Rising Voice of Silent Public: Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Having a significantly different structure than the hierarchical broadcasting system of traditional media, social media has considerably altered the dynamics pertaining to information flow. Due to the capability of receiving instantaneous reactions from users, social media has undoubtedly been the most important medium of social organization by not only providing proximity as well as common areas of interest among individuals and societies, but also allowing millions of people to communicate simultaneously without any limitations of time and space. As the incidents in Tottenham in the UK as well as Egypt and Tunisia indicate, great changes have been experienced in the world so far thanks the use of Facebook and Twitter. In the same way, social media has gradually been a great power and enabled thousands of people to gather and get organized instantaneously with a single message. The power of social media has clearly been demonstrated during the public upheaval that emerged on May 31, 2013 as a result of the attempt to build a mall at Gezi Park in Taksim, Istanbul, Turkey. Most of the protesters were Facebook and Twitter users, between the ages of 19 and 30. However, there happened to be a vast participation from all segments of society. “Stand up! Call Film” produced by Taksim Gezi Park Society started to be shared immediately with English captions on Facebook pages as well as mobile phones. Apart from Twitter and Facebook, it reached millions of people with the use of other communication applications, such as Whatsapp, Skype, Ipad, Android and tablet computers. In addition to the comments written and shared in news sites on the Internet, thousands of sites were opened and also thousands of pictures were downloaded and shared in them in a matter of seconds. As the respective events have demonstrated, most of the information is obtained through visual elements, and films has the potential of dragging masses to common sensibilities, changing their thoughts and expressing much more than the incidents narrated with thousands of words. Based on the coil of silence theory, the purpose of our study to analyze the interactive role of the social media in Turkey, considered unique in the world, along with the Gezi Park incidents that took place with the participation of millions of citizens. Thus, a questionnaire has been circulated through the implementation of the descriptive method as one of the qualitative research methods. In this context, Twitter and Facebook users constitute the corpus of our study. As for the sampling, 200 users between the ages of 19 and 30 have been chosen.

Keywords: Social Media, Facebook, Twitter, Public Opinion, Gezi Park in Taksim

INTRODUCTION

Having changed our value judgments and lifestyle, social media has provided new formations in our lives by creating a democratic atmosphere enabling the spread of news and information freely. As a virtual public sphere, it provides us a domain where we can manage all kinds of communication and organize our political views. Simultaneous communication of millions of
people without any limitations of time and space has caused social media to be a great power and also enabled thousands of people gather and get organized even with a single message. Therefore, social media has recently been considered as the primary medium of social organization.

In the Turkey of 21st century, 70% of its population is made up of young people, communication technologies is used very intensively as a result of sharing every bit of information as well as vision both domestically and abroad. The demonstrations began in Istanbul, as a sit-in over plans to redevelop Gezi Park in Taksim Square. The purpose of the controversial redevelopment project was to relieve the congestion around Taksim Square, but it also came to building a shopping centre in Gezi Park. In an atmosphere where silent and furious people were obliged to live silently but furiously, the power of social media played a significant role to create an environment for multitudes, most of which were young people, to get organized rapidly and pour into streets

Needless to say, movies express much more than what is narrated with thousands of words (Online PR: 2011). Along with the public movement began with the demonstrations in Gezi Park, Taksim, the film, namely “Stand Up! Call”, produced to enlighten the public started to be shared immediately with English captions on Facebook pages as well as mobile phones. Apart from Twitter and Facebook, other communication applications, such as Whatsapp, Skype, Ipad, Android as well as tablets, mail groups and SMS have been used quite differently than their uses in other countries. The demonstrators did not only use the websites that stream live video, but also tweeted appeals for names of other smart phone applications that they could use to broadcast live on the web. Moreover, local residents have posted the passwords for their personal wireless internet connections in order to enable the protesters to stay online.

