Tweeting Taksim communication power and social media advocacy in the Taksim square protests

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ABSTRACT

The extent to which social media empower individuals represents a fruitful yet untapped area of communication research. This study explores the phenomenon whereby individuals exert their influence and seek change in a particular case of social media engagement—the Taksim Square protests in Turkey in 2013. Building from literatures in social media engagement and empowerment, and using Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, we content analyzed 770 Taksim-related messages on Twitter. Results suggest that efforts to seek change in social media are realized through information dissemination more than through calls to action and social organization. Namely, social media users seek influence through vicarious experience—representation of the experience of others—than direct personal experience. From these findings, we argue that social media is used to effect change from a distance, and that content ownership and online reputation are driving forces of online participation in an issue.

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1. Introduction

In the pursuit of understanding the pretenses and themes of social media behavior, the assumption that social media grant power through their capacity for connectivity and visibility has gone relatively under-examined. Instead, research exploring the promotional and strategic side of social media has been a dominant, ongoing theme (Cho, Schweickart, & Haase, 2014; Mangold & Smith, 2012). What drives individuals to complain, seek change, and otherwise exert influence via social media has received relatively less attention. In fact, Williams (2013) reviewed the literature and found few studies examining the way individuals express their power and seek influence on social media. Yet, the overlap between social media and power is a critical research need because of the ease of "dispersed individuals with seemingly marginal concerns to connect and collectively promote issues" (Fieseler & Fleck, 2013, p. 759).

Though the relationship between social media use and issue and political participation has already been established in research (Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012), what remains to be understood is the way publics use social media to communicate their social media-based empowerment and seek change. The purpose of this study is to provide insight on the way publics communicate power and seek change through social media. In this study, we analyze messaging in a particular case of social media advocacy—the Taksim Square protests in Turkey.

In 2013, civil unrest erupted in Turkey when a small group protesting urban development in Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park was met with violence from police (Letsch, 2013). Despite the peaceful nature of the demonstration (citizens staged a sit-in at the park), authorities retaliated using tear gas and burning down protesters' tents, sparking what would be a drawn-out protest effort resembling the Occupy Movement that lasted for months (Letsch, 2013).

Social media played a pivotal part in the protests, as Turkish media downplayed the demonstrations, with CNN-Turk infamously airing a penguin documentary rather than covering the developments (Kates, 2013a). Demonstrators commonly used Twitter, Facebook, and other social media applications to rally support and share information with each other (Kates, 2013b). Turkey leaders, including Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, denounced social media during the protests and sought to restrict their usage. In fact, dozens of people were arrested for using social media in protest efforts (Pearson & Tuysuz, 2013). Overall, social media enabled protestors to assemble against Erdogan's authoritarian regime, as protestors used Twitter hashtags and other linking devices to connect disparate groups of Turkish citizens (Kates, 2013b; Zakaria, 2013).

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This study analyzes messaging about Taksim Square on Twitter during the height of the protests (between May and December 2013) to gather insight on the use of social media to communicate power and seek change. Through a quantitative content analysis of 770 tweets about Taksim, we analyze power in social media using Albert Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy. Bandura's principles of self-efficacy apply to tweets about Taksim protests because we argue that to seek change through social media requires confidence in one's ability to communicate effectively to effect change, which is central to self-efficacy. In fact, findings show that Bandura's concept of vicarious experience—representing others' experiences in protest efforts—was a dominant practice in Taksim tweets. Findings also showed that individuals favor self-as-source and content-ownership behaviors when seeking change online. Overall, data analyses showed a higher percentage of information dissemination, personal commentary, and vicarious experience than direct criticism, social networking, and calls to action, from which we argue that social media may be used for raising awareness and seeking change from a distance, rather than for directing the change efforts directly (i.e. through calls to action). Furthermore, content ownership and online reputation may be driving forces of online participation in an issue.

2. Literature review

For the better part of the past decade, social media have dominated communication research. Though the concept extends beyond the digital tools commonly associated with the term, most references to social media apply to the use of the Internet and digital interactive communication services (i.e. online social networks). To this point, social media may be defined as: "Media designed to facilitate the dissemination of content through social interaction between individuals, groups, and organizations using Internet and Web-based technologies to enable the transformation of broadcast monologues (one to many) into social dialogues (many to many)" (Botha & Mills, 2012, p. 85, chap. 4).

