

Youth and Party Politics in Digital Era: Social Media Practices of Young Members of Political Parties in Turkey¹

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Abstract

New media offer young people the opportunity to follow political news independently from the mainstream media and their personal networks, while at the same time they empower young people's political participation, and produce new forms of political participation based on digital, multimedia, flexible and visual features. The studies on political participation of young people on digital platforms are mainly focused either on apolitical youth or on young people, who are active in social movements. The uses of new media by youth branches of traditional institutions such as political parties have been understudied. Considering the power of traditional politics and political parties in Turkey, the place and the role of young members of political parties merit a particular attention. This study examines the role of social media within the youth branches of three political parties (AKP, CHP and HDP) in Turkey. Based on the semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups, this study reveals the opportunities and limits of social media for young members of the political parties. Our findings show that the opportunities of social media are limited for youth organisations due to several factors. Although social

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media empower and make more visible young members; and facilitate communication and organisation of the party youth; the factors such as state surveillance, censorship and self-censorship and the prevailing effects of traditional politics are among these limits.

Keywords: political parties, youth, social media, digital politics.

Dijital Çağda Gençlik ve Parti Politikaları: Türkiye'deki Siyasi Partilerin Genç Üyelerinin Sosyal Medya Kullanımı

Özet

Yeni medya gençlere siyasi haberleri ana akım medyadan ve kişisel ağlarından bağımsız olarak izleme fırsatını sunarken aynı zamanda gençlerin siyasi katılımını güçlendirmekte ve dijital, multimedya, esnek ve görsel özelliklere dayalı yeni siyasi katılım biçimleri üretmektedir. Gençlerin dijital platformlara siyasi olarak katılmaları üzerine yapılan çalışmalar, temel olarak ya apolitik gençlere ya da toplumsal hareketlerde aktif olan gençlere odaklanmaktadır. Siyasi partiler gibi geleneksel kurumların gençlik kolları tarafından yeni medyanın kullanımları daha az incelenmiştir. Türkiye'de geleneksel siyasetin ve siyasi partilerin gücü göz önüne alındığında, siyasi partilerin genç üyelerinin yeri ve rolü özel bir ilgiyi hak etmektedir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki üç siyasi partinin (AKP, CHP, HDP) gençlik kollarında sosyal medya kullanımının rolünü incelemektedir. Yarı-yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmelere ve odak gruplara dayanan bu çalışma, siyasi partilerin genç üyeleri için sosyal medyanın fırsatlarını ve sınırlarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bulgularımız sosyal medya olanaklarının gençlik örgütleri için birkaç faktörden dolayı sınırlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Bir yandan sosyal medya genç üyeleri güçlendirip daha görünür kılmakta, parti gençliğinin iletişimini ve örgütlenmesini kolaylaştırmaktadır. Öte yandan devlet gözetimi, sansür ve oto-sansür, geleneksel siyasetin süren etkileri gibi faktörler sosyal medya kullanımının sınırlarını oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: siyasi partiler, gençlik, sosyal medya, dijital politika.

Introduction

Young people, who keep distance from the hierarchical structures within the political parties or social movements and from old style politics, discover new digital forms of political participation as producers and consumers of political messages on social media (Dalhgren, 2011, p.15). Young generations, also called digital natives, have the opportunity to express themselves and to participate autonomously on the Web 2.0, freed from predominant social groups and hierarchies in their offline lives (Davies, Coleman & Livingstone, 2014). Social media offer young people many opportunities such as following political news independently from the mainstream media and their personal circles, strengthening their participation in politics and creating different forms of political participation based on digital, multimedia, flexible and visual features.

The Western literature on the political participation of young people through

digital media generally focuses on the role of new media in the participation of apolitical youth or young people who are active in social movements. The role of social media in political parties' youth branches has been understudied. This study aims to fill this gap. In Turkey, when considering the predominance of traditional politics and political parties, the study of young people involved in political parties merits a particular attention. This study examines the effects of social media on the young people's ways of doing politics within political parties. The main research questions are as follows: For what purposes do political parties' young members use social media? What are the factors that influence their use? How does their use of social media influence traditional politics? Our main argument is that the young people involved in institutional-traditional politics use social media more effectively than older generations among the political parties that tend to exclude young people; and they are strengthened as political actors through social media. The sample of the study is comprised of the members of the youth branches of three political parties (Ak Parti, CHP and HDP) in Turkey. The research methodology consists of in-depth interviews and focus groups with young members.