The discomfort that people experience when they feel that their opinions are in minority forms the basis of the spiral of silence. Some actions taken by the government have recently led to public discontent. Except a few TV channels and newspapers that put forth contrary discourses, Turkish broadcasters were accused of imposing a news blackout and failing to report on the demonstrations as the supporters of the government. In the same way, common views and ideas in the public have gained dominance through social media and make the spiral of silence process reach maturity. In this study, the public upheaval experienced in the end of May 2013 in Turkey has been studied by formulating a questionnaire towards the users of Facebook and Twitter and their views have been evaluated.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

People usually wonder if their views and opinions are in concurrence with those of majority. If they are not, they generally keep silent, but if they do, they simply jump on the bandwagon. The media assumes the role of determining the dominant views. It is a well-known fact that one party system usually steers towards a totalitarian system and begins to launch a majoritarian rather than a pluralist regime. When the division of powers begins to disappear, the media acting as the supporter of the government attempts to direct the public by presenting information about it in the way that seems most positive. It is where the power of social media emerges because social media is not in the monopoly of any powers. In the same way, the discourses and formations in social media are just the discourses of users; that is, the genuine discourses of the public. Thus, the means of social media through which information and news shared freely and simultaneously by millions of people has been the basis of the protests that mushroomed throughout Turkey. Considering the significance of social media along with these aspects, it is aimed in this study to get the views of Facebook and Twitter users about the respective events.
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In this study, the Gezi Park protests staged by millions of people have been studied with regard to the spiral of silence theory. With a questionnaire formulated towards Facebook and Twitter users, the views of the public have been obtained and the overall progress of the respective incident has been evaluated.

CORPUS AND SAMPLING OF THE STUDY

The users of the social networks that played a noticeably active role in Gezi Park protests, namely, Twitter and Facebook, are the corpus of our study. As the sampling; on the other hand, 200 individuals between the ages of 19-30 have been chosen as those who use Facebook and Twitter most.

LIMITATIONS

Our study is limited to 200 people from the age range of 19-30, who are supposed to use Facebook and Twitter most with random sampling method.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The spiral of silence theory that is associated with the Gezi Protests in Taksim in this study has been developed by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, a German sociologist. According to this theory, if people think that they are alone in adopting a particular view, they avoid expressing it overtly. Nevertheless, if they think that these views are shared and supported, they talk about these views with the people around them. Individuals may use the media as a benchmark in order to identify how effectual a particular view is in society. If the view they adopted does not take place in the media sufficiently, they may easily infer that the respective view is not approved commonly. Therefore, many people having a particular view cannot defend it in their environment as well as society. As long as individuals remain silent, this view is considered to be less common and valid than it really is and this situation leads to the formation of the spiral of silence. If individuals believe that their views are in minority, they simply avoid expressing them. During this process, the media plays an active role as a fundamental source of information, which results from the fact that it is the source that people regard for the distribution of the views of the public. The media affects the spiral of silence in three ways: The media shapes the impressions about

1. The views that are dominant in society
2. The views that are gaining popularity
3. The views that can be expressed by individuals before the public without being abstracted (Yüksel et. al., 2013: 64-65).

If people believe that their opinions are shared by the public, they feel more confident about expressing their own views. Nevertheless, if they feel that they are in minority, they tend to be restrained and silent in expressing themselves. Hence, the impression about the weakness of their ideas gets even stronger (qtd. In Tekinalp & Uzun, 2004: 138), which in turn causes the spiral of silence to get bigger.

The spiral of silence theory is based on three hypotheses:

1. Society threatens the individuals who tend to segregate with isolation
2. Individuals continually experience the fear of isolation
3. This fear of isolation causes individuals to evaluate the opinion climate continuously
4. The results of this evaluation affect the behaviors in public and particularly expressing or hiding views
5. This hypothesis is related to the first four and all of these hypotheses are responsible for shaping, protecting and changing the public (Tekinalp & Uzun, 2013: 138).

In this study, the shaping of the public during the protests that began as a sit-in over plans to redevelop Gezi Park in Taksim Square, but escalated in major cities has been associated with the spiral of silence theory. In fact, the reactions against the practices and discourses of the government in the Turkish public began to form the spiral of silence gradually until then. However, the decision about the demolition of Gezi Park which sparked the protests became the breaking point of the spiral of silence and millions of people took to the streets. During the protests that lasted for days, the demonstrators, most of which were young people, began to exercise the right to protest as a requirement of democratic life.

