DİJİTAL DÜNYADA GENÇLERİN POLİTİK ETKİNLİKLERİNE YÖNELİK NİTEL BİR ÇALIŞMA: DEMOKRASİ, ÖZGÜRLÜK VE SINIRLARI

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ÖZ

Günümüzde politik ifade ya da etkinlikler için bir araç olarak dijital sosyal platformlar genç nesiller için gündelik yaşamın önemli bir parçası durumundadır. Ancak, kimi zamanlar, özellikle kriz dönemlerinde, ulus devletler bu dijital platformları bir tehdit olarak algılayabilmektedirler. Bu nedenle, son yirmi yılda devletler, internetteki içeriğe erişimi kısıtlamak veya dijital sosyal platformlara erişimi farklı derecelerde engellemek için giderek daha fazla istekli hale geldiler. Bu çalışmada gençlerin dijital sosyal platformlara erişimin sürekli veya geçici olarak kısıtlanması veya engellenmesi gibi devlet politikaları hakkındaki düşünceleri veya tutumları demokrasi ve özgürlük bağlamında incelenmiştir. Nitel yöntem bağlamında veri toplama aracı olarak derinlemesine görüşme tekniği kullanılmıştır. Araştırmanın örneklemini Türkiye'de Aydın Adnan Menderes Üniversitesi'nde okuyan gençlerden oluşmaktadır. Bulgulara göre, dijital sosyal platformların demokrasi ve özgürlük yayma potansiyeline yönelik iki ana alternatif yaklaşım veya tutum bulunmaktadır: siber-ütopiklerin ve siber-şüphecilerin görüşleri. Dijital sosyal platformlara erişimin kısıtlanması veya engellenmesi gibi devlet politikalarına yönelik farklı tutumlar olsa da dijital dünyanın sunduğu kaynakların veya araçların, internet ortamlarındaki insanlar ve hükümetler, politika yapıcılar gibi diğer paydaşlar sorumlu davrandıkları müddetçe gerçek anlamda demokrasiye ve özgürlüğe olumlu katkı sağlayabileceği düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gençlik, Dijital ağ temelli politik etkinlikler, Demokrasi, İfade özgürlüğü, Kısıtlamalar.

A QUALITATIVE STUDY of YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL ACTS IN THE DIGITAL WORLD: DEMOCRACY, FREEDOM AND ITS LIMITS

ABSTRACT

Today, digital social platforms, as a tool for political expression or activities, are an important part of everyday life for younger generations. However, at times, especially during times of crisis nation states may perceive these digital platforms as a threat. Thus, over the last twenty years, states are increasingly willing to restrict access to content on the internet or block access to digital social at varying degrees. In this study, young people's thoughts or attitudes about the state policies such as restricting or blocking access to digital social platforms permanently or temporarily has been examined in the context of democracy and freedom. In the context of the qualitative method, in-depth interviewing technique was used as data collection tool. The sample of the research is composed of young people who are studying at Aydın Adnan Menderes University in Turkey. According to findings, there is two main alternative approaches or attitudes towards the potential of digital social platforms to spread democracy and freedom: views of cyber-utopians and cyber-skeptics. Though there are different attitudes towards the state policies such as restricting and blocking access to digital social platforms, it is thought that the resources or facilities offered by the digital world may positively contribute to

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democracy and freedom in real terms as long as people and other internet stakeholders such as governments, policymakers are acting responsibly.

Keywords: Youth, Digitally networked political acts, Democracy, Freedom of expression, Restrictions.

Introduction

Today, digital social media use by citizens is becoming more participatory. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010:61) defines social media as a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content. It can be said that a fresh wave of technological optimism has more recently accompanied the advent of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Wikies and the blogsphere (Loader & Mercea, 2011:758). Kim et al. (2013:498) indicate that recent years have demonstrated the importance of social media within the realm of public affairs, as well as individuals' everyday lives. So, the new world of reciprocal and interactive communication means that, in principle, the capacity now exists for larger numbers of people to express their ideas about, and preferences for, particular policies, forms of policymaking and indeed modes of governance (Ellison & Hardey, 2014:21). No doubt, younger people are most affected by the possibilities offered by this digital age.

The growing popularity of social media platforms raises questions about their role in the democratic process (Kim et al., 2013:498). Not surprisingly, for Zhao (2014:1) scholars are increasingly interested in evaluating the benefits and drawbacks of new media technologies for political purposes. In particular, researchers have asked if the internet acts as a positive force in the development of democratic systems and ideals (Best & Wade, 2009:255). In this sense, the role of information and communication technologies, in the democratization process, either promoting democratic transitions or strengthening young democracies, as has become a highly salient question for scholars and policy-makers alike in recent years (Nisbet et al., 2012:249; see Groshek, 2009; Howard, 2009; Mozorov, 2011). As Kellner (1999:102) noted, in the internet era, new forms of political communication are emerging that are creating new challenges and potential crises for democracy. As new public spheres emerge, new political actors come to the fore, the very nature of political news and discussion changes, and politics and democracy undergo transformation.

In fact, there are two main alternative approaches in the discussions on the potential for digital social media environments to spread democracy and freedom: views of cyber-utopians or optimists and cyber-skeptics or pessimists. The first of these approaches posits a positive attitude by emphasizing the contribution of digital social networks to ideal citizenship and its role in the functioning of a democratic and free system at a societal level. Johnson (2009:74) argues that the internet or social media platforms facilitates access to information, dissemination of information and opinions. In this sense, the role of social media platforms in providing information about public affairs and offering online space for people to express their opinions and engage in a variety of activities has been increasing as users are not only obtaining news and information but they also are able to post their own thoughts and opinions (Kim et al.,

2013:498). When assessed in this regard, the internet and digital social platforms has become an indispensable element of life practice as a powerful tool to support democracy with its contribution of free expression, free communication and participation. So, there has been widespread enthusiasm about the possibility of digital media technology advancing and enhancing democratic communication (Dahlberg, 2011:855).