Literature review

Young people, political participation and the Internet

A considerable part of the research on young people's digital political participation claims that the Internet strengthens the participation of young people in politics as new forms of political participation (digital, multimedia, flexible and visual) have emerged. The Internet, especially social media, offers more autonomous socialization, expression and participation tools than traditional social groups and hierarchies in which young people are involved (Davies, Coleman & Livingstone, 2014). Most of the young people participate in political life through digital media, to be called "participatory politics". Unlike traditional politics, participatory politics are based on an interactive, peer-based policy, and are not guided by traditional institutions such as political parties or newspaper editors (Kahne and Middaugh, 2012, p. 52).

Young people present their views on politics on the Internet, create their own political content, and contribute to participatory politics by creating alternative narratives to traditional politics and mainstream media. Vromen says that the Internet has three basic political uses, and it is an integrated tool for young people's daily life practices and facilitates their political participation (2008, p. 80). Lee, Shah and McLeod suggest that the consumption of news in online environments triggers young people's civic and political participation by stimulating the possibilities of discussion and expression, and it

has a stronger influence than traditional media, peer groups, schools and families have (2012, p. 687). Another study show that social media have an equalizing role in the political participation of young citizens, because while the interest in politics increases with age, the fact that young people are social media users increases their interest and participation in politics (Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck and Ljungberg, 2013, p. 31-32).

According to Bennett, Wells and Freelon, we need to rethink citizenship and political participation considering online generation. Dutiful citizenship of the past has been replaced by the actualizing citizenship of today. Dutiful citizenship is based on one-way consumption of information about citizenship (news or political advertisements), shaped around official public institutions and campaigns, rooted in terms of duty and responsibility, defined by membership to certain social groups. In this citizenship paradigm, the production of individuals' content is often directed towards specific institutional goals (elected officials, letters to newspapers, etc.). Actualizing citizenship includes many creative inputs ranging from government to consumer policies and global activism. It is based on self-actualization through social expression, and personal interests are channelled through loosely tied networks. From a communicative point of view, border between content consumption and production are blurred, and the production of individual content and its sharing on networks connects personal identity to political participation (2011, p.840).

Also, Harris, Wyn and Younes show that young people's participation styles differ, even though they lost their faith in political structures that cannot respond to their interests and needs, they still prove to be interested in social and political issues. The participatory practices of young people are not directed towards huge anti-state activism or cultural policies; on the contrary, it takes the form of informal, individualized and everyday activities (2010, p. 9). Young people are developing a 'new biography of citizenship', characterized by 'dynamic identities, open, weak-tie relationships and more fluid, short-lived commitments in informal permeable institutions and associations' (Henk Vinken, 2005, p.155, cit. Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010, p.13).

The studies investigating the effects of online political activities and news consumption on offline political participation of young people offer different results. Hargittai and Shaw (2013), who measure the impact of social capital and internet practices of young people on their online political information gathering and participation processes, on their voting and other offline political behaviours, prove that young people are more engaged in social capital building and political engagement through the Internet,

however their forms of participation facilitate “clicktivism” (p. 130). While Yamamoto, Kuhin and Dalisay prove that young people using blogs, social networks, forums and mobile apps to gain political knowledge have more online political expression and offline political participation (2015, p. 892); Ekström and Sveningsson show that online media has changed the way that citizens are involved in politics and that young people have various opportunities for political participation ranging from traditional political institutions to political communities on Facebook. However, the participation of young people in both traditional political institutions and new political communities is variable, and the motivation of young people to participate in politics plays an important role (2017, p.8). Ünal examines the factors that encourage and discourage the political use of online social networks by Turkish university students. On the one hand, an important part of the youth consider online social networks as democratic platforms on which different ideas are represented, they are informed about social and political issues, exposed to political information (information flow, diversity of information and raising awareness), they self-actualise, they share and discuss social and political issues, express their ideas and gain an awareness on citizenship (2017, s. 2519-2524). On the other hand, young people say that stigmatization, surveillance, loss of social capital, fear of exclusion, disinformation, slacktivism, and heterogeneity in social networks constitute the obstacles for democratization and political participation (2017, pp. 2525-2533).

Social media and political parties

The instantaneous, reactive, temporary and digital communication activities of social media users have led political parties to review their communication repertoire and develop strategies for new media. Previously, political elites were unable to control political news flow and social interactions with the expansion of Web 2.0 platforms, but they have attempted to control social media in recent years (Raynauld & Turcotte, 2013, p.6). Social media has led to the personalization of politics; especially small and disadvantaged political parties outside the mass parties with less visibility have also become able to make their voices heard.

Political parties often see social media as a new means of political marketing. According to Bayraktutan et al. (2013, p. 20), the political parties' reasons for starting to use the Web 2.0 are introducing themselves and their leaders, informing the voters about the party activities through a regular flow of information, collecting voters' views on certain issues, collecting financial support, and receiving offline support for the activities of the political party and its leader.