Defining social media as a vehicle for interaction between individuals, groups, and organizations calls into focus public relations literature because of its emphasis on moderating the connections between publics, organizations, and the environment, including the way publics engage in activism (Dozier & Lauzen, 2009). Particularly relevant is the concept of a public, which has received significant attention in public relations research. In this section, we discuss the principle subjects that inform this study: publics, social media behavior, and power.

2.1. Social media and the public

Social media usage for advocacy and change necessarily begins with the notion of a public, articulated by Dewey (1927). In his seminal work *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey established that groups of individuals connect and form around an issue. Dewey's concept of the public is particularly relevant to the current study because of its undercurrent in social reform. According to Dewey (1927), a public is "a group of individuals who together are affected by a particular action or idea" (p. 128). For Dewey, issues create publics, which form spontaneously when individuals face the effects of a social action or event. The purpose of this type of public organization, according to Dewey, is to influence or control the consequences of an action. Therefore, the formation of a public presumes a sense of ability to act and make a difference through community connection, as individuals organize to confront and resolve an issue.

Recent scholarship has explored the concept of the public in today's globally connected society. In particular, Valentini,

Kruckeberg, and Starck (2012) argued that technology and globalization have "altered the concept of publics" because technology has made communication "faster, less mediated, and more widespread...facilitating the process of sharing ideas, concerns, and common interests" (p. 875). Social media have enhanced the capability of publics to create and distribute messages, thereby extending their opportunities for influence. In fact, the common term for referring to publics involved on social media—social media "users"—is a misnomer. The terms producer, distributor, and co-creator are more appropriate to describe public social media behavior. Valentini, et al. put it simply—through social media, "publics are not simply publics, audiences, target groups, stake- or share-holders. Instead, they become active players, often unrecognizable leaders of social interactions and of social construction of reality and meanings around reality" (p. 875).

Considering social media users as publics puts the focal point of social media usage on organizing and communicating around issues. Studies have confirmed the correlation between social media use and getting involved in a cause or issue (Mano, 2014; de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2013). Ozdemir (2012) has argued, "The masses that realize that their contributions can have a rapid effect and outcome become more willing to participate in the advocacy activities" (p. 27). Valentini et al. (2012) argue that social media empower publics because they "widen the range of people receiving messages and ultimately, increase the power they wield in confronting organizations" (p. 875). Fieseler and Fleck (2013) similarly argue that the capacity to air grievances via social media means more individuals will be willing to take to their social media accounts to do so. They argued, that social media lead to "increasing polarization, as more ideological or polarized citizens may feel a stronger need to organize and affect public outcomes" (p. 760). Miller and Brunner (2008) confirmed this polarization effect online—their research found that assertiveness and exaggeration were significant factors of online influence efforts.

Though the use of social media to express discontent is already well-established, the need to analyze the practices underlying such activity remains. Much of the research has been devoted to the promotional opportunities and strategies for organizations and brands to gain public support and prove advertising effectiveness through social media (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Fieseler & Fleck, 2013; Saxton & Waters, 2014). The need is to move past the promotional components of social media to publics' polarized activities online. Therefore, this study asks the following research question:

RQ 1. How do publics use social media to communicate about the Taksim Square protests?

Research on social media engagement provides a basic set of considerations underlying social media usage in Taksim Square protests. Researchers use the term "engagement" to refer to the emotionally and cognitively heightened use of social media (Oh, Bellur, & Sundar, 2010; Kang, 2014). Oh et al. (2010) define engagement as a "progression from interacting with the interface physically to becoming cognitively immersed in the content offered by it and then onto proactively spreading the outcomes of this involvement" (p. 25). The cognitive immersion underscoring engagement also connotes a sense of empowerment among social media users in sending and receiving messages online (Kang, 2014).

We argue that usage of social media to participate in a social movement like the Taksim Square protests would involve the emotional and cognitive immersion characteristic of the term engagement. Researchers have found a range of activities that underline social media engagement. Smith (2010) studied social media