However, as Soriano (2013:334) stated, besides the nature of the internet that strengthens democracy, it cannot be ignored that it could create an effect in the opposite direction. As with any other technology, we must not overlook the dual effect of these tools (Köchler, 2013:240). Thus, in recent years, "the vision about the pro-democratic nature of internet has been challenged by another antagonistic perspective. For cyber-skeptics, technology not only fails to support the democratization process; but rather moreover it possess characteristics that lead to regression" (Soriano, 2013:334). Loader and Mercea (2011:761) argue that skeptics are likely to reject the democratic potential of social media and instead point to its capacity to undermine serious rational deliberation. Instead, they will cite its use for negative campaigning and encouraging populist rhetoric and even extremism, as a future means to sensationalize the public sphere and foster celebrity politics. Similarly, Köchler (2013:240) indicates that in times intense conflict, the use of new means of communication can lead to strengthen stereotypes, or to encourage destructive and violent actions that overthrow the structure of a democratic society. In this regard, according to cyber skeptics or pessimists, there is an exaggeration about the idea that these digital media platforms will bring more democracy and freedom. According to them, the influence of these environments is not purely positive, as it is claimed.

Utopians and skeptics have different arguments whether digital social platforms will provide more democracy and freedom or not. However, it is an unfortunate truth that today, many countries restricting access to digital social platforms or censor internet content, the number of countries doing so is growing every year (Nunziato, 2010:2). The fact that digital social platforms, as a tool for political expression or activities, are at the center of the daily lives of young citizens requires the examination of how they perceive these digital platforms in the context of democracy and freedom. Because, at times, nation states may perceive these digital media platforms as a threat and restrict their use permanently or temporarily. As Mendel (2010:1) stated, it is universally acknowledged that the right to freedom of expression is a foundational human right of the greatest importance. At the same time, it is also universally recognized that it is not an absolute right, and every democracy has developed some system of limitations on freedom of expression. Thereby, in this study, it is tried to examine how young people evaluate the political activities and interactions in various digital social platforms and how they perceive the state policies such as restricting and blocking access to social media platforms.

Purpose and Problems of Research

Many countries restrict access to content on the internet or block access to social media platforms at varying degrees. Over the last twenty years, states are increasingly willing to interfere with the links between nodes of digital infrastructure by shutting out

particular users or shutting off particular servers (Howard et al., 2011:219). Hence, restricting and blocking access to digital social platforms permanently or temporarily may come to the fore in many countries at times, especially during times of social crisis, and become an intense contention. Today, the most popular digital social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Instagram and YouTube, as a tool for political expression or activities, are an important part of everyday life for younger generations. For example, majority of young internet users have a profile on more than one digital social platforms. In this sense, it is becoming more important to investigate how young people evaluate or perceive the state policies on the internet use such as restricting or blocking access to social media platforms.

In the study, in the light of the qualitative data, it has been tried to examine young people's thoughts or attitudes about the state policies such as restricting or blocking access to digital social platforms permanently or temporarily in the context of democracy and freedom. In this regard, the two main axes of work are formulated as research questions: (i) How do young people evaluate the political activities and the possibilities of self-expression in digital social platforms in terms of democracy and freedom? (ii) What are the opinions of young people about the policies such as restricting or blocking access to social media platforms permanently or temporarily if deemed necessary by state.

But we have to say that the findings of this research only refer to a specific group of young people live in Turkey. Because the participants consist of educated young people of a certain age range. In this sense, there is a bias in terms of educated young people. Therefore, it cannot be said that the data we found are apply to all other young people.

Method and Sample of Research

The qualitative method, which is a perspective based on understanding and interpretation, has been adopted in the research. In-depth interviewing technique was used as data collection tool. The universe of the research is composed of young people who are studying at undergraduate and graduate programs during the 2017-2018 academic year at Aydın Adnan Menderes University in Turkey. 18-29 age group, which is one of the preferred age ranges for studies on youth who are undergraduate and graduate students, has been determined as the target group. The sample of the research consists of 46 young people. For this choice, maximum diversity sampling method is used. There are 26 male and 20 female participants in the sample.

In this frame, in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face through a semi-structured interview form. The interviews conducted through the semi-structured interview form were tried to be performed as flexible as possible. The interviews were recorded by using the voice recorder. In this regard, the recorded qualitative data were analyzed trough creating some specific categorizations. In the presentation of qualitative data, the age and sex of participants are coded. P=Participant; F=Female; M=Male and Age. The data collection process of the research was conducted in January and February of 2018.

Theoretical Framework

The Digital World and Democracy: Are New Freedom and Self-Expression Areas Expanding?

Social media refer to digital technologies emphasizing user-generated content or interaction (Carr & Hayes, 2015:47; see Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In other words, social media includes internet-based services that allow individuals to create, share and seek content, as well as to communicate and collaborate with each other (Lee & Ma, 2012:332; see Kim et al., 2010; Lewis, 2010). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010:61) within this general definition, there are various types of social media that need to be distinguished further. But, most people would probably agree that digital social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, and MySpace are all part of this large group and have become most popular internet services in the World.

