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Meta's Challenge with Olives and Watermelon: The Case of Blocking Posts About Gaza

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Abstract

Digitalization stands out as an important factor transforming social structures and forms of communication in today's society. Social media offers a socio-political ground for participatory democracy and an alternative to traditional media in a globalizing world. Recently, Israel's attack on Gaza and the massive genocide in the region have caused a great resonance on the internet and social media. The aim of this study is to examine the censorship mechanisms applied by social media platforms during Israel's attacks on Gaza. The main question of the research is how social media censorship mechanisms affect freedom of expression and digital activism. As a result of the research, it has been observed that since the first days of the war, especially on Facebook and Instagram, posts were removed biasedly, and the accounts of people who frequently posted such posts were slowed down, and their posts were algorithmically blocked from being seen. As a result of this process, users have tried to overcome this situation with visuals such as watermelons and olives, symbols associated with Gaza. Contradicting the idea that alternative new media creates a libertarian space, it created great disappointment and damaged the trust of users. The importance of the research lies in its demonstration of the effects of censorship on freedom of expression and digital activism in social media. The study will examine social media censorship in Gaza in detail through using a literature review methodology and discussing relevant figures. As a result, we will present examples of the efforts of social media users who are algorithmically censored, which we call symbolic subversion, to overcome this situation with symbols.

Keywords: Social Media, Symbolic Defeat, Culture of Surveillance, Censorship, Meta

Meta'nın Zeytin ve Karpuzla İmtihani: Gazze İle İlgili Paylaşımların Engellenmesi Örneği

Öz

Günümüz toplumunda dijitalleşme, toplumsal yapıları ve iletişim biçimlerini dönüştüren önemli bir faktör olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Küreselleşen dünyada sosyal medya, katılımcı demokrasi ve geleneksel medyaya alternatif olabilecek bir sosyo-politik zemin sunmaktadır. Yakın zamanda İsrail'in Gazze'ye saldırı düzenlemesi ve bölgedeki büyük soykırım, internette ve sosyal medyada büyük yankı uyandırmıştır. Çalışmanın amacı İsrail'in Gazze'ye yönelik saldırıları sırasında sosyal medya platformlarının uyguladığı sansür mekanizmalarını incelemektir. Araştırmanın temel sorusu sosyal medya sansür mekanizmalarının, ifade özgürlüğü ve dijital aktivizmi nasıl etkilediğidir. Araştırma sonucunda savaşın ilk günlerinden itibaren özellikle Facebook ve Instagram'da yapılan paylaşımların yanı sıra kaldırıldığı, sıklıkla bu tür paylaşım yapan kişilerin hesabının yavaşlatılarak paylaşımlarının görülme oranlarının algoritmik olarak engellendiği gözlemlenmiştir. Bu süreç sonucunda kullanıcılar Gazze ile bütünleşen sembollerden karpuz ve zeytin gibi görsellerle bu durumu aşmaya çalışmışlardır. Alternatif yeni medyanın özgürlükçü bir alan oluşturduğu düşüncesi ile çelişerek büyük hayal kırıklığı oluşturmuş, kullanıcıların güvenini zedelemiştir. Araştırmanın önemi, sosyal medyada sansürün ifade özgürlüğü ve dijital aktivizm üzerindeki etkilerini ortaya koymasında yatmaktadır. Çalışma, literatür taraması yöntemini kullanarak ve konuyla ilgili görselleri tartışarak Gazze'deki sosyal medya sansürünü inceleyecektir. Sonuç olarak, sembolik yıkım olarak adlandırdığımız algoritmik olarak sansürlenmiş sosyal medya kullanıcılarının bu durumu sembollerle aşma çabalarından örnekler sunacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Medya, Sembolik Alt Etme, Gözetim Kültürü, Sansür, Meta

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Introduction

Nowadays, information technologies have integrated all metal devices like magnets. With the discovery of the Internet, these information technologies have been incorporated into the network. The primary institutions of today's society, which Manuel Castells describes as a network society, are located around the network (Castells, 2013a). These networks increasingly connect every function and part of society (Dijk, 2012). Many institutions, from education to health, politics to economy, have been digitalized with the internet. With the transition of the Internet to Web 2.0, a new interactive level has been reached. The individual has become not only a producer but also a consumer in cyberspace. In other words, the user becomes the prosumer, a form of production-consumption culture adapted to new media in digital environments (Ritzer, 2015). This situation has opened the door to a new era in the internet age. Technology, which Zygmunt Bauman interprets as 'do-it-yourself slavery,' has started to progress depending on the labor rather than the user-friendliness of the tools. In this way, the masses have managed to establish a faster and new communication network by interacting with social media channels (Bauman & Lyon, 2013). Thus, the masses have established a faster and new communication network by interacting with social media. With the possibility of mutual interaction, socialization has started in virtual space and time. Individuals have started to take a more active role in producing and consuming on this new platform. The most well-known of these platforms are Instagram, Facebook, Twitter(X) and TikTok. Through social media, communication has become more instantaneous and faster, reaching a wider audience.

In social media, individuals create a virtual identity and develop attitudes and behaviors towards the construction of this identity. At the same time, the formation of virtual communities and societies is a factor affecting society. Social media has influenced social movements by enabling the masses to collaborate. The claims of those who see the public representation of identities as a matter of freedom and justice find representation in this new media environment. In this way, virtual interaction on social media has found its counterpart on the street. Various non-governmental organizations have used social media in social movements to synchronize activists, ensure fast communication, and reach large masses without cost. Thus, social movements occur from cyberspace to urban space (Castells, 2013).

With its lack of a centralized structure, this new instrumentality has given social media a new mission. In addition to expressing themselves, individuals in society have benefited from social media, which exhibits a more libertarian and democratic attitude, to share their views against power and authority, to express opinions in socio-political debates, and to organize and get up-to-date and accurate news from the agenda. Thus, social media platforms have assumed the role of alternative new media in the face of traditional media.