Social media plays a positive role for politicians and political parties to reach masses, especially young people, changing the distance and speed of politician-citizen communication, at the same time becoming a conflict area of different and opposing views. In the study of Parmalee and Bichard, the reasons for political leaders in the USA to use Twitter are to reach wider audiences, to pass traditional media by communicating voters directly, to present their messages through alternative channels, to take their users into action, and to disseminate their ideas rapidly (2012, p. 11-13). Similarly, Jacobs and Spierings say that social media offers four opportunities for political parties: 1- Advertising opportunity: sending unfiltered messages with the potential to reach a wide audience, 2- Opportunity to communicate with people: creating a sense of social presence by interacting with followers, 3- Target group opportunity: reaching geographically dispersed niche groups, and 4- Discussion opportunity: communicating and discussing directly with journalists (2016, p. 25).

Investigating the online political involvement of three different social media users (members of political parties, interest groups and non-members) in Sweden, Gustafsson argues that social networks are not alone enough to involve people who are not active in politics (2012, p. 1111). For political party members, Facebook stands out as a means of articulating communication strategies. Political party members use Facebook to get information about their own parties and to discuss with others from other parties, especially seeing it as an important tool in internal party communication and organization whereby politics is accelerated, the internal party hierarchy is being solved and they state the cooperation of the local branches of the party is facilitated (2012, p. 1116-1117). In summary, political parties and politicians use social media with different functions: political propaganda, maintaining party communication, organizing, campaigning, recruiting new members, alternative media, agenda setting, political debate, public opinion polling, opposition, fundraising etc.

However, it should be added that the power struggle between political parties is also reflected in cyberspace. Jacobs and Spierings developed the motivation/ resource-based dissemination model as an alternative to equalizing and normalizing theses, investigating the effects of social media on institutional politics through the Dutch case. Those who advocate the equalizing thesis argue that the disadvantaged groups in the social media are strengthened, more visible, equalized with other mass parties, while those who advocate the normalizing thesis reflect the inequalities of existing powers in social networks (2016, p.7). Jacobs and Spierings update the equalization and

normalizing these of social media for political parties, adding the process of technological adoption. According to them, in the early adoption phase of new technology, social media plays an equalizing role for small and non-mainstream political parties by enabling them to make their voices heard cheaply, but the mainstream and large political parties take their place in social networks, especially during the election periods. In the recent period, when the spread of technology has slowed down, more traditional small political parties have begun to use social media (pp. 30-34). In addition, the authors argue that social media changes the balance of power within the parties. In particular, because social media allows individual use, politicians may differ from the discourse of their parties. Furthermore, politicians / groups with less visibility within the party may be more visible here (p. 114).

In Turkish literature, the majority of the corpus of research on online political communication is dedicated to the use of social media by political leaders or political parties during general or local elections period (Alemdar and Köker, 2011; Bayraktutan et al., 2014, Doğu et al.; 2014; Fidan and Özer, 2014; Çalışır, 2015; Keskin and Sönmez, 2015; Evren, 2015 Akyol, 2015; Attouf and Özdemir, 2016; Sarıtaş, 2016; Çağlar and Köklü, 2017). These studies focus on how political parties mobilize the Internet and / or social media in public communication, use them as strategic tools, and what the outputs of political messages on social media are. Another trend in these studies focuses on citizens. In these user-oriented studies, the political participation of citizens through social networks, their relationships with politicians, their political news consumption and the influence of new media on voting behaviours are investigated. (Çıldan et al., 2012, Bostancı, 2014, Ertürk, 2014; Balcı and Sarıtaş, 2015).

The number of studies on the use of new media by political parties and its members are very limited. Yurdigül (2013) interviewed 30 female members of the Ak Parti and the CHP in Erzurum, and found that 60% of the participants engaged in politics through social media and 40% shared political pictures or videos on social media. Based on a survey conducted on 410 media users Bostancı (2014) found that significant differences have been observed in the use of social media between party members and non-party members. 11% of the respondents were political party members, 88.9% of them liked the pages related to politics, while 54.2% of non-political party members stated that they liked these pages (p.95). The majority of the social media users who are members of the party have political shares (93.3%). Even if they are not political party members, 63.3% of the users state that they share political content on social media. 40% of the party

members and 17.3% of the non-party participants state that they had bilateral dialogue with a political actor on social media (p. 95). Yıldırım and Çobaner show that the women's branches of political parties primarily use social media to inform their followers on their party leader, party and the activities of the party (2018, p. 393).

