

Social media and the “Menace to Society”: Potential and limitations of alternative media in Turkey

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Abstract

In the absence of Turkish mainstream news reporting of the Gezi Park protests in May-June 2013, Turkish citizens effectively turned to sites like Twitter and Facebook to access information from the ground and resist against the Turkish authorities. This generated representations of social media's role throughout the events as filling the gap left by Turkish media outlets. However, this article argues that representations of social media simply as an alternative to the Turkish mainstream media fail to consider the complexities of how activists used social media as well as the complicated relationship between media and the state, and its consequences for open, democratic debate in Turkey.

Keywords

Social media, citizen journalism, alternative media, counter-hegemonic representations, rhizomatic media.

Introduction

Media and representations are essentially intertwined concepts. Rather than reflecting a “true” image of reality, representations are constructed through culturally situated language that gives meaning to what we take to be true about the world (Hall 2003). Therefore it becomes crucial to question the discourses about the role that media have – and are allowed to have – in a given society, whether those discourses refer to mainstream media functioning closer to the state or to social media and their capacity to act as alternative news channels.

Social media has been foregrounded in public uprisings over the past several years. They were core components in the Iranian Elections in 2009-2010; the Occupy Wall Street movement, the ousting of Tunisian President Ben Ali and the popularly labeled Facebook Revolution in Egypt in 2011; the Gezi Park Protests in 2013; and Ukraine's Euromaidan in early 2014. In the wake of these events, social media have been tools for enabling citizen journalism, the mobilization of people to the streets, and political engagement that blurs the lines between the on- and offline public spheres. More importantly for political activism, social media can be powerful tools for people to speak up and resist mainstream cultures, politics or power structures (Liewrouv 2011).

While mainstream media traditionally tend to be biased and reinforce government discourses, alternative media enable individuals and social movements to create counter-hegemonic discourses and representations that defy the mainstream (Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2008). In a recent case where the national mainstream media failed to cover events on the ground, the use of social media in the Gezi Park protests was widely represented as an alternative to the Turkish mass media. Looking beyond such representations, the events

showed the deep faults in freedom of expression in Turkey, as well as the capacity of people to mobilize and exercise their right to information with the use of new technology.

This article draws on empirical data gathered through qualitative interviews with Gezi Park activists combined with critical discourse analysis (CDA) of two alternative media texts produced as critiques to the Turkish government approach in handling the events. I analyze the role that social media usage played in enabling citizen journalism and the mobilization of people in the streets, and their potential and limitations for empowering civic participation given the Turkish social and political context.

The State of the Media in Turkey

Since the ruling party – conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) – came to power in the 2002 election, it has loosened taboos around speaking about minority rights issues (such as for example the Kurdish peace process, lifting the headscarf ban for women, and the recent “shared pain” statement before the Armenia genocide remembrance²). But it has also tightened control over free speech (Corke et al. 2014). The fastened grip on government-critical voices conflicts not only with people’s personal space or reputation, but also with their freedom. For the second consecutive year, in 2013 Turkey jailed the largest number of journalists in the world, followed by Iran and China (CPJ 2013). In February 2014, the Turkish Parliament passed an Internet law that increases digital surveillance and online censorship, including social media sites (Akgül, 2014). The amendment directly facilitated the recent bans against Twitter and Youtube – the sites used to leak dozens of phone conversations and documents spurring corruption allegations against high-level government officials – ahead of local elections in March 2014. The ban on Twitter came just hours after then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan publically declared his plans to “wipe out Twitter” in Turkey (The Telegraph 2014).

Nonetheless, the Internet is an important space for Turkish citizens to engage in public debate. The Turkish Statistical Institute (2013) shows that the amount of Turkish Internet users is increasing: households with Internet access in Turkey rose from 47.2 percent in 2012 to 49.1 percent in 2013, and an average of 73.2 percent of the population uses the Internet for social networking. According to a study by We Are Social (2014), social media penetration as a percentage of the total population has reached nearly 45 percent, and 97 percent of all Internet users owns an account on social media.