Through these digital social platforms, users can find various social activities, interact with each other, create their own personal profiles, share personal information and thoughts (e.g. Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kim et al., 2010). The distinctiveness of this second generation of internet democracy is the displacement of the public sphere model with that of a networked citizen-centred perspective providing opportunities to connect the private sphere of autonomous political identity to a multitude of chosen political spaces (Loader & Mercea, 2011:758; see Papacharissi 2010).

One of the most important debates emerging with the widespread use of digital social platforms whether these environments contribute to the democratic process and individual freedom in societies. Breindl and Francq (2008:19-20) advocate that as for the concept(s) of e-democracy, a continuous tension between a utopian vision and a pessimistic (or skeptic) view surrounds the Web 2.0: some consider the Web 2.0 as a form of democratic management of the internet, others see it as a place where popularity and quantity replace quality. In this sense, there are two main alternative approaches in the discussions on the potential for digital social platforms to spread democracy and freedom: views of cyber-utopians or optimists and cyber-skeptics or pessimists.

Cyber-utopians who assessed the impact of online communication on democracy and the political sphere from an optimistic perspective emphasize that the internet is a fore bearer of the establishing and reinforcing of democratic political systems. The main reasons used by the cyber-utopians include: (i) giving power to isolated individuals; (ii) promoting inter-group relations; (iii) local events take on international repercussions. (iv) promoting the economic development and social modernization on which democracy is established (Soriano, 2013:335-336). This perspective likens the internet-based environments to the participatory model of the Athens democracy and suggests that all citizens are directly involved in the political process, just as the agoras of the period (Tunç, 2005:139; see Bentivegna, 2002). Thus, cyber-utopians suggest that the new media will make political information more attractive, reduce the cost of participation, and create political participation opportunities. Similarly, Coleman (2001:118) argued that online digital-based communication can strengthen participatory democracy.

In light of contemporary world events where new information and communication technologies have been credited for democratic advancements, cross-national

research has begun to empirically explore the relationship between internet penetration and democratic development (Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014:628). In this context, findings confirm the positive role that information and communication technologies play in promoting democratic transitions or deepening democracy in democratizing regimes by allowing to access more pluralistic content that increases citizens demand for democracy (Nisbet et al., 2012:251-252; see Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014; Norris, 2011; Groshek, 2009; Howard, 2009; Best & Wade, 2009). From this point of view, as stated by Kim et al. (2013:499) the relationship between social media use and individuals' discussion network heterogeneity and civic participation is an important area of exploration, as both promote democratic citizenship and are key markers of deliberative and participatory democracies (e.g. Gil de Zuniga & Valenzuela, 2011; Mutz, 2006; Sunstein, 2001.) Shah et. al. (2005:532) indicate that in contrast with traditional media, the internet provides a source of political information and a sphere for political expression, both of which would seem to support civic engagement.

However, as stated by Soriano (2013:337) within this trend, we find ourselves amongst some observers who make an antagonistic form of diagnosis, which not only casts doubts on the liberalising effects of this technology, but which also considers that the consequences of this are quite the contrary (e.g. Sunstein, 2001; Bimber, 2003). Cyber-skeptics advocates that cyber-optimists overrate the internet-mediated democracy. According to them, the optimist claim that Athens's agora democracy will revives with the new cyber democracy is a fiction. Further, as noted by Van Dijk, (2012) cyber-skeptics argued that the digital media would drive up the speed of deliberation and consideration in political representation, that they would support populism, increase information inequality and be no solution for a basic lack for political motivation among many citizens. Some have also attacked the democratizing potential of the technological characteristics. In addition to this, they argue that the internet has detracted individuals from traditional democratic processes and wasted the enormous energy of individuals by transforming the sense of citizenship. Generally, for cyber-skeptics, information pollution, risk of propaganda, provocation, manipulation, insulting messages, boundaries of privacy areas, limits of the freedom of expression, disintegration of public sphere, cultural conflicts and standardization of masses are seen as the most problematic aspects of the digital social platforms.

According to Soriano (2013:348) in both perspectives we can infer a certain simplification in the causes that feed the processes of political change. When cyber-optimists talk about the internet paving the way towards the establishing of democratic systems, they over-estimate the role of freedom of expression and of information as requirements for democracy. For Meriç (2017:36), no doubt that online communication offers tremendous opportunities in terms of democracy, citizenship and political communication, but it also, as cyber-skeptics advocates, reinforces the existing obstacles or barriers. As a consequence, as stated by Toprak et al. (2009:199), whether the contribution of the new media to the development of democracy and social movements is positive or negative, almost everyone and every group in the world find a place for themselves on the internet.

Although the existence of different attitudes towards the influence of digital social media platforms on democratic life is important, what is more important is how

especially young people, the active users of these environments, think about this issue. Because, along with the rapid growth in digital social platforms, internet restrictions (or censorship) has also become increasingly visible (Fourie et al., 2013:5). According to the data of Freedom House (2016), internet freedom around the world has been declining for six consecutive years, and only 17 of the 65 countries included in their study were labeled as free (Shen, 2017:2093). As Penney (2017) stated, with the internet regulation and censorship [or restrictions] on the rise, increasingly engaging in online surveillance, and state cyber-policing capabilities rapidly evolving globally concerns about regulatory chilling effects online.

In this respect, it is important to understand how the young people perceive the restrictive and regulatory policies of the nation states on the use of these digital social platforms in terms of democracy and freedom. However, evaluating the restrictions to access internet content and digital social platforms or censorship on freedom of expression, is a complex matter. In this regard, motivations for internet restrictions or censorship differ from country to country, Cohen (1997) identifies a number of concerns common to many countries that lead to restriction or censorship, namely: National security, protection of minors, protection of human dignity, economic security, information security, protection of privacy, protection of reputation, intellectual property (Fourie et al., 2013:11; see also Howard et al., 2011).

