

The Revolution Will Be Hacktivated

Turkish Marxist Hacker Groups

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In March 2012, the Turkish Police Department website was hacked and secret government documents were released to the public. Several new attacks in the next three months targeted the departments of defense, foreign affairs, education and finally the ruling governmental, justice and development (AKP) party website. The perpetrator(s) of the attacks was Redhack, an anonymous Marxist/socialist hacker group. This paper focuses on the analysis of this new Turkish hacktivist group and their cyber cold war against the government, operating as a self-proclaimed revolutionary group. Their support for Turkish Airlines's (THY) striking workers, their anti-fascist stance by attacking police and military sites, their anti-corruption discourse through the attack on the ÖSYM (Öğrenci Seçme ve Yerleştirme Merkezi/ The Central Student Selection and Placement Board, an institution similar to ETS) site and finally their leaking of information on Turkish citizens held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs points towards the idea that a new hacktivist movement is born, as hackers act as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and conduct micro-politics on the Internet. This paper intends to analyze the activities of Redhack from the perspective of a soft power revolutionary NGO that hacks for social benefit and acts as an oppositional force for social change.

In January 2013, Redhack leaked documents from the Board of Higher Education's system, publicizing monetary and other scandals present in numerous universities. Redhack attacked through the board's file sharing system, successfully obtaining 60,000 documents, most of which were confidential. These documents showed bank statements listing purchases of luxurious vehicles for university presidents in exchange for their agreement to deposit university tuition fees at a particular bank. Another document showed that a tender given to a cleaning company at Uludağ University in Bursa led to a three million TL public loss (approximately \$1.5 million), while another showed that an academic position was offered to a candidate

with a fake diploma at Kastamonu University. Another document showed that the medical school of Çukurova University lost 4.5 million TL (approximately \$2.5 million) in a medical tender because the winning company failed to comply with the conditions of the contract (“Cyber attack raises YÖK corruption allegations,” 2013).

Although similar to WikiLeaks in action and form of resistance (Lindgren and Lundström, 2011), Redhack claims a distinct ideology for their operational identity—Marxism—which WikiLeaks did not. Hence Redhack’s actions warrant a study in order to understand online resistance to systems of domination. In a way, resisting the system through cyber-attacks for the distinct political benefit of disadvantaged groups has not, other than examinations of Anonymous, been studied within the hacktivist literature before.

The actions of Redhack are discussed here through discourse analysis by adopting a vantage point that acknowledges Redhack actions as resistance. Here networked structures of hierarchy created by the Turkish bureaucracy are disrupted through mediation. This mediation process bridges the discursive and symbolic struggles to increase mainstream media coverage. Thus digital transformation of discursive and networked battles by Redhack changes the classical print and broadcast media. Hence in this analysis of the group’s actions, I address three points of entry: the strength and reach of the networked interference, the symbolic and discursive play on government structures, and the communicative strategies that create sympathy from the public.

BACKGROUND

There are two extreme viewpoints on hacktivism. Early researchers have focused on a malignant type of hacktivism: the free dissemination to others of sensitive data belonging to the state, especially perceived enemies of the state. Jensen (2012) sees cyber protest groups as a threat to national security. From this perspective the state must have deterrence and revelation measures in place as strategies against such groups. Alfred Julian calls the activities by hacktivist groups ‘malicious mischief.’ Julian goes so far as to compare hacktivism to breaking and entering:

This type of endeavor has been described, however, as the equivalent of smashing in the front door of a stranger’s house with a length of steel pipe, then claiming that the intent was to help the householder realize that both the door and the locking device need to be made stronger! (Julian, 1999, 7)

The second, more benign approach, is the one that sees hacktivism propagating democratic discourse and participation. Stefanie Milan hails hacktivism as an organized collective action. By cyberactivism she means:

collective action in cyberspace that addresses network infrastructure or exploits the infrastructure’s technical and ontological features for political or social change. Examples

of cyberactivism include electronic disturbance tactics and online civil disobedience, self-organization and autonomous creation of infrastructure, software and hardware hacking, and hacktivism. Leaking can be seen as another example, as it takes advantage of the distribution capacity of the Internet. (Milan, 2013, 191)

Hacktivism is the use of computers and computer networks to promote political ends, chiefly free speech, human rights, and information ethics (Krapp, 2005). It is carried out under the premise that proper use of technology can produce results similar to those of conventional acts of protest, activism, and civil disobedience. Hacktivism's definition is contested in many circles and hacktivists are the subject of lexical warfare to define them. Some definitions of these terms include acts of cyberterrorism while others limit the definition to the use of technology hacking to effect social change (Ludlow, 2013). Hacktivism is a contested term with several meanings and some consciously define it as cyberterrorism. A hack is used to refer to cybercrime, and hacktivism can be used to mean activism that is "malicious, destructive, and undermining the security of the Internet as a technical, economic, and political platform" (Krapp, 2011, 30). The term came to prominence with a Cult of the Dead Cow member known as "Omega" in 1996 (Mills, 2012). According to Julian Assange hacktivism goes as far back as 1989 when the anti-nuclear WANK worm entered NASA computers and had their login screens altered (Assange, 2005).

