Can Social Networks Create Public Sphere? Gezi Park Protests and Intersections with the Media

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Abstract

Social network provides a good opportunity for coordination and exchange of opinions. However, those exchanges through social media can be misleading because it could be used to manipulate people, distorts facts, and give wrong impression about the real public opinion. The case of the May 2013 protests for the redevelopment of Taksim Gezi Park serves a good example of distorted public opinion. Those protests started as a peaceful movement, however later turned into protests for which the intention and meaning became unclear. Protests and strikes took place across Turkey under the banners of freedom of speech, press, and the government's authoritarian attitude towards public concerns. Social media was a galvanizing force in the protests; it was the most popular means of exchange and dissemination of ideas amongst those participants.

This paper discusses Stuart Hall' s essay "Encoding Decoding" to evaluate how messages were produced and disseminated in the context of the Gezi Park protests. Jodi Dean' s essay "The Net and Multiple Realities" is used to analyze whether net represents accurate public opinion and Nancy Fraser's essay "Rethinking The Public Sphere" is used to bring a better understanding of social media over representation of public opinion. The study will try to reveal whether social media truly reflects public opinion by analyzing Gezi Protests.

Keywords: Social Networks, Public Sphere, Gezi Protests, Facebook, Twitter.

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Sosyal Ağlar Kamusal Alan Yaratablir mi? Gezi Parkı Protestoları ve Sosyal Medya ile Kesişmeler

Öz

Sosyal medya fikir alışverişi ve koordinasyonu gibi konularda elverişli bir platform sağlamaktadır. Ancak, bu fikir alışverişleri, gerçeklerin çarpıtılması veya kamu fikri hakkında yanlış bir izlenim vermesi gibi sebeplerden insanlar yanlış yönlendirilebilir. Taksim Gezi parkının yeniden inşasını protesto eden Mayıs 2013 protestoları gerçek kamu fikrinin çarpıtılmasına iyi bir örnek teşkil eder. Bu protestolar barışçıl bir hareket olarak başlamıştır, fakat sonrasında amaç ve yöntemi belirsiz bir hal almıştır. Türkiye'nin değişik yerleri ifade ve basın özgürlüğü, kamu düzeni konusunda hükümetin otoriter tavrını protesto eden gösteri ve protestolara sahne olmuştur. Sosyal medya protestolarda katılımcıların fikir alışverişi ve bu fikirlerin yayılımı konusunda önemli bir araç olarak kullanılmış ve tetikleyici bir rol üstlenmiştir.

Bu çalışmada Gezi park protestoları bağlamında Stuart Hall tarafından yazılan " Kodlama Dekodlama" adlı makale ile mesajların nasıl üretildiği ve dağıtıldığı anlatılmaktadır. Jodi Dean tarafından yazılan " Net ve Sayısız Gerçeklikler" makalesi internetin gerçek kamu fikrini yansıtıp yansıtmadığı tartışmaktadır. Diğer taraftan Nancy Fraser' ın " Kamu alanının tekrardan ele alınması" adlı makalesi sosyal medyanın gerçek kamu fikrinin temsilini konu etmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı Gezi parkı protestolarını inceleyerek sosyal medyanın gerçek kamu fikrini yansıtıp yansıtmadığını ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal medya, Kamu alanı, Gezi Parkı protestoları, Facebook, twitter.

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INTRODUCTION

In his essay "Encoding Decoding", Hall explains how messages are produced and disseminated. He puts forth the stages of communication, which are production, circulation, use, and reproduction. While each stage has its respective determining limits, possible outcomes, they are interdependent as well. Hall's approach proposes that TV and media audiences are introduced to messages that are decoded in several ways which could change according to individual's economic standing, cultural background, personal experiences and choices. Hall states that audience can actively participate in decoding messages, "each stage will affect the message being conveyed as a result of its discursive form. However, the sender of information can never be sure that the message will be perceived by the target audience in the way that was originally intended, as a result of this chain of discourse" (Hall, 2011: 508). The message decoding depends on society's dominant ideologies, beliefs and values. How consumers perceive things and interpret the message are based on their cultural background, values, and social background.

In his essay, Hall also claims that consumers take three distinctive positions during encoding process. The first position is the "hegemonic position", in which Hall claims that the consumer takes the message directly, and decodes it exactly the way it was meant to be decoded. The consumer is located in the dominant view, and interprets the codes intended meaning completely, accepting and responding to the intended meaning. Here, there is no misunderstanding in interpretation because both the sender and receiver have the same cultural biases:

"The domains of preferred meanings have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of how things work for all practical purposes in this culture, the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions" (Hall, 2011: 510).

