

The Role of Online Social Networks in Social Movements: Social Polarization and Violations against Social Unity and Privacy of Individuals in Turkey

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Abstract—As a matter of the fact that online social networks like Twitter, Facebook and MySpace have experienced an extensive growth in recent years. Social media offers individuals with a tool for communicating and interacting with one another. These social networks enable people to stay in touch with other people and express themselves. This process makes the users of online social networks active creators of content rather than being only consumers of traditional media. That's why millions of people show strong desire to learn the methods and tools of digital content production and necessary communication skills. However, the booming interest in communication and interaction through online social networks and high level of eagerness to invent and implement the ways to participate in content production raise some privacy and security concerns.

This presentation aims to open the assumed revolutionary, democratic and liberating nature of the online social media up for discussion by reviewing some recent political developments in Turkey. Firstly, the role of Internet and online social networks in mobilizing collective movements through social interactions and communications will be questioned. Secondly, some cases from Gezi and Okmeydanı Protests and also December 17-25 period will be presented in order to illustrate misinformation and manipulation in social media and violation of individual privacy through online social networks in order to damage social unity and stability contradictory to democratic nature of online social networking.

Keywords—Online, social media networks, democratic participation, social polarization, privacy of individuals, Turkey.

I. INTRODUCTION

RECENT major trends in the social media literature and technological developments has made online social networks a means of social participation beyond knowledge sharing and gave the role of disseminating knowledge and paved the way for new forms of citizen participation. Social media is recognized as an online technology establishing bridge between new forms of media production and civic engagement. Social media as a means of achieving greater citizen engagement in politics received an extensive attention and new forms and uses of social media have a considerably significant potential to make citizen's engagement in political sphere more accessible. Undoubtedly, new communication technologies have become significant source

for the mobilization of collective action and organization of social movements. The development of social media has also provided many opportunities for cyber activism and helped in promoting a sense of community and collective identity [1].

However, this participatory nature of online social networks should not lead a kind of cyber utopianism considering social media tools on the Internet intrinsically democratic. Although new uses of social media have the ability to make citizen engagement more accessible, the unintended consequences of social media uses can severely impede this deliberative process [2].

It is out of question that the online social networks serve an instrumental function in mobilizing social movements in significant political developments of recent years like Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street movement and Gezi Protests. However, treating the Internet and social media inherently liberating and in an excessively optimistic manner marking its role as a "revolutionary" one destroying dictatorship, undermining religious fundamentalism and making up for failures of institutions is an approach needed to be questioned [3]. Although there is no enough empirical data marking online social network's level of impact upon social movements and political activism, it is problematic to mention about a social media "revolution" by only basing upon its instrumental role in social mobilization.

Many recent developments especially the ones experienced in Turkey during Gezi and Okmeydanı Protests and December 17 and 25 period shows us how extent the information published and different types of contents produced through social networks on the Internet has threatened the social unity and violated individual privacy for the sake political propaganda.

II. IS A PROPER WAY OF SOCIAL INTERACTION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS POSSIBLE THROUGH ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS?

It is surely beyond doubt that networks have fundamentally altered the capacity of individuals to be active participants in the public sphere as opposed to traditional mass media's passive readers, listeners, or viewers and also provide them a very broad opportunity to participate in every kind of social and political debate. However, the naive optimism about the Internet and online social networks is needed to be questioned

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in regard to some aspects including also its effects on personalization social reactions, social exclusion, fragmentation of discourse and polarization.

The previous century has witnessed many social movements carried out through respectively centralized organization of political parties, syndicates, ethnic or religious group. Naturally, these kind of organized movements necessitated time, money, human resource and also logistic supports. In comparison to traditional ways of organizing collective actions that necessitates a long preparatory period, the cyberactivism through online social media platforms shorten information paths, ease the flow of knowledge and make the rapid diffusion of information among the members of each platform. Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook, YouTube Twitter and MySpace added the role of average Internet user in the organization of collective actions by distributing links and videos or creating online communities and making instant messaging with them.

The respectively centralized social movements of pre-social media period included activists having close individual, ideological and hierarchical bonds and also a powerful leadership envisaging long term ideals [4]. On the other hand, social media creates the illusion of face-to-face communication even as millions of people share information and seems to be in a strong social interaction. Unlike face-to-face discussion that takes place among people, information pathways in cyberspace follow weak ties [5]. Furthermore, weak ties among online social network group members pave the way for weakening of group loyalties. Social fragmentation due to overdose information content supplied through Internet and the decline of group loyalties have given rise to an era of personalized politics in which individual expression replaced with collective action frames. The increase in personalized forms of political participation by means of social media platforms also brings a radical change in the political culture of era [6].

