

Social Media in Turkey: Walking the line between opportunity and danger

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Abstract

Turkey, the Western Gateway to the Caucasus, is currently deeply involved in discussions of social media issues. Older Turks anxiously follow the online activity of the average Turkish youth, who spends 7.8 hours per day online. While the older generation regards this as a 'waste of time', it has become a 'living space' for young people. Inside that virtual space, they develop their own lands and businesses. These innovative products and services have become weapons once integrated into the physical world – for example, the destruction of the music and film industries by online file sharing technologies. Likewise, social media was used as a political weapon during the Arab Spring and during the massive protests against Internet Censorship in Istanbul. Young Turks also benefit from social media as internet entrepreneurs. In addition, top Turkish brands are investing heavily in social media for the future, while the traditional media industry is experiencing serious problems due to their old-fashioned management. This New Medium will grow rapidly and become the center of activity as things develop. Therefore, New Media Literacy will be the keyword in preparing the Caucasus for the Information Age.

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A land where 46% of citizens live in metropolitan areas¹, a nation in which 60% of the population is under 35², and a society which has 35 million Internet users³, 61.7 million mobile subscribers⁴ and 30 million Facebook users:⁵ this is Turkey, a country of social networkers.

Social media is a trending topic in Turkey. Its social, cultural, economical, political and legal influences are discussed by all segments of society. It is the primary medium for communicate for almost 50% of Turks. In this new communication environment, known as *New Media*, they share their thoughts and emotions, they chat with friends all around the world, they do their shopping, they play games and they even argue about politics with people they've never met before. In this sense, social media has become a living space, particularly for young people trying to escape from the 'boring rules' of the physical world; it offers a virtual paradise in which they feel themselves free.

1 Turkish Statistical Institute Population Demographics web pages: (in Turkish) http://www.tuik.gov.tr/VeriBilgi.do?tb_id=60&ust_id=2 (Metropolitan Municipalities-2011)

2 Turkish Statistical Institute Population Demographics web pages: (in Turkish) http://www.tuik.gov.tr/VeriBilgi.do?tb_id=39&ust_id=11 (Age-2011)

3 Internet World Stats <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm>

4 Electronic Communications Market in Turkey, Quarterly Market Data Report, (pp.41) May2011, Information Technologies and Communication Authority Publications, Ankara, Turkey. <http://www.btk.gov.tr/eski/eng/pdf/2011/MarketDataReport2011-1.pdf>

5 <http://www.socialbakers.com/blog/207-turkey-is-facebook-world-country-no-4/>

According to global social media research by ComScore, Turkish 'netizens' spend an average of 7.8 hours online per day (5th highest in the world)⁶, mainly on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, MSN, Twitter, Foursquare, Google+, etc. Turks ranked even higher for television watching, second internationally, behind the United States⁷. The higher youth unemployment rate (21.5%) could be an important factor fuelling this trend.⁸ But the tempting aspects of social media platforms such as socialization, interactivity, entertainment, matchmaking, anonymity, etc. also need to be considered independently. Of course, these dynamics are not easily understood by older generations. For this reason, the majority of parents, teachers, managers, high level professionals, high state officials, etc. anxiously follow the online activity of the youth. In the beginning, they all regarded this activity as 'a waste of time' or at least 'an activity for spare time. And though 'spare time' has already become 'prime time', they are still some distance from achieving a clear perspective on the matter due to the

6 Average Time Spent on Social Networking Sites Across Geographies, ComScore Media Matrix April 2011. <http://www.comscore.com/2011/06/average-time-spent-on-social-networking-sites-across-geographies/>

7 Average daily TV hours per country 2005 (OECD) <http://vorg.ca/2505-Average-daily-TV-hours-per-country> & Communications Outlook 2007 (The Economist) http://www.economist.com/node/9527126?subjectid=7933596&story_id=9527126

8 OECD Countries Youth Unemployment Rate 2003-2010 http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/youth-unemployment-rate-2011_unemp-yth-table-2011-1-en

“complexity” of this new medium. This is true around the world, even in Iran and China.