**Mass Power of the 21st Century – Social Networks: Facebook and Twitter**

Along with the introduction of the Web.2.0 technology on the Internet, users are now able to create their content, communicate without considering time and space differences and also structure their own networks. Today social network sites have been virtual meeting points.

It is possible to suggest that the Internet has become a public sphere out of the control of an institution or government. Virtual groups and forums enable individuals to have open and transparent discussions about society and culture without any pressure and alienation. By creating a new way of talking, these groups have also assumed the role of a participatory media that can serve public interest effectively. Forming a new public sphere, these groups allow free communication and exchange of ideas and thus, contribute to the formation of public opinion in a democratic way (Sayımer, 2008: 41). B. J. Fogg defines the way of communication over social networks as “Mass Interpersonal Persuasion.” This concept unites the power of interpersonal persuasion with the vast access power of the mass media. Mass personal persuasion constitutes six elements (qtd. in Çakır, 273-274)

1. Persuasive experience: experiences change the attitudes and actions
2. Automated structure: Digital technology shapes persuasive experiences
3. Social mediation: Persuasive experience displays differentiation from one person to another
4. Rapid circulation: Persuasive experience can be distributed from one person to another rapidly
5. A Social curve in a vast space: Persuasive experience can be potentially conveyed to millions of people through the connection provided by social networks or structured interaction.
6. Measurable Effect: The effect of persuasive experience can be observed by the users as well as the creators of the respective experience.

Communication in social media can be maintained relatively freely and indirectly. Moreover, the language, symbols and images shared make the messages more effective and comprehensible. There seems to be the preponderance of political discourses in Twitter with regard to leftist, socialist and democrat views. Opinions and thought flows formed around social events are shared instantaneously without the interference of opinion leaders and the reactions emerge and spread simultaneously. The pages in Facebook harbor people from both sides. Political nature of the respective network enables to get organized without the interference of the opposite side. Hocalı March and the musical drinking protest in Turkey got
organized in Facebook (Irak & Yazıcıoğlu, 2012: 34). Agendas are set instantaneously in Facebook and they change rapidly when a new one is placed.

Therefore, social networks are turning to mass powers. For instance, Facebook and Twitter played important roles as the most widely used means of communication during the social movements in Egypt (Alikılıç, 2011: 36). Being a micro blogging platform through which millions of people send one hundred-forty-character messages and displaying a significant development, Twitter has started to play a noticeable role in political activities of individuals by constituting a link between the virtual and real worlds since 2006 (Poynter, 2012: 299). Thus, political actions and messages can be conveyed instantaneously. This function was shown first in one of the places where democracy and the Internet suffer problems.

The claims about the gerrymander during the presidential elections in Iran in 2009 and the pressure over the opposition were spread the world through Twitter and the opponents used this new medium with an incredible creativity and shared whatever the news agencies could not report and broadcast on TV with the world. The Arab Spring that emerged nearly a year later simply carried this means of social media to the top (Irak & Yazıcıoğlu, 2012: 19-20). The public upheavals in Tottenham, Tunisia and finally at the Gezi park in Turkey have once again demonstrated the power of Social networks that could easily lead the masses all through common aims. Today Twitter set the agenda of traditional media as well. The news shared in Twitter comes to the fore in printed media and television.

The Youth of the Informatics Age and the Demonstrations at Gezi Park

As Erdoğan and Alemdar (2005: 142) have indicated, media technologies determine what individuals should think and feel and also how they should act along with the structure and function of societies as a whole. McLuhan suggests that not the content of a message, but the message itself is important and he supports this argument with technology. Stressing the determining role of technological structure, McLuhan also argues that technology has a great power and this power produces new societies and living conditions accordingly (Yengin, 2012: 39). Social media brings about many changes in the political sphere too. Governments’ use of social media as new surveillance technologies and particularly in riots is usually intended to pursue demonstrators through social media. While “global panopticon” continually tries to silence the opposition all over the world in cooperation with states, it is somewhat obliged to get flexible and develop new policies as a result of the communicative aspects of social media based on dialogue and reaction (Şener, 2013: 11). Although social media is likened to “global panoptic on” with respect to the formation of political ideas and participation of the youth into political life, getting organized and transformation of ideas into actions, it appears as a new public sphere where people share information and news freely as well as a great collective power.

