of words, he said: ‘we always spoke with the language of our nation. We spoke as our people would in defining these vandals … we are not at a point to learn a lesson from a mayor that rather lowly insult women or those that insult the sister of a martyr’ (Karar 2022). This political recycling of Kabataş attests to the affective power of sensational claims and bitter speech in eventocracy. An event that never happened even reincarnates precisely due to its power in consolidating the AKP’s affective supremacy, claims of victimhood and the party supporters’ ontological insecurities. This last recycling of Kabataş in 2022 took place within a context of deep economic crisis causing major political trouble for the AKP before the 2023 elections. These gendered words and statements might surely tap into existing affective repertoires when remediated across the captured pro-government media outlets. Yet, there also seems to be a limit and an expiration date for the AKP’s use of its affective repertoires since more citizens in street interviews and on social media express how they regret supporting the AKP government and vow not to vote for them again. These viral videos achieve likes, retweets and are circulated on private WhatsApp groups. After all, Turkey’s mainstream media is dead and one strong path to a more egalitarian Turkey is perhaps to be found not in the opposition’s fact checking political style but artists’ creative work and ordinary citizens’ contagious media performances on the streets and across social media.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Rolien Hoyng, the reviewers, Special Issue editors and our writing group for their feedback on this manuscript.
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