The second position is "negotiated", in which there are both accepting and rejecting elements. Readers are accepting the dominant message, but do not show any willingness to accept completely the way the encoder had originally intended. The reader, to a certain extent, shares the texts code and generally accepts the preferred meaning, but is resisting at the same time and modifying it in a way which reflects their own experiences, interests and point of view. Hall states,

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"Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations, while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground rules- it operates with exceptions to the rule" (Hall, 2011: 510).

The third position is "Oppositional", in which a consumer understands the literal meaning, but due to different backgrounds, each individual has his/ her own way of decoding messages while forming their own interpretations. The readers' social situation has placed them in a directly oppositional relation to the dominant code, and although they understand the intended purpose, they do not share the text's code and end up rejecting it.

Based on Hall's classification of consumer's assumption, a position and decoding relayed messages, the reaction on social media to major political events, as in the example of Gezi Protests, differed a great deal from public opinion. Operating under the belief that social network users comprise only a small stratum of the greater population it can be said that social network users during those protests did not represent the public opinion. Most notably, users of Twitter and Facebook during those protests were considerably younger than the general public and therefore only represent a fraction of the population. In another respect, participating groups, those utilizing social media, had a mutual cause as well as shared cultural background, values, and social background as those groups shared a position in a specific segment of an elite group. The mutual cause of the protestor's was their dissatisfaction with the government's practices. Their position of discord with the practices of the government represent only one side of the argument at hand. When taking into consideration the opposing position, that of agreement and support for the government's practices, in addition to those members of the populace not involved in social media communications, they remain a minority. Their minority status becomes further emphasized when taking into consideration those members living outside the country when those conversations are taking place.

GEZİ PARK PROTESTS AND INTERSECTIONS WITH MEDIA

The Gezi Park protest movement marked a special moment because it indicated a point at which negotiated code, through the mass communication force of the media, instantaneously burst into oppositional coding. The, until then, dormant

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perceptions of the minority mobilizing and perpetuating the protests had engaged in a mostly negotiative means of coding information and positions put forth by the government up until that point. However, with the help of the social media catalyst, a mass movement into an oppositional mode of interpretation of the events occurred. The opinions of social media users assumed a direct contrary to the negotiated positions that had existed before and, due to the communicative fluidity of the internet, spread rapidly and exhaustively, perpetuating the illusion that the positions held by this group were of public opinion.

Furthermore, the role of social media in this shift is important, not only as a means of communication of information, but as a means of portrayal of it. Along with words, media items, such as photographs and video footage were disseminated. These photographs and video footage were largely disturbing and violent images were quickly assumed a "preferred" or "dominant" meaning that was misused by social media users for perpetuation of a non-universal idea. Hall's definition of " preferred meanings" are meanings which, " have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of 'how things work for all practical purposes in this culture', the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions" (Hall, 1997: 134). Because the images explicitly displayed violent acts committed against the population who were protesting the Gezi Park reconstruction- the same population utilizing social media networks- the media associated with the protest quickly assumed the dominant meaning of a transgression on certain socio-political expectations and beliefs held by the community spreading it. Namely, those of the government's protection of its people. As this dominant belief represented what social media users considered a violation on their understanding of " how things [should] work" and an overall severely negative meaning, the images and their negative portrayal under this dominant belief spread rapidly.

NET AS A PUBLIC SPHERE

Hall's essay on how messages are produced and disseminated can be applied in conjunction with an understanding of the importance of exchanges through the net. On the most significant invention with regard to dissemination of information, Dean presents her understanding of the net. In her essay, "The Net and Multiple Realities", Dean analyzes the significance of considering net as a public sphere. The internet provides the opportunity to interact and register thoughts in several

ways. She suggests that it is similar to democracy in terms of a functionality, which is based on discussion, inclusion and participation. Thanks to advancements in technology and the Internet, there has been the emergence of a 'world Public Sphere', which means that information is no longer the privilege of the elite but everyone might have access to information and register their thoughts freely,

"The internet is a great facility to enhance democracy and individual participation in politics, only if the thoughts and voices of different people are posed properly, with organization and clarity, through a website that is recognized by the state and government, a website that has legitimacy" (Dean, 2007: 524).