The debates over secularity-conservatism that have recently been in the focal point of politics in Turkey and some decisions taken by the government and the discourses have drawn the reaction of the public. Furthermore, the decisions that might pose a threat to the private life of individuals have noticeably increased the reactions in society and finally the decision to redevelop and even remove Gezi Park, as one of Istanbul’s few green spaces, ignited the protests of the public, particularly young people. In fact, the core of the protesters was the university youth who can use technology very well, have a good sense of humor and are very productive. The groups representing different segments of society, different generations, overall; millions of men and women have given support with a common sensibility through the demonstrations in several squares and quarters.
According to the evaluations (Kongar & Küçükkaya, 2013: 37-38), the public upheaval started as Gezi Park protests has a non-homogeneous, multifaceted, pluralist, multi-component as well as multi-colored nature. While young people was in the centre of the protests, there was always a large crowd who did not leave the squares at all and who was composed of young and educated people, non-governmental organizations and political parties. The protests were also supported by the participation of millions of people along with the actions taken in various districts and quarters. Identified as the digital generation, internet generation or Y generation, these young people have shown reaction to the patriarchal, imperious and conservative policy and culture imposed on them.

FINDINGS

75% of the respondents are between the ages of 19-25 while 20% of them are between 26-30 and 5% is above 30.

50.8% of the respondents are women and 49.2% is men.
95% of the participants are university graduates and above.

80% of the participants are students and 9.9% of them have full-time jobs.

Civil and Political Activities

"Are you a member of a society, party or club?"

The ratio of those who are affiliated with any societies is only 23.2%.
According to the respondents the most important problem of Turkey is the constraints over freedom. 35.6% of the respondents have this view, 32% of them consider education as the most important issue. Devastation of green areas; on the other hand, is thought to be the least important one of the respective problems with the ratio of 5%.

When the respondents were asked about their political stance with respect to the given ones, Kemalism seems to have the highest ratio. In addition, the ratio of those who define themselves as emancipatory is 17%. The ratios of those who consider themselves conservative, democrat, socialist and secular are relatively low.

Evaluations over the Gezi Park Protests
As a reply to the question, “through which channels they were informed about the Gezi Park protests,” “social media” appears to be the most preferred channel with the ratio of 85.4% by the respondents. Internet and television; on the other hand, are the other medium having relatively high ratios. It should be noted that the respondents were allowed to check more than one channel.

56.1% of the respondents have affirmatively replied this question: “Have you participated in Gezi Park protests?”

Table 1. Attitude and value differences between participates in Gezi Park protests and others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Those who participated in Gezi Park protests</th>
<th>Those who did not participate in Gezi Park protests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you a member of a society, party or club?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>%24,7</td>
<td>%22,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>%75,9</td>
<td>%78,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints on freedoms</td>
<td>%44,0</td>
<td>%27,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>%26,2</td>
<td>%38,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>%14,3</td>
<td>%25,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
<td>%14,2</td>
<td>%18,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destruction of green areas</td>
<td>%2,4</td>
<td>%7,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kemalist</td>
<td>%52,0</td>
<td>%33,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>%18,2</td>
<td>%16,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>%3,9</td>
<td>%19,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>%10,4</td>
<td>%11,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>%10,4</td>
<td>%9,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>%7,8</td>
<td>%9,3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attitude and value differences between those who participated in Gezi Park protests and who did not, have been shown in the table above. There seems to be no significant difference with respect to age, sex, education and profession between these groups.

Similarly, the ratios between these two segments are almost equal with regard to being a member of a society, party or club.

The main differences between the respective groups are as follows:

1. While the most important problem of Turkey is the constraints on freedom for those who participated in the protest with the ratio of 44 %, this ratio is only 27 % for those who did not.

