



## **Turkish Social Media and Its Impact on Democratization**

In recent years, the power of social media is being strongly felt in Turkey. It has an effect on many incidents that has happened. This effect has become an impact on democratization of the Turkish society. Now, since news information can quickly spread through social media, therefore social media can serve as the virtual arena of the masses to express their views and opinions.

### **History of Internet and Social Media in Turkey**

The history of the Internet in Turkey began as early as in 1986 when the first wide-area network was established. However, Turkey's first Internet connection to U.S. was made in 1993.<sup>1</sup> In 1996, the first Internet infrastructure in Turkey, TURNET, was put into practice. By the end of 1997, the number of business organizations using Internet service reached around 10,000 and 30,000 computers were connected to the Internet. The penetration rate of the Internet reached 8%, and there were a total of 250,000 Internet users in the country.<sup>2</sup> In 2001, the broadband services started. Aside from the broadband services, 3G mobile services were also soon provided.<sup>3</sup> As the Internet became widespread in Turkey, the law on regulation of publications on the Internet was enacted in 2007. As a result, after the enactment of the law, there has been an increase in the number of websites that were blocked for access. Consequently, the Internet law has been discussed within the framework of constitutional fundamental rights and freedoms. That has become a matter of debate in the country, particularly concerning freedom of expression.

Despite so, the Internet usage percentage of individuals in Turkey reached 53.8% in 2014. That percentage is among the highest in Arabic nations.<sup>4</sup> The age group with the highest computer and Internet usage rate is ages 16-24. The households with Internet access is 60.2%, and social media is in first place among the purposes of Internet usage. In the 2015 report of *We Are Social*, which reports global Internet and social media statistics, Turkey is in 21<sup>st</sup> place in terms of social media penetration rate, 10<sup>th</sup> place in social media usage, and 11<sup>th</sup> place in time spending on social media.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.internetarsivi.metu.edu.tr/tarihce.php> (26.03.2015)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ekatalog.com.tr/turkiye-internet-tarihi.html> (26.03.2015)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tobb.org.tr/Documents/yayinlar/2013/Telekom%C3%BCnikasyon%20Meclisi%20Geni%C5%9Fbant%20Raporu%202011.pdf> (26.03.2015)

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Ward, Diana Owen, Richard Davis and David Taras (eds), *Making A Difference: A Comparative View Of The Role Of The Internet in Election Politics*, Lexington Books, 2008, pp.16-17.

According to the report, today there are 37.7 million Internet users and 40 million social media users in Turkey. In other words, in Turkey the social media penetration rate is higher than the Internet user penetration rate. Compared with the 2014 report, it can be seen that there has been an increase by 5% in Internet users, 11% in social media users, and 14% in mobile social media users. In Turkey, the most commonly used social networks are: Facebook 26%, WhatsApp 23%, Facebook Messenger 21%, Twitter 17%, Google+ 14%, Skype 13%, Instagram 12%, LinkedIn 8%, Pinterest 7%, and Viber 6%. The Turkish people spend almost 5 hours on the Internet every day, in which 3 hours are on social media. As seen in the above listed numbers, people in Turkey are using social media intensively. Both the penetration of social media and the time the Turkish people spend on social media is increasing day by day. Thanks to this constant change, social media in Turkey has been bringing a new dimension to communication, thus making the wave of democratization more possible.

### **The Gezi Park incidents and the Impact of Social Media**

Social media is often considered as a tool that facilitates and liberates human life and strengthens social change, including political transformation and democratization. To a certain extent, social media in Turkey has been serving as a tool for the people to make themselves heard. It mobilizes the public opinions with an unlimited discussion platform.

One of the most recent and most exemplified case is the impact of social media on the Gezi Park incidents that occurred in Turkey in 2013. Due to the power of social media, the impact of the Gezi Park incidents reached an unprecedented number of masses across the entire Turkish society. Moreover, people were easy to express their opinions and organize demonstrations to demand for democracy and freedom. The Gezi Park incidents are very important in the history of Turkey. It is because for the first time people were mobilized through social media. The original motive of the Gezi Park incidents was to prevent the rebuilding of the Taksim