The Gezi Park Protests and Resistance Through the Use of Social Media

An estimated three and a half million people took to the streets in protests last summer across 80 of Turkey’s 81 provinces (Yaman 2014; Corke et al. 2014), disclosing the increasingly visible gap between the Turkish government and more liberal sectors of the population. The protests started on 27 May 2013 as a peaceful sit-in against the government’s plans to demolish Gezi Park, one of the few green areas in central Istanbul, and quickly turned into a nationwide, regime-critical movement following extensive use of police force and widespread media censorship. According to a recent report launched by English PEN and PEN International, this “starkly illustrated the shortcomings of Turkish democracy in its lack of pluralism and disregard for fundamental rights and freedoms” (Yaman 2014). The Gezi Park resistance movement, dominated by young middle class professionals (see Gokay & Shain 2013), was widely regarded as a consequence of leftist and secular segments of the Turkish

population becoming fed-up with the government's urban development plans and increasingly authoritarian tendencies. For example, only days before the protests arose, the Turkish Parliament passed a law proposed by the AKP to restrict alcohol sales (Üzüm 2014), which sparked public debate and was regarded to interfere with liberal lifestyles. As the Gezi Park events unfolded, the Turkish mainstream media fell silent. This exposed the close relationship between Turkish television and print media, run by a few large holding companies, and the AKP-government, and the wider issue of these outlets engaging in self-censorship³.

As the Turkish mainstream media outlets failed to cover the protests, Turkish citizens turned to social media for channels to speak up and resist against the government. This use of social media helped in terms of spreading news about the developments on the ground, and has been portrayed as replacing the Turkish traditional forms of news media (see Devitt 2013; Celik 2013; Tucker 2013; SMaPP 2013). According to New York University's Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) report, the Taksim protests are unique in that Twitter was used to spread information about the developments on the ground, with the words *#direngeziparki* and its English version *#occupygezi* mentioned 4 million and 1,9 million times, respectively, during the protests' first days alone. Ninety percent of the tweets came directly from Taksim, Istanbul and other places within Turkey, which represents a change in comparison with other recent uprisings, where the majority of tweets came from abroad: during the Egyptian revolution, only an estimated 30 percent of the people tweeting did so from inside Egypt (SMaPP 2013). According to the analysts of the SMaPP report, this:

“marks a turning point in the role of social and traditional media – one in which channels such as Twitter are, in fact, displacing, rather than merely supplementing, newspapers and television” (Devitt 2013).

Yet, social media do not escape the continued government crackdown on media and worsening situation for freedom of expression in Turkey. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) recently reported that the state of press freedom in the country has worsened following the Gezi Park events, as shown by “[h]eated anti-press rhetoric, the firing of leading journalists, threats to restrict online speech, and a series of physical and legal assaults” (CPJ 2013b). Then-Prime Minister Erdoğan openly said about Twitter: “The best examples of lies can be found there. To me, social media is the worst menace to society” (Letsch 2013). In Freedom House's special report on Turkey, the organization states that the government's continued crackdown on social media results in “an increasingly shrill and divisive media – and public debate – split into ‘Erdoğanist’ loyalists and polemical critics” (Corke et al. 2014, p. 15). In addition, a large number of journalists – 59, according to the Turkish Journalists' Union's reports in July 2013 – had to leave their jobs over their coverage of the Gezi Park protests, some after expressing their support for the demonstrators via social media.

Theoretical Framework

The article draws on theoretical approaches to alternative media as antagonistic and as rhizomatic in relation to mainstream media, and on discussions of communication power, citizen journalism, and mediated mobilization.

The concept of *mediated mobilization* is useful in order to understand how social movements or activists mobilize by using new media and in turn promote participatory democracy and social change. It refers to making use of new media as mobilizing tools for people who take collective action and organize together for social change (Lievrouw 2011) and in this sense entails the intertwined aspects of “message and channel, material and social, means and ends, offline and online” (p. 161). In the case of the Gezi Park protests, these intertwined notions let us view the usage of social media in more complex terms than previous representations of its role as merely filling the gap left by mainstream media.