Hypothesis and research questions

Social media has not only provided the opportunity to engage in politics other than corporate politics, but also influenced the politics of political parties. The main hypothesis of this study is that young people are empowered through the use of social media in party politics and strengthen their position in their parties. Obviously, this does not mean that traditional methods are abandoned, nor social media do not reproduce traditional party discourses. However, the young people involved in institutional-traditional politics use social media more effectively than older generations among the political parties that tend to exclude young people; and they are strengthened as political actors through social media. The main research questions are as follows: For what purposes do political parties' young members use social media? What are the factors that influence their use? How does their use of social media influence traditional politics? What are the opportunities and limits of social media for the youth branches of political parties?

Methodology

The research population includes the members of youth branches of political parties in Turkey. The sample was selected from the members of the youth branches of the three political parties represented in the Turkish Grand National Assembly: the Justice and Development Party's (Ak Parti) Youth Branches, the People's Democratic Party's (HDP) Youth Assembly, the Republican People's Party's (CHP) Youth Branches. Considering the time and budget constraints of the study, the sample was only limited to the members living in Istanbul. The field study was conducted between June-November 2018 in the boroughs' of Istanbul (Beşiktaş, Üsküdar, Kadıköy, Ataşehir, Kartal, Fatih).

Firstly, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 young people who manage the social media accounts of their youth branches in Istanbul and two young people who used to manage social media accounts of the youth branches in the past to understand the social media strategies of the youth branches. The in-depth interviews include questions about the adherence of the interviewee to the youth branches, the purposes and motivations of their social media use, their target audience, their social media agenda, intra-party communication, their fight against cyber attacks, and their social media strategies against rival parties.

Secondly, two focus groups of six participants each were organized with the attendance of Ak Parti and CHP Youth Branches' members. The members of Ülkü Ocakları, the Grey Wolves (Youth Branch of the Nationalist Movement Party) that we contacted for the research did not participate in the study, stating that they could not get permission from their party administration. We could hold the in-depth interviews with HDP's members; however they did not want to participate in the focus group due to security concerns. In the focus groups, the participants were asked questions about how they decided to become the youth branches' members, their use of social media, their perception of digital politics, the impact of social media on participatory politics, their news consumption in social media, self-censorship, and the generational gap in social media. For privacy and confidentiality concerns, the participants are given pseudonyms.

Results

Young people's perception of digital politics

When the young members of the political parties are asked about the difference between online politics and offline politics, even though they express the various advantages of social media in politics, they believe that traditional politics, street politics and face-to-face relationships are still effective, and that digital politics should be complemented by traditional politics. Kenan (CHP) states that social media are not a "magic wand," and social media and street campaign have to complement each other. Berfin (HDP) suggests that they do not prioritize politics in digital space, that they see this field as a propaganda tool, and that they use social media to reach a wider audience. Mehmet and Selim (AK Parti) also emphasize the "sincerity" of street politics, and they believe that social media cannot replace it: "You can contact people in the streets more sincerely. How can an emoji replace this?" Social media is not seen as an effective tool for young people in terms of political debates. While Mehmet (Ak Parti) says that political debates in the digital environment are often offensive and based on insulting, Fidan (Ak Parti) also points out the difficulty of breaking the prejudice of people in social networks.

Young members list the advantages of social media as follows: transferring political messages to wider audiences at less cost and easily, reaching young people, making politicians more accessible, making messages permanent, allowing users to express their ideas freely, and being eco-friendly. The disadvantages include state surveillance and easier profiling of dissidents by the government, digital divide, lack of change in political ideas due to people often following accounts close to their own views (echo chambers), disembedding of politics and troll culture.

Still, few interviewees think that digital politics will replace traditional politics in the near future. Uğur (Ak Parti) claims that social media are more effective than offline politics, and the future is digital, and Çiğdem (CHP) believes that street movements are out-dated: “If I want to spread my word somewhere, it’s definitely on Youtube.”

Visibility of young people on social media

Social media primarily serve as a “showcase” where youth branches display their activities and their political messages for masses and for the party administration. Youth branches consider social media as a complement of their political communication strategies. Images and messages they share on social media are seen as a proof of the work of the young members of the party. For them, visibility on social media is regarded as the “sine qua non” of today's politics. “If you don't share what you do on social media, you haven't done it. Do an excellent job, do not share on social media, you will fall to this position” (Fatih, Ak Parti). Social media make young people of the political parties and their activities visible. Young people, who cannot make their voices heard in traditional politics, are using online social networks as an alternative means of political participation. The interviewees state that the old generation politicians became more aware of social media after the Gezi movements, and that youngsters have become empowered through social media, also their creativity and humour affect politics. Çiğdem (CHP) explains this empowerment of young people within the party with the following example:

The current Central Executive Board member and Vice President Gökçe Gökçen is the youngest member. Her success is due to social media... You can go to the headquarters, and say that young people come forward, but that doesn't always have an effect because traditional understanding of politics still prevails. But when you express this idea on social media, then you can get the support of the society. This has a serious impact both outside and within the political party.