However, it is seen that the operability of new media is interrupted by elements such as disinformation, manipulation, perception management, and propaganda. In addition, Foucault's panopticon concept of surveillance culture has evolved into a more voluntary and participatory surveillance culture through social media. In the context of this surveillance culture, users are faced with a situation that is contrary to their expectations from social media platforms. The reflection of all these on the power and authority front appears as censorship, slowing down, blocking, and

surveillance. These four elements cannot be considered independently of each other. With surveillance as the key element, the other elements of censorship, blocking, and throttling have become political weapons against users of social media platforms. This is contrary to the accepted structure of social media platforms that promise to provide a democratic space.

Recently, censorship on social media has been the subject of considerable debate, especially after the US elections. The suspension of Trump's social media accounts pushed him into a spiral of silence, and attempts to discredit it caused the issue to peak. The spiral of silence is a theory that explains the tendency of individuals to remain silent about voicing an opinion contrary to that of the majority (Neumann, 2002). It has recently been observed that Meta, in particular, censored the sharing of the Israeli massacre in Palestine on social media. In addition to the posts of many news channels and social media users, Human Rights Watch (HRW) prepared a report and revealed the situation (HRW, 2023). Despite the claims of social media platforms to provide libertarian and decentralized information flow, they question their impartiality and credibility by censoring content in times of crisis, as we have seen in the Gaza Attacks. By analyzing the censorship, blocking, slowing down, and surveillance practices of social media platforms in Gaza, this study aims to discuss the contradictions of alternative new media in terms of transparency, neutrality, and user trust.

The aims of this study are to analyze the censorship mechanisms applied on social media platforms during the Israeli attacks on Gaza and to examine the effects of this censorship on users' freedom of expression and digital activism practices. The study aims to discuss the contradictions of censorship practices with alternative media ideals and to reveal the symbolic strategies developed by users to overcome this censorship.

This study has two main questions for this purpose:

- 1) Which censorship mechanisms were implemented by social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) during the Israeli attacks on Gaza, and how did these mechanisms shape their impact on users' content production and sharing?
- 2) What symbolic and alternative methods have social media users developed to overcome censorship mechanisms, and how can these strategies be evaluated in the context of digital activism?

This research will use literature review and case study analysis methods to examine the censorship mechanisms applied on social media platforms. In view of the studies on digital censorship and digital activism in the literature, the types of censorship (content removal, account slowdown, algorithmic manipulation) applied on social media, especially during the attacks on Gaza, will be identified and their effects on users will be analyzed. Furthermore, the symbolic resistance strategies developed by users against censorship will be discussed in the context of digital activism. Data will be collected and analyzed from academic sources and social media posts.

In this study, the problem of censorship of social media, which is expected to offer a libertarian airspace, is going to be analyzed within the framework of surveillance culture and digital activism. This topical issue is expected to contribute to the literature on new media studies and digital activism. The censorship mechanisms implemented by platforms such as Facebook and Instagram during the Israeli attacks on Gaza have led to the questioning of this libertarian structure. First of all, the types of censorship are emphasized, and the censorship applied to the posts about

the massacre committed by Israel's attacks on Palestine on social media is discussed. In this context, what is systematic online censorship? Why is censorship applied on social media so far from being transparent? Against this censorship, it is observed that social media users continue to support Palestine and condemn the massacre with the watermelon symbol integrated with the Palestinian flag, which activists also use in street protests. It will be revealed how there is a way out against this censorship in the algorithm as a digital activism/slactivism through symbolic overcoming. This situation is going to be discussed in the study, and the findings obtained will be analyzed through content analysis.

Alternative New Media and Digital Activism

With its decentralized and libertarian structure and potentials, such as easy access to information and knowledge, immunity from authority, and freedom of expression, the Internet is presented on a socio-political plane that can pave the way for participatory democracy and alternative new media that aims to become the eyes and ears of the public again against traditional media.

Traditional media is strongly connected with politics through its centralized and hierarchical structure. The internet has allowed individuals to produce content with its decentralized structure. The new media is differentiated from traditional media by providing more instant and faster insider information. It has changed its axis by taking news out of the focus of the traditional media, which is biased and proceeds on the path determined by its supporters on the political plane.

There are two approaches to mass communication in the social context;

- 1) The first one emphasizes technological developments and the libertarian side of technology
- 2) The other emphasizes the socio-economic and political aspects of technology.

In addition, there is also an approach that social media platforms are merely a tool.

New social movements have incorporated virtual elements into their actions by using developing communication and information technologies. With the transformation of social movements into internet-based action through the use of social media, the term “new” was added and used together with digital activism (Tani & Boztepe Taşkıran, 2018). With the transition of the Internet to interactive media, new social movements created by the masses by organizing through new media are referred to as digital activism (Aksu, 2017). Digital activism is a concept that refers to social movements harnessing the power of social networks in addition to traditional communication methods (Tuna & Türkölmez, 2023). The uniqueness of digital activism lies in the fact that its practitioners, the digital natives, are very different from previous generations. Digital activism has become one of the main ways of subjectivization in the political sphere and of influencing political actors in terms of its transformation into an instrument of control over power (Tuna & Türkölmez, 2023). Digital activism is the mobilization of civil society through internet-enabled digital platforms and mobile phones to participate in governance processes (Tani, 2019). According to the methods chosen by activists and their goals, digital activism is characterized by slactivism/clitivism, taking sides/awareness activism, hacktivism, and citizen journalism (Köse, 2020).

From a technological progressivist point of view, the idea that the Internet will create a necessary and possible democratic environment is misleading. The focus is mainly on the emancipatory aspect of the Internet, which the decentralized nature of the Internet counts on. Nevertheless, this is the first perspective on the Internet. Another way of looking at this “liberating” aspect of the Internet is that it has an “anarchist” character. With this aspect, the internet has enabled people in society to express their ideas and thoughts more independently and demandingly against authority. Social movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, etc. can be given as examples. It can be said that this feature of the internet is used relatively more effectively, especially in strict regimes. Thus, the internet turns into a tool of control over authorities. Therefore, the progressive perspective and the tradition of technological determinism argue that the internet will bring about more democratic societies. On the one hand, the Internet rings the bells of democracy; on the other hand, it is seen to ring anti-authoritarian bells. However, the most ironic aspect of the Internet is that it was built mainly by anarchists but funded by the military. Both sides believed technology would fulfill their dreams (Bozkurt, 2000).

