

The movements against state-controlled Internet in Turkey: A short account of its history and future challenges

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We are members of Alternatif Bilişim Derneği (Alternative Informatics Association)², one of many organizations that oppose the ongoing efforts for state-controlled Internet in Turkey. We see that the problems with media control in Turkey and in Europe are increasingly becoming part of a global problem. The governments are working on their own view of a 'secure' Internet, and we have to articulate and suggest an alternative.

In our talk we want to give an account of our anti-censorship movement and the challenges we face in Turkey. We will first provide an overview of the political events; sanctions, censorship regulations and attempts of resistance in the country. Then, we will point out the main problems we face in making use of laws and technology against state control. We would also like to use our presentation as an opportunity to meet people at the CCC with similar affinities and to learn from their experience. We see a great need to create global networks and communities to articulate an alternative message; the Internet as the peoples' media.

A short history

Despite its growing economy, democracy and fundamental rights have always been disputed in Turkey, where the shadow of the 1980 coup and still unresolved Kurdish problem is strongly felt, with the state persistently denying Kurdish citizens' rights and repressing real political opposition to canalize the people's consent to the authorized 'official' parties in the parliament. The coup in 1980 was mainly used to implement liberal policies, and this process is near completion: most state enterprises have been privatized in the last decade, including Türk Telekom, the phone company and the single ISP that owns the ADSL infrastructure in Turkey. In the same decade, the Internet use became widespread. Yet, the increasing popularity of the Internet has been accompanied by attempts to control it through criminal sanctions.

Until 2007, tens of thousands of websites had been blocked by courts as 'precaution', including sites like Wordpress and YouTube. After the Law 5651 in 2007, even more websites were censored directly by government administration. As a response to this law, Sansüre Karşı Platform (Platform Against Censorship) was organized.

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²Alternatif Bilişim is a social network that includes users, developers and researchers of digital technologies, studying and practicing alternative uses of technology. Ultimately, our objective is to diminish the alienation of people to technical knowledge.

In the first anti-censorship rally in 17 July 2010, nearly 3000 people participated, including Internet youth, political parties, trade unions, etc.

Not long after the events in Tunisia and Egypt; the state institution for telecommunication, Bilgi Teknolojileri ve İletişim Kurumu (BTK) made a decision to force ISPs to provide unpaid Internet filters under the headings 'children', 'family' etc. This move created an enormous reaction, the culmination of which led to a nationwide Internet freedom rally in 15 May 2011 that took place in tens of cities. Alone in Istanbul 60 thousand people marched against the imposed censorship measures. What followed was a smearing campaign by controlled media (including state TV) against the protesters, and a pseudo-governance meeting with NGOs by BTK. After the general elections in June, the war with PKK escalated, suppressing the BTK decision out of media attention. Currently, DNS or IP blocking is used mostly for 'obscene' and in some cases for political websites.

National security has always functioned as an excuse for the Turkish state to introduce exceptions to a rule or to make the exception the rule itself. An example is 'Ulusal Kripto Yönetmeliği' (National Crypto By-law) that was put in order in 2010. This by-law necessitates 'official authorization' for any encrypted communication by any citizen, and also requires the citizens to give away their encryption mechanisms and private keys to BTK for 'storage'.

In conclusion, we have reasons to believe that the government is currently developing infrastructure to utilize methods like deep packet inspection (DPI) as weapons in a 'cyberwar', possibly against its own people. These methods will include monitoring and labeling of Internet users as well as blocking communication. We made use of our 'right to information' to inquire about the plans for employing DPI, but were 'informed' that this is 'beyond the limits our right to information'.

Problems in using laws & technology against state control

The greatest problems with respect to guaranteeing fundamental rights in technology deployment and use currently are with how laws are made and how they are enforced. The lawmaking process is exclusionist, only including a few NGOs that can better be called QUANGOs (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations). There are several political parties and trade unions, but even their peaceful protests are occasionally declared 'unauthorized' and considered illegal. People in general do not trust the judiciary system, but are simply unorganized and do not believe in their power. The regime bases its legitimacy on ideology and not on lawful justice.

Türk Telekom (TT), privatized in 2005, monopolizes the ADSL infrastructure, making Internet services expensive and prone to state control. In 2007, a workers' strike in TT had triggered debates on this monopoly being protected by the government. The company also acts as a service provider in several domains, creating questions about net neutrality.

Another problem is with the limitation of how people can relate to technology. Computers, cellphones and other gadgets are aggressively marketed and widely used throughout the country, but the marketed forms of use mostly remain superficial, e.g., these gadgets are depicted as entertainment or as status symbols. We argue that the hegemony of these consumerist cultural connotations do hamper diverse

uses of these products for a variety of motivations.

A small community of Linux promoters have emerged around universities. These groups could promote alternative approaches to technology. However, under the usual political fears, they only articulate their positions professionally. Their statements usually target Microsoft or other big proprietary software companies. This position is compatible with the officially accepted national pride and national security positions in Turkey, and hence is limited to politics of technology only (see Pardus project).

Leftist and Kurdish political organizations are in a position to benefit most from digital communication technologies. However, they still lack the capacity and enthusiasm to use it effectively. Alternative political media initiatives online exist, but they are mostly limited to standard uses and their technical quality reflect the lack of developers in the political community.

In Turkey, engineering education is praised and supported by families. Families make up for the lack of a financially strong social system. The society in general also praises technical knowledge. However, a strong barrier separates the 'educated people' who are supposed to know it, from 'regular people' who are only supposed to consume it. Under economic pressure and feeling indebted to their families, most white collar workers dedicate themselves to their work in private companies. There is some space in some universities for shared work and creativity, but such spaces are getting smaller as most universities are being turned into technical schools.

Lecture proposal for 283C

October 2011