Alternative Media as Counter-Hegemonic

As forms of participatory media, social media are often viewed in an antagonistic relationship to mainstream media. According to Bailey et al. (2008), mainstream media often construct meaning by presenting and reproducing a certain view of reality, thus legitimatizing mainstream social values. Participatory media, on the other hand, tend to present alternative views, for example by allowing alternative voices to speak up (see Carpentier 2007). In the Gezi Park movement, as much as they challenged mainstream representations of what was going on, alternative media may be seen as channels for activist groups to talk back against power-discourses by “produc[ing] non-conformist and sometimes counter-hegemonic representations” (Bailey et al. 2008, p. 17).

Castells’ (2007) discussion of power and counter-power as inherent in social actors complements Bailey et al.’s approach to alternative media as counter-hegemonic. He argues that people have the capacity to “resist and challenge relations that are institutionalized” through communication (ibid. 2007, p. 239). In his analysis of power, however, he pays less attention to how governmental and media power has consequences for communication than to the power of communication for individuals. In other words, he does not consider how power and structural relations are shaping the conditions for communication. But the potential of social media to produce counter-hegemonic discourses and challenge powerful institutions has to be viewed in relation to their structural context, including those with the power to control online media in a given society. As my analysis will show, the ways in which social media were used in the Gezi Park demonstrations illustrate the complex interplay between online media and the Turkish state, such that the Internet has been both effectively used as an outlet for public debate and increasingly targeted by government control over the media at large.

Alternative Media as Rhizomatic Media

A society-centered approach to alternative media is beneficial in order to scrutinize the complex relationship between social media and structural institutions in Turkey. According to Bailey et al. (2008, p.26), alternative media are rhizomatic: they have a structure that is “non-linear, anarchic and nomadic” like that of tree branches, compared to more hierarchical structures such as those of the traditional commercial mass media. Because of their linkage to the state and the market (ibid. p. 26-27), they are not just a part of the public sphere, but have a “catalytic role in functioning as the crossroads where people from different types of movements and struggles meet and collaborate” (ibid. p. 29).

Because they function differently and more flexibly than mainstream media, alternative media can more independently challenge how traditional (public and commercial) media outlets operate (ibid). This explains the complexity in how social media function in Turkey: as alternative channels that are more independent than mainstream media, but at the same time bound to the local and the global markets through Turkish corporate-owned media companies, media giants like Facebook and Google, and the state's interests in controlling personal accounts and information online. Finally, this view of social media as rhizomatic reveals the vulnerability of new digital movements in view of the state's and the market's power over access to information and online speech. Potential threats to social media's functioning commonly exist inside states where governments take increasing measures to control activities on these channels by means of surveillance, monitoring or co-opting new technology (Shirky 2011). Although alternative media generally are harder to control, seeing them as rhizomatic – that is, as partly existing in, and being influenced by, their structural surrounding and institutions – helps us to analyze external “threats to the existence and functioning of alternative media” (Bailey et al. 2008, p. 29). Such threats may include market and state interference through digital surveillance and monitoring, which are increasing in the Turkish case.

Methodology

My study, which deals with representations of social events, is based on the social constructivist approach to research and applies qualitative research methods: critical discourse analysis (CDA) and qualitative semi-structured interviews. CDA is suitable for studying how certain issues are reported and how the ways in which they are framed shape public responses, which in turn can make it possible to advocate for public policy changes (Gillen & Petersen 2005). Studying discourse reveals linkages between representations of certain issues and responses to these issues in their social and political settings. Specifically, the article utilizes Fairclough's three-dimensional model for doing CDA at the levels of text, discourse and social practice, which looks at any text as “simultaneously representing, setting up identities, and setting up relations” (ibid. 1995, p. 5) and acknowledges that “[t]he relationship between texts and social practice is mediated by discursive practice” (Winther & Phillips 2002, p. 69). Thus it is applicable to analyses of the correlation between citizens and their collective actions, and of the media and wider socio-political context.