However, the challenge in considering net as a true public sphere is due to the fact that even today, net is limited to the urban population, and to the urban middle-class or wealthy population in developing countries. Again, people who engage in net debates and discussions are the elite and not the masses. Those communities participating in the Gezi Park protests were largely those with reliable and frequent access to technology and the Internet. This group, by no means, comprises the exhaustive population and therefore cannot be assumed to represent public opinion. Thus, the notion of the net as a completely incorporative public sphere is far from being accurate when considering the demographics and socioeconomic factors of a society.

To add, Dean redefines net as communicative capitalism. The most significant aspect of net is that it is a medium of communication. Today it has become a system like capitalism with its own rules, regulations and structure: "Communicative capitalism designates that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies" (Dean, 1997: 528). Even though the net is encouraging participation, in fact "it is a financially mediated exchange centered on advertising, public relations and the means of mass communication" (Dean, 1997: 529). Thus, it operates on a system of gains and losses, and the incurrence of value upon certain types of information.

More importantly, Dean indicates that, "with the commodification of communication, more and more domains of life seem to have been reformatted in terms of market and spectacle" (Dean, 1997: 530). which means it has pull on the Internet world tends to be that which has value and an ability to draw audience with its audacity. She puts it quite clearly when she states, "finance and consumption-

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driven entertainment culture" are the facets of democratic governance today, and assuming the Internet is a democratic governance, attribute value to media that is transmitted rapidly on the Internet. Consistent with discussed critics approach to media's role, Noam Chomsky in the *Media Control* asserts two models of democracy - one in which the public actively participates, and the other in which the public is manipulated and controlled.(Chomsky, 2002: 67). Chomsky observes that "propaganda is to democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state", and the mass media is the primary mechanism for delivering propaganda. (Chomsky, 2002: 75) Chomsky examines how the mass media and public relations industries have been used as propaganda apparatus to generate public support. Chomsky states that the 20th century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance: "the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy" (Chomsky, 2002: 17). Contrary to the ideal of public participation, media has been used as a manipulative vehicle to control the public in modern democracies. The mass media industries abrogate their responsibilities and exacerbate fear, manipulate public opinion, distort facts and give wrong impression about reality and thus generate public support for their hidden agendas. Thus, the public is meant to be observers, not participants, consumers of ideology as well as products.

These points are particularly noteworthy in the case of the Gezi Protests for many reasons, starting with the belief that the information disseminated during the protests was highly commodified and artificially imbued with value. The heightened entertainment-value of the histrionic video footage made it a commodifiable quantity on the Internet. While violent images have a high value as it is on the Internet, the fact that the images in question were meant to further a particular political agenda further inflated their value. Furthermore, highly stylized images and artwork that spread during the protests had all the advertising verve of a well-placed television ad. As Dean states rather bluntly, "democracy demands publicity" and the false Internet democracy perpetuated by the provocative imagery meant to "advertising" a certain political viewpoint gained momentum and popularity due, at its core, to inappropriately commodified communication. By questioning the objectivity of the media, and the relations among knowledge, power and the Western media, Edward Said claims in *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1981) that, "if knowledge is power, those who control the modern Western media are most powerful because they are able to determine what they should know and must not know about themselves" (Said, 1997: 76).

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This commodification of information during the Gezi Protests on the basis of its violence value and politically motivated allure falls into line further with Dean's attempts to discredit, or at the very least, question the nature of the internet as a true public sphere. She asserts that, "market competition as public good thus displaces attention from the actual antagonisms, the actual conflict going on in the world in various forms and spaces" (Dean, 1997: 570). The media that gained speed during the Gezi Protests, imbued with its violent and political Internet market value, became a currency and catalyst for competition in what Dean would consider the Internet democracy. Catalyst in that those with differing political beliefs were compelled to counter social media users' comments and media shares and currency in the sense that once understanding of the Internet value of these media items became known their proliferation multiplied and their value increased further. That being said, this catalysis and inflated valuation given to social media items, as Dean posits, just took attention away from greater real-life concerns of the greater populace. Those individuals to whom the political agendas allegedly being addressed by social media users comprised only a small portion of the internet-using community, while in real-life, the greater public sphere was left without access or contribution to this marketplace of media. The exclusion of this portion of society in the context of the Gezi Protests cannot be overlooked and serves to further invalidate the notion that the Internet represents a viable notion of the public sphere.

