


Chapter 13

Hashtag Activism Due to Restrictions and Measures During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the hashtag activism of Twitter users who became slacktivists regarding pandemic restrictions and measures in Turkey's first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. From March 2020 to March 2021, 1,464,334 tweets regarding all 13 hashtag activisms, which were the most participated in each month according to the course of the pandemic, were collected using Twitter API and examined with big data analysis. Out of the 13 hashtag activisms with the highest number of tweets analyzed by month, the demand for measures and regulations to be taken to protect against the risks posed by the pandemic came to the forefront in 9, while the demand for lifting or easing the restrictions in 4 of them came to the forefront. Students, detainees and prisoners, and teachers were the actors of the most tweeted hashtag activism. The average mentioned rate of decision makers and authorities in the 13 activisms is 71.52%. As a result, in the first year of the pandemic in Turkey, hashtag activism supporting the implementation of measures and restrictions was more common.

INTRODUCTION

The efforts of social movements to use the media, to be present in the media, and to create their own media is, of course, not a new phenomenon. From Vladimir I. Lenin (1992) attributed a revolutionary role to the socialist press in the struggle of the proletariat to ensure solidarity, organization, and class consciousness, to the Zapatistas' use of the Internet to build alternative networks of resistance against neoliberal policies around the world (Burbach, 2001; Castells, 2008). Social movements have positioned

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-0896-7.ch013

the media as one of the strategic tools of their struggle for organizing, forming public opinion, expressing their opinions, and solidarity, despite the different nature of the means of communication and the mechanisms of repression and censorship.

However, it is an irrefutable reality that digital media, and social media in particular, have differentiated and diversified the action repertoires of social movements. According to Bonilla and Rosa (2015), Twitter has a different significance among the forms of digital activism used to express forms of action mediated by digital communication technologies: Twitter's "multivocality and dialogicality" nature distinguishes it from other digital tools used by social movements to disseminate and amplify their struggles, as it makes it possible to see different perspectives and feel individual reactions at the same time (p.7). The use of hashtags has supported Twitter's use as a 'multivocal and dialogical' activist tool. The transformation of the hash (#) into an activist tool as a marking and indexing system on digital platforms in the form of tags is defined as hashtag activism.

While hashtags can become a means of making a global impact on activism, the power of hashtags in terms of their impact on the real world is a matter of debate. This debate is shaped on the one hand by the possibilities that hashtag activism provides for real-life forms of social dissent (Shirky, 2008, 2011; Soriano, 2013; Zulli, 2020) and on the other by the claim that its role in achieving concrete political results for real political gains does not go beyond slacktivism (Morozov, 2009, 2011; Christensen, 2011; Halupka, 2014; Glenn, 2015).

Although this study inevitably questions these debates in a conceptual context, it seeks to emphasize the importance of the collective narrative structure and themes that emerge with hashtag activism, rather than focusing on the impact of activism that is collectively manifested through the use of hashtags on political decision-making mechanisms in terms of achieving concrete political gains. This study evaluates hashtag activism in the context of the collective production of political discourse and how this collective narrative structure also includes a guiding character in how collective action is framed.

In this context, the study aims to reveal how Twitter users who had to become slacktivists in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when real activism was restricted by imposing bans on demonstrations and mass marches in Turkey, framed collective actions in their hashtag activism practices regarding the measures and restrictions imposed. In line with this purpose, the hashtag activism on Twitter regarding the restrictions and measures imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the one-year period between March 11, 2020, and March 11, 2021, when the COVID-19 case was seen, is examined using big data text analysis technique. The main problem of the study is shaped to explain whether hashtag activism against pandemic measures and restriction policies supports these policies and which issues come to the fore.

HASHTAG USAGE

The first use of hashtags in the digital environment actually began in 1988 in Internet Relay Chat (IRC), long before Twitter, first to mark channels and then to group videos, images, and topics (Chu, 2017, p. 390). One example of the widespread use of hashtags in IRC occurred during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the Gulf War, when the Internet remained the only source of news due to a week-long radio and TV broadcast blackout (Salazar, 2017, p. 23). In fact, this can be regarded as an early example of the hashtag's later spread and current use on Twitter, reflecting the origins of creating a common narrative by sharing and following news on a certain topic. Therefore, the hashtag offered usage experiences similar to current usage, albeit much more limited, in IRC before Twitter.

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