Censorship from Surveillance Culture to Super Panopticon

While the Internet has, on the one hand, provided a liberating ground -due to its structure, on the other hand, it has enabled the control and surveillance of too much information about individuals. In this way, the authorities can quickly obtain information such as an individual's ideology, opinion, and whether he or she is opposed to the government. It is known that information from what people eat to what they buy is processed and marketed for economic strategies through data mining. This situation brings to mind Foucault's panopticon metaphor (Foucault, 2011). The “panopticon,” whose metaphor Bentham gave meaning to within the framework of power relations, continues to be a part of surveillance culture today (Çelik, 2022). The phenomenon of surveillance defines an instrumental process through which power is established to establish its hegemony and gain power and to protect and develop that power (Marshall, 2001). From the past to the present, surveillance culture has been transformed by replacing control, coercion, and fear with voluntariness and consent. Surveillance, in which consent gains importance, today consists of participation in which the surveilled is also a part (Lyon, 2013). Relatively comfortable and unperturbed control and surveillance by the authority are carried out continuously. In the new society where information is power, surveillance is embedded in the fabric of society. According to Foucault, the Age of Enlightenment, which discovered freedom, also discovered disciplines and modern society became a society dominated by “surveillance” and “discipline” (Foucault, 2011). The concept of surveillance, which Foucault puts forward in a very striking way, “*the systematic investigation or monitoring of the communication or action of one or more persons,*” has recently gained particular importance in parallel with the development process of information technologies such as the internet (Foucault, 2011). The structure conceptualized as a surveillance society breaks down the barriers against total/integrated control with the impact of new communication technologies and puts all social life under control with the increasing spread of technologies. The surveillance society thus constitutes a superpanopticon, a structure that allows the minority to monitor the majority, the majority to monitor the minority, and everyone to monitor everyone from anywhere. The superpanopticon, as an understanding of surveillance independent of space and time, can be used in many different fields such as the security of individuals with society, health care services, road and traffic analysis, easy and fast detection of criminals, design of smart buildings, and automation. Surveillance in the superpanopticon takes

place in two ways; first, it increases control by creating awareness and self-criticism in individuals through databases. The other is to provide the power to quickly recognize and control individuals by recording personal information (Dereli, 2020; Kavut, 2023).

Jean Baudrillard says “the image is violent. Because what happens there is the murder of the truth”, pointing out that in an environment where everything is exhibited to be seen, there is actually nothing left to be seen (Baudrillard, 2024). In the risk society, the individual is not a victim of image but an image (Günerigök, 2018). In Nazife Şişman's words, “It makes itself transparent by holding the copyright of everyone's own life” (Şişman, 2016). By voluntarily placing themselves in the hands of their audience, individuals internalize control. This situation cannot be explained only by the high use of social media by young people; that is, it cannot be explained only as age-specific (Bauman & Lyon, 2013). But this does not mean that there is no external control and surveillance. In addition, virtual environments have a positive impact on mass movements. In addition, virtual environments have a positive impact on social movements. Virtual environments are effective in mass movements. Walter Lippman states that the words and images presented to the masses create a kind of virtual reality and effectively develop the desired behavior. Global social movements generally focus on “democracy, revolution, freedom, and peace.” Social media can shape and direct social movements in which large masses participate more effectively. However, there are also disadvantages, such as surveillance and censorship (Dijk, 2012).

While social media platforms, which appear to be emancipatory, can tend to be independent of power and authority, they can also go in the opposite direction in today's surveillance society. Castells calls mass self-communication fundamentally based on horizontal interactional communication networks, which are difficult for governments and corporations to control (Castells, 2013). However, networks consist of horizontal connectivity and vertical hubs and nodes (Dijk, 2012). It is seen that its emancipatory effect is realized within the boundaries presented to us and under control and surveillance. We are granted a virtual and yet managed area of freedom. This virtual medium is an area that differentiates according to ideology and culture and includes and enables digital surveillance and surveillance that is carried out unannounced. In the context of a culture of surveillance and control, it is also observed that the current dominant ideological understanding is suppressed.

Networks serve the efforts of governments and public institutions to record and control all citizens. In authoritarian states, this enables surveillance and censorship. In democratic states, it increases the power of public officials (Dijk, 2012). In order to manage social media platforms, states have developed methods of control and self-control and have introduced censorship, surveillance, and control mechanisms. Censorship has a political and policy background and emerges as a state intervention against political and ideological freedom of expression (Tekeli, 2021). Internet censorship, a new form of censorship, is defined as the practice of states controlling citizens' online activities, restricting the free flow of information, and violating the fundamental rights and freedoms of online users (Shukla & Moosavi, 2013). With the use of social media by power and authority, situations such as party formation, perception management, ideological collapse, or revolution emerge, especially in social movements. This situation affects meaning, ideology, culture, and perception. Here, individuals whose points of resistance are mentally weakened become ready to manipulate the content offered by mass media and do not question the

information imposed on them (Habermas, 2002). In this context, governments, administrations, political agents, and, as recent events have shown, large technological companies that want to shape or influence social movements resort to censorship, slowdowns, or blocking to influence the masses. There are different types of censorship on the Internet. These include technical blocking, slowing down, censoring search engine results, and restricting website content.

The intervention of nation-states and certain powers in access to the Internet shows that this issue cannot be evaluated solely within the framework of liberal freedom. There are also national and international organizations and initiatives (ITU-International Telecommunications Union/EU Convention on Cybercrime) that justify opposing every regulation on the Internet as censorship. It is expected that these organizations make regulations that prioritize political engagements.

Recently, one of the biggest examples of internet censorship took place during the 2020 elections. The recent US general elections clearly showed how much influence networks have on the relationship between politics and media. Donald Trump's posts were censored on social media. Trump's conflicts with social media and traditional media go back much further. In fact, his statements during COVID-19 were partially censored by Twitter and shared as sensitive content. During the elections, Trump's statements were countered by Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, claiming that his early victory announcements were shady. In this process, it was observed that Biden was favored, and some of the shady posts (related to Ukraine, private life, etc.) were removed from circulation. Trump openly criticized this situation, and he accused Facebook and Twitter of being the “third arm” of the Democrats, claiming that they supported the election campaigns of the Democrats.