2. Those who did not participate in the protests have given priority to education (38 %) and unemployment (26 %) compared to the ones who were in at when the protests began.

3. While the ratio of those who identify themselves as “Kemalists” is 44 %, this ratio is 27 % for those who did not actively take part in the protests.

4. The ratio of those who define their political identities as “conservative” is 20 % for those who participated and 4 % for those who did not.

5. There is not a considerable difference among other identity definitions.

To sum up, those who took part in Gezi Park protests consider themselves as Kemalists more and speculate that the most important problem of Turkey is the constraints on freedom. Nevertheless, those who did not, regard themselves as conservatives and think that the most important problems are education and unemployment.

When those who took part in the protests were asked about their reason, protesting the excessive force used by the police is in the first place. On the other hand, the policies related to freedoms come in the second place, which is followed by showing reaction to the attitudes of the prime minister.
The ratio of those who participated for the protection of green areas is 59.3%. Likewise, the ratio of the ones who stated to have taken part in the protests for claiming their public park is 54.7%.

As for the demands of the protesters, the first one is “not interfering in the freedoms of individuals,” which seem to be supported by almost all respondents. In the second place is “the prevention of the violation of rights” with the ratio of 76.7%. The ratio of those who stated that the prime minister or the government has to resign is 51.2%. The respondents could check more than one choice.

The respondents think that the main reason for the escalation of the events is the excessive force used by the police as well as the discourses of the prime minister. In addition,
constraints on freedoms and interference in lifestyles have also been mentioned with high ratios.

As for the reasons why the events mushroomed, there seems to be a noticeable difference with respect to perception between those who participated in the protests and who did not. While the participants highlighted the violence exercised by the police (36.5 %) and objectionable discourses of the prime minister (40 %), for those who did not take part in the protests, the first reason is the constraints of freedom and interference in lifestyles.” Moreover, “the decision of the government to go ahead with the plan to rebuild an Ottoman era military barracks on the Gezi Park,” which did not find favor among the participants seems to be mentioned more by those who did not take part in the protests. It can be inferred that those who did not take part in the protests and have different political views do not also favor an imposing attitude that restraints freedoms.
While 54% of the respondents have expressed that they would enter the protest if the same situation were experienced again, 30% of them said that they would not. In addition, 15% of the respondents is indecisive.

There is also a significant difference between those who took part in the protests and who did not with regard to the attitude to enter a protest again if the events were experienced again. Almost all of those who participated in the respective upheaval before stated that they would lodge a strong protest if similar events were experienced again. However, the ratio of those who did not take part in the protests, but would, is only 20%. Most of those who are decisive comprise the ones who did not participate in the protests. Thus, those who did not enter the protest might be considered as the silent supporters of those who did.
Nearly 50% of the respondents believe that protests may change some things in the country. The ratio of the opponents of this idea is 27%.

Those who actively took part in the protests at Gezi Park have stronger views that protests may bring about change in the country. While the ratio of the proponents of this view is 71%, the ratio of the proponents is 8%. Nevertheless, 31% of those who expressed that they did not take part in the protests state that protests may lead to change. The ratio of the undetermined is the same for both groups.
Most of the respondents agree that young people should be keenly interested in political developments for the future of the country. There seems to be no significant difference between those who participated in the protests and who did not. It has now been borne in on young people that no matter which political view they represent, “their taking part in political activities is important for the future of the country.”

CONCLUSION

It is quite obvious that communication in social media can be achieved freely without the interference of governments and gatekeepers and also the language, symbols and visions shared can make the messages more effective and comprehensible. Twitter is rather seen as the medium of political discourses and pro-democratic discourses appear to be maintaining preponderance. The views formed around social events and information flows can be shared instantaneously without potential influence of opinion leaders and reactions towards them emerge promptly and begin to spread rapidly. It is possible to encounter various people in Facebook. Apart from enabling people to get in touch with friends and relatives, it provides the opportunity to get organized without any interference. Moreover, films and clips have great importance as they can affect the multitudes easily instead of the messages conveyed with hundreds of words. “Stand Up! Call Film,” made to inform the public about the social events ignited by the protests at Gezi Park, was instantly shared in Twitter and Facebook as well as mobile phones with English caption in addition to the national and international networks set through Whatsapp, Skype, Ipad, Android, mail groups and SMS.