The role of social media in reaching young audience

Political parties see social media as an effective communication channel for reaching young people. The fact that social media users are mostly young people is advantageous in terms of reaching out to young people more easily for political parties and attracting them to the party. The interviewees say they have made contact with young people who hesitate to participate in active politics such as being a member of political

parties or taking in street protests, through social media. Kerim (CHP), who finds new generation as asocial, says that youngsters communicate them via social media. Also, Ali (Ak Parti) says that they meet young people both face-to-face and in digital games: “Some of the young people are currently smoking shisha, some are in Playstation cafes. We're going around. We also form teams in CSGO and LOL games. We broadcast live on Twitch. Everybody comes to team up and compete.” The members of the youth branches emphasize the importance of adapting the language of young people and creating a specific discourse for them. They say that they adapt party executives' messages to young audience, using pop culture, activism, music and video. Çiğdem (CHP) exemplifies this: “Animal rights, games, makeup, music bands etc. As long as we share such posts, we can organize young people. They like them and come to our party, saying there's someone like me.”

However, young people think that the official language of traditional politics cannot be easily broken in social networks. The AK Party youth state that they have to maintain the corporate language in their youth accounts with the directive of the party administration. Uğur (Ak Parti) says that it is necessary to use a softer, more communicative language in order to capture young people, and to add some humour to their work. Fidan (Ak Parti), who says that official language leads to limitations in relations, says that the humorous language of the youth should be used, but as a party they cannot reach the point they want.

On the other hand, the interviewees disagree on the role of social media in recruiting new members to the youth branches. While some believe that face-to-face communication in boroughs are more effective than social media for recruiting new members, others think that social media, especially Instagram, facilitate for young people to have the first contact with the political party.

Social media as mobilisation tools

With digitalization of politics, young people find the opportunity to be organized faster. Social media are used to attract young people to the parties' events, and to mobilize them. Murat (HDP) finds online mobilisation effective: “People are organized on social media even for a smallest event. Due to reactions from people on social media, things are beginning to be done. For instance, in a femicide case, people are sharing their reactions on social media. These days, social media are better in terms of mobilisation.”

Party youth describe social networks as a new area for political struggle. Reacting to current events, organizing offline actions in social networks, responding to rival parties in online environments, and agenda setting with hashtags present new forms of digital struggle. As a form of online action, all the parties commonly use hashtag campaigns in order to raise awareness and attract attention on certain issues on Twitter. In terms of agenda setting on Twitter, the AK Party and the CHP Youth Branches state that they are mobilized from the top to the bottom, and the coordination is very important. However, Eylem (HDP) says that they are not coordinated enough, because they face censorship and their social media profiles are always under attack. The interviewees agree that social media strengthen mobilisation, but this potential is threatened by censorship, and that the parties do not compete on a level playing.

Generation gap

We also asked the young people if there were differences in the use of social media between middle-aged or older politicians and the younger generation. The interviewees say that young people are more dominant in social media, and that the older generation politicians have been learning the use of social media from young people. Göksel (CHP) finds the young generation more advantageous in using social media, and Ali (Ak Parti) emphasizes that they belong to the digital born generation whereas older people are interested in technology after a certain age: “A 40-year-old uncle can not shoot a V-log!” Çiğdem (CHP) indicates that young members’ creative and humoristic messages have positive impacts on the older generation’s look on young people within the party. However, the interviewees also add that sometimes there is a conflict of generations in their party in the ways of doing politics.

There is a conflict of generations, especially between the members of the generation who saw the coup d’état period and the younger generation. We say “Let's do it on social media,” but they say that social media are not suitable, let’s take to the streets. They are willing to continue in a more traditional ways, but we care about youth and we say that is not possible in today's conditions. (Murat, HDP)

This data shows us that the perception of the purpose of use and social media differ across the generations. In other words, there are differences not only in the tendency to engage in digital or traditional politics, but also in the way they use digital politics.

Social media strategies of young members

Youth branches' members implement similar strategies in social media to connect different groups (especially age groups). They also adopt different methods in content creation. While managing their accounts, they develop different strategies that can be categorized in three groups: hierarchical, semi-autonomous and autonomous management of social and media accounts.