The discourse analysis was applied to two texts from two different alternative news organizations: a press release by Istanbul-based Alternative Informatics Association's (*Alternatif Bilişim Derneği* or AIA) (2013) entitled “#Resist Social Media”, and an open letter by the international press freedom advocacy organization CPJs (Committee to Protect Journalists') (2013c) to Turkey's then-Prime Minister Erdoğan to embrace press freedom. Both texts signify the growing concern for the current state of freedom of expression in Turkey, and can be seen as parts in an alternative, counter-hegemonic discourse practice challenging both the Turkish mainstream media and the government's grip on the media.

In combination with CDA, the research allocates space to people's stories as a strategy to “get behind the news” (Gillen and Petersen 2005, p. 151) and interact with the sources in order to better understand how they represent and perceive certain social events. To let people with first-hand knowledge from the Gezi Park events speak their opinions was a useful complementary method to explore whether the discursive representations of social media are

representative of reality as experienced by its protagonists. The interviews were conducted with five Gezi Park activists of different gender and educational backgrounds that represent the dominant group of the resistance movement, i.e. middle-class young professionals (see Gokay & Shain 2013). They followed a face-to-face, semi-structured format and covered four types of questions (see Pickering 2008) related to the activists' *behavior* (e.g. 'Were you active during the Gezi Park protests?' or 'Did you use social media during the events?'), *beliefs* and *attitudes* (e.g. 'Do you think that social media can work as an alternative to Turkish mainstream media?'), and *attributes* (age, education, occupation). The number of interviews was decided based on the limited timeframe and scope of the analysis. The interviews were conducted in

Results

The analysis of the selected texts at the levels of content and discursive practice shows that social media in light of the mainstream media blackout during the protests provide alternative news channels. The texts reaffirm the importance of social media in the absence of Turkish mainstream news coverage. Also, representations of social media of the two texts – with very strong, contradictory statements compared to those of government officials – reaffirm “us/them” polarization between regime-critical, alternative voices and government representatives. At the level of social practice, the texts show how social media are placed in a wider, problematic media environment and are concerned with an ongoing struggle for freedom of expression in Turkey.

From the empirical findings gathered from the interviews, we can see that social media usage on the ground was complex, revealing both the potential and limitations of social media as an alternative to the mainstream media. Social media served as tools for movement mobilization, for empowering citizens to take to the streets and share updates about the developments as citizen journalists, and consequently, for encouraging wider participation in the public sphere. While these three main uses of can be broadly categorized, the interviews also indicate that social media were sources of misinformation that made organizing on the grounds more difficult. They were far from the only tool used by the activists, but rather one of many. Furthermore, as they facilitated forms of citizen journalism that provided very different information about developments on the ground, people started to question whether in the past they had received accurate information from mainstream news channels. In this sense, the activists' stories also shed light on other problematic aspects of self-censorship underlying the close relationship between the state and the media.

Analysis

CDA of the selected texts: Counter-hegemonic representations of social media

The role of social media usage is described in the texts as an alternative news source, considered to fill in the gap left by Turkish press and television channels amid widespread media censorship during the Gezi Park protests. In a critique of the country's press freedom environment, the CPJs open letter to Prime Minister Erdoğan places importance on the role of the Internet and social media in providing an “important outlet for free expression in Turkey” (CPJ 2013c). The press release by AIA explicitly states the role of social media as

indispensable as “communication outlets that filled the gap left wide open by the mainstream media” (AIA 2013). According to the organization,

“[t]hroughout the protests, social media platforms have become the primary news source in this environment where the mainstream media have proven themselves to be the site of disinformation or inertia.” (AIA 2013).