But, as Shen (2017) questioned, do people all over the world desire a free internet? Or what is the limit? Results of statistical interaction analyses which based on secondary data set, suggest the impact of internet use on demand for internet freedom and control is contingent on people's perceived freedom supply in their respective countries.

According to the survey data of Dutta et al. (2011), which collected from internet users in 13 different countries, an overwhelmingly majority (more than 70 percent) strongly felt that access to internet should be a fundamental right for all people. Also, the majority of users across countries felt that people should be able to freely criticize their government online and express their opinion anonymously on the internet freely. On average, 55 percent of all users supported freedom of expression online, while 28 percent neither agreed nor disagreed and only 14 percent disagreed.

The study conducted by BBC World Service in 26 countries between 2009 and 2010 showed that about 79% of the people agreed or strongly agreed that access to the digital platforms should be a fundamental right, but only 53% of the respondents believed that the internet should never be regulated. Also, 78 percent of people felt that the internet had brought them more freedom (Incordporeated, 2010). Similarly, Internet Society's Survey (2012) findings showed that 83% of the respondents (internet users from 20 countries) agreed that access to the internet should be a basic human right, and 86% agreed that freedom of expression should be guaranteed

The findings of Pew Research Center (2014) indicate that among 21,847 people in 24 emerging and developing economies, support for internet freedom is especially strong in countries where a large percentage of the population is online. And, in most of the countries polled, young people are particularly likely to consider internet freedom a priority.

Findings

Dutta et al. (2011:5) noted that "as more and more people are connected to the internet, today's networked society makes it increasingly difficult to remain offline. Consequently, individual citizens are becoming more focused on the opportunities and risks electronic devices pose". Today, social media platforms, as a tool for political expression or activities, are an important part of everyday life for younger generations. In this sense, it is becoming more important to investigate how young people perceive the policies of state such as restricting and blocking access to social media platforms. Do digital social platforms always contribute to the democratic process in a positive way? In this context, it has been tried to investigate the thoughts attitudes of participants about the policies such as restricting or blocking access to digital social platforms permanently or temporarily if deemed necessary by state. Thus, it is intended to understand the background of the young people's thoughts for this issue. In this framework, 6 basic categories emerged from the collected qualitative data[1].

Category 1: Be on the horns of a dilemma

For Bihani and Hamilton (2009:59) the internet today is standing at a threshold; both limitless opportunities and daunting threats lie ahead. The challenge is to grab the opportunities and exploit them to the fullest, while containing, if not eliminating, the threats. We can say that there is no consensus in the literature about the positive or negative effects of the political use of social networks on the democratic functioning and freedom in society. A significant part of participants has emphasized the dual impact of political activities (such as the expression or sharing of political ideas) in social media platforms. In other words, they evaluate the positive and negative consequences of digital platforms on democratic system equally. Some statements that summarize this dual effect of the digital social platforms for the use of political purposes have drawn particular attention:

> "…it's a matter of freedom. Anyone who uses social media appropriately can learn something and follow the social and political agenda. Again, for example, you can learn to respect opposing views. This allows us to become a more democratic and tolerant society. But, the activities in these platforms can also negatively affect. For example, when you see that a person cannot tolerate different ideas and shares, you can get angry and upset. The possibility of conflict is very high…" (P.11, M-23).

> "…everyone has free will. I do not think that it is a problem as long as there are respectful shares and expressions towards different opinions. These platforms allow us to be aware of a large number of different views. But it can also damage your relationships. When shares are insulting, you can get nervous. Also, because of their political view, people can be labeled very easily. So, this makes people frightened to share their ideas. This damages democracy too..." (P.17, F-28).

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[1] In the presentation of qualitative data, the age and sex of participants are coded. P=Participant; F=Female; M=Male and Age.

"…not always, but I think people should have opportunity for express themselves in every way. This is important in terms of democracy. However, sometimes people go too far. There are also useful and damaging features. Sometimes great tensions can arise. In fact, people are constantly making fun of each other's opinions, underestimating, this is wrong…" (P.45, M-24).

According to the statements, it is seen that the participants often have a clear dilemma whether the digital social platforms have positive or negative effects on democratic functioning. Participants have an equal emphasis on the positive and negative contributions of social media platforms. It can be argued that because of this mental confusion or dilemma, individuals often have a skeptical attitude towards these digital platforms. In this sense, it is understood that individuals often have some hesitations about the use of these digital social platforms on a political basis.

Undoubtedly, the attitudes and thoughts of young individuals may be contradictory and differ from each other about the effects of the political use of these environments on democratic functioning. However, a deep inquiry is needed to understand the role of these digital platforms play in the daily lives of individuals and to realize the underlying justifications of their thoughts. For this purpose, the participants thoughts and their justifications about the policies such as restricting or blocking access to digital social platforms permanently or temporarily if deemed necessary by state has been examined. In this context, the data obtained from the interviews reveals various attitudes based on different justifications.

For example, McClosky et al. (1983) found that citizens had conflicting values that impeded on civil rights, such as freedom, when they felt insecure or fearful about specific issues. Similarly, in the study conducted by Dutta et al. (2011) show that on average, 42 percent of respondents supported general government regulation of the internet, while 26 percent disagreed, and 28 percent neither agreed nor disagreed. In addition to this, according to the survey data of Pew Research Center (2014), there is widespread opposition to internet censorship in emerging and developing nations. Majorities in 22 of 24 countries surveyed say it is important that people have access to the internet without government censorship. In Turkey %58 of participants saying it is important that people have access to the internet without government censorship or restriction.