What we have with Redhack is that it operates on various levels of discursive action. There is reality hacking-defacing and information theft. Redhack also actively creates agendas through their blog and Twitter account. Members or representatives of the group appear on television giving live interviews. The public is fascinated with Redhack to such extent that they are linked by association to the legendary activist and hacktivist group Anonymous: As it is in the case of Anonymous, Redhack has also had a documentary produced on their activities called RED!¹

NEGATIVE LITERATURE ON HACKTIVISM

Tim Jordan addresses the issue of hacktivism from a perspective of community activism. Hacktivist groups share "a deep sense of non-hierarchical comradeship" among members (Jordan, 2008, 67). The activities of the group is anonymous to outsiders, being viewed as a united front of individuals trying to achieve a social end. The scare impact of such aspect of the collective unknown, having access to state and private information, is multiplied in the Turkish context by the government, politicians, and the bureaucracy. The Turkish state is perceived and revered by many as an apparatus that keeps society in balance. Politicians stress forcibly the existence of the state as the stabilizing factor in an otherwise diverse and contested society. The underlying assumption here is that the state is a caretaker of otherwise childlike citizens who are ready to rebel at whim with the inevitable social disintegration this implies. The current negative literature on hacktivism concentrates on legal issues such as access to private and sensitive information as a violation of basic rights. There has been even a

tendency among Turkish scholars to label hacktivism as terrorism. For example, Acar presents the activities of Redhack as identity theft (Acar, 2013, 206). Gökhan Albayrak sees Redhack activities as cyber war and cyberterror (Albayrak, 2013). These terms have been used differently by scholars in the field. Brett Lunceford (2012) puts Redhack and the Ayyıldız Team² on the same hacktivism category. The tactics may be similar, i.e., defacing a website for a political reason, yet it is the nature of the politics that makes Redhack stand out. Redhack defaces a website temporarily by putting a poster on it calling for all workers to unite (Albayrak, 2013). Whereas at the other extreme, the Ayyıldız Team actually attacks Armenian sites and posts photos and comments against genocide claims (Lunceford, 2012, 46). Finally, Redhack is seeking support for apolitical collectivism and humanist action. The Ayyıldız Team instead is attacking those who seek justice, a definite political and anti-humanist act. Tim Jordan defines cyber war as happening between nations and cyber terror as a coercive measure, an effort to force upon people a particular kind of thinking (Jordan, 2008). It is this article's contention that by these definitions Redhack and their hacktivism cannot be defined as cyber terror.

REDHACK: A BRIEF HISTORY

The Turkish hacktivist group Redhack was established in 1997. The group declared themselves as the first of their kind some years ahead of Anonymous. They are a self-defined Marxist and socialist group in constant struggle against imperialism and capitalism. As also revealed in the documentary RED!, members use aliases from the popular children's animated series the *Smurfs*. The core group of Redhack consists of twelve individuals.

At the outset, the activities of Redhack were limited. This limitation was due to the fact that the number of Internet users was relatively low during 1997. The corporate and governmental websites were also in their infancy in Turkey at the time. E-government and other private e-services were non-existent. Redhack mainly targeted MHP/Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi) websites and their youth organization *Ülkü Ocakları* (Ideal Hearths). Their main action was to oppose fascism and the target was the political party they knew to have these fascist tactics. Yet, Redhack activism reached new heights with the AKP coming into power. The AKP has held a majority in Turkey since the parliamentary elections of 2002, 2007, and 2011.