In this sense, the description of social media in opposition to Turkish mainstream media can be viewed as counter-hegemonic representations (discussed in Bailey et al. 2008; Carpentier 2007) and as sources to resist power discourses. AIA argues that citizen reports from the ground were key to bringing the events to the “world’s attention” as well as in “preventing the further deterioration of tensions with the police” (AIA2013). Social media is credited for its “crucial role in organizing *rescue* and treatment of injured people”. According to the organization, its excessive use, in effect, “even prove[d] to *save lives*” (AIA 2013, emphasis added). Moreover, social media allowed citizens to “make their voices heard” and to “demonstrate to the world the injustices they have been subject to” (AIA 2013). From this perspective, the texts produced as critiques of the biased stance of Turkish mainstream media and their failure to cover the Gezi Park events, in a way, reinforce the importance of social media by counter-representations and by taking the side of the protestors.

At the level of discursive practice, representations of social media’s importance during the protests can be viewed as part of a wider discursive practice having to do with how the texts are produced and received at the consumption side. The texts relate to one another in terms of production as they are both authored by alternative media organizations that oppose the close relationship between the media and the state in Turkey. In both cases, authors express their deep concerns for the media environment in Turkey and defy the official statements on social media’s role in society. For example, the AIA press release brings up Turkish officials’ “public[] den[unciation of] these media platforms”, including Prime Minister Erdoğan’s now infamous declaration of social media as a “menace of society” (AIA 2013). Both texts include Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç’s statement about his party’s capacity to cut Internet access, which, according to AIA, is an “*open threat* to put further constraints on the basic freedoms associated with the use of the Internet” (AIA2013, emphasis added).

The underlying tensions between the authors and the Turkish government are imbedded in the texts, expressed by intonation – i.e. the authors’ attitudes and emotions demonstrating their distance from Turkish officials and their statements. In both texts distanciation towards government rhetoric and actions controlling free flows of information is further expressed by the authors’ positioning themselves against the state officials who they criticize. CPJ, for instance, brings up official statements intimidating reporters: “When *top officials* use the term ‘terrorists’ to describe critical journalists *they* send a disturbing message that could cause others to take action” (CPJ 2013c, emphasis added). Distanciation is further expressed in the texts as they permit to speak to the capacity in state officials to set actions in motion. For instance, in their call for the government to embrace press freedom in Turkey, CPJ boldly addresses former Turkish PM Erdoğan. It states, “[i]n mid-june, with tensions running high, *you* publicly accused the international media of biased coverage of the Gezi Park events”, and “[y]et, regrettably, *your* government has attempted on several occasions to control the news flow” (CPJ 2013c, emphasis added).

In this sense, the texts reinforce the “us” versus “them” polarization visible in government statements against social media and the Gezi Park activists. On the one hand, social media – through their capacity to allow counter-hegemonic discourses to be produced and circulated – might contribute to social change in challenging power structures. However, binary representations of social media usage in relation to government representatives’ statements seemly add to further widen the gap in Turkish society between alternative (secular) voices and the (conservative-rooted) government.

Social Media as Part of a Bigger Problem: Limits to Public Debate in Turkey

In the Gezi Park resistance movement, social media were an intrinsic online part of their social struggle. In AIA’s press release, this is directly indicated in the title: the word *resist* calls for fighting back against restrictions and government criticisms of social media. Placed in the context of the tighter government controls, including increased censorship and restrictions to free Internet access, the text concludes that the author would continue to “take all possible legal steps to counter attempts to illegitimately limit and take away the constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens in a democratic society” (AIA 2013). At the textual level analysis, this statement shows the modalities of both truth and permission: the organization claims with certainty that the Gezi Park protests and usage of social media are parts in a larger social struggle; and permits itself to take actions and resist against the current state of the media in Turkey.

Combining the levels of discursive and social practices, the analysis deals with how the Turkish media landscape is described in the texts, the indications of how these representations relate to the wider socio-political context, and how, potentially, social media might contribute to social change. From this perspective, both texts signify that there is an ongoing struggle for freedom of expression in Turkey. As CPJ describes,

“With traditional media under pressure, the Internet, including social media, has become an important outlet for free expression in Turkey. But recent official comments, including threats to restrict the online flow of information, cause concern” (CPJ 2013c).