Category 2: Digital social platforms should be restricted and blocked for the sake of survival of the nation state and the social order

For all societies, democracy is the guarantee of social order, freedom and stability. Therefore, it is important to understand how the young individuals evaluate the resources or facilities offered by digital social environments in terms of democracy, social order and freedom. There is some remarkable statements and justifications of the participants who believe that the access to social media platforms should be restricted or blocked by the state if it is necessary.

"…misinformation is being produced and spreading very easily. So, I do not really trust these platforms. However, most people do not think

about it. The right to express themselves on these platforms is natural, but there are people who are damaged due to misleading news and information. That's why hatred is rising. It really damages democracy and freedom. Sometimes, I think access to digital social platforms should be restricted and blocked by the state..." (P.15, F-23).

"…the information circulating in digital media platforms can sometimes be true or wrong. In general, everything that is shared is non-objective. Thus, these environments are not reliable. Democracy doesn't mean to saying everything that comes into your mind. I respect if the state thinks that there should be restriction. This is related to the security of the state. People are doing the wrong things. Restrictions are necessary to prevent people from organizing and posing a threat to the state. So, I think that it is acceptable when restrictions and blocking are needed…" (P.16, M-25).

"…there is a lot of hearsay information. It is very difficult to find the right information. Discussions are very frustrating. Whoever insults the president of the state should be directly complained. People organize each other, spreading the wrong ideas very quickly. In fact, it seems that the government's restriction is right. We have seen the best example of this in Gezi protests. Provocateurs do good work. What happened? Many people are killed. Is this democracy?..." (P.17, F-28).

It is seen that those who argue that digital social platforms should be restricted or blocked if it is necessary emphasize some common points. According to them, digital social environments create information pollution, arouse feelings of hatred, and are therefore open to provocation. Hence, these platforms are not credible. However, the most important argument that has emerged from statements is the information pollution (and incredibility) created by such environments. According to this argument, information pollution has the potential to harm the state, leading to illicit reactions and actions against it, thus disrupting the social order. For these reasons, it is thought that the access to digital social platforms should be restricted or blocked by the state if it is necessary for the sake of survival of the state and maintaining social order.

In the literature, pessimistic or skeptical scholars who evaluate the relationship between political activities in digital social platforms and democracy question the effects and consequences of these environments on democratic functioning critically. Firstly, the credibility and validity of the information on the internet is questioned, and it is argued that such a lot of data will hurt citizens' decision-making and participation process (Tunç, 2005:141).

According to survey data of Dutta et al. (2011), the majority of users in all countries showed high levels of distrust in information and people online. Their research data indicate that more than 75 percent of users in all countries felt at least somewhat concerned about being misled by inaccurate information on the internet, and 70 percent or more felt somewhat concerned about people lying about who they were online. Recent concerns about credibility stem from the fact that "internet and digitization technologies both lower the cost of and increase access to information

production and dissemination. This obviously raises issues of credibility" (Metzger, 2007:2079). As Johnson and Kaye (2014:959) stated, understandably, assessing the credibility of SNS messages is complicated because information comes from a variety of sources, ranging from expertly vetted articles from well-respected publications and websites to views spouted from friends one has never met.

Therefore, it is thought that the information pollution created by these platforms will weaken or undermine the democratic administrative processes, and the very small groups which have limited agenda will pollute the cyber environment (Tunç, 2005:141). For these reasons, for those who have a skeptical or pessimistic view, although these environments are regarded as a field of freedom, freedom can be sacrificed if it is necessary for the sake of survival of the state and maintaining social order. Therefore, the state policies on the internet use such as restricting and blocking access to social media platforms are often perceived as a necessity.

Similarly, it has been found that some participants are worried that not everyone will use the digital freedom environments well-intentioned or rightminded. Therefore, these concerns are presented as legitimate or reasonable grounds for restricting and blocking access to digital social platforms in order to maintain social order:

"…the shares in such environments are not rational and healthy. For example, there are news with full of misinformation. Everyone has a law unto one's own. There are a lot of disrespectful people. Nobody listens to each other's thoughts. For example, there are many evil-minded people who want to stir controversy. They are often supported by foreign countries or outside forces. A lot of people want to provoke. In this context, the state must block access to these platforms for the general happiness of the society…" (P.18, F-22).

"…yes, access to digital media platforms should be restricted or blocked when needed. In fact, I think that it is necessary for maintain social order. Because everybody's intentions are not the same, those who are supported by foreign forces and traitors can do anything. If restriction or blocking access to some platforms is needed, of course, the state should do it without thinking…" (P.38, F-19).

"…I respect that, but the negative side of digital media is more. People are not so well-intentioned, unfortunately. At the same time, states are not well-intentioned. When we look at the events in the world, the strongest countries are able to deceive and manipulate the peoples of the weakest countries through misinformation in these environments. The nation state should also protect itself and the citizens in a way. The state must have the right to intervene. The state needs to defend itself against evil-minded forces. Thus, access to digital media environments should be restricted or blocked. This is not a matter of freedom…" (P.15, F-23).

As can be seen from the statements, those who emphasize the negative consequences of the political activities in digital social platforms draw attention to the use of these environments by evil-minded people or forces. It is argued that these

social platforms are used as a means of manipulation and provocation, especially in times of intense international conflict or struggle, and it is emphasized that nation states have the right to self-defense against this. Therefore, those who consider the matter as a legitimate self-defense or self-protection do not perceive the state policies on the internet use such as restricting and blocking access to social media platforms as destructive for democracy and freedom. On the contrary, it is believed that the absence of restrictions would have a negative effect on democracy, social order and freedom. They argue that digital social platforms will create chaos and crisis. This means that all actors of civil society cannot be well-intentioned at nature. It is also unexpected that they share the same ideals. For this reason, it is accepted that it is reasonable and legitimate for the state to take precaution in the face of such threats.