It is important to understand the appeal and impact of AKP's rise to power in Turkish politics in 2002, since this explains the fierce resistance and attack on them by Redhack. After a decade of volatile and unstable coalition governments between 1991 and 2002, the Turkish voters preferred a strong majority government who could take action. In the initial years of the government between 2002 and 2004, the AKP government showed performance that supported Turkey's European Union membership bid. AKP looked like a party of reform, against the status quo and a

critical oppositional force in government. By 2009, the reformist approach of AKP shifted to a more authoritarian position. After 2010, the AKP government applied a series of measures to silence press freedom. The traditional press had changed since the 1980s increasingly becoming dominated by corporate conglomerate ideologies which meant their economic interest could be threatened if they criticized the government (Turkan, 2012). There have been a series of strategies to repress freedom of expression pursued by the AKP government some of which were press accreditation, surveillance defamation, and online blocking of YouTube (Akser and Baybars-Hawks, 2012). Traditional media became unable to express the plight of the general populace or the dreadful conditions of the de-unionized laborers. In this context, social and political, Redhack stated their self-proclaimed active resistance against globalization.

The actions and discourse of Redhack are in fact complementary. At the height of the Gezi Park protests in the summer of 2013, Redhack spokespersons participated in live television interviews during news programs. Members of Redhack, appearing hooded and masked in still photographs on television, gave hour-long telephone interviews. The Turkish government's negative reactions to hacktivism took a tragicomic turn when a popular television actor, Barış Atay, was temporarily mistakenly arrested as the police confused his voice with that of a member of Redhackers giving the interview on television ("Suspects in Redhack, Anonymous case released," 2013).

REDHACK ACTIVITIES: FROM REVELATION TO COUNTER-ATTACK

This study traces a history of change in Redhack tactics and argues that they have become "softer." Hackers aiming to disrupt or even destroy data or hardware are employing hard power tactics. In some instances they are accused of being cyber terrorists. Redhack's tactics are about passive resistance and the revealing of information to the public in order that they can make informed choices, and that traditional media can approach the issues of favoritism and oppression by the government more freely. I look at three areas of activity by Redhack where this tactical change has happened: Resistance, revelation, and counter-attack. Resistance here is defined as action towards day-to-day policies of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government ranging from favouritism of AKP supporters to ethical violation of government tenders. In this case, messages written on defaced websites of the government and the party exemplify a voice demanding change. Revelation is in a way online grounded in data-journalism revealing massive data and documents relating to the abuse and misuse of government power. Bolt first uses the term revelation in connection to WikiLeaks (Bolt, 2010). Examples are Assange³ and Snowden style releases of government materials to public. Countering is a post-Gezi Park phenomenon where Redhack people actively appeared on television giving speeches and calling for change in support of June 2013 mass demonstrations against the government.

Table 14.1. Change in Redhack Activities

<i>Date</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Cause</i>	<i>Tactic</i>
1997–2007	Fascist website hacks	Anti-fascist	Resistance
2005	Istanbul Police Department Traffic Services hack	Excessive fining of drivers	Resistance
2008, July 2	Ministry of Interior website hack	15th anniversary of lynching of leftist intellectuals in Sivas	Resistance
2012, May 29	Turkish Airlines website hack	Firing of unionized staff	Resistance
2013, February 26	Mayor of Ankara's private documents released online	Government misuse	Revelation
2013, January 8	YÖK website hack	Government misuse	Revelation
2013, June 12	Ankara Police Department website hack	Murder of protester by the police	Countering
2014, February 4	Breach of all telecom companies' systems	Government order to store all voicemail data	Countering

Unlike their previous low profile action, Redhack targeted the government verbally and as a result became a target of a government hunt. They were labelled as terrorists during the protests which can be seen as an attempt of the government to equate hacktivism with terrorism. Yet, as Conway (2007) states, at a tactical level hacktivism is clearly differentiated from cyber-terrorism and is more aligned with tactics of civic disobedience—i.e., hacktivism refers more to disruption than it does to destruction. Table 14.1 lists the change in tactics over time by Redhack.

RESISTANCE

Stefania Milan defines this type of hacktivism as disruption of “computer networks and websites through jamming, netstrikes, defacement of websites, and distributed denial-of-service attacks (DDoS)” (Milan, 2013b, 5). Other types of sabotage and information theft are also part of hacktivism. Though illegal, these actions pursue political protest and aim to raise awareness. They are political tools for social and cultural ends. These decentralized individual networked units do seek to create critical action through online tools targeting policy makers, governments, and corporations (Meikle, 2002). In this context, groups such as LulzSec⁴ and Anonymous are the most notorious hacktivist action groups. In an interview on Halk TV, members

to present a message and stance that is strictly against corporate power and firmly favours transparency and good governance.

