

Chapter 16

Social Media Strategies of Political Power: An Analysis of the Ruling Party in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the social media strategies of political power focusing on Turkey. By using inner-circle and outer-circle conceptualizations, it shows that the ruling party in Turkey simultaneously prevents and embraces social media in order to consolidate its power. The inner-circle strategies consist of practices facilitating an efficient use of social media whereas the outer-circle strategies are composed of judicial and technical measures to obstruct the democratic use of social media. By stressing that political power can also use social media efficiently, the chapter contributes to the literature in which social media is generally associated with emancipatory initiatives and the strategies of power are mostly explored in terms of restrictive measures. The chapter also describes the strategic role of social media in the increasingly violent power struggle in Turkey and the difficulties of using it in advocacy campaigns.

INTRODUCTION

Social struggles are being transformed due to the development of communication technologies. The Arab Spring in the Middle East, the Occupy Wall Street Movement in the USA, anti-austerity movements in Europe, the Gezi Park Protest in Turkey are among the many examples of how social media has changed the organization and action of social protests against the powers that be, thus, enriching the related literature in social sciences. With this transformation, it has become necessary to inquire into social advocacy in current circumstances. This is important for democracy at both global and local levels. The development of social media, however, is not linear. As with emancipatory movements, power organizations are also searching for strategies for using social media efficiently and in order to reach the democratic ideals, this issue must also be explored.

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This chapter analyzes social media strategies of political power focusing on Turkey within the framework of inner-circle and outer-circle conceptualizations that contribute to the literature. It shows that social media strategies of power are not limited to bans, restrictions and surveillance but also include embracing social media. Accordingly, the outer-circle strategies consist of constraining practices that prevent the democratic use of social media and can be analyzed at the levels of the judicial and technical. Conversely, the inner-circles strategies embrace social media. They are composed of proactive practices that benefit from social media and can also be analyzed at two levels; that of the official and unofficial.

Turkey is a suitable focus for such an investigation. It is among the developed countries in terms of the Internet and mobile technologies, and the use of social media is very common. Furthermore, social media is one of the strategic domains in the ever-increasing power struggle in Turkey. Different actors utilize different strategies within social media and their attitudes are changing due to their interaction. The violent nature and multiple facets of the power struggle render Turkey a laboratory, in which the strategies that political powers can apply or be subject to can be analyzed. International organizations confirm this by defining Turkey as a “swing state” and emphasizing that the strategies shaped in this country would constitute a democratic or repressive model for others. This chapter focuses mostly on Twitter because it is the main battlefield in the political struggle on social media.

The chapter consists of four sections. The first concerns the literature on social media and the approaches adopted by political powers around the world. The second section describes the socio-political context, Internet infrastructure and social media diffusion in Turkey in order to better comprehend the political struggle and social media strategies of the ruling party. The third and fourth sections focus on the inner and outer circles strategies. The consequences of the strategies for the advocacy initiatives in Turkey are analyzed in the concluding section. This section also contains information gathered through the interviews done with Turkish activists in order to verify the results.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE LITERATURE

The distinctive aspect of social media literature is the contrast between techno-optimists and techno-pessimists (Gerbaudo, 2012, pp. 5-9; Fuchs, 2012a, pp. 777-779). While the optimists claim that social media strengthens democracy and facilitates emancipation, pessimists argue the opposite. With a unidimensional perspective, both approaches represent extreme positions regarding social media.

The optimistic literature can be categorized into two branches according to the focus of their research. The first branch explores the role of social media in institutional politics and emphasizes that it can be useful in broadening public discussion and participation in political processes. Given that social media platforms empowered by the interactive technology provide more opportunities for users to manage the Internet content and communication, it is underscored that people are able to affect political party strategies and policies by producing and disseminating their messages on the Internet, and candidates can have a direct contact with their electorate (McNair, 2011, p. xviii; Williams and Gulati, 2007; Vergeer, Hermans & Sams, 2011; Vergeer, 2012 p. 10; Demirhan, 2014, pp. 286-287). The success of 2008 Obama campaign in using social media during the presidential race of the USA is particularly emphasized in this literature.

The second branch of the optimistic literature deals with the role of social media in social change. Witnessing massive social protests that occurred in various countries in the late 2000s and early 2010s, such as the popular protests in Europe and the USA against the economic crisis and social injustice or the

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