What the older generations don't understand is that this is not just a generational change, but also a transformative shift from the Industrial Age to the Information Age, and these ‘newbies’ were, are and will remain the primary drivers of this transformation. Called the digital immigrants and natives, they first conquered the ‘terra incognita’ just after the internet was released for public use in 1992.⁹ Between then and now, they have discovered new virtual lands, and cultivated and harvested them with their own innovative methods. The way they use these innovative products and services can be regarded as weapons, destroying the traditional systems. In the past, some of these weapons have been used as competitive business tools that can destroy the standards of an establishment; online music and film download technologies¹⁰, for example, which have violated the traditional copyright model of entertainment industry. Some of them were even worse: a destructive political weapon that can organize opposition groups against the regime, for instance.

⁹ *History of Internet @ Computer History Museum* http://www.computerhistory.org/internet_history/internet_history_90s.html

¹⁰ *How 'Internet file sharing' dramatically changed the whole entertainment industry?* <http://point-topic.com/content/bmm/profiles/BMMfilesharingq311.html>

As happened during the Arab Spring movements, the digital youth can interact, digitalize and mobilize not only on the net but also on the streets in all circumstances, since they have a native ability to create, design, develop, implement and use these new digital technologies. The way they use social media is amazing. They are able to create, develop and deliver their content over their own media sites. They are also capable of integrating all kinds of social platforms, thereby enabling users to send content instantaneously via many social media platforms and spread it to the public domain, thanks to the interconnected personal networks.

David D. Kirkpatrick, Cairo Bureau Chief of The New York Times during the Tahrir Square Protests, shared his observations and views on the uses of social media as a political tool.¹¹ Kirkpatrick introduced the April 6th Youth Movement, an online activism group which organized the Egyptian Young Activists during the Tahrir protests via his column @ NYTimes.com. Kirkpatrick emphasized the importance of benefiting from past social media experiences. In this case, Tunisian activists shared their experiences with their Egyptian counterparts - how to protect themselves from attacks by the

¹¹ *A Tunisian-Egyptian Link That Shook Arab History*, David D. Kirkpatrick, NYTimes.com <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/14/world/middleeast/14egypt-tunisia-protests.html?pagewanted=all>

security forces, when and where to pause and resume, etc.

However, there is another side to the coin. There is speculation that these activists were supported by external powers. In addition, there are questions to be asked and to be answered: 'If the internet is a global infrastructure, why are these massive protests all happening within the Arab World? Why aren't they happening in other countries?' One way or another, the role of social media in these types of public movements is limited by the time and space of independent organizations, at most as a catalyst to provoke people. In other words, the revolution will not be on Facebook but on the streets with Facebook. I believe that the general rule for all regimes will henceforth be "the more social media activity, the more freedom the population demands".

Despite the internet's increasing role in daily life, the older generations are remain intolerant of the freedom it entails, and want to change the demands of young people, as they are afraid of losing their control mechanisms. That is why they filter, censor and/or ban the Internet; it is typical authoritarian father-figure behavior! It does not matter whether he or she is a parent, a teacher, a high level professional, a manager or a boss.

On the other hand, freedom alone cannot solve the major problems

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of social media such as content manipulation, fake profiles, privacy violations, child pornography, hate speech, hacking, online fraud, etc. For this reason, security is necessary to a peaceful online existence. It is better to listen to the experiences of the older generation at this point. There must be a healthy balance between security and freedom.

In comparison with Arab countries, Turkey has the advantage of having had a pluralistic democratic culture for almost a century, though the country still has a long way to go. Some would ask whether Turkey has been influenced by the Arab Spring. My answer would be both yes and no. Yes, because the Arab Spring broke down psychological barriers and proved that there is hope for the new generation. The things they have done so far have paved the way for countries all around the world. No, because the political dynamics of Turkey and the Arab World are very different, as are the characteristics of digital activism.