CPJ expresses its concern about the “extremely difficult” media landscape – with one of several issues being “[t]he official threats to restrict social media, a vibrant space for Turkey’s independent and opposition voices” (CPJ 2013c). Additionally, in criticizing official rhetoric and actions restricting free speech in Turkey, AIA states its concern with regards to the government’s apparent intent to “increas[e] censorship on public information outlets” (AIA 2013). These statements point at how the limitations to social media usage as an alternative to mainstream media and in contributing to social change in Turkey relate to the larger problem of restrictions on free speech in Turkey.

Analysis of the interviews: “Now people are asking if, in the past, we had the right information or not”

This part of the analysis focuses on how social media were used by the activists as tools for mobilization of the masses, citizen journalism and encouraging civic engagement in the public sphere, and how effective these tools were considering the broader media environment in Turkey. Importantly, the activists confirm that social media were used as a significant alternative news channel amid Turkish media outlets’ failure to cover the events:

“Since the media really gave up on us, the most important thing was getting the word out to the world [...]. Social media were important in order to get the actual picture out to the world from the inside.” (Eset Akcilad, filmmaker/activist, personal communication, December 17, 2013).

“It was my main channel because there wasn’t anything on the media or on television channels, so we were getting more information from Twitter and anybody who was on Twitter.” (“Ege”, engineer/activist, personal communication, April 5, 2014)

In their statements the activists relate to their role as citizen journalists, shouldering the responsibility to provide a more trustworthy picture of what was going on to the world. In the event of media censorship, the power of citizen journalism lays in instant reports coming directly from the ground. This relates to the large amounts of credibility that eye-witness reports carry with them, enough to influence people’s opinions (discussed in Castells 2007). The activists’ first-hand accounts of the Gezi Park developments provided an option in the sense that they allowed Turkish citizens from various circles to get a different picture of what was going on than what the television and press media channels conveyed:

“I think it really helped the people who are not from this same, social media aware, circle. So that’s why I think it works. I know it from my mom, because she was really worried at first when I told her I was going to Gezi Park. Then when I told her what was going on there, she said ‘Oh, Okay then, maybe it’s not that bad what you’re doing.’”

“[...] I think right now they have an option. The usage of all social media, not only Facebook and Twitter, but the usage of Internet gives them the option to choose what to believe right now. Without it there wouldn’t be the option.” (“Zeynep”, research assistant/activist, personal communication, March 2, 2014)

“It reminded the other government side that they were no longer able to escape their wrongs. Everybody knows that the images of the police violence are there. [...] Thanks to social media I have endless of examples to show.” (Eset Akcilad, filmmaker/activist, personal communication, December 17, 2013).

“In the media it said that one person was killed, and bla bla... It wasn’t right at all. We saw Gezi and the things that were going on, and we saw the media channels that showed a totally opposite picture of what was going on. So now people are asking if, in the past, we had the right information or not.” (“Ege”, engineer/activist, personal communication, April 5, 2014)

In this sense, social media helped to enable reports that were contrary to Turkish media outlets and provided an alternative view – the option to choose what to believe, as “Zeynep” argues. “Ege’s” statement further shows that these reports opened the eyes of people to the mainstream media bias. The power of social media to create alternative news that is available through first-hand accounts thus adds to a more vibrant information society and to a diversity of viewpoints. Allowing for alternative voices to be heard through participation in the online public sphere(s), in turn, arguably lays the basis for civic participation and demonstrates the inseparable relationship between online and offline participation.

