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Social Media as a Public Space for Political Activism: The Use of Twitter During Gezi Park Protests¹

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ABSTRACT

Political polarization in Turkey has not only been visible during electoral processes but it has also been evident in non-electoral processes in online and offline protests. Gezi Park protests in 2013 denote to such processes. This study analyzes the use of Twitter during Gezi Park protests that had sparked a big polarization. The role of Twitter had been influential in mobilizing the masses in the protests. During Gezi protests as seen in the Arab Spring, Twitter was used by the protesters in a dense way in the polarized political environment. Using the “mediated populism” as the theoretical framework, this study argues that social media has paved the way for the emergence of a citizen-centered public space in times of crisis and polarization during Gezi protests. The data that will be under analysis consist of the tweets posted on Twitter during the peak of Gezi protests. The date between May 25 and June 16, 2013 is taken as the time span that refers to the peak time of protests. By detecting top-mentioned tweets, this study aims to analyze how political activism had been expressed by the protesters. To achieve this aim, the randomly selected tweets posted in this time span were examined by conducting content analysis methodology.

Keywords: content analysis, mediated populism, Gezi Park protests, political polarization, Twitter.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have been increasingly used in protest movements in recent years. The social media sites which can be seen as the new online gathering spaces provide new communication and participation space for enhanced political activism especially during times of crisis and political polarization (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

This study attempts to analyze the use of Twitter during Gezi protests that had caused a mass-participated movement and a big political polarization in 2013. Using the “mediated populism” (Mazzoleni, 2008; Chakravartty & Roy, 2015) as the theoretical framework, this study argues that social media has paved the way for the emergence of a citizen-centered public space during Gezi protests. The data² that will be under scrutiny consist of the tweets posted on Twitter during the peak of Gezi protests. The date between May 25 and June 16, 2013 is taken as the time span that refers to the peak time of the protests. By looking at the content of these tweets, this study aims to discuss how political activism had been expressed by the protesters on Twitter. Following this purpose, the randomly-selected top mentioned tweets were examined by conducting content analysis methodology.

Content analysis methodology is a research instrument for the description of the content of communication (Berelson, 1952). After examining the tweets posted in peak of Gezi protests, the results reveal that the top mentioned words are the following: “polis”, “Gezi”, “Tayyip” “Gezi Parkı” “Beşiktaş”, “Çapulcu”, “Çarşı”, “RTE”, “TOMA” and “Biber Gazi”. It can be argued that Twitter was used as a public space for political activism, the protests in the Gezi Park were also supported by the online protests on Twitter and this reveals that political polarization was also evident on Twitter.

The limitation of the study is related with the dataset. As there is a large dataset, the qualitative content analysis of millions of tweets is impossible. Due to this reason, randomly-selected tweets in the determined time range have been put under consideration. The content analysis of these selected tweets suggests that there was a heavy discontent against the government among Twitter users while the government officials regarded the protests as an uprising against Turkey’s well-being.

The study proceeds in five parts. The first part addresses Twitter and the concept of political polarization. This part also critically analyzes the role of Twitter in times of political polarization. The second part addresses the context and influence of Gezi protests in Turkish political life besides addressing the function of Twitter as a space for political activism in this process. The third part is devoted to the theoretical framework explaining the concept of “mediated populism”. The next part is devoted to the methodological framework explaining content analysis methodology and the final part is the analysis part of the selected tweets.

² The dataset was first used in the article titled “A social influence perspective on expressive political participation in Twitter: the case of #OccupyGezi” authored by Kaan Varnali and Vehbi Gorgülü in 2015.

TWITTER AS A PUBLIC SPACE IN TIMES OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Twitter was launched in 2006 as a microblogging website. “Micro-blogging refers to the activity that users broadcast brief text updates about small little things happening in their daily life and work activities, such as what they are reading, thinking, and experiencing” (Zhao & Rosson, 2009, p. 243). Twitter provides postings known as “tweets” and facilitates a major increase in social interaction (Fischer & Reuber, 2011). Twitter offers networking and entertainment at the same time (Howard, 2008).