Thus, a question appears in minds that whether these personalized forms of collective action are able to achieve sustainability of a social movement, which is essential to express and push the demands of the social group successfully. For example; to describe the overthrown of dictatorial regime of Hosni Mubarak in early 2011 as a social media revolution by disregarding strong influence of social, political and historical background of social reactions and strong influence of outside conditions is to overemphasized the instrumental role of online social networks on the mobilization social movement. It should be keep in mind that although Mubarak regime totally cut off Internet and cellular phone communication throughout Egypt, every day thousands of people get together at Tahrir Square [7].

Depressing socio-political and economic climate, lack of transparency in presidential elections, pervaded corruption in all government bodies, oppressive political conditions, preventing free expression and also problems in general political participation have been already established a reaction against the regime [8]. The social movement in Egypt is not an anticipated consequence of freedom offered by online social

media platforms and also a direct result of online inspiration from social movements in Tunisia but actually coming out of a social reaction against depressing social and economic conditions of the country with the help of also the Internet facilities and online social networks. To illustrate, personalization of social movements and lack of loyalty among social media activists, the number of new Twitter users which was over 600.000 during early stages of Tunisian uprisings in 2011 was less than 100.000 just a few months before Tunisian revolution [9].

Although there are some conflicting ideas regarding both the role of online social networks in social movements and especially anti-government protests in recent years (in Tunisia, Egypt, Iran, Russian Federation, the USA, etc.) and also the democratic environment of online social media networks; the participatory nature of social media which gave way to online arguments, exchange of ideas and political expressions are mostly accepted due to its easily, rapidly and cheaply forming interactive and multidimensional debate opportunity. Basing upon this situation some scholars assert that exchange of ideas of millions of people through online social networks results in inclusion of masses into democratic debate and revival of the public sphere [10]. The inclusion of masses into social interaction and also political debates is an undeniable process through new media instruments but it should be questionable that this process of public engagement is enough for transforming social media platforms into a public sphere. It actually seems very difficult due to so-called "digital divide".

There is a huge gap between and within countries concerning the accession to information and communication technologies (ICT). While the Internet might contribute to broaden the circle of participants in the public sphere, the people who already are well-to-do or the countries which have little problems in terms of wealth and skills already have more access to Internet and social media tools. The surveys shows that people in richer countries have better access to ICT and use them more intensively than people in poorer countries. Moreover, Internet usage is far more common in richer countries than in poorer countries and in richer countries the number of Internet users has grown much more quickly in richer countries [11]. On the other hand, within countries not all people have opportunity to access Internet. To illustrate; In Turkey, albeit of great increase in number of Internet users in recent years, the total ratio of Internet users is not more than 50% of the total population between the ages of 16-74. The number of Internet users is %48.9 of total population between the ages of 16-74 in 2013 and 47.4% in 2012 [12]. Furthermore %73,2 of total Internet users facilitates from Internet for participating in social media activities. This statistics figure out that Internet can offer a limited social expression through online social media instruments and significant amount of total population is excluded from Internet and social media facilities.

Criticism of the democratizing effects of the Internet necessitates mentioning centralization of Internet and social media in terms of the both basic tools and ownership relations. Today social media activities overwhelmingly concentrate on

a few mega sites like Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and Flickr etc. Only a small number of sites are used by the vast majority of users. On the other hand, ownership relations also put a restriction upon the freedom of social media. It is clear that social media tools are very easily, rapidly and cheaply accessible for the users. However, the establishment and maintenance of social media platforms necessitate big investments in technology and infrastructure. Hence, the ownership of social media platforms mostly concentrated in the hands of a few global companies. As being enterprises of global companies, social media platforms have a very complex relationship mechanism with governments and other companies and groups, which also affect the users of these social media tools [13]. So, the centralization of Internet and social media in terms of tools and ownership violate the democratic nature of social media activities.

An important problem arising from ubiquity of information and the uncontrollable increase in the amount of information circling around is the fragmentation of discourse. The fragmentation effect cause atomization public debate and impede the realization of public sphere. People have to encounter with millions of personalized and modified opinions that may offer no common ground for social interaction, political debate and participation in action. This situation might confine people into debate or political action of which limits have been already defined by the masses of highly similar individuals who seeking for the comfort of only being together with the groups seeing the world from similar windows. Also, some social networks might intent to reinforce their existence by facilitating from social fragmentation and by underlying the lines of differences [14]. Thus the fragmentation of discourse and the determinism arousing from this fragmentation also might hinder the realization of social media as a public sphere.

