Can Pomegranates Replace Penguins? Social Media and the Rise of Citizen Journalism in Turkey

Aslı Tunç

The Gezi Park protests in 2013 sparked an outpouring of creativity and new media development online. The vibrancy of Turkey's citizen journalism sector is the flipside of a traditional media that has failed in its role as an independent provider of information. This section describes the growth of citizen journalism in Turkey and the possibilities for its future.

A BOOMING ONLINE AUDIENCE

Turkey has a vibrant online community, with nearly 36.5 million Internet users[35] in a country with a population of 77 million. Facebook is the most popular social network with 32,354,900 users and a penetration equal to 41.59 percent of the population. Around 90 percent of the country's Internet users are active on Facebook. Turkey is witnessing an explosion in social media, ranking the fourth largest in global use of Facebook and eighth largest for Twitter with 31.1 percent penetration and 11,337,500 active Twitter users. From 2012–13, the number of Twitter users in Turkey increased from 7.2 million to 9.6 million. The number of tweets sent daily also increased dramatically, by 370 percent. Turkish Internet users now send approximately 8 million tweets per day, or roughly 92 tweets per second.

It was during the Gezi Park protests of May–June 2013 that Twitter became a widely accepted source of news for the Turkish public. On May 31, the total number of tweets sent daily in Turkey skyrocketed from the normal 9–11 million to 15.2 million, the day when the events erupted into a national movement. New York University researchers found that during Gezi about 90 percent of geo-located tweets with protest hashtags were coming from within Turkey—in contrast to the Egyptian protests in 2011, when another research project estimated only 30 percent of those tweeting were in the country.[36]

The popularity of social media in Turkey and during the Gezi Park protests is due in part to the failures of the traditional Turkish media. As discussed in the first section of this report, the financial connections of media owners with the government, weak professional trade unions, and aggressive use of repressive laws have produced a situation of severe self-censorship in Turkey's traditional media. This was seen clearly in the first days of the protests, when cable news channels broadcast cooking shows and penguin documentaries instead of covering huge protests in the heart of Turkey's largest city. The penguin, in particular, became a national symbol of media complicity that the protesters adopted as their own ironic icon.

Figure 1

SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT OWNERSHIP AND USAGE IN TURKEY
Share of population age 15-64
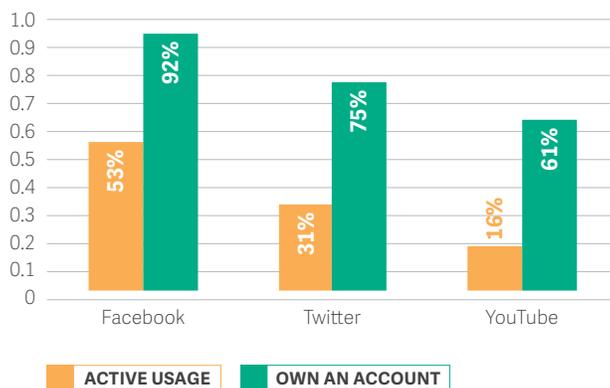
Source: Global-WebIndex, Second Quarter 2014.

Given the profound distrust of urban, educated youth towards highly partisan news outlets, it should be no surprise to see the powerful impact of social media on the young, desperate as they are for an alternative way to find out what is going on in the world and share information with their friends. During the Gezi Park events, every element of news ignored by traditional media spread like wildfire across social media. Twitter became the obvious outlet for digitally literate people in search of information.

Additionally, the constantly updating, live-streaming quality of social media made it a powerful tool during the protests. Citizen journalism and live-stream broadcasts not only helped to fill the gap left by the traditional media but they also usurped the traditional media's functions by allowing participants and users to directly share and verify valuable information about rapidly developing situations. Live-stream channels on platforms like Ustream also included live-chat tools, enabling real-time communication about real-time

events on a local and global scale. Participants did not just use the tools; they actively took on the challenge of creating structures for gathering and disseminating information. By the third day of the protests, media desks were formed at Gezi Park calling for volunteers to team up with live-streamers with their tools: smart-phones, laptops, video cameras, and 3G modems. A popular slogan to promote civic journalism during the protests was: "There is no media, we are all journalists." The downsides of social media were also on display during the protests, including misinformation, lack of verification, slander, and hate speech. But citizen-generated content on social media played a major role in raising awareness and mobilizing action.