The literature on the use of twitter for political activism addresses how it transforms the collective action by making it possible for the citizens to diffuse their ideas and get organized. Kavanaugh et. al. (2011) focused on use of social media in Iran, Tunisia and Egypt during the mass movements in 2009, 2010 and 2011, and concluded that Twitter was used by the protestors. In line to that, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil Garcia (2013) studied why and how the social media-enabled movements emerged by focusing on the students’ use of social media to organize mass protests in Mexico.

Twitter holds the advantage of rapid communication, and it is also utilized by the politicians to directly communicate with the citizens (Merry, 2012). As a result of these, twitter has also been used as a tool of political communication for the ruling elites in addition to social networking function. In an era of developing technology, Twitter makes it easy for both citizens and ruling elites to interact in an effective way. Especially in times of political crisis and polarization, Twitter can also be used as a public space for political engagement. During times of political polarization, social media sites including Twitter play a key role in making the society get mobilized and have the ability to participate mass demonstrations through online political activism. Thus, the concept of “political polarization” is important while analyzing how Twitter has been used as a medium for protesters during the political turmoil evident in Gezi protests.

Political polarization emerges as a result of the so-called “echo chamber” environment, “in which individuals are exposed only to information and communities that support their own views, while ignoring opposing viewpoints” and when “ideas become more extreme due to lack of contact with contradictory views” (Gruzd & Roy 2014, p. 30). In the case of social media sites, this may be more likely, because people on social media tend to connect with common backgrounds, including common political orientations (McPherson et al., 2001).

Political polarization is one of the important themes while discussing Turkish politics. It is known that polarization is directly tied to the increased levels of gridlock in the political sphere (Jones, 2001). Political polarization can also be defined as the increasing of the political distance separating partisans. Polarization can be regarded as the extent to which different political ideologies are opposed. In addition, the emotions of citizens who affiliate with a political party are also related with polarization; the extent to which citizens dislike affiliates of other political parties (Talissee, 2019). During times of political polarization, twitter can be used as a tool of online mobilization and can serve as a space for political activism. It can be a public space through which collective action can be managed by empowering citizens to diffuse ideas and to engage in social interaction. On the other hand, despite the stress put on the advantages of social media for political communication and serving a space for political activism, some researchers argue that social media also makes society become more polarized (Gruzd & Roy, 2014).

GEZI PARK PROTESTS AND THE USE OF TWITTER FOR POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Gezi Park protests attracted a major attention from all over the world. The protests that started at Gezi Park located in Taksim on May 28, 2013 occurred as a consequence of an urban plan. The urban plan was a project to construct a shopping center in this region. The protests started after the AKP- ruled municipality of Istanbul declared that it would redesign the park. After this move, protesters stayed in the park with the aim to protect the trees in the park. They pitched tents and started living in the park (Kirisci, 2013). When the police forces tried to suppress the protesters, the demonstrations got public attention and the protests that began in a peaceful way in Istanbul spread to other cities in Turkey in a short period of time and radicalization and violence came to stage as well. Some of the protesters saw restrictions on civil liberties and the authoritarian policies as their reasons for joining the protests (Erhart, 2013). The protests were not solely against “tree-cutting”.

A significant part of the literature on Gezi protests has been shaped by two understandings: the views from a conservative and nationalist perspective define Gezi as a Kemalist uprising. An alternative account is presented by researchers like Nilüfer Göle who argue that Gezi represents the Turkish type of global anti-capitalist social movement posing challenges to the neoliberal economic order. According to Göle, Gezi protests can be seen as an urban movement. This movement was started by young people, and supported by the middle class. Göle (2013, p. 8) explains Gezi movement as follows:

“The Gezi movement marked a new threshold for democracy. As every new event unfolded, there is a date, ‘before’ and ‘after’ Gezi. The movement in which they have gained a new voice and unifying force happily surprised the participants themselves. The movement created its actors, a repertoire of action of its own, and instigated a new social dynamic that challenges the established political norms.”