The powerful and authoritarian structure of the big tech companies (Big Tech) and different platforms have started to be established to develop opposing discourses. Furthermore, again, applications such as Parler were removed from service after the raid on the US Congress because they were far-right. Twitter closed more than 70,000 accounts for similar reasons. Facebook removed all election-related posts with the hashtag “stop the theft.” It is known that certain institutions control these big companies entering the equation. Looking at the censorship processes from this perspective, it is tough to claim that posts with high discursive power are unbiased and from within the society. We are confronted with a landscape quite far from the techno-liberal plane that the Internet is accepted to host.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to examine the extent and forms of censorship of pro-Palestinian posts on social media platforms during the Israeli-Palestinian war. The research will be based on qualitative research methodology, using literature review and case study analysis. The literature review will examine existing academic sources on digital activism, algorithmic censorship, and alternative media theories to identify the types of censorship applied on social media platforms and analyze the effects of censorship on digital activism. The study aims to concretely analyze the censorship applied in the context of the Gaza attacks with examples. In addition, symbolic resistance strategies against censorship, such as watermelon and olive symbols, will be evaluated in the context of digital activism. This research aims to understand the mechanisms of digital censorship and the effects of censorship on user behavior while at the same time revealing how

symbolic strategies developed in the face of censorship contribute to the debates on digital activism and freedom of expression

In this study, censorship allegations against the posts made on social media regarding the Israeli-Palestinian war that started on October 7, 2023, and the results of the reports published by human rights monitoring organizations on this situation are presented according to the types of censorship. Since sharing all the posts in the study is impossible, an example of each type of censorship is given. It will then discuss how the watermelon, a symbolic item, has become an essential element of resistance for activists to cope with and overcome online systematic censorship.

Findings

Palestine, including Jerusalem, which is considered sacred for all three Abrahamic religions, has been home to many tribes and civilizations throughout history. Palestine, which has a strategic position on the axis of oil and holy, is a fragile region in the Middle East, known as a bleeding wound from the past to the present. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict began after the Second World War when the Jews, who had been allowed to immigrate under the Ottoman policies of tolerance, declared their independence in Palestine and violated international law through occupation (Filiu, 2016). The Palestinian Conflict emerged as an international problem on a regional and global basis as a result of the Arab-Israeli Wars that followed (Yıldırım, 2021). On October 7, 2023, the Palestinian organization Hamas launched an attack on Israel in an operation called the “Aqsa Flood.” With Israel's response, it turned into a war.

Israel's attack on Gaza and the war over the bombardment and genocide in the region have had a great repercussion on social media. Since the first days of the war, it has been observed that posts, especially on Facebook and Instagram, have been removed biasedly, the accounts of people who frequently post such posts have been slowed down, and their posts have been algorithmically blocked from being seen. In addition, fake and manipulative news showed that a psychological war had begun on social media through propaganda and perception management (Aydin, 2024).



Figure 1. Example of a restriction on content

The people and pages that experienced this situation tried to overcome this algorithm with a guidance method. In this process, the meta was deceived with images such as watermelon and olive, integrated with Gaza symbols. In this process, these social media platforms, accepted as alternative new media, have created great disappointment and damaged users' trust.

According to a 51-page report published by Human Rights Watch (HRW), Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, systematically censors pro-Palestinian content as seen figure 1 (Crabapple, 2023) and figure 2 (Warah, 2023) . Meta's content moderation policies and systems have increasingly silenced pro-Palestinian posts on Instagram and Facebook in the wake of Israeli attacks on Gaza, Human Rights Watch reported (Younes, 2023).

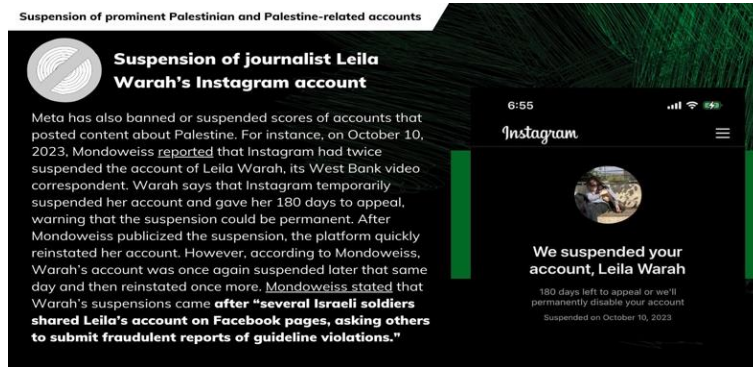


Figure 2. Example of account suspension

HRW accused Meta of erasing Palestinian suffering and limiting opportunities to tell the world what is happening in Gaza. Users of social media platforms owned by Meta say their posts calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and protection of civilians in the territory have been restricted, removed, or banned, as seen figure 3 (Mondoweiss, 2023). The removal of expressions of peaceful support for Gazans is the result of “flawed Meta policies and their inconsistent and erroneous application, over-reliance on automated tools to moderate content, and excessive government influence over content removal processes,” HRW said (Younes, 2023)

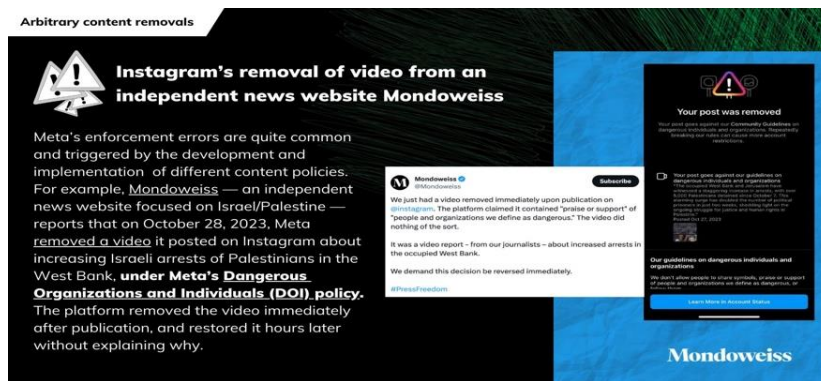


Figure 3. Example of Meta's content removal

In the report published by 7amleh in 2022, the digital censorship applied to the posts of pro-Palestinian and mainly activists was listed as account removal, restriction, warning, and limiting access visibility (7amleh, 2022). This shows that censorship has existed for many years and has not changed despite promises to fix it. After Meta asked for an independent body to investigate the issue after allegations of censorship, content removal, shadow banning, and suspensions during the Sheik Jarrah protests in 2021 as seen figure 4 (Soliiman, 2021), BSR (Business of Social Responsibility) published a report in 2022, “Human Rights Due Diligence of Meta Impacts in Israel and Palestine in May 2021”, which found that “there is a negative human rights impact on Palestinian users’ rights to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, political participation and non-discrimination, and therefore on Palestinians’ ability to share information and opinions about