Military Barracks over Taksim Gezi Park in the scope of the Taksim Pedestrianization Project. The reason that caused the incidents was to relocate a couple of trees. A group of people pitched tents and sat up all night, and subsequently the attendance of people was substantially increased following the instant spread of the event on social media. The event soon became incidents after police intervention. Police was attacked, police vehicles, broadcast vehicles and public buses were burnt, bombs were thrown out and various private workplaces and public buildings were damaged. During these incidents, social media had indispensable impacts as a public's communication tool. The Gezi Park incidents that started in June occupied the agenda in Turkey for a couple of months and began as a form of

democratic political participation. Social media seriously increased the public's participation in the protests. More importantly, the social media that brought out social movements almost turned to be an uprising against the government. Social media quickly spread the news about the Gezi Park incidents all over the nation and abroad, and the incidents were perceived as a sort of the public's pursue for democracy and received various supports from both inside and outside the country. Subsequently, people from all segments of the Turkish society demanded for a change of government.

Evidently, social media had a very important impact on the Gezi Park incidents. One of the examples that proves this fact can be felt in the statement of Abdullah Gül, the then-Turkish President. He stated that "If you ask why these incidents happened, there is government that has been ruling Turkey for 10 years. The opponent people may have lost their patience and may be sensitive. There may be those who don't approve of the [government's] actions. There are times when politics in Turkey can hurt feelings, so they may get hurt. There may be environmental issues. There may be people who think that no one asks them about what happens in Istanbul. Some may walk for trees for animal rights. Some may be concerned whether their life style and opinions are respected. I see all of this. ...What happens in Turkey is similar to these Western countries."<sup>5</sup> In another statement, Gül also stated that "Democracies are formed of course with public will. But democracy is not just about elections. There is nothing more normal than to speak out in different ways different opinions, different situations, objections, if any, other than the elections. The peaceful demonstrations are of course a part of this". Gül particularly referred the Gezi Park incidents as an example that the democracy in Turkey is being tested.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Bülent Arınç, the then-Vice Prime Minister, also stated that "We are ready to hear all democratic demands", and he met with the protesters during the Gezi Park incidents.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

Today, social media in Turkey is in a development pattern that is parallel to the entire world. In terms of the number of users in social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, Turkey surpasses many Arabic countries in social media usage.<sup>8</sup> Online forums, blogs and websites are widely used. Especially, groups benefit from Internet network services to form various social organizations.<sup>9</sup> It is raising voices of the people and also is making various new social movements as well. Therefore, social media plays a significant role in the recent democratic outbursts in Turkey. They have caused a positive understanding in democracy perception and thus started a sort of revolution. The Gezi Park incidents have become a milestone as to the reconsideration of democracy by the government. In this

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.aksam.com.tr/siyaset/cumhurbaskani-abdullah-gulden-arap-bahari-iddialarina-yanit/haber-212662> (28.03.2015)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ntv.com.tr/arsiv/id/25446804/> (28.03.2015)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.aksam.com.tr/guncel/gezi-parki-olaylari-nedir-nasil-basladi-neler-yasandi-iste-gun-gun-gezi-eylemleri/haber-212253> (28.03.2015)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.byegm.gov.tr/uploads/docs/Bir\\_Bakista\\_Turk\\_Medyasi\\_TR.pdf](http://www.byegm.gov.tr/uploads/docs/Bir_Bakista_Turk_Medyasi_TR.pdf) (29.03.2015)

<sup>9</sup> Aldon Hynes, "What is DeanSpace?", *Extreme Democracy*, Eds. Jon Lebkowsky and Mitch Ratcliffe, Lulu.com, 2005, p.322.

respect, the impact of social media on democracy found a reciprocity as it was stated by the government officials that democracy is not just about elections. Moreover, the Gezi Park incidents did not only reveal the formation of the people's ideas and voices, but also pioneered the formation of a deliberate uprising.

Overall, social media in Turkey has demonstrated that it can strengthen social movements, pour masses to streets, bring up the subjects that do not exist in traditional media, and adapt a form of international solidarity to the Turkish society. The impact of Internet and social media is increasingly to be felt in the Turkey's social change, including political transformation and democratization.

### **Emrah Aydemir**

Communication faculty member at Firat University in Turkey, visiting scholar (August 2014 - June 2015) at the State University of New York at Buffalo, U.S.A.

### **Junhao Hong**

Professor of Communication at the State University of New York at Buffalo, U.S.A.

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