When the social media accounts of the youth branches of the four political parties in all districts of Istanbul are analysed, it is seen that the two platforms most actively used by the party youth are Twitter and Facebook. In July 2018, there are 39 active official Twitter accounts belonging to the Ak Parti Youth Branches, 36 to the CHP Youth Branches and 33 to the Ülkü Ocakları. Each party's youth branches have 38 active Facebook pages except HDP. The HDP Youth Councils have only 6 official accounts on Twitter, and 11 official accounts on Facebook. HDP Beşiktaş and Üsküdar Youth Councils created their profiles on Twitter in August 2018.

According to the HDP Youth Assemblies' representatives, their limited existence on social media is due to several reasons: the closure of their profiles by Twitter and Facebook due to users'/trolls' complaints, the creation of fake accounts and withdrawal of the party from social media to prevent these fake accounts speak on their behalf, the difficulty of finding volunteers to manage the social media profiles in each district of Istanbul, and the assumption that the party's target audience is not social media users. There are also some inactive social media profiles which had been created by the youth branches and have not been updated anymore.

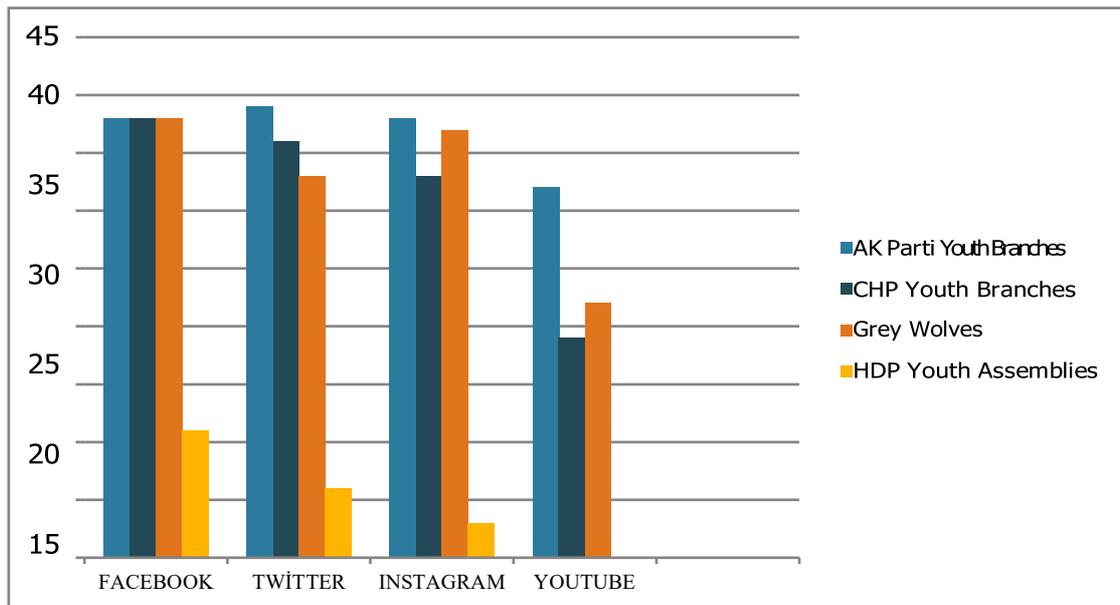


Figure 1: The number of the official social media profiles of the political parties' youth branches in Istanbul and its districts, July 2018.

Most of the interviewees say that the main advantages of Twitter are instantaneity, easier access, information and news sharing and that Twitter is the most suitable social media platform for raising awareness on politics and social issues. For HDP, especially since 2015, Twitter distinguishes itself with its alternative media function. Berfin (HDP) says:

We try to use Twitter as much as possible. When we need to speak, we do this from Twitter. Twitter became an alternative for us especially after almost all of our television channels were shut down after July. However, we can speak periodically on the agenda on Twitter.

Young people, who find Facebook “older,” “more closed” and “more informal” than other social media platforms, invoke that this platform works to spread in-party activities and also strengthen intra-party communication, where the older generation of the party can communicate more with the youth. They find Facebook advantageous, “because it favours long debates and comments.” Çiğdem (CHP) remarks that Facebook is a platform on which party members show off and communicate with each other. Emir (CHP), who finds Facebook more informal and “friendly” than Twitter, says that they can discuss political issues with friends on Facebook.

The fact that Instagram users are mainly young people makes this area very attractive for youth branches. Stating that young people are more attracted by visual features, Sinan (CHP) says that they give priority to Instagram in their districts. The fact that Instagram is based on images, there are no limits like 240 characters like on Twitter, the videos there are shorter than on Youtube, it has rich content are among the advantages. The members of youth branches state that they share their events' pictures or videos, they conduct surveys, and they interact with young people more quickly on Instagram.