In addition to marking a new breakpoint for democracy, Gezi protests also resulted in the formation of new political identities which have been no longer grounded in ethnicity, religious identity or citizenship. The Gezi protests became a “placeholder for the representation of a new public and a new people - the generic notions of public space and nature as a source of reproduction” (Karakayalı & Yaka, 2014, p. 133).

During Gezi protests, as seen in the Arab Spring, Twitter was used by the protesters in a dense way. According to Statista (cited in Bianet, 2020) as of April, 2020 there were 13.6 million Twitter users in Turkey, and Turkey has been the sixth highest ranking in the world. The number of Twitter users in Turkey increased from around 1.8 million to over 9.5 million in the first five days of Gezi protests (Arda, 2015). As Twitter is free and has an interactive structure, protesters were able to interact with other protesters and support each other. Thus Twitter played a significant role for the protestors in conveying their messages to the peers and to the whole world and presented a public space for the protesters (Bayraktutan et al., 2013).

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: MEDIATED POPULISM

The conceptualization of “mediated populism” (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015; Mazzoleni, 2003;2008) focuses on how populist movements help mass movements gain visibility and gain a “mediatic legitimization” through reality construction, framing, news making, and agenda-setting. (Mazzoleni, 2003, pp. 7–10). Mediated populism can be seen as an outcome of the connection between media-originated parameters and populist movements. It is known that mediated populism can change depending on the development of the movements.

Research on mediated populism shows a four-stage life cycle (Stewart et al., 2003). The first one is known as the ground-laying phase. In the ground-laying phase, the media might be engaged in providing a major portrayal of the country’s problems such as covering corruption news about the government. The second stage is the insurgent phase. In the insurgent phase, populist movements aim to consolidate their support by using the communication tools that media provide as much as possible. The third stage is the established phase. The established phase is known as the stage when the movement obtains full legitimization in the country’s political system. As the final stage, there exists a decline phase. Some movements have experienced a decline phase, like Ross Perot’s Reform Party USA (Mazzoleni, 2008). In this final stage, media is not used as efficient as it is used in the first two stages.

On the other hand, concerning the role of social media while explaining the concept of “mediated populism” Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018, p. 3) write the following:

“Arguably, social media contribute to dramatising populist communication because they are platforms suited to producing emotional, controversial, even violent contents typical of much populist activism, and to stimulating a ‘remix’ activity, a creative collage of video clips, sound bites, clickbaits, graffiti, parodies, memes, and many other contents, including insults and fake-news, that can prove crucial in boosting the popularity of the leader, of his/her creed, of his/her movement.”

Based on the definition made by Chakravartty and Roy (2015) mediated populism can be seen as the imperatives of populism in a “new logics of political communication”. During Gezi Park protests, Twitter was used as a space for political activism for the protesters while providing new logics of political communication for both the masses and the ruling elites.

CONTENT ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

The history of content analysis dates back to the 18th century (Rosengren, 1981). In USA, content analysis was first used in the early 20th century (Barcus, 1959). Content analysis can be used for all types of written texts and there are no specific rules that must be followed for example, deep interviews, open-ended questions as in a questionnaire or observations of situations as well as from pictures (Berg & Lune, 2007). The ways how data are collected shape the quality of analysis.

In all data analysis, the aim is to get meaning from the data collected and draw meaningful conclusions (Burnard, 1991). Holsti (1968) notes that content analysis methodology can be any technique for making inferences by identifying features of messages. Content analysis has both a quantitative and a qualitative methodology. Quantitative content analysis has its origin in media research, whereas qualitative content analysis has its origin in

social science research. This article adopts the qualitative content analysis methodology. In qualitative content analysis, data are presented in words and themes. This makes it possible to draw meaningful evaluation of the results. Researches using qualitative content analysis focus on the characteristics of language in the content of the texts (Tesch, 1990).

At the outset, content analysis technique was mainly used for quantitative research. Previously, content analysis was mainly used to study texts from traditional media such as magazines. Today, researchers continue to analyze texts obtained from the new media that include blogs, social media and many more. Data taken from social media such as Twitter and the analysis made based on these data can be useful for researchers not only for examining news but also for understanding reactions to the news (Al-Rawi, 2016).