Category 3: It should be restricted temporarily if it is necessary for maintain social order, but not blocked permanently

A part of the participants interviewed in the context of the qualitative study complain about the political activities in such environments due to the irrational political content sharing and discussions. Participants who complain about the irrational and unhealthy political content sharing think that these platforms should be restricted temporarily if it is necessary but still not be completely or permanently blocked:

"…a few people are able to make political discussions consciously and rationally. This is also reflected in digital media. It is even becoming more irrational and unhealthy due to some evil-minded digital heros. It is unclear to whom and which country they serve. They are provoking people and creating a conflict climate. They are trying to weaken this country. I think that digital platforms are a threat to national security. However, I oppose to blocking access to these platforms permanently. But, if there is a threat to national security, or if there is a state of exception, access to these platforms should be restricted temporarily..." (P.4, F-26).

"…these environments create enmity and sense of hatred. Of course, such social media platforms should not be blocked completely. However, such shares should be controlled. For example, insulting content should be filtered or restricted legally. However, no result can be accomplished by blocking or restricting access to social networks where people communicate with each other freely. This problem must be solved at the individual level…" (P.12, M-24).

"…there should be no blocking. But sometimes there may be temporary restrictions to ensure social order and democratic functioning. Provocative expressions are damaging national-spiritual feelings. These can lead to dangerous events. Because sometimes I see people who are in a rage. They swear at people's values and provoke them. They also define this as freedom. It hurts the unity of this society and demoralize people. I can call it an information pollution. People doing this are brainless...." (P.30, M-20).

According to the data, it is understood that the thoughts of those, who advocate that access to digital social environments should be restricted temporarily in case of emergency but not blocked permanently, are based on the concepts and arguments such as national security, national threat, national interest, provocation, corruption of community spirit, distrust, harming moral values, exploitation, insult, right to information and communication, freedom of speech or expression. People in support of restriction or censorship such as Cohen (1997) argue that information over the internet is controlled because open communication technology carries a certain amount of potentially harmful or illegal content. The fear is that it can be used as a vehicle for criminal activities and terrorism (Fourie et al., 2013:10). Also, it is believed that the digital social platforms damage the community spirit and social values.

However, despite this great concern for online trust and security, young participants perceive the digital social platforms as guarantee of democracy and freedom of expression. In this regard, for these participants, restricting access to social media platforms temporarily if deemed necessary by state are valid and acceptable, because they have potential hazards at both the individual and the social level. However, it is thought that a further stage of this would harm democratic rights and freedoms. Therefore, according to them, an intervention like blocking access to social media permanently will be wrong. Because, in any case, digital social platforms help to find political solutions to the general problems of society.

Category 4: It should not be restricted or blocked at all costs

There are divergent views on the effects of political activities in the digital social environments on the democratic functioning in society. An important part of the participants believed that the existence of these digital platforms is absolutely indispensable in terms of democratic functioning. In this respect, it is important to distinguish and understand the basic arguments of those who argue that access to such environments should not be restricted or blocked at all costs.

In this framework, discourses show that the participants, who are opposed to the state policies such as restricting and blocking access to digital social platforms, perceive the issue as a restriction on individual freedom and destruction of democratic functioning of the society.

> "…because I live in a country with freedom of thought or speech. Blocking access to these environments means to restricting my freedom. That's not right behavior. They want to obstruct the political organizations, but they actually restrict my freedom of thought. However, sometimes absurd thoughts are shared that you think it should be closed. But no, should not be blocked or closed…" (P.13, F-22).

> "…controlling, restricting or blocking should not be necessary. This means to interfere in people's freedom areas. People can share what they want to. People's thoughts cannot be banned. We have freedom of speech..." (P.24, F-24).

> "…social media environments should never be restricted. These are free platforms. People consider it as an environment in which they express

themselves. Blocking access to social media means to restriction on my freedom. Everyone can express your mind freely. Why do these restrictions exist? It's very meaningless…" (P.14, M-24).

According to the statements of the participants, such environments are considered to be the means by which individuals can freely behave in their daily lives or think they are free. A key attribute of social media, Papacharissi (2012) suggests, is that they allow multiple connections to varied and distinct social realms. In addition to this, it is also believed that the use of social media is an important tool for individuals to express themselves politically (Gil De Zuniga et al., 2014:612). In this framework, such platforms are seen as an opportunity for individuals to express their political ideas and opinions, to share with others and to recognize different views. Hence, as fundamental right the freedom of self-expression provided by these environments make it indispensable for the individual. Therefore, state policies on the internet use such as restricting and blocking access to social media platforms are perceived as an interference in the field of individual freedom.

According to Soriano (2013:335) through cyberspace, individuals can express themselves freely and without the mediation of the protagonists, which represents an enriching of the political debate because a greater number of participants with different perspectives join in. Thus, as stated by Balkin (2004:3) the digital technologies highlight the cultural and participatory features of freedom of expression. The purpose of freedom of speech is to promote a democratic culture.