their experiences” (Allison-Hope, 2022). In response, Meta issued an apology and promised to rectify the situation as seen figure 5 (Stone, 2023), but the events of October 2023 proved to be a broken promise (Younes, 2023). The recurrence of such situations on Meta and some social media platforms, especially in times of crisis, suggests that Meta's opaque and discriminatory moderation rules are disproportionately applied to oppressed and marginalized communities.



Figure 4. A tweet during the Sheikh Jarrah protests

Social media moderation theories have four main systematic factors. The first can be seen as removing tweets mentioning groups designated as terrorist organizations (DOI Policy). In 2021, Meta's addition of Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is considered sacred for Muslims, to the list of dangerous people and organizations was a matter of controversy (Özkan, 2024). The problem is that the US government determines this list, and its framework is not shared transparently. The second issue is newsworthy content. The third is content removal requests from countries, including Israel. Rules' arbitrary and erroneous application is far from transparent, inconsistent, and discriminatory (Fatafta, 2024).



Figure 5. Description of meta manager about shadow banning

Censored hashtags such as “Fromtherivertothesea,” “FreePalestine,” and “IStandWithPalestine,” as well as the Palestinian flag emoji, were caught in the online systemic censorship. Several prominent Palestinian accounts were suspended, as well as hate speech against Israel and the word Zionist.

Table 1. Standard models for analyzing online censorship according to HRW

Censorship Types Online	Description
Content Removal	Removal of posts, stories, and comments
Suspending or Deleting Accounts	Suspending or permanently removing accounts
Inability to Engage with Content	Restrictions on the ability to interact with content such as liking, commenting, sharing, and reposting stories for a set period ranging from 24 hours to 3 months
Unable to Follow or Tag Accounts	Restrictions on the ability to follow or tag other accounts
Restricting the Use of Features such as Instagram and Facebook Live	Restricting the use of features such as Instagram and Facebook Live, monetization, and recommending accounts to non-followers
Shadow Ban	Significant reduction in the visibility of a person's posts, stories, or accounts without notice, such as reducing distribution or access to content or turning off searches for accounts.

Belgium-based filmmaker and activist Thomas Maddens claims that a Palestinian video he posted with the word “genocide” suddenly stopped receiving engagement on the platform after an initial surge (BBC, 2024). “I thought I would get millions of views, but the engagement stopped,” Maddens told Al Jazeera. Authors, activists, journalists, filmmakers, and ordinary users around the world have said that posts with hashtags such as “FreePalestine” and “IStandWithPalestine,” as well as messages expressing support for Palestinian civilians killed by Israeli forces, are hidden by the platforms (Altın, 2024). “My account was shadowbanned yesterday after I posted an Instagram story about the war in Gaza,” Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Azmat Khan said on X, adding, “Many of my colleagues and fellow journalists reported the same thing. This is an extraordinary threat to the flow of information and credible journalism about an unprecedented war.” Such examples can be multiplied.

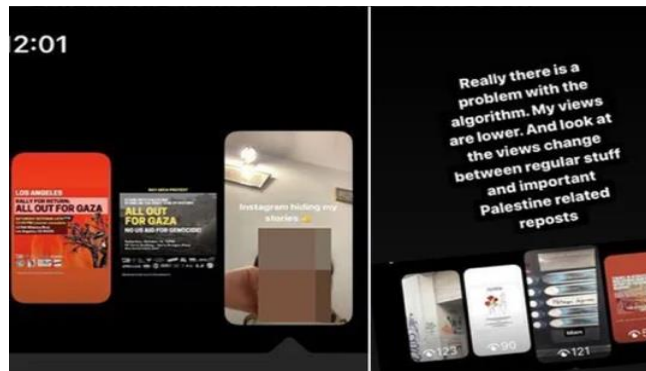


Figure 6. An example of a post expressing the decrease in the rate of views of posts about Gaza

Mohammad Darwish, as seen in figure 6 and figure 7 (Shankar, 2023), by creating an online tool to change how words are spelled to avoid online censorship;

As a community of developers, we have a principle that ‘there is nothing that cannot be done with code.’ So, I developed this tool in two versions, one in Arabic and one in English. The function of the tool is to change the form of sentences to make it harder for AI and Facebook algorithms to understand the meaning of the text.

Users are thus looking for ways to avoid the algorithm combined with artificial intelligence (Shankar, 2023).

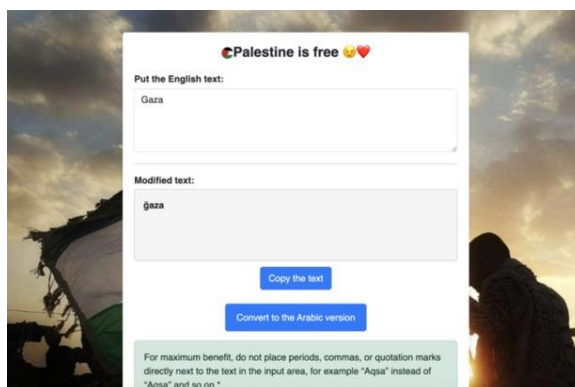


Figure 7. An example of Meta's feedback to users is that Aksa has been added to the list of dangerous persons and organizations

The Symbolic Defacement as a Form of Internet Activism: Watermelon Emoji

Algorithmic moderation systems classify user-generated content based on matching or prediction, leading to a decision and moderation output (removal, blocking, account closure, etc.). According to Grimmelman, algorithmic moderation is a control mechanism that facilitates collaboration and prevents abuses by shaping participation in a community (Grimmelman, 2015).