In the early days of the Gezi protests, on June 6–8, 2013, KONDA Research and Consultancy conducted 4,411 face-to-face interviews with participants. One of the questions was to identify the initial source of news about the protests. Sixty-nine percent of protesters in the park indicated that they first heard about the events from social media. Only 7 percent got the news from television, 10 times less than at the national level (71.3 percent) (Figure 2). Age and education level were the main indicators on this question. Only 5 percent of participants above the age of 44 got their initial news of the protests from social media, 2 percent from online news sites, and 88 percent from television.

Figure 3 shows how much more Gezi Park protesters used social media in comparison with Turkey as a whole. While 84.6 percent of protesters had posted on social media in the last month at the time of the survey, only 18.3 percent of Turkey as a whole had done so. And less than 8 percent of Gezi protesters did not use social media, compared with 55 percent of Turkey as a whole. According to the KONDA research, use of social media was also correlated with the time that participants arrived at Gezi Park. The earlier they arrived at the park, the more they used social media.

The following examples of independent initiatives give an idea of the desperate search for reliable news and how it has led to a blossoming of citizen journalism in Turkey.

140journos
This commercial-free, volunteer-based "counter-media" initiative started just after an airstrike on the Turkey-Iraq border that killed 35 Kurdish villagers on December 29, 2011. The mainstream media released

Figure 2

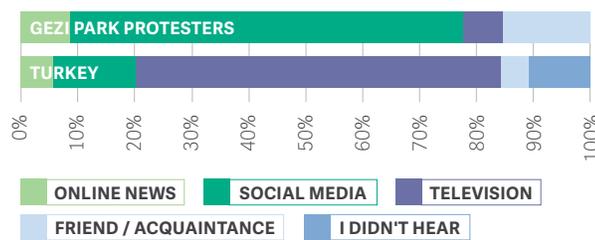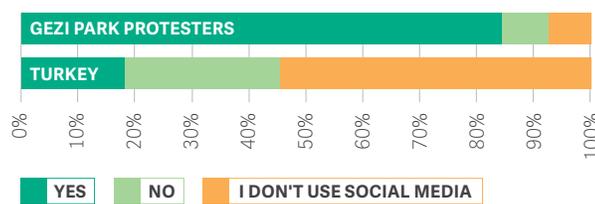**FROM WHICH SOURCE DID YOU FIRST HEAR ABOUT THE GEZI PARK PROTESTS?**

Figure 3

OVER THE PAST MONTH, DID YOU POST ANY MESSAGES ABOUT THE PROTESTS?

Source: (Figures 2 & 3) KONDA Gezi Park Research 2013

the first information to the public a full 12 hours after the tragedy, even as social media was already in a storm. Frustrated by the lack of media coverage, a 21-year-old college student, Engin Önder, decided to found 140journos, an organization whose volunteers use their own mobile devices to provide uncensored news to the public via social media platforms like Twitter and SoundCloud. Currently, 140journos has a team of 20 students from different academic backgrounds, none of whom is a journalism student.

140journos considers itself a "data project" rather than a journalism outlet. Its main output at present is its Twitter feed, which covers events through photographs, micro-videos using Vine, and live broadcasts, as well as interviews conducted on the spot. 140journos members actively use Twitter to cover issues that are largely ignored in the society, such as LGBT movements, student trials, protests, and terrorism cases. Recently, its work has expanded into areas like crowdsourced vote-counting through the journos.com.tr and saydirac.com platforms.

Ötekilerin Postası (The Others' Post)

The Ötekilerin Postası platform started as a Facebook page sharing news related to hunger strikes of Kurdish prisoners demanding better conditions for PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and greater freedom for the Kurdish language in public life in Turkey, both taboo issues in the mainstream media. Eventually, Ötekilerin Postası became a platform for rights journalism that invited citizen journalists to contribute. It now has more than 140,000 "likes" on Facebook and a stand-alone website, otekilerinpostasi.org.

When Gezi started, Ötekilerin Postası was already providing activist news from a radical left-wing perspective. During the protests, it became a citizen journalism hub and a major alternative news source on the Kurdish issue. Its Facebook page has been closed repeatedly, but each time the authors have reopened it and rebuilt their audience. In August 2013, the logo of Ötekilerin Postası—a pomegranate—was reported to Facebook for violation of community standards, resulting in the editors being banned from posting to the page for 30 days. The logo had been chosen as "the most beautiful symbol of social peace," as one of the editors told Hürriyet Daily News. "A pomegranate is a whole with a thousand different seeds."[37] The Facebook page continues to face problems with community complaints. In early August 2014, the page was closed for the ninth time for unclear reasons.[38]

The popularity of social media in Turkey and during the Gezi Park protests is due in part to the failures of the traditional Turkish media.