While one may believe that an important aspect of social media is that the reaction to political events reflects the comments and views of active users and that this provides a perspective into how communities of interest respond to certain circumstances, it does not reliably present the overall reaction of public. In our era, communication with hundreds of people has been easy and cheap thanks to social media. However one major handicap social media presents is that the number of online activists who engage in a fierce battles does not always match the number of activists who appear on the streets. There is an undeniable gap between individuals who are willing to represent their political agendas via the internet and individuals willing to represent their political agendas on the internet and in person. This co-existence of different public spaces allows more people to speak out and disseminate ideas to influence others, but at the bottom line, it is far from realizing a true public opinion due to disconnect from real-world activities that it intrinsically represents.

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Perhaps a notion that Dean puts forth that can best illustrate the fallacy that social media users fell into during the Gezi Protest, is that of the Internet as a "zero institution" (Dean, 1997: 570). She suggests that the net may just be, "an institution that has no positive function at all-its only function is to signal the actuality of social institutions as opposed to pre-institutional chaos."(Dean, 1997: 571) As the social media users in the Gezi Protests were primarily protesting political institutions via the Internet, it goes to say that their online proliferation of hyperbolic media with regard to political institutions only served to further actualize the political institutions that they were protesting in the first place. Meanwhile, the political institutions themselves as well as the greater population represent, in real life, what it was the protestors were attempting to protest without the buffer of the net. In this "zero-institution" interpretation of Dean's, although the public at large is not represented via the online ruminations of a select group like the Gezi protestors. It makes no difference as that public is undoubtedly the real-life manifestation of what internet users, in their attempts to display communicative capital with politically motivated media often times against this public, only end up reaffirming.

On the other hand, social media provides a fast flow of information exchange to disseminate the most intriguing messages, create opposition and spread ideas. According to Jürgen Habermas, "the public sphere is conceived as a neutral social space for critical debate among private persons who gather to discuss matters of common concern in a free, rational and in principle disinterested way" (Habermas, 1991: 91). Habermas' emphasis on the bourgeois conception of the public sphere seems to claim to be open and accessible to all citizens. Habermas saw the media as contributing to the "decay of the rational-critical discourse and causing the decline of the public sphere" (Habermas, 1991: 95).

THE GEZI PROTESTS AND PUBLIC SPHERE

The Gezi protests fail to fulfill Habermas' criterion for the notion of the public sphere in this respect. First, that the nature of social media use during the protests was inherently sided, making the Internet and certain social media sites in particular a non-neutral space. Social media platforms became volatile grounds of discourse with Gezi supporters hurling comments at those who disagreed with their political notions. The fervid nature of the discourse that took place on these platforms also eliminated the possibility that users were " disinterested". This lack of "disinterest" eliminates the possibility of "rational-critical discourse" that Habermas posits is necessary for the notion of a public sphere.

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Habermas recognized three institutional criteria that act "as the preconditions for a public sphere to exist…" (Habermas, 1991: 75). The first precondition refers to the "disregard of status" that is to say one could participate in those public discussions regardless of their status, position or profession. If status is disregarded, the influence of rank will be diminished and thus the better argument will uphold against the hierarchy imposed by the society. In this way, the uniformity of "common humanity" will be asserted.

The Gezi protests do not adhere to this criteria. As stated before, with technology as the harbinger for discourse there is the undeniable truth that in developing regions of the world, computer and Internet access is not a universal availability. Therefore, status, position, and profession as they correlate with wealth and financial ability and, namely, the ability to access, with some regularity, the computer and the net, prevent universal participation in online discourse. In the case of Turkey and the Gezi protests, its classification as a still developing country means that profession and status undoubtedly interfere with an individual ability to participate in online discourse. Assuming individuals of such a status comprise a reasonable stratum of the public, it can be said that, in this respect, the Internet does not represent a public sphere.

The second precondition for a public sphere to emerge is that it needs to be a "domain of common concern." If the discussed issue is a common concern to participants, it is likely to have a fruitful participation. Before the development of the public sphere, authority of interpretation laid in the domains of the state and the church. These two institutions had a monopoly of interpretation in the fields of literature, philosophy and art. During this time philosophy, literature and art became commercialized and were accessible to private citizens only. As time went by, these matters no longer remained domains of the church and courts. Thus the private individuals, for whom these cultural products became available, determined meaning of it by the use of rational communication with others, voiced it and stated the implicitness for so long that they could assert its authority: "Cultural products and information became the common concern of private citizens and this paved the way for other issues of common concern to be introduced as topics of deliberation" (Habermas, 1991: 36).