Most recently, the Turkish government's decision to side with foreign fighters in Syria against Esad forces, led the Redhack group to interfere. The group leaked information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' intelligence gathering computer system. The group revealed that the Turkish intelligence agency MİT had been actively helping the Syrian opposition forces by smuggling weapons across the Turkish-Syria border. The Turkish government's response to the leak has been once again that of covering up. Through a series of court orders citing national security the government blocked the news of this scandal. This has been the standard practice of the AKP governments, hoping to pressurize news editors through the conglomerate ownership of the newspapers and television channels since 2009 (Akser and Baybars-Hawks, 2012). When faced with scrutiny from traditional media the AKP government takes informal and legal steps to urge news channels and newspapers to mention less of the disturbing (anti-government) news ("TGC condemns media ban on Cihan news agency in Reyhanlı," 2013). A striking example is the Reyhanlı Incident. On May 11, 2013, several car bombs exploded on the Turkish-Syrian border town of Reyhanlı leaving forty-three dead and 100 injured. It has now been proved that it was organized by ISIS against the Kurds living on Turkish soil. The Turkish government's approach was to cover up the event. Redhack revealed documents related to the events making them accessible to public scrutiny through their blog redleaks.blogspot.com and their Twitter account.

On January 9, 2013, Redhack revealed 60,000 documents taken from the Board of Higher Education YÖK (Yüksek Öğretim Kurumu) servers. When the documents were leaked, the mainstream press was able report some of the news as a corruption scandal after the leak of the document. The documents consisted of bank account information, parliamentary complaints, correspondence between YÖK and universities, and final reports of corruption investigations. Some of the popular headlines were: "Bank Pays for Rector's Car" or "Lab Construction Mishandled" ("E-attack reveals fraud, rift in university system," 2013). The revelation tactic of Redhack thus encouraged the mainstream media to fulfil its function of informing the public.

COUNTERING

Finally the third tactic developed by Redhack team is countering. After the initial tactic of resistance to AKP government's misuse of power between 2003–2007 and second tactic of revealing information to create public awareness between 2010–2012, Redhack took the step to openly counter attack the government since 2012. On February 27, 2012, the website of the hacktivist group Redhack (www.kizilhack.org) was blocked. As a response they attacked many governmental websites including the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkish National Police, and the Information Technologies and Communication Authority (ITCA) Turkish regulator

of Internet TIB (Telekomünikasyon İletişim Başkanlığı) (Kinikoglu, 2014). The disinformation tactics of the AKP government were created to give the impression that several people thought to be belonging to the Redhack group were arrested for terror charges. During the legal proceedings of the arrested suspects, Redhack made video and online declarations that those arrested were not their members. The fact that they were still at large and operating proved that the arrests were wrongfully made (“Hacking suspects freed pending trial,” 2012).

Since the countering tactics of Redhack, there have been increasing attempts to block the Redhack website and its social media outlets. The Turkish government dubs Redhack a terrorist group and has filed official complaints with international regulators of social media to delete or suspend Redhack websites. As a result Twitter blocked the Redhack account (“Twitter suspends RedHack, ‘suggests’ another Turkish user deletes political tweet,” 2014). Some attribute the Turkish government’s more hostile and active attack on Redhack to Redhack’s anti-fascist stance since the Gezi Park events of June 2013. During the events the group regularly attacked Turkish police and military sites. The heavy-handed police tactics of the AKP government to get rid of ecological activists backfired when millions of people started protesting and clashing with the police. During late May and early June of 2013 when protests were gaining momentum Redhack took more direct action. They openly called television programs and gave hour-long interviews where they outlined their tactics and reasons for their actions. Their anti-capitalist stance, their idea of open public access to information and their insistence for the right of free assembly and expression are all outlined in an interview they gave to Halk TV on June 9, 2013. As their statement goes:

Yes, we are using humor, because this resistance will be remembered by not only its painful events and government violence, but also about its humor. The people have put out such creative, such nice, alternative responses, and these will be remembered too, because until the people realize the power that comes from consumption, it seems that the reign of the media and the pressure on the media will continue. (Redhack, 2013)

CONCLUSION

It is the finding of this study that Redhack as a hacktivist group changed the way cyber mischief/terror is perceived. The networked, mediated, discursive, and playful tactics of this group has led the traditional media in Turkey to play a more active role in relaying information to the public. The analysis of Redhack activities throughout the last few years reveals that the group progressively developed three tactics that aim to resist government corruption, create public awareness and finally actively oppose government repression. Redhack’s gradual transition from (1) resistance to (2) revelation to (3) countering has allowed protests, freedom of expression and political action. Redhack used the Internet to resist the AKP government. While the AKP government used mainstream media such as newspapers and TV to downplay

reuse (Schneider, 2011). It has gained attention due to its high profile targets and the sarcastic messages it has posted in the aftermath of its attacks (Sparito, 2011).

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