Similarly, although a significant part of the participants has a dominant view that political content sharing in digital environments does not operate rationally, they do not think that access to digital platforms should be restricted or blocked. The following discourses exemplify this attitude:

"…the discussions in such platforms are not rational and healthy. There are too many expressions of anger and hate. There is an effort to humiliate each other or to see themselves superior. But, no, it should definitely not be closed. People are communicating there. These social platforms are the areas of people's freedom. Thus, no one has the right to block the freedom of speech. That's why I think it can never be closed..." (P.20, F-23).

"…as the leaders do, everyone is trying to pollute each other and throw mud. No one respects anyone. Everyone always thinks of themselves superior. But despite this, restriction is ridiculous. Social media platforms are the places where we have fun and speak politically. Freedom of self-expression should not be restricted…" (P.19, F-19).

It can be argued from the discourses that the political content sharing and discussions in digital social environments are not rational and healthy for many participants and are perceived as unsecured. However, according to them, state policies such as restricting and blocking access to social media platforms means restricting the right of individuals to receive information, to communicate, to express opinions, to organize and to participate politically. These participants consider the

restrictions as a matter of freedom. Likewise, the results of the study conducted by Dutta et al. (2011:12) indicate that there was general consensus amongst all users in support of online freedom of expression and privacy, and a high level of online distrust and concern for security. Therefore, according to the young participants statements, despite its negative side, these platforms need to be protected in order to be able to form a more democratic culture. For Balkin (2004:4) the idea of a democratic culture captures the inherent duality of freedom of speech: Although freedom of speech is deeply individual, it is at the same time deeply collective because it is deeply cultural.

In modern democratic societies, citizens must have a sense of being able to influence the actions or thoughts of the state or decision-makers to some extent. In this sense, it is expected that the level of citizens' political self-sufficiency for democratic stability is expected to be high, because citizens believing that they have this power are likely to have higher beliefs about the democratic system. Some recent studies show that political self-sufficiency affects online political participation positively (Yang and Dehart, 2016:5; see Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2011). According to Yang and Dehart (2016:5) there is a positive relationship between political self-efficacy and self-expression or political participation. Participants, therefore, think that digital social platforms allow them to express themselves, which in turn increases political self-sufficiency and contributes to democratic functioning. When people think that they have freedom of speech, they become more attached to the democratic system. In this sense, according to Balkin, (2004:4), "freedom of speech is a cultural system as well as a political system. It is a network of people interacting with each other, agreeing and disagreeing, gossiping and shaming, criticizing and parodying, imitating and innovating, supporting and praising. People exercise their freedom by participating in this system".

Many free speech theorists maintain that access to information on the Internet should be unrestricted and that those of us who are committed to free speech should work to oppose the restrictions imposed by other regimes on Internet speech (Nunziato, 2010:4). Therefore, according to participants who think in this way, the state policies such as restricting or blocking access to social media platforms permanently or temporarily is inacceptable at all costs.

Category 5: Restricting or blocking access to social media platforms may create more crisis

Some participants believed that the state policies such as restricting and blocking access to social media platforms does not contribute to the resolution of any problems, and this may create more crises. Participants perceive these restrictions as the destruction of areas where they can express themselves comfortably and freely:

> "…I share a lot of things. And try to ensure that others are aware of it and react to it. What happens when they restrict? This time people probably resort to violence. It gets worse. Digital platforms should never be restricted or blocked. This will create crisis. These environments allow people to express themselves and make political expression. It's a place of relaxing. It may be restricted temporarily, but this time people resort to different methods…" (P.40, M-23).

"…sometimes people are bullshitting, swearing, fighting. But, blocking is not the solution actually. Self-expression in digital platforms provide psychological comfort first. If blocked, people may resort to physical violence more often. Digital platforms should never be restricted or blocked. Also, temporarily restrictions do not make any sense. No need for that. It's important in terms of democracy…" (P.42, F-21).

"…I'm definitely in opposition to blocking. I do not believe that the problems will be solved with restrictions or blocking. If they want to find solutions to the problems, they should try different ways. Blocking access to social media sites does not create a real solution. We have lived before. Many people have searched for and found ways to break the law. Such environments are important places for ordinary people to express themselves. We have seen examples of this. People are organized on Facebook and moved to the squares…" (P.21, F-23).

According to the statements, participants who oppose to restriction and blocking think that the state policies on the social media platforms which are perceived as areas of freedom of expression and self-actualization or political self-sufficiency, will not solve the problems. As Balkin (2004:4) noted, freedom of expression protects the ability of individuals to participate in the culture in which they live and promotes the development of a culture that is more democratic and participatory. Therefore, participants believe that any restrictions or prohibitions will create a bigger crisis.

These participants are emphasizing the fact that activities in the digital environments allows for an individual and collective response against the social events. Moreover, individuals express themselves through the digital social platforms which makes them psychologically relaxed or feel good. Hence, individuals do not want to be deprived of this kind of relaxing, and do not accept any reason to restriction or blocking. As a matter of fact, people are building relationships with others who have similar complaints through social media. Stoycheff and Nisbet (2014:630) claim that internet use may aid citizens to more accurately assess democratic supply in their countries. The rise of critical participant citizens, facilitated by internet use, makes individuals cognitively aware when governments are not meeting their democratic demands. Likewise, Norris (2011) found that internet use could make people to be more critical of the supply of democracy. For Castells (2015) in this process, individuals create networks and try to struggle with existing structures. Social media makes it easy for masses that are highly dispersed and act individually to physically come together. It also undertakes the responsibility of establishing a collective consciousness in the form of a process of establishing a symbolic public space (Gerbaudo, 2014:8). In this sense, participants indicate that these platforms are functional in terms of the potential to turn individual reactions into a collective response or action. It is therefore emphasized that individuals who consider themselves to be severely limited or restricted in their daily lives will exert more effort to overcome this situation. It is stated that these restrictions will create a far greater crisis than actually contributing to ensuring social order.