ANALYSIS: USING TWITTER AS A CITIZEN-CENTERED PUBLIC SPACE

The table below shows the number of top-mentioned tweets posted between May 25 and June 16, 2013. Unlike the online protests occurred in Egypt, nearly all the tweets originated from Turkey. About 30 percent of people tweeting in the Egypt in 2011 were in Egypt, but around 90 percent of all the Gezi tweets came from Turkey (Tocker, 2013).

Table1: The number of top-mentioned tweets posted between May 25 and June 16,2013

The keywords	Number of tweets
Polis	8.956.591
Gezi	8.473.164
Tayyip	3.647.085
Gezi Parkı	3.568.204
Beşiktaş	2.928.353
Toma	1.641.375
Çapulcu	1.586.077
Biber Gazı	1.438.739
Çarşı	1.209.014
RTE	1.072.707

The table reveals that the top mentioned words were “polis” (police), “Gezi”, “Gezi Parkı” “Tayyip” “Beşiktaş” (A district in Istanbul), “Toma” (Abbreviation of the heavily armoured vehicle used by the police), “Çapulcu” (Erdogan used the word Çapulcu “looter” for the protestors), “Çarşı” (Fan group of Beşiktaş Football Club), “RTE” (The initials of the Recep Tayyip Erdogan), and “Biber Gazı” (Pepper gas). During the protests, football fans

particularly Beşiktaş supporters used Twitter to organize mass protests. A total number of 1.209.014 tweets were posted including the word “Çarşı” At the time-being, football fans from different football clubs were unified for the most part by lifestyle concerns (Irak, 2015, p. 139).

Through using Twitter in an active way, the protestors attempted to make themselves visible. In this regard, it can be argued that Twitter was used as a public space for political activism. The protests in the Gezi Park were also supported by the online protests on Twitter and this reveals that polarization was evident on Twitter in an obvious way as well. The protestors presented their concerns and demand from the political authority via using Twitter an active way. Twitter was used as an online public space to build a mass movement in Gezi Park region.

- **Some Examples of The Tweets Posted Between May 25 And June 16, 2013**

-Tweet posted by artist Mehmet Ali Bora on May 30, 2013.

Mesele sadece Gezi Parkı değil arkadaş, sen hâlâ anlamadın mı? Hadi gel. #direngeziparkı (It's not just about Gezi Park, buddy, don't you still get it? Come on #resistgezipark)

-Tweet posted by anchorman Metin Uca on May 30, 2013.

Biber gazına karşı antiasit kullanımı California Üniversitesi'nce denemiş ve Yunanistandaki büyük protestolarda başarı ile kullanılmış. (The use of antacids against pepper gas has been tried by the University of California and successfully used in major protests in Greece.)

-Tweet posted by journalist Cüneyt Özdemir on May 31, 2013

Polisin Gezi Parkı göstericilerine sert müdahalesi artık durmalı.. Taksim'de durum çok ciddi bir gerilime doğru gidiyor...(The harsh intervention of the police against the Gezi Park protesters must stop. The situation in Taksim is moving towards a very serious tension ...)

-Tweet posted by author Elif Şafak on May 31, 2013

Bu kadar sertlik neden?Eli silahsız gencecik insanlara gaz sıkılmak neden? Vicdanım, yüreğim, aklım kabul etmiyor... (Why is there so harshness, why is gas put to unarmed young people? My conscience, heart, mind do not accept ...)

-Tweet posted by actor Ahmet Mümtaz Taylan on June 1, 2013

Taksim ve Gezi Parkı açıldı! Polis Dolmabahçe'ye çekiliyor! ARTIK SAKİN LÜTFEN! (Taksim and Gezi Park have been opened. Police is moving to Dolmabahçe! PLEASE CALM DOWN NOW!)

-Tweet posted by the account @OccupyGezi on June 3, 2013

İnönü Stadı çevresinde bir dozeri ele geçiren eylemciler, TOMA'nın üzerine sürüyor!! (Activists, who seized a dozer around İnönü Stadium are driving on TOMA!!)