Once again, the issue of access to technology in the case of the Gezi protests nullifies the notion of the Internet as a public sphere on the basis of Habermas' criterion. Limited public access to computers, Internet access and social media

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websites ensure that the Internet is not, as Habermas calls it, a "domain of common concern" (Habermas, 1991: 55). With that in mind, the positions and ideas perpetuated by the Gezi protestors do not fall within the public sphere.

The last precondition is the idea of "inclusivity" which is the process that commercialized cultural products and information makes it inclusive. Even at times when the public strengthened its boundaries to exclude people, it was never able to shut itself down to disallow participation. Thus, the public sphere has always been immersed within a more inclusive public of private individuals. These private individuals could gain from this process. Issues discussed, which were previously confined to the debates amongst secluded groups now became general and common in their accessibility. Thus everybody was able to participate. The Gezi Park protests can not be considered to meet this precondition because it does not include every stratum of the society.

Within the internet, these three criteria are, to some extent, adhered to people who have access to the internet via virtual identities. If individuals' socio-economic status allows it and they have the skills needed to use the internet, anybody can use it. Yet, the Internet does not only allow for private individuals to access it. The mass communication medium is used by interest groups and other organizations to explore and use the information available,

"Social media has the potential to form a public sphere for the dissemination of counter hegemonic discourses, or to mobilize public opinion outside the centralized authoritative state control" (Habermas, 1991: 75). Most of the actions pop up spontaneously after information is exchanged on social media. The actions such as these have started to change the perception and the dynamics among citizens, government officials and economic interests.

Therefore, the Gezi Protests created a political sphere in which political participation enacted through the medium of talk and communicative action. Thus the sphere allowed democratic participation and demand for rights and privileges of a specific segment of Turkish society through contemporary institutions of deliberative democracy. By employing social media for a rapid dissemination of false information, though, the protests lost its credibility. Thus, a peaceful protest with all the good intentions which could have helped towards a stronger participatory and deliberative democracy turned into a masquerade. The disorganized structure of protestors, lack of ability to turn opposition into

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meaningful demands had a negative effect on the creation of a true public sphere. Consistent with this assessment, Baudrillard argues that, " the role of the images is highly ambiguous. For, at the same time as they exalt the event, they also take it hostage. They serve to multiply it to infinity and, at the same time, they are a diversion and neutralization… the image consumes the event, in the sense it absorbs it and offers it for consumption (Baudrillard, 2002: 27).

It seems both the government and protestors are competently and effectively using the media to control the minds of ill-fated audience for their purposes. Both are emboldened to exploit the incidences for their agendas, and also to look forward to the next one not with an apparent anxiety, but an inner longing. Likewise, Stanley Fish sees the contemporary culture as one where " everything is permitted, but nothing is to be taken seriously." (Fish, 2006: 88). This sort of hollow pluralism functions as " the morality of a withdrawal from morality in any strong insistent form." (Fish, 2006: 73). Tolerance is possible only to the extent that one is not forced to take the other seriously. When the other reacts in a way that confronts the liberal subject directly – say in the case of Gezi Park Protests one finds instead an aggressive intolerance toward the other. Tolerance is only possible if it costs the self nothing and all too often harbors a deeper intolerance.

The public sphere is an ideal model that has probably never existed. According to Habermas, people are encouraged to participate "in a process of deliberation and access is guaranteed to everybody; they are respected as equals and are expected to contribute to the common good; power elites are held accountable to the independent public body". (Habermas, 1991: 88). In the contemporary context, however, the modern public sphere and public discourse cannot be separated from the social media. Public opinion has been facilitated by various forms of media including newspapers, magazines, television talk programs as well as the Internet. The Internet has been taken as a new potential public sphere as it opened new channels for political communication and public discourse. Within the Internet, exchanges are seen as a potential development that could act as a new form of this public sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study explained the power of social media on creating a public sphere and the rise of social opposition through social media. Even though, social media facilitates the creation and sharing of information, ideas, and other forms of expression, it also

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introduces substantial and pervasive challenges such as disparity of information available, issues with trustworthiness, and reliability of information presented. These issues cast doubts on the conventional wisdom that social media is open and participatory. The study described notion of the Internet as a public sphere. Thus, the social media helped to organize massive protests demanding justice and call for action. The role of social media in the Gezi Protests can be understood through its relation to social networks and mobilization mechanisms. In Gezi Protests, social media provided space and tool for the formation and the expansion of networks that the government could not easily control. Social media helped a popular movement for political change to expand the sphere of participation.

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