In the 21st century, when limitless communication opportunities are provided, the masses in a country like Turkey, the majority of which is the young people who can use communication technologies effectively, may tend to exercise their rights to protest some actions and processes of governments notwithstanding the public opinion by utilizing these technologies. The discomfort that people experience when they feel that their opinions are in minority, form the basis of the spiral of silence. In addition, those who wonder whether their ideas and opinions are the same with those of the majority tend to remain silent if this does not happen. Yet, when they have the same ideas and opinions with the majority, then they act together with them.
It is usually observed that one-party systems steer for totalitarian regimes and in time begin to exercise majoritarianism rather than pluralism. As a consequence, division of powers begin to disappear and ministerialist media attempts to direct the public opinion with the discourses favoring the government. Actions and processes performed by the governing powers in Turkey have recently created disturbance in the public and opposite discourses have been put forth only by a few TV corporations and newspapers in minority within the silent ministerialist media. Furthermore, common views and opinions in public have become dominant through the sharing’s in social media and made the spiral of silence process mature. It is where the power of social media has emerged and somehow formed the protests for Gezi Park all through Turkey. It should be remembered that social media is not in monopoly of any powers and all the formations and discourses that have been observed so far can be considered authentic developments. Those who participated in the protests, particularly the young people, have stood up to the state interference prying into even private life. Thus, there has been a broad public participation in several quarters and squares.

According to the findings of the questionnaire administered to the users of Facebook and Twitter, Turkey’s most effective social networks, the ratio of the respondents who are members in any societies is only 23.2 %. Moreover, the respondents think that the most important problem of Turkey is the constraints on freedoms. While 35.6% of the respondents think that way, it is education for 32.2 % of them. Devastation of green areas; on the other hand, seems to be given pretty little importance with 5 %. Such a result shows us that the reason for the Gezi park protests might be some practices of the government considered to be anti-democratic. Among the demands of the protesters, the first one is “not interfering in the freedoms of individuals.” This view, supported by almost all respondents, is followed by “the prevention of abuse of rights” with 77 %. There appears to be a different perception between those who took part in the protests and who did not with regard to the reasons for the spread of events. While those who participated in the protests have highlighted the excessive use of power by the police (37 %) as well as the objectionable discourses of the prime minister (40 %), those who did not, consider “restraints over freedoms and interference in private life” as the most important reason.

“Unyielding attitude of the government towards the decision to remove the park,” which has not been favored by those who participated in the protests, seems to have been indicated more by those who did not. This result demonstrate that the domineering and compelling attitude of the government is a common view for both who support and do not support the events. Furthermore, there is not a significant difference with respect to the tendency to participate in the events if they happened again between those who already took part in them and who did not. Almost all of those who participated in the Gezi Park protests stated that they would do the same if it happened again. Nevertheless, the ratio of those who did not join the protests, but would, is only 20 %. Likewise, most of the indecisive ones are those who did not take part in the events.

Even those who did not join the protests show the signs that they would take part in them if they were held again unless the government does not give up its oppressive and restraining attitude with regard to freedoms. As a result, most of the respondents grant that “young people should be closely interested in the political processes for the future of the country.”

Raised apolitically and considered apolitical until the recent events, young people have shown that they in fact are not no matter which section or side they represent and they also have some things to say for the future of the country. The positive aspects of the respective events can be regarded as the unity of people from different ethnic, political, economic and social backgrounds around a common purpose with the same discourse.
These events have shown that different sections of a society experiencing polarization can unite around common purposes for democracy and freedom as well as for the perpetuity of the Turkish Republic. Sustainability of a state is possible when a nation can act together as a whole or support a particular view no matter what its ideology is.

Today especially the young people who constitute 70% of the Turkish population are supposed to form the future of Turkey. Their ardor to voice their concerns and also get involved in political life is quite important for the maintenance as well as the future of democracy.
REFERENCES