There are Turkish NGOs that are aggressively defending internet

freedom. Key examples include: <http://sansuresansur.org> (translates as ‘censor the censorship’), <http://netdas.org> (‘netizen’), Alternative Information Technologies Association, and the Turkish branch of Pirate Party International Network, which is the world’s most popular internet freedom political organization, on <http://korsanparti.org>. The majority do not have a physical existence and are active only on the internet. Some of the members never meet in person, but they have contact via

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social networking sites. They are all highly sensitive to internet freedom issues, and perceive any regulation on Internet as restrictions on their living space. At times when internet freedom is threatened, not only active members but also many social media netizens drop everything and come together under the umbrella of this digital NGO network, as happened last February. At that time, Turkish Telekom and Internet Authority (BTK) wanted to impose restrictions on internet activity due to security concerns and complaints about the protection of families and children. They issued a ‘Safe Internet use’ directive that imposed a default

mandatory filter, by collecting all internet subscribers under four filtered profiles: standard, family, children and national. The directive has an old-fashioned mindset and was prepared independently by the Internet Authority, without consulting the internet audience in Turkey. Upon release, it was heavily criticized by local internet communities. Right after, Turkish internet users organized a social media campaign against the measure, which was supported by more than 600.000 online users¹². 60.000 of them were out on the streets of 35 cities across Turkey and Europe on the day of the protest, May 15th 2011. The 50,000 strong protests in Istanbul were recorded as the biggest internet censorship protest in history.¹³ Just after the protest, a meeting between the BTK Officials and representatives of the Turkish internet society was organized. A few months later, BTK took a step back and revised the directive in line with some of the demands from internet users. Of course, there remain issues to be negotiated with regard to adjusting the balance between freedom and security, but this is a promising step, which demonstrated the importance of public participation in governmental decisions.

Besides censorship, there have also

¹² Facebook Campaign on Turkey Net Ban <http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=152334771499561>

¹³ Thousands March in Istanbul Against Turkish Internet Censorship <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-05-15/thousands-march-in-istanbul-against-turkish-internet-censorship.html>

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been significant developments in social media business. Turkey is very active online, and has been involved in the mobile communications business from the beginning. Today, the country's online market is mature, as demonstrated by statistics. The volume of e-commerce is expected to reach 10 billion USD by the end of 2011¹⁴, and e-banking and e-trading jointly reached a volume of 300 billion USD with a customer base of almost 17 million.¹⁵ In addition to these figures, there are young entrepreneurs who have explored the opportunities of the internet, and capitalized on them. Mynet.com is a website founded by young entrepreneur Emre Kurttepelı during the early days of the Internet. It has become one of Turkey's the most popular sites almost immediately, and remains so, currently serving 6.5 million registered subscribers and 38 million monthly unique visitors among the Top 1000 sites in the

¹⁴ The volume of e-commerce in Turkey and estimates for 2011 (in Turkish) <http://blog.sanalmimarlar.com/2011/08/turkiyede-e-ticaret-hacmi-haziran-2011-ve-2011-yilsonu-hede-fi/>

¹⁵ Milliyet Newspaper, '300 B USD transfer has shifted to the net. M-banking becomes the rising star' (In Turkish) <http://ekonomi.milliyet.com.tr/300-milyar-lik-transfer-net-e-kaydi-bankalarin-yildizi-m-bankacilik-oldu/ekonomi/ekonomidetay/18.09.2011/1440074/default.htm>

world. The secret of his success was 'catching the zeitgeist' that kept users involved. The site began as a web portal, and now it is a social platform where people can find whatever they need. Gittigidiyor.com, an e-shopping site with almost 7 million members, was acquired by E-bay for between 150 and 200 million USD. Fizy.com is a local online jukebox founded by three internet 'geeks' a year or two ago and was sold to Turkcell for a couple of million dollars, according to rumors. There are more such examples. Nowadays, the most difficult task in Istanbul is to employ an IT staff. There are many opportunities to be pursued, but beware of problems and errors. Aside from these internet-born entrepreneurs, there are also industries that have been trying to migrate from the Industrial Age to the Information Age. Integrating business models with the internet is one thing, but business integration with social media is quite another. In Turkey, most of the industries have already integrated their IT infrastructure with the internet. But social media is a step further, and is no easy task. It is not only just analysis but perceptions. It is not only news but also gossip, manipulation and falsifications. There are not only customers, but also the anonymous users and fakes. And finally it is not only professionalism but also friendship and sincerity. It has a complicated nature that requires great care; otherwise social media