Despite the potential promise of algorithms and AI, automated moderation exacerbates the situation for three main reasons related to content policy enacted by social media platforms. First, in an attempt to increase transparency, it makes it harder to understand and audit a set of opaque practices. Restrictions on information have turned into an abusive model of less transparency and less accountability (Bambuer, 2012). The second is to complicate justice and equity issues in large-scale socio-technological systems. Finally, it is to ignore the fundamentally political nature of communication policies (Riley, 2013). Algorithmic moderation has the negative effect of reducing judicial transparency, making justice issues more complex, and promising positives on the problems of depoliticizing and obscuring complex political issues (Gorwa vd., 2020).

Symbolic subversion is a concept that refers to questioning and transforming the existing social order, norms, and values. In this context, Mike Featherstone, in his study of consumer culture, emphasizes the need to reshape traditions and cultural structures to produce new symbolic products. In this process, cultural experts transform the relationship between symbols and values by transferring meaning (Featherstone, 2007). Similarly, Erving Goffman, through his dramaturgical approach, addresses how individuals reconstruct social roles through performance. Goffman argues that individuals have the potential to both maintain and transform social norms through their performances (Goffman, 1956). This literature shows how the concept of symbolic subversion can be examined in the context of the critique and reconstruction of social norms.

Meta users have started a resistance against censorship by finding a way around content moderation policies. By using emojis of the Palestinian symbols Keyfe, Lemon, Watermelon, and Olive (or olive tree), users have managed to evade the algorithm in a symbolic subversion. On Instagram and Facebook, pro-Palestinian activists have posted by typing "G4z4" or using

watermelon instead of the Palestinian flag to avoid Meta's censorship (HRW, 2023). Thus, a consensus was achieved through emojis and symbols in the reactions shown on social media against the attacks in Gaza. Emojis respond to the need to express a lot with few words and gain meaning through visual indicators and social consensus (Demirci, 2024).

The watermelon became an essential symbol for Palestine even before October 7. In 1967, as a result of the Six-Day War, Palestine and Gaza came under Israeli rule. Under occupation, the Palestinian flag and its colors were banned. When the Palestinian flag was banned, young people started using watermelon slices, a popular fruit of the region, with the same colors as the Palestinian flag, to protest as seen figure 9 and figure 10 (BBC, 2023). After the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993, the Palestinian flag was recognized as the symbol of the Palestinian Authority. It was used in Gaza and the occupied West Bank. The watermelon symbol has thus become a tradition among activists and users of social media for decades in protests against censorship and symbolism. Many people continue to use watermelon slices to support Palestine, from everyday clothing to graffiti, from artwork to emojis on social media (Keskin, 2023). As seen figure 8 (BBC, 2023), the watermelon slice was drawn by artist Khaled Hourani in 2007 for his book “The Subjective Atlas of Palestine.”

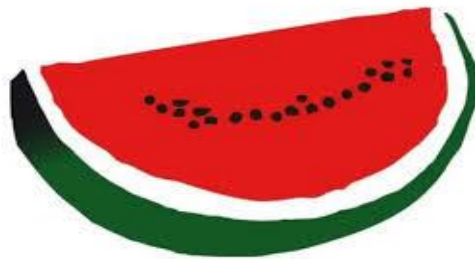


Figure 8. The watermelon slice was drawn by artist Khaled Hourani

Processes from the poem “In Praise of the Watermelon” by the American poet Aracelis Girmay, a poem dedicated to the symbolic meaning of the watermelon for the “Palestinian cause”;

In Palestine, where waving the Palestinian flag is a crime,
 Against Israeli soldiers,
 Watermelon slices are raised,
 Palestine's red, black, white, green.



Figure 9. An image from a demonstration in Tel Aviv: “This is not a Palestinian flag.”

On TikTok, British Muslim comedian Shumirun Nesssa created watermelon filters and asked his followers to make videos using them. He said that the proceeds would be given to foundations helping Gaza. In the meantime, some social media users started using watermelon symbols instead of the Palestinian flag to prevent their videos and accounts from being blocked (BBC, 2023). Thus, over the years, the watermelon symbol became an essential symbol of activism.



Figure 10. Image of protesters in Jerusalem carrying watermelon slices symbolizing Palestine

Conclusion

The internet and social media are becoming increasingly important in a digital world. Within the network society, social media promises its users a libertarian and democratic ground. Nevertheless, this libertarian structure has become a culture of voluntary and participatory surveillance, called the super panopticon. As a result, censorship takes place algorithmically on social media platforms. These censorships restrict access to information, disrupt freedom of expression, and cause polarization and discrimination. As a result of online censorship, injustice, political obscurantism, and lack of transparency are harbingers of danger in the socio-political and economic spheres.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that content moderation policies and systems on Meta-controlled social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have silenced pro-Palestinian content following the attacks on Gaza (Alaca, 2023). In a 51-page report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) analyzed 1,050 cases of online censorship from more than 60 countries. In total, HRW found more than a hundred recurrences of six common patterns of censorship, including peaceful expression on the Palestinian-Israeli war. These include removing content, suspending or deleting accounts, being unable to interact with content, following or tagging accounts, and restricting using features such as the Live feature (HRW, 2023).

Against this censorship by Meta on social media, activists and users prevented systematic censorship online by using symbols and emoji. Instead of the pool of concepts censored through artificial intelligence and algorithmic moderation, they continued to express their views and opinions without censorship through emojis and symbols. This process, which continues by developing new ones to replace the methods that have been noticed, can be called 'symbolic subversion.' Thus, the watermelon emoji, which bears the same colors as the Palestinian flag, has become a symbol of peace and resistance against war all over the world. Language, symbols, discourse, and ideologies are essential actors in political culture that help us explain society and the

political system in terms of power and power relations. People have used this symbol as a powerful tool to show the world that they stand with Palestine. These symbols play a significant role in the construction of cultural identity and are embedded in the codes of society. It has been a symbol of resilience and determination in the Palestinian struggle.