Movement Mobilization: “When You Shut Up On Social Media, It’s Like It Never Happened”

The interviews indicate an evident online component to the activists’ organization and mobilization in the real, offline world and reveal a process of mediatization, i.e., the basic

impact that media have on social and cultural life in transforming actions through media (Couldry & Hepp 2013; Couldry 2008). The Gezi Park activists used social media to organize on the ground, thus blurring lines between online and offline interaction and social engagement:

“For us social media was very useful in the sense that we would get our needs out to the community, just by posting a list of stuff we need” (Eset Akcilad, filmmaker/activist, personal communication, December 17, 2013).

Although social media were used effectively as tools for organization throughout the protests, the practice is problematized by the activists’ own stories. These emphasized the importance of other tools, including mobile phone applications, text messaging, walkie-talkies and the traditional word of mouth to facilitate on-the-ground activism. Such accounts arguably problematize the range of representations produced on social media as replacing mainstream news channels. According to Istanbul-based filmmaker and activist Eset Akcilad, social media, although helpful in some aspects, also worked as “a big megaphone” that took attention away from the activism cause:

“When your activism is being defined by how loud you are on social media, the death of your activism is also as easy, because when you shut up on social media it’s like it never happened. But it did happen. It did carry on.” (Eset Akcilad, filmmaker/activist, personal communication, December 17, 2013).

The Media, the State and the (Global) Market: “They Don’t Care About Our Freedoms”

“Facebook and Twitter are just companies, and of course they don’t care about our freedoms, or want to fight for our freedom of information. They don’t have any interest in freedom of information. They want their websites to be open in Turkey and have lots of users. [...] They just get it like that.” (Serhat Koc, IT and IP law specialized attorney at law and spokesman of Pirate Party Turkey/activist, personal communication, March 3, 2014)

The activists indicate that the interests of the (global) market and the Turkish state affect how social media function. As the quote above shows, freedom of expression in Turkey is complicated by large media companies’ control over and interest in social media usage. Because social media operate through companies like Facebook and Twitter, they are ultimately restricted. Activists’ stories also provide insight into the potentially dangerous results from widespread media censorship and top-down threatening rhetoric along with actions that restrict social media, forcing people to self-censorship. As explained by “Zeynep”,

“There was a big campaign against Twitter... Or not campaign but more like threatening, because there was so many news on the newspapers and televisions and on the radio saying that ‘this many people were arrested yesterday because of their tweets’, or ‘yesterday three people were arrested because of Facebook’.”

“After the Gezi protests people really started to depend on Twitter as an alternative media. That’s when it started and you couldn’t any longer use Twitter for this because you don’t know how to use it and if you just cross the line then you’ll get arrested. It started like that and then that line, which officials actually indicated, was getting lower and lower, but it was a psychology... It was not real. And from a legal point of view, it was of course not legal, but the

government somehow managed to make people scared. And it somehow turned into self-censorship". ("Zeynep", research assistant/activist, personal communication, March 2, 2014)

Her statement shows how the state's attempts to regulate freedom of expression restrict public democratic debate in Turkey, for which online media and communication through community and social networking sites are important outlets. While "Zeynep" states that the threat was not real, she indicates the very real implications such discourse practice can have on critical voices. Along with the string of actual arrests and firings of prominent journalists following the Gezi Park events (see Corke et al. 2014; Yaman 2014), the threatening rhetoric arguably worked to discourage rather than encourage civic participation and political debate.

Finally, the activists provide insight into what may be the government's intentions to silence regime-critical voices by cracking down on users of social media although it also co-opts new technology, including social media sites. Serhat argues that even though the Prime Minister and his party declare social media the menace to society, "they use it in maybe the best way". While threats against citizens' use of social media to resist the state are commonplace, the government effectively turns to these channels to promote their party's best interests. As "Zeynep" states,

"As soon as everybody realized what Twitter is and can make, then somehow Twitter became dirty. [...] The government realized that there is Twitter and if we – as the Gezi Park protesters – can affect people with Twitter, than they can affect people with Twitter as well" ("Zeynep", research assistant/activist, personal communication, March 2, 2014)

In one high-level case, AKP politician and Ankara mayor Melih Gökçek led a Twitter campaign against BBC journalist Selin Girit, with the hash tag *"#İNGİLTEREADINAAJANLIKYAPMASELİNGİRİT"*, or "Don't be a spy in the name of England Selin Girit" (Corke et al. p. 9). The campaign drew attention in international media to the Turkish authorities' intimidation of journalists and demonstrated how social media were used for targeting regime-critics. At the same time, short after the Gezi Park protests, it was reported that AKP hired some 6000 staff specifically to "boost the party's social media presence" (Hürriyet Daily News 2013).