users could destroy a popular brand in a very short time. That must be the reason that the major brands keep away. What many companies had been doing up until now was to use social media as a cheap advertising medium, and follow it to see the public interactions about their own brand by using an online monitoring program. But this year, many brands changed strategy, and started to play an active role in social media. Banking, finance and telecommunications are the pioneering industries so far. Their objectives are to keep in contact with their customers, to get to know them better and to get their feedback about the company. A few of them, such as Akbank and Garanti Bank, have gone further, and provided an online platform to interact with their customers. For instance, Akbank organized a competition based on a Facebook game application. The aim of the game is to build and manage an enterprise by using Akbank's existing banking and finance services. This allows customers to test and familiarize themselves with Akbank's product and service portfolio, and even give feedback, enabling the company to revise its products in line with customer responses.¹⁶ Thanks to all these activities and games, Akbank has gained more than 500 000 users in social media. Other brands active in social media are the mobile operators Avea, with 1.5 million users, and Turkcell, with

1 million users. Of course, there is a long way to go for all of them, but this is an inspiring start

In fact, social media is important for all industries, but remains vital for one of them: the media industry itself. For the time being, Turkey's traditional media industry is still bringing in huge revenues (not profit) from newspapers, magazines, radio and television. But there has been a dramatic shift towards new media. Right now, there is less threat to television, but the initial negative impacts have been seen on magazines, newspapers, and radio. With a few exceptions, all magazines and newspapers in Turkey are losing money. Potentially there is still room for print media, but in the case of a long and deep recession, their end will be expedited. There are rumors about Radikal newspaper to moving from print to digital. Are they ready for it? Absolutely not. In order to succeed in new media, it is necessary to appoint an editor in chief who is experienced in both traditional and new media, but has the ability to prioritize the new. The Guardian did this very well by appointing Alan Rusbridger as editor in chief, and announcing its new media concept as 'digital-first'.¹⁷ But neither the media bosses nor the traditional editors in chief have the necessary mindset to develop even a simple business model for the new

¹⁶ Akbank Social Media game <http://thefinancialbrand.com/19315/akbank-facebook-social-media-strategy/>

¹⁷ 'Guardian News & Media to be a digital-first organization' <http://www.guardian.co.uk/gnm-press-office/guardian-news-media-digital-first-organisation>

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media industry. One way or the other, with or without them, traditional media will transform into new media. But can they compete with the user generated content and social media? Not at first, but later on - when they rationalize the new media concept, and users (mainly young people) rationalize the meaning of the truth. Further to the transformation of traditional media, there are exciting developments in the brand-new media. Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube and the other social media platforms are all attracting hundreds of millions of users, thanks to the introduction of numerous innovative services. Despite the financial crisis in the more traditional industries, these new players have been designing new virtual worlds in social media. I'm not sure they did a good job, but I'm sure they did their job well.

To sum up, there are plenty of opportunities in the new media business in terms of social media platforms. They have influences all around the world, including in the Caucasus. The transformation from the Industrial Age to the Information Age will be the next big thing. In

order to eliminate the serious impact of coming global crisis, there are two tasks. First of all, the older generation has to move on from its struggle with the new generation and empower them to develop this new living space. Secondly, we must immediately begin to educate people to work on new lines of businesses. For this reason, we founded a New Media Department in Kadir Has University-Istanbul two years ago. The demand from young people has been incredible. This year, two more New Media Departments have been opened in other universities. As well as the university department, last year we also launched a Social Media Certificate Program to meet the demand outside of university education. The program is already beyond maximum capacity, and we are still oversubscribed.

In conclusion, this is an opportunity that is not limited to Turkey, but is available all around the world and all around the Caucasus. Let's use this as a way out before the threatening clouds of global crisis arrive.