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Meta'nın Zeytin ve Karpuzla İmtihani: Gazze ile İlgili Paylaşımların Engellenmesi Örneği

Nuran KIZMAZ ÖZTÜRK*

Genişletilmiş Özet

Giriş

Günümüzde dijitalleşme gün geçtikçe artmaktadır. Ağ toplumu olarak nitelendirebileceğimiz toplumsal yapı içerisinde etkileşimli medya çağın işaret fişeği olarak nitelendirilmektedir. Bu etkileşimli medyanın gündelik dili ağırlıklı olarak sosyal medya platformlarıdır. Başta Facebook, Instagram ve Twitter olmak üzere çok çeşitli ve farklı işlevlere sahip olan sosyal medya platformları kullanıcıların gündelik hayat ihtiyaçlarının bir kısmını sanal uzam ve zamansallıkla karşılayarak farklı bir zemin sunmaktadır. Bu platform üzerinden daha hızlı, daha anlık ve geniş bir kitleye ulaşan sosyal medya, sokakta karşılığını araçsal bir ajan olarak sürdürmektedir.

Alternatif Yeni Medya ve Dijital Aktivizm

İnternetin Web 2.0 a geçmesiyle birlikte etkileşimli yeni bir düzleme geçilmiştir. Birey sadece tüketen değil aynı zamanda siber uzamda üretici konumuna geçmiştir. Bu durum internet çağında yeni bir dönemin kapısını aralamıştır. Böylece kitleler sosyal medya kanalları ile etkileşim kurarak daha hızlı ve yeni bir iletişim ağı kurmayı başarmıştır. Küreselleşen dünyada, merkezizsiz ve özgürlükçü olarak nitelendirebileceğimiz bu zemin, sağladığı bilgi ve enformasyona kolay erişim, otoriteden bağımsızlık, ifade özgürlüğü gibi potansiyellerle katılımcı demokrasi ve geleneksel medyaya karşı yeniden halkın gözü kulağı olmayı amaçlayan alternatif yeni medyaya zemin oluşturabilecek bir sosyo-politik düzlemde sunulmaktadır.

Gözetim Kültüründen Süper Panoptikona Sansür

Ağlar, hükümetlerin ve kamu kurumlarının tüm vatandaşları kayıt altına alma ve kontrol etme çabalarına yaramaktadır. Otoriter devletlerde bu gözetim ve sansüre olanak tanır. Demokratik devletlerde ise kamu görevlilerinin gücünü arttırmaktadır. Algoritma ve yapay zekanın potansiyel vaatlerine rağmen sosyal medya platformları tarafından yürürlüğe konulan içerik politikası ile otomatik moderasyon durumu daha da kötüleştirmektedir. Birincisi şeffaflığı daha çok arttırmak gayesi ile şeffaf olmayan bir dizi uygulamanın anlaşılması ve denetlenmesini zorlaştırmaktır. Bilgi üzerindeki kısıtlamalar daha az şeffaf daha az hesap verilebilir kötücül bir modele dönüşmüştür.

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Teknolojide ilerlemeci anlayış ile örtüşen bir bakış açısı ile internetin zorunlu ve mümkün bir demokratik ortam hazırlayacağı düşüncesi yanıltıcı bir düşüncedir. Temelde internetin merkezsiz yapısının sağladığı özgürleştirici yönüne odaklanılır. Fakat bu internete karşı birinci bakış açısıdır. İnternetin bu “özgürleştirici” yanına bir diğer bakış açısı ise internetin “anarşist” karakterinin olduğu görüşüdür. Bu tarafı ile internet toplumda insanların fikirlerini ve düşüncelerini daha bağımsız ve talepkâr bir şekilde otoriteye karşı ifade etmelerini sağlamıştır. Arap baharı, Occupy Wall Street vs. gibi toplumsal hareketler buna örnek olarak verilebilir. Özellikle katı rejimlerde internetin bu özelliğinin nispeten daha etkin kullanıldığı söylenebilir. Böylece internet yöneticiler üzerinde bir denetim aracına dönüşmektedir. Dolayısıyla ilerlemeci bakış açısı ile teknolojik determinizm geleneği internetin daha demokratik toplumları ortaya çıkaracağını savunur. İnternet bir yandan demokrasinin çanlarını çalarken diğer yandan otorite karşıtı çanları çaldığı görülmektedir. Öte yandan internetin en ironik tarafı büyük ölçüde anarşistler tarafından inşa edilmiş, fakat ordu için finanse edilmiş olmasıdır. Her iki taraf da teknolojinin rüyalarını gerçekleştireceğine inanmışlardır.

Metodoloji

Bu çalışmada İsrail- Filistin savaşı sırasında bireylerin sosyal medya üzerinden yapmış oldukları Filistin yanlısı gönderilere uygulanan sansürün hangi boyutta ve ne şekilde gerçekleştiğini araştırmayı amaçlanmıştır. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılarak verilerin analizinde literatür incelemesi tercih edilmiştir. Buna ek olarak örnek olay analizine dayalı teorik bir yaklaşım benimsenmiştir. Literatür taraması, dijital aktivizm ve algoritmik sansür konularında mevcut akademik kaynakların incelenmesini içermektedir. Bu teorik çerçeve sosyal medya platformlarının Gazze saldırıları sırasında uyguladığı sansürü anlamak için bir temel oluşturacaktır. Çalışmada Gazze özelinde yaşanan sansür olayları, literatürdeki kavramsal tartışmalar ile ilişkilendirilerek örnekler üzerinden analiz edilecektir. Araştırmada 7 Ekim 2023'te başlayan İsrail-Filistin savaşına dair sosyal medyalar üzerinden yapılmış olan paylaşımlara sansür iddialara ve bu durum hakkında yayınlanmış insan hakları izleme örgütü tarafından yayınlanmış raporların sonuçları sansür türlerine göre ortaya konmuştur. Çalışmada her sansür türüne bir örnek verilmiştir. Daha sonra çevrimiçi sistematik sansür ile bir başa çıkma ve alt etme biçimi olarak sembolik bir öge olan karpuzun nasıl aktivistlerin önemli bir direniş unsuruna dönüştüğü ele alınmıştır.