Surprisingly, the youth branches are not active enough on Youtube. Although there are 73 Youtube profiles belonging to the youth branches in Istanbul, the number of active accounts is very low. The interviewees gave many reasons why the youth's popular social network cannot be used effectively. They underline that making videos is a “difficult labour,” and it requires a specific budget, technical skills and equipment, as well as they need to form a video production team for the sustainability, and it can not really work with voluntary work.

When we ask young people what kind of differences are there in the use of social media by districts, they say that the presence of members as social media experts strengthens the digital performance of their district organization. The effective use of social media contributes to the visibility of youth branches in districts where youth branches are not organized enough.

As for in-party communication, Whatsapp stands out as the primary communication channel for all parties. The party organization scheme is recreated on their Whatsapp groups: Whatsapp groups, which bring together different units, presidents or officers at provincial, district and neighborhood levels and/or bring together the coordination of youth branches to take action quicker. Explaining that SMS communication is expensive and email is “too official,” the young members state that they also use Whatsapp as a decision-making tool in case of emergency.

Problems of budget and human resources

The difference between the parties in terms of the budget and human resources allocated by the youth branches to communication activities and social media is huge. With the advantage of being the ruling party, young people from the AK Parti can access financial resources more easily in social media communication; they work with experts and get professional help when necessary. Although the AK Party Youth Branch does not have any special budget for social media, they receive budget support from the party headquarters. Also, the Ak Parti Youth Branch has a specialized Promotion & Media Unit, and social media strategies are implemented in coordination from the top to the bottom, from the Istanbul Centre to districts and neighbourhoods. The Ak Parti Youth Branches are working with larger teams and conducting a more systematic work in both Istanbul and its districts. The social media teams include young volunteers for videos, photos and other visuals. Social media influencers and celebrities, and young Youtubers are often invited to their events.

In the CHP Youth Branch, social media teams are usually composed of 3-4 volunteer members who are experienced in social media. Stating that they can get a limited budget from the party whenever they have a special event or campaign, Kenan (CHP) says that they cannot use the sponsored content sufficiently due to the budgetary problems. He adds that despite the lack of budget, amateurship on social media is not a disadvantage for them.

The social media accounts of the HDP Youth Assemblies are not run by a team, but by one or two young volunteers in every district. Murat (HDP) indicates that although they do not have a budget, they do not see this as a problem and that broadcasting on social media does not require professionalism and a budget: “For example, when I join the Saturday Mothers, I turn on my phone’s camera directly and record it from there. In the evening I edit everything and install it from my phone. No professional machine required. I don't have any budget, but I'm make activism using my phone.”

Political identity management on social media

It is necessary to evaluate separately the official social media accounts of the youth branches and the individual profiles of the members in terms of content management. While the official accounts are mainly used as a propaganda tool, criticism can also take place in their individual accounts. The interviewees say that they express themselves more freely in their individual accounts than in official accounts.

The social media policy of the youth branches and the content management of their official accounts are influenced by the party culture and the way the party is organized. In-party rules such as party constitution, disciplinary regulations, party ethics etc. are also taken into account in content management. While there is a vertical and coordinated communication strategy within the AK Party Youth Branches, the CHP Youth Branches have semi-autonomous, and HDP Youth Councils have autonomous communication strategies.

The messages coming from Mahir Ünal, Chairman of the Ak Parti Promotion and Media Section, are forwarded to the youth branches, provincial and district presidencies and neighborhood representatives. While Fidan (Ak Parti) underlines that their official posts should always be approved by the whole team before they are posted, Kenan (CHP) says that they are generally independent in social media content, but sometimes there is some intervention and orientation from the party headquarters:

Indeed, we share posts in accord with the official identity of our party. By looking at what our leader shares and the party headquarters share, I try to give messages compatible with them. I do not see it as an obstacle, but as a natural consequence of the organizational structure.

The HDP Youth Assemblies, which are autonomous from the party administration in terms of both the functioning and decision-making, maintain their autonomy in social media policy. The interviewees say that it is the initiative of the social media managers

of the youth assemblies to determine the content to be shared and that the provincial administration or the party centre cannot interfere with the content.

When the interviewees are asked which topics they mostly shared in their official social media accounts, the youth of the Ak Parti share youth branches' activities, regular meetings, and the activities of the party while the young members of the HDP report that they mostly share the arrests and court news and their work on the youth, and the CHP youth, their activities and issues related to the agenda.