Conclusion

The internet and social media in particular constitute important communicative spaces for public debate in Turkey, providing outlets for resistance against the Turkish mainstream media and the government's tightening the grip of freedom of expression. The Gezi Park events and related uses of social media to keep updated, share information, take to the streets and engage in the public sphere constitute an example of civic engagement happening simultaneously online and offline. At the same time, these events illustrate how socio-political conditions such as state and market interests to increasingly control the online public sphere(s) also affect our capacities to act as civic participants through engagement in communicative spaces online.

The interviews in particular provided insights on social media's role for the activists as: tools for movement mobilizing through collective actions and solidarity (social); facilitating citizen journalism in the absence of Turkish mainstream news coverage (informational); and providing communicative spaces that may encourage political participation through civic

interaction (cultural). Findings point to the potential of social media to contribute to a more vibrant public sphere in Turkish society. However, in combination with the discourse analysis of the AIA and the CPJ texts, the study also reveals the more complex picture underlying social media's potential in relation to mainstream media and social relations of power. Both official statements denouncing social media, as well as alternative discourses stating their importance in filling the gap left by Turkish mainstream media, reaffirm the polarization of "us" against "them" and the divides between different (secular/conservative) fragments of society.

Analyzing the alternative media texts at the textual, discursive and social levels helped to reveal social media as part of a bigger problem related to the control over print and online media and the current worrying state of freedom of expression in Turkey. Unexpectedly, the interviews also provided examples of how the social and political conditions inhibit free civic debate, for example by forcing young critical minds to turn to self-censorship. Adding to the great deal of existing studies on the role of social media in public uprisings, this paper presents a recent case and an approach that may be reapplied and expanded on for future research on public unrest triggered by sentiments of social exclusion. Along with previous research (see Shirky 2011; Christensen 2011; Jurgensen 2012), it recognizes that social media's place in promoting social change should not be exaggerated. Arguably, the reasons for why social media in Turkey cannot effectively provide an alternative to the mainstream media bias correspond with social and political conditions limiting free speech. Rather than painting the full picture of the state of the media in the country, counter-hegemonic representations of social media as an alternative to mainstream media work to reinforce social power relations and widen the gap between regime-critical and pro-government groups in Turkey.

The Gezi Park protests did not happen in a vacuum but arose in the process of different social and political groups becoming fed-up over time with the government's urban development projects and increasingly authoritarian interference with public space. The event illustrated only one of many recent examples of the growing political tensions and deepening divisions between different social and political groups in the Turkish society. While social media have been the main outlets for critical voices to be heard, these sites are countered by tendencies to limit Internet access, including the amendment to the Internet Law and the latest bans on Twitter and Youtube. Along with the Turkish leader's claim of social media being "the worst menace to society", such tendencies reveal the alarming consequences of the restraint that they put – consciously or subconsciously – on open, democratic debate.

*** Some of the interviewees' names have been changed in this article in order to conceal their real identities. Fake names are indicated with quotation marks.*

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² Then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a historical statement on the 99th anniversary of the 1915 mass killings of Armenians during the Ottoman Empire, stressing the "shared pain" endured during these events and expressing condolences on behalf of the Turkish state.

³ In the wake of the Gezi Park protests, journalists who reported the events or supported the protestors were arrested, fired and threatened through, for instance, public condemnation by politicians. Media outlets changed their editorial line following political pressure, according to reports by CPJ.