Bulgular

İsrail'in Gazze'ye saldırı düzenlemesi ve bölgedeki bombardıman ve soykırım üzerine savaş, sosyal medyada büyük yankı uyandırmıştır. Savaşın ilk günlerinden itibaren özellikle Facebook ve Instagram'da yapılan paylaşımların yanlı olarak kaldırıldığı, sıklıkla bu tür paylaşım yapan kişilerin hesabının yavaşlatılarak paylaşımlarının görülme oranlarının algoritmik olarak engellendiği gözlemlenmiştir. Bu süreç sahte, manipülatif haberler ve propagandalar ile algı yönetimi suretinde sosyal medya üzerinden psikolojik bir savaşın başladığını göstermiştir. HRW Filistin-İsrail savaşına dair barışçıl ifadeler de dahil toplamda altı ortak sansür modelinin yüzden fazla tekrar ettiğini tespit etmiştir. Bunlar: içerik kaldırma, hesapları askıya alınması veya silinmesi, içerikle etkileşime girememe, hesapları takip edememe veya etiketleyememe, 'Live' özelliği gibi özelliklerin kullanımının kısıtlanması olarak sıralanabilir. Özellikle sosyal medya platformunda Filistin destekçileri ve aktivistler (veya slaktivist) sosyal medya kısıtlamaları ile savaş suçlarının gizlenmeye çalışılmasına ve desteklerin kesilerek toplumsal hareketlere karşı daha evvel Filistin bayrağını taşımanın yasaklandığı 1967'de meydana gelen Altı Gün Savaş'larının ardından tepki ve direnişin

sembolü haline gelen karpuz metaforu ile sansüre karşı tepkilerini ortaya koymuşlardır. Karpuz figürü Filistin için 7 Ekimden daha önce önemli bir sembol haline gelmiştir. 1967'de Altı Gün Savaşı'nın sonucunda Filistin ve Gazze İsrail yönetimine geçmiştir. İşgal altında Filistin bayrağının ve bayrağın içindeki renklerin taşınması yasaklanmıştır. Filistin bayrağının taşınmasının yasaklanması ile birlikte gençler bu durumu protesto etmek için bölgenin sevilen bir meyvesi olan ve Filistin bayrağı ile aynı renkleri taşıyan karpuz dilimleri kullanmaya başlamıştır. Böylece karpuz sembolü sansüre karşı on yıllardır protestolarda ve sembolik olarak sosyal medyada aktivistleri ve kullanıcıları arasında geleneğe dönüşmüş durumda. Birçok insan Filistin'e desteğini göstermek için günlük kıyafetlerinden duvar grafitilerine, sanat eserlerinden sosyal medyadaki emojiye kadar yaygın bir biçimde karpuz dilimi kullanmaya devam etmektedir. Meta kullanıcıları sansüre karşı içerik denetleme politikalarını aşmanın yolunu bularak bir direniş başlatmıştır. Kullanıcılar Filistin'in sembolü haline gelen Keyfe, Limon, Karpuz ve Zeytinin (veya zeytin ağacı) emojiilerini kullanarak sembolik bir alt etme yöntemi ile algoritmadan kaçmayı başarmışlardır. Instagram ve Facebook'ta Filistin yanlısı aktivistler "G4z4" yazarak ya da Meta'nın sansüründen kaçınmak için Filistin bayrağı yerine karpuz kullanarak paylaşım yapmışlardır. Sosyal medyada Meta'nın uyguladığı bu sansüre karşı aktivistleri ve kullanıcılar sembol ve emoji kullanarak çevrimiçi sistematik sansürün önüne geçmişlerdir. Yapay zeka ve algoritmik moderasyon üzerinden sansürlenilen kavram havuzunun yerine emoji ve semboller yoluyla görüş ve düşüncelerini sansüre takılmadan ifade etmeye devam etmişlerdir.

Sonuç

Sonuç olarak dijitalleşen dünyada internet ve sosyal medya gün geçtikçe daha önemli bir konuma sahip olmaktadır. Ağ toplumu içerisinde sosyal medya, kullanıcılarına özgürlükçü ve demokratik bir zemin vaat etmektedir. Fakat aslında bu özgürlükçü yapının süper panoptikon olarak adlandırabileceğimiz gönüllü ve katılımlı bir gözetim kültürüne dönüştüğünü görmekteyiz. Bunun neticesinde algoritmik olarak sosyal medya platformlarında sansürün gerçekleştiği görülmektedir. Bu sansürler bilgiye erişimin kısıtlanması ifade özgürlüğünün sekteye uğratılması, kutuplaşma ve ayrımcılığa sebep olmaktadır. Çevrimiçi sansürlerin sonucu olarak adaletsizlik, siyasetin belirsizleştirilmesi ve şeffaflık olmaması sosyo-politik ve ekonomik düzlemde tehlikenin habercisi unsurlardır. Sosyal medyada Meta'nın uyguladığı bu sansüre karşı aktivistleri ve kullanıcılar sembol ve emoji kullanarak çevrimiçi sistematik sansürün önüne geçmişlerdir. Yapay zeka ve algoritmik moderasyon üzerinden sansürlenilen kavram havuzunun yerine emoji ve semboller yoluyla görüş ve düşüncelerini sansüre takılmadan ifade etmeye devam etmişlerdir. Farkedilen metotların yerine yenilerini geliştirmek suretiyle devam eden bu sürece 'sembolik alt etme' denilebilir. Böylece Filistin bayrağı ile aynı renkleri taşıyan karpuz emojiisi tüm dünyada savaşa karşı barış ve direnişin sembolü haline gelmiştir. Böylece Filistin mücadelesinde dayanıklılık ve kararlılığın sembolü olmuştur.

Araştırmacıların Katkı Oranı Beyanı / Contribution of Authors

Araştırma tek bir yazar tarafından yürütülmüştür.

The research was conducted by a single author.

Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı / Conflict of Interest

Çalışma kapsamında herhangi bir kurum veya kişi ile çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

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