The young members also state that they manage their political identity in their individual social media profiles. They think that they are the carriers of the party identity, and that they should share the ideology and the official identity of the party, and that social media sharing will affect their political careers.

I am more careful on social media because I am a party member and I share accordingly. If you make a share, the President will see, our secretary will. I'm paying attention. I don't make criticism. In the future, if I become a candidate for presidency, they will take a look on my profile; they will say that this man has criticized the party. (Eren, CHP)

On the other hand, there are also young people who state that they share more freely in individual accounts than in corporate accounts. Ali (AK Parti) marks that he wouldn't share any message which could be incompatible with his party values; however, he adds that he can even share a quotation from a left-wing person on his personal social media accounts. Also, Berfin (HDP) underlines that he can criticize his party on his personal profiles.

In sum, young people think that they are the carriers of the party identity and that they should share in line with the ideology and institutional identity of the party, and that social media sharing will affect their political careers.

Censorship and self-censorship

The young people state that they cannot freely share social networks on political issues, that they use self-censorship for various reasons and that they are blocked by trolls. The state surveillance on social media, detention or arrests of people who share dissenting opinions in social networks, and lawsuits against citizens who criticize government or the President are obstacles for freedom of expression.

You can't express yourself properly. If you write something, there's a letter from the court coming to your house. We're not that free ... If you're going

to write something, you choose your words, you read four or five times. You're wondering if I could get a job. It is not an effective platform for our country. (Eren, CHP)

There is a fear in social media because many of the cases or raids are due to social media posts. They're using any single word, filing a lawsuit. That's why a lot of our friends are under arrest. Because of this fear, we are trying to give social media training to our party friends as much as possible. (Murat, HDP)

Another concern on social media is the internal party criticism. The young people say that they do not criticize their party on social media for all the world to see.”

Digital security and social media training

The members of the youth branches indicate that they have taken various technical measures against cyber attacks. They try to use digital security methods through regular password changes, certified pages, two-stage verification, complaints, and support from IT professionals. The young people from the CHP and the AK Party say that they are not exposed to cyber attacks, but that they are taking precautions. The young people from the HDP say that they are constantly attacked by trolls and insulted on social media. They say they prefer short-term correspondence and face-to-face communication rather than communicating on social media and Whatsapp groups due to the security concerns.

Among the youth branches, Ak Parti is the party that attaches the highest importance to digital education. Various trainings and seminars about the use of social media in different districts are organized and seminars are held at the meetings of the Promotion Media units on the issues of social media strategies. In CHP and the HDP, the young people state that education is organized if needed, and they need social media education more and more especially in terms of security.

Conclusion

As a result of the research, we observed that young people are in favour of both face-to-face and digital politics as social media make them more visible and self-confident in their parties. Whereas social media enable them to transfer political messages to masses, reach more easily young people, make politicians accessible, and make political messages permanent, digital divide, echo chambers, trolling, and the state surveillance are among the disadvantages of social media. In addition, social media make young people visible in their political parties. By using social networks as an alternative

political participation tool, young people have easier access to their party management, and they can have more influence on party politics. Young people show that they have strengthened their position in the party by showing their potential in the creative and humorous political language they use in social media. They also see social media as main means of reaching young voters.

However, we found out that the political parties' youth branches do not have equal opportunities in terms of budget and human resources for the use of social media. While the Ak Parti Youth Branch is conducting a more widespread and systematic work, the CHP Youth Branches can receive irregular budgets from the party headquarters for their campaigns and the HDP Youth Assemblies are neither managed by a team nor have a budget for social media. Also, AK Parti is more coordinated in content production than CHP and HDP.

Finally, we can add that corporate political identities and self-censorship prevent young people from fully demonstrating their potential through social media. Young people believe that they are the carriers of their party's identity, and that they should share according to it, and that their posts on social media might affect their future political career. Moreover, young members do not feel free to express themselves on social media due to the state surveillance and trolls, and they prefer self-censorship most of the time.

To empower young people to be involved more in digital politics, freedom of expression should be ameliorated at the national level, and the Internet crackdown should be decreased in order to create a political climate under which social media posts will not be considered as crime, and young people will communicate without fear. At the party level, intra-party democracy should be established for the inclusion of the young members in decision-taking processes and mechanisms; and the political parties' youth branches should acquire legal status to have their own budgets. Thus, they would be able to get more autonomy and create alternative discourses. Intra-party democracy could also help minimising the effects of gerontocracy, which limit youth participation. Moreover, the young members may take Youtube in consideration more seriously and develop specific strategies, as this platform represents an alternative space for young people in Turkey.

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