Another consequence of fragmentation and the political determinism arousing from this might be the polarization. While mentioning the ideas of scholars criticizing the idea that Internet is a convenient means of revitalizing public sphere, Benkler who believes in democratizing effects of the Internet focus on the critics' claim that fragmentation would lead to polarization. When information and opinions are shared only within groups of participants having similar way of thinking, they would intend to strengthen each other's views or beliefs without questioning and without seeking for alternatives. This may ease the emergence of more extremist views increases the distance between positions taken by opposing parties [15].

III. SOCIAL POLARIZATION AND THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENTS AGAINST SOCIAL UNITY AND PRIVACY OF INDIVIDUALS

Online production and distribution of information through the Internet based media is sometimes very problematic due to the fact that its content might give way to polarization of the society which encourage hate among opposing camps and legitimize the use private information in the sake of political propaganda. Even the violation of privacy might become an apparatus of policymaking and management of perceptions.

The diversification and complexity of purposes and also patterns of content production and consuming in online social media platforms has already introduce privacy infringement risks to politicians, opinion leaders, bureaucrats, businessmen and also other people. The illegal disclosure and inappropriate use of people's private information can cause damaging consequences in people's lives [16]. It is the fact that especially with 17 and 25 December 2013 cases in Turkey, it is not surprising that privacy violations through Facebook and Twitter appear repeatedly and also information of individual privacy also used by mainstream media. The illegally acquired personal information within tape recordings of which accuracy is not confirmed yet was disclosed.

Following 17 December 2014 many other tape recordings were published through Internet and online social media networks and mainstream media reported most of the information disseminating by social media [17]. Every day new tapes consisting voice recordings of politicians and their family members, bureaucrats and also businessmen which assumed to be proof of corruptions and abuses by politicians including the Prime Minister of Turkey were reported. The serial disclosure of tape recordings and rising curiosity of people towards new tape recordings affect the social psychology in two ways. Firstly, it has stirred up the social anxiety and put the individuals into fear that all people over the country might be suffer from illegal eavesdropping and phone hacking. Secondly, the sensitivity of society on the issue gradually disappeared and this abnormal process normalized in the eyes of people. Therefore, the tape recordings published successively on social media in the aim of increasing social awareness towards corruption may result in unresponsiveness of the society, because successive stimulus may result in the loss of sensitivity towards social problems and political debates [18]. In this way, Internet also challenges moral values of the society [19]. This may lead the evaporation of democratic and participatory nature of social media network on the Internet.

On the other hand, some online social networks often provide an ideal environment as a propaganda platform for extremist groups to promote their ideologies [20]. The content of information on online social media platforms is always beyond any kind social control and millions of unconfirmed news and information are in circulation on the Internet and in social media platforms. The problems of misinformation and also the circulation of too much unconfirmed information in social media networks become layered when the mass media use the unconfirmed information in social media networks as the source of their news which was a widely encountered case especially during Gezi and Okmeydanı Protests.

As a most recent example on May 2014; a photograph which assumed to be taken during police investigation in an Allewite origin citizen living around Okmeydanı twitted by a lawyer and tagged as "Madness of the State at Okmeydanı! [21]. With the help of the painting of Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, this social media user tried to manipulate that the police forces has been oppressing over Allewit citizens living around Okmeydanı and treated as guilty. However, it is discovered

that this photograph is belong to an operation carried out by Iraqi police against a suspect [22]. It is clearly seen that this tweet intended to provoke masses following the death of Uğur Kurt by accidentally by the police Okmeydanı Demonstrations and committed to convert the demonstration anti-government social movement.

There are many other examples of misinformation and manipulation through online social media networks in order to reinforce social fragmentation and to interrupt social unity after the Gezi Protests launched on the last day of 2013 May. One of the most provocative disinformation made through social media claimed that the police forces in charge of interfering in protest used real bullets and the police also used chemicals against protesters [23]. Other insulting news shared on online social media tools are on a photograph of a young man heavily wounded and tragically died. The news on social media asserts that this young man was deliberately run over by a police panzer and died with great bodily injuries. However, the truth is quite the opposite of what told in the related social media sharing. This photograph was taken after a deadly sea accident in a foreign country [24]. In another sharing on social media, there was a photograph of little young man seriously injured. This social media news claimed that the little boy on a stretcher was beaten by the police forces during a demonstration organized in Çanakkale province in the aim of supporting Gezi Protests. But the real story is that the photograph was taken just after a car accident in Çanakkale one year earlier than the Gezi Protests [25].