Dokuz8Haber

Dokuz8Haber is a journalism network that gathers various independent citizen journalism outlets, such as Ayağa Kalk Taksim, Demokrat Haber, Emek Dünyası, Gezi Postası, HaberVesaire, Jiyan, Solfasol, and Ötekilerin Postası, to join forces and create a common newsroom. Volunteers and citizen journalists send their stories to professional editors, and the news stories are serviced domestically and internationally via this independent news agency. There is live-stream coverage and translation if needed.

VagusTV

The website VagusTV was a combination of professional and citizen journalism. It became especially popular due to its coverage of corruption allegations against the government in late 2013–early 2014, when the corruption scandal was at its height but many media outlets were tentative about releasing details of the allegations. In January 2014, the site was blocked by the government of Turkey for approximately two weeks under unclear circumstances. The site closed not long after the blocking, which had disrupted its business and reduced its audience. VagusTV is a concrete example of the risk independent journalism runs in Turkey.

VivaHiba

VivaHiba (www.vivahiba.com) is a relatively new and open-ended citizen journalism platform that enables freelance photojournalists and amateurs to share user-generated content and images. News stories may be uploaded to the Internet directly or by using a smartphone application. The website was launched in November 2013 by cofounders Hıdır Geviş and Barış Şarer and is based in New York City. VivaHiba is run by a team of volunteers and has roughly 5,000 subscribers, among whom 400 are actively producing content for the site from 25 different cities in Turkey. Hıdır Geviş has future plans to expand the site into different languages, including English, German, and Arabic.[39]

From top to bottom
The logos for 140journos, Ötekilerin Postası, Dokuz8Haber, VagusTV, VivaHiba, and P24 used on Twitter and Facebook

Members of Occupy Wall Street and New York City's Turkish community demonstrating in New York during the Gezi Park protests June 8, 2013. Michael Fleshman/Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0

Despite all of the practical and legal obstacles, journalism in Turkey seems to be more alive than ever.

investigative reporting or criticism of the government can put reporters at risk of being fired, deported, or imprisoned and that self-censorship is widespread as a result. The question is whether citizen journalism can help improve a media landscape that is rapidly deteriorating. While advancements in technology gives these independent initiatives the tools to create diverse and "unfiltered" journalism, there are two primary challenges: 1) to find sustainable, self-sufficient business models; and 2) to harness more participation from Turkish citizens, especially beyond the educated, urban, and mostly left-wing participants that are most active in citizen journalism but are a minority in Turkey.

Citizen journalism is far from replacing the mainstream news culture (especially television), despite the decline of trust in journalism as a profession in Turkey. Citizen journalism also poses a problem for advocates of quality, accuracy, and objectivity, as contributors typically lack formal training or knowledge of the essential roles that independent media play in ensuring accountable and transparent government. Citizen journalism platforms now produce a daily review of public events the traditional press in Turkey is not covering, but they are not yet able to produce investigative or in-depth reports. Meanwhile, threats are mounting in the form of recent amendments to Law 5651 on blocking Internet sites and the proposal to expand the Press Law to cover Internet news sites (see first section of this report).

P24 (Platform for Independent Journalism)

An exception to the citizen journalism model, P24 is a nonprofit, civil-society organization formed to support and promote editorial independence in the Turkish media under the supervision of experienced journalists and columnists, including Hasan Cemal, Doğan Akın, Yasemin Çongar, Andrew Finkel, Hazal Özvarış, Yavuz Baydar, and Murat Sabuncu. It launched in 2013 with a broad mission to strengthen the integrity of independent media in Turkey. It does this through a wide range of activities, such as press monitoring, organizing investigative journalism workshops, journalistic training, and public advocacy. Increasingly, P24 also acts as a news outlet itself by supporting the projects and reporting trips of independent professional journalists.

What is Next for Citizen Journalism in Turkey?

Citizen journalists are becoming a potent force for building open and democratic societies, especially in countries where antidemocratic regulations and problematic ownership structures limit the ability of professional journalists to operate freely. With social media use rapidly increasing in Turkey, citizen journalists have helped fill the gap in news coverage. Economic threats, intimidation, and other heavy-handed tactics have humbled the country's largest news organizations. Journalists acknowledge that

Yet, this dynamic landscape of continuous and diversified witnessing and reporting should not be seen as a crisis of journalism but, rather, as an explosion of potential. Despite all of the practical and legal obstacles, journalism in Turkey seems to be more alive than ever and undergoing a multiplication of both forms and content at amazing speed. Citizen journalism has provided a refreshing platform for the future of the news profession. The current challenge for journalists is to dare to imagine what they could be in the future, instead of hanging on to the constraints of their past.