-Tweet posted by author R. İhsan Eliaçık on June 5, 2013.

Gezi 'saygı'yı öğretiyor: Ateiste ve dindara,Türk'e ve Kürd'e,mini eteğe ve başörtüsüne aynı anda saygı. Müthiş şeyler oluyor,eğitiliyoruz (Gezi teaches 'respect': respect for atheist and pious, Turks and Kurds, miniskirts and headscarves at the same time. Great things are happening, we are being educated)

-Tweet posted by singer Atilla Taş on June 5, 2013

Hiç bu kadar biber gazına gerek yoktu! Olayların ilk günü Taksim'de bir konser versem,dagılırdı zaten millet! (There was no need for this much pepper gas! If I gave a concert in Taksim on the first day of the events, the people would leave!)

-Tweeet posted by journalist Emre Kızılkaya on June 11, 2013

Gezi Parkında çığlık sesleri, biber gazı kokusu ve TOMA vızıltısıyla huzurlu bir öğleden sonra yaşanıyor, doğru mu Sayın Vali #occupygezi (In Gezi Park, a peaceful afternoon is experienced among the scream sounds, pepper gas smell and TOMA buzzes, is it correct respected governor #occupygezi)

-Tweet posted by the then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on June 11, 2013.
Gezi Parkı olayları sonrası kimse ellerini ovuşturup farklı heveslere kapılmasın. Türkiye her alanda büyümeye devam edecektir. (After the Gezi Park events, nobody should rub their hands and have different enthusiasm. Turkey will continue to develop in every field.)



Image 1. Tweet posted by artist Mehmet Ali Bora on May 30, 2013.



Image 2: Tweet posted by singer Atilla Taş on June 5, 2013

As noted earlier in the study, the limitation of the study is related with the dataset. As there is a large dataset, the qualitative content analysis of tweets is impossible. Due to this reason, randomly-selected tweets in the determined time range have been put under consideration. After analyzing the tweets, it was revealed that the extreme police violence and the use of pepper gas have been the main themes seen in the tweets except one tweet stressing the unifying impact of Gezi (see R. İhsan Eliaçık's tweet below). The main theme suggests that there was a heavy discontent against the government's management of the protests among Twitter users. By contrast, the government as seen in the tweet posted by the then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan saw Gezi as a plot staged by foreign forces to weaken Turkey's development.



Image 3: Tweet posted by author R. İhsan Eliaçık on June 5, 2013



Image 4: Tweet posted by author Elif Şafak on May 31, 2013

CONCLUSION

On 10 April 2013, the hashtag #ayagakalk ('stand up') appeared on the Turkish Twitter space aiming to stage a movement at Gezi Park against the redesign of the historical park (Kuymulu, 2013). In the aftermath of the mass protests that began in Gezi Park on May 28, the protesters used Twitter to shape the demonstration themselves and Twitter provided a public space for political activism. The protestors, including environmentalists, football fans, and secular nationalists got mobilized via Twitter.

This study has been an attempt to analyze the use of Twitter by the protestors during the peak time of the events May 25-June 16, 2013 and how Twitter provided a public space for political activism. Political polarization in Turkey is not an issue only for the election times, also times of major social movements witness such polarization as well. The Gezi

protests can be evaluated as an example of such a polarized environment through which social media was used as an online gathering space to raise voices against the government. Due to the ability of Twitter to increase social interaction among the users, it can also be seen as an ideal platform for online protests and mobilization during times of political polarization.

The use of Twitter during Gezi protests showed how social movements can make political claims on behalf of the people and gain mass participation through reality construction and news making via social media. Through using Twitter in an active way, the protestors made themselves visible amid the polarized political environment. It is known that this became possible particularly due to the use of Twitter by the protestors. The traditional mainstream media largely neglected the protests at the beginning. In such an atmosphere, Twitter played an important role for the protestors providing them space in conveying their messages to other protestors and to the whole world. Twitter presented a major functionality during the protests creating a citizen-centered public space for political activism. The protestors raised their voice against the urban plan that aimed to redesign Gezi Park as well as protesting the authoritarian policies of the government.

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