Evidently there are many other cases illustrating the abused role of social media. Group interaction through social media among the users having similar way of thinking and antagonistic inclinations against opposing camp might stir up the social, political and ethnic discrimination and deepen social polarization. The masses which adapted Internet-centric style of thought and deemed Internet as a sole democratic way of expression are both in an naïve optimism regarding the social role of social media in social movements and also regardless of the destructive effects of Internet and also social media.

Obviously the disinformation is not limited with the ones spread by anti-government groups. In fact there are some other examples illustrating the manipulative attempts by pro-government groups in the aim of increasing antipathy against Gezi protesters, ceasing the protests and keeping the social tension up. One of the examples of disinformation of this kind made through social media tools is a dispute on a photograph of a man holding a can in his hands when he was in Dolmabahçe Mosque which was a refuge for the protesters escaping from police intervention. Some of the news on the social media asserted that the can in man's hands was full of alcohol and there were some other people drinking alcohol inside the mosque. However, the reality was a bit different and the can in man's hands was of a coke originally as stated by also the protester himself. As well, no evidence proving that people drunk in the mosque could be found after the investigation carried out by the Presidency of Religious Affairs [26].

In another example, a photograph of Ethem Sarisülük who is a protester died after shot in his head by a policeman and has stayed in intensive care for fourteen days has been used in order to provoke pro-government masses. Some social media news claimed that this photograph showing Sarisülük in military clothing with an arm in his hand was taken in a DHKPC military training camp which is accepted as a terrorist organization. However, it has been revealed that this photograph is one of the profiles photos of Sarisülük's Facebook account and was taken when he worked for the construction of a military guardhouse in Hakkari [27]. Another important example illustrating pro-government groups' misuse of social media tools is about "the woman in red" who is one of the iconic figures of Gezi protests. The videos and pictures showing the woman in red dresses when she was exposed to pepper gas by a policeman who sprayed the gas directly on his ways have been very widespread on TV's and Internet and also in newspapers. In some news in social media, the woman in red dresses, Ceyda Sungur, was mentioned as a commercial actress and implied that protest groups used an actress to provoke the masses. Also, a visual depicting her in a photography studio while posing for the camera of a commercial photographer was used to support this argument. However, it was subsequently revealed that the photograph was produced by photomontage and in the original photograph, there is a different person who is a model posing for photograph artist Jason Christopher [28]. It was seen that the view of Sungur was placed on the fake photograph by photomontage.

On the other hand, misuse of social media platforms and corrosive influences of Internet open the way for authoritarian countries filter or censor Internet use. This is another argument for criticizing assumed democratizing effect of social media even if the misuse of social media tools might be the real reason for authoritarian regimes. Each way of exploitation of social media platforms is a pretext for oppressive regimes to take measures against Internet and social media use and to censor social media contents.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is the fact that the increasing role of social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube, Myspace etc. in the organization of social participation and it's being an important resource for collective action seems to be a furthering step in the progress of deliberative democracy and social participation. However, the characteristics of social media encouraging democratic involvement of individuals at the same might be transformed into destructive tools threatening social unity and individual privacy. The fact that social media platforms in which the users express their views, beliefs and sometimes the private life information would be easily misused by violation of the principle of privacy and these platforms would be easily turned into tools of publicizing the users' routines, private information and individual relations should not be disregarded.

The unintended consequences of social media abuse are not only limited with the ones having harsh effects on individuals

but also it causes many problems regarding social order. The most threatening risk emerged from abuse of social media atomization social structure, fragmentation of public debate and social polarization. The very personalized forms of collective action and individualized cyber activism can make sustainability of a social movement difficult and prevent virtually organized social groups from strongly participating in political debate and pushing their demands successfully. The fragmentation effect of social media tools causing atomization of public debate makes realization of public sphere and deliberative democratic involvement of citizens in political discussion difficult. More seriously, polarization effect of social media content may cause the widening of the distance among opposing parties and might create a convenient atmosphere for political extremism.

To sum up, naïve optimism emphasizing on democratizing effect of social media facilities should be negotiated. The following two critical questions should be considered by describing the exact role of social media platforms in social movements and political participation. What kind of democratic practices does the social media produce and offer for the use of citizens and all kind of social units like NGO's, syndicates, political parties, charities, student organizations etc. in terms of democracy? It is the fact that social media make space for democratic involvement of individuals but what is necessary for the transformation of this space into a public sphere?

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