Social media Turkish style

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Yes, YouTube is back in Turkey. The ban on YouTube has been lifted after two years of blocking access to the site. According to a court’s decision, in March 2007 access to YouTube was to be banned in Turkey because of its offensive content about the Turkish Republic’s founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. After the decision, complete blocking took place in May 2008.

On October 30, 2010, Turkish Transport Minister Binali Yıldırım declared that the ban had been lifted as the offending videos had been removed from YouTube. YouTube has symbolic meaning in Turkey. The Internet censorship’s key word in Turkey is YouTube. There are currently an estimated 6000 blocked sites for internet users in Turkey, according to various sources.

YouTube is not the only case in Turkey in terms of internet censorship. For instance, access to a significant number of websites including Google Sites, Geocities, DailyMotion, and Farmville have been blocked from Turkey on numerous occasions by different court orders and blocking practices. Reporters Without Borders, OSCE and other related organizations have pointed to these practices in various reports.

Unfortunately, blocking access to websites is not the only example from Turkey. Access to other web-based services has also been blocked by various court orders. Well known web 2.0 based sites like ‘Last.fm’, ‘myspace.com’, and ‘Justin.tv’ have been blocked in addition to those listed above.

Accordingly, cases related to Internet censorship and press freedom place Turkey in premier league of censuring nations. According to RSF-Reporters Without Borders, Turkey is ranked 138 out of 178 in the latest worldwide Press Freedom index. Similarly, Reporters Without Borders labels Turkey as one of the ‘enemies of the internet’ and puts Turkey in the category of ‘countries under surveillance’.

Besides these developments, Turkey shows other interesting tendencies towards internet and social media use. By June 2010, 45% of the population – 35 million users – were active internet users in Turkey. In addition to this number, 84% of all internet users in Turkey have an account on Facebook according to ComScore. These numbers put Turkey in third place among Facebook users around the world.

The numbers, in terms of the relationship between internet use and social media, reveal very interesting points. While internet penetration is quite low in Turkey, in contrast there is great and growing interest for social media use. Again, although there is still censorship of the internet in Turkey, indicators reflect a growing demand for social media in Turkey. It is most likely because of its very young population.

Thirty-eight percent of internet users in Turkey are in the age group 15-24. A further 31% are in the age group of 25-34. As a result, almost 70% of all internet users in Turkey are young users. Another eye-opening indicator is the amount of time spent on the internet. The average time for internet use in Turkey is almost 30 hours per month, which positions Turkey in third place worldwide after Canada and the U.S.A.

There are other indicators about the way internet and social media are being used. For instance, Twitter is a growing trend in Turkey. According to Radikal newspaper’s report on November 21, 2010, the President of the Turkish Republic, Abdullah Gül, has 130,022 twitter
followers. Opposition party leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has 44,666 followers on Twitter while the Prime Minister of Turkey, Tayyip Erdoğan, has 22,456 followers. Interestingly, Abdullah Gül is not following anyone on Twitter and has tweeted 262 times!

While social media are considered a new arena for many people in Turkey, including many political figures, practices related with Facebook reflect interesting dimensions. For instance, a report in Hurriyet newspaper on November 21, 2010, states that, ‘Even Kurds get naked on Facebook.’ There are similar examples from other newspapers like Zaman and Vakit.

Those newspapers post stories related to Facebook accounts and criticise the daily lives of individuals. Another example may be given from television. In the television show called ‘Pozitif Reality’, the show’s hero-presenter ‘Brother Yalçın’ secretly traces children of families from their Facebook accounts and criticises those children’s life styles according to their posts on Facebook.

Social surveillance and criticism
In the Turkish case, social media are considered in a way as a surveillance area. It is almost a platform for social criticism of the values of individuals and groups of people. It recalls Jean-Paul Sartre’s statement that, ‘I am possessed by the other. The other holds a secret. The secret of who I am.’

Social media are perceived as a new source of information for media companies in Turkey. While communication rights and freedom of expression are still controversial issues in the country, there are still questions related to the use of internet and social media. The way social media are used and shared in daily life practices may contribute to greater democracy, freedom of expression, cooperation, participation and education.

A study I conducted at Anadolu University in Turkey in 2010 reflects the way social media and Facebook are used by students, who mainly use social media for surveillance reasons in terms of their relationships. Sixty-two percent of male/female students confirmed that they use Facebook for surveillance reasons. Twenty-four percent of male students stated that they caught/found out about their girlfriend’s affair with someone else on Facebook. Fifty-two percent of female students stated that they found out about their boyfriend’s affair with someone on Facebook.

These brief examples from Turkey show that the fundamental issues related to the internet and social media, such as freedom of expression, communication rights and the potential of social media, are still neglected in Turkey. While there is great interest among young people in Turkey, social media can still be promoted as a platform for all voices. They can contribute to improving communication within the society.

In the service of civil society dialogue and democracy, social media can also be seen as a great tool for building bridges in a culturally diverse country like Turkey.

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