As a result, for a significant part of young people any restriction on these areas has the potential to evolve into a spontaneous zone defense or reaction. In other

words, for some young participants, restrictions can reveal the feeling of being excluded from the social context. Hence, such interventions are perceived as a direct restriction on individual freedom, and people feel the need to resist against it. As Castells (1997) clearly explains, those who feel excluded or who feel the sense of being deprived of their right to express themselves based on identity can soon develop a resistance identity.

Category 6: How to act in public spaces? Social decorum in digital platforms

There is no doubt that digital social platforms somehow have a central place in people's lives. However, it is also true that there are social groups (cyber-utopians and cyber-skeptics) with different attitudes. According to Soriano (2013:348), despite the fact that cyber-utopians and cyber-skeptics seem to maintain irreconcilable positions, both of these focuses possess multiple points in common. These positions are based on a technological determinism, consisting of attributing an inexorable link between the appearance of a new technology and the generation of wide-ranging social and political changes. While some consider that democratization is an inevitable derivation of the internet, others warn that this instrument is irreversibly generating a wave of political involvement and loss of freedom.

In this sense even though there are different opinions, it can be said that the dream of each individual is in fact living in a more democratic and trust-based society. Hence, it is possible to say that although individuals have different attitudes towards the state policies on the internet use such as restricting and blocking access to social media platforms for different reasons, they actually act with similar goals and ideals.

In this framework, a significant part of participants expresses the necessity of some common rules or codes of conduct for the use of these digital environments politically. Participants have common statements about how to be better treated in the digital environment:

> "…of course, it is beautiful for people to express their thoughts and to express what they want for the country and humanity. But these thoughts and desires should not be contrary to universal morality or principles. Because uncivil discourses can cause violence, oppression and pessimism in society. The virtual environment should not be a place for redeem..." (P.12, M-24).

> "…everyone in the social media can explain their ideas. People are free, ideas are free. But it should not be rigid or in a way that would exclude other groups' thoughts. No matter how restricted, everyone can think and defend what they want. But not disrespectfully. For example, if you are glorifying your own race, people may react. When sharing or explaining something, it is necessary to think whether it is beneficial or harmful…" (P.20, F-23).

According to the statements, a common consensus of the participants is that the political activities in the digital social networks are often uncivil and lack of rationality. Also, participants seemed concerned about information and people on the internet

misleading them. However, another consensus is that it contributes to freedom of expression for a democratic system as long as everyone act properly. In other words, these platforms provide freedom of speech for everyone. But for that, everyone needs to know how to act in digital media. As Balkin (2004:3) stated, freedom of speech allows ordinary people to participate freely in the spread of ideas and in the creation of meanings that, in turn, help constitute them as persons.

Participants, while emphasizing freedom of speech, often think that this freedom is exploited. Therefore, it is thought that this does not conform to a real democratic understanding. In this sense, though there are different attitudes towards the state policies such as restricting and blocking access to digital social platforms, it is thought that the essential thing is to expressing opinions in a way without any provocation, manipulation and conflict. As Dutta et al. (2011:29) noted, people desire an online environment where they can simultaneously express themselves freely, protect their personal data and privacy, trust the people and information they find, and feel safe. For users, these values are not necessarily mutually exclusive or conflicting. In short, young participants emphasize that the resources or facilities offered by the digital world may positively contribute to democracy and freedom in real terms as long as people and other internet stakeholders such as governments, policymakers are acting responsibly.

Conclusion

In the digital age, especially for young people, the importance of these digital platforms may not be denied. For today's young people, defined as net generation, digital social platforms are at the center of everyday life. Young people are socializing and building identities compatible with their behavior patterns and values within the digital social environments. The way young citizens express themselves is transformed. For the younger generation, where communication or interactions in the digital environments seem to be problematic from time to time, these platforms are regarded as areas of freedom or interaction spaces in which they can express and realize themselves. Hence, discussions on the limit and value of the democracy and freedom of expression is not new. But, this debate has become more complex and comprehensive with the widespread use of digital social platforms.

The digital age provides a technological infrastructure that greatly expands the possibilities for individual participation in the growth and spread of culture and thus greatly expands the possibilities for the realization of a truly democratic culture (Balkin, 2004:5). In this sense, especially for young people, the meaning and importance of these digital environments may not be denied. In spite of that, at times, nation states may perceive these digital media platforms as a threat and restrict their use permanently or temporarily. In this context, young people's thoughts about the state policies such as restricting or blocking access to digital social platforms permanently or temporarily in the context of democracy and freedom has been examined.

According to findings, the liberalising effect of digital media is a common acceptance among participants, but there are different perspectives or attitudes on the results that they create. In fact, there is two main alternative approaches or attitudes towards the potential of digital social media environments to spread democracy and

freedom: views of cyber-utopians and cyber-skeptics. Who is right in emphasizing the opportunities or threats of digital social platforms or internet-based social environments for democracy and freedom? In fact, both perspectives help to comprehend the impact of digital media platforms on democracy and freedom. In this regard, a common consensus of the participants is that the political activities in the digital social networks are often uncivil and lack of rationality. Also, participants seemed concerned about information and people on the internet misleading them. However, another consensus is that it contributes to freedom of expression for a democratic system as long as everyone act properly. In other words, these platforms provide freedom of speech for everyone. But for that, everyone needs to know how to act in digital media.

Participants, while emphasizing freedom of speech, often think that this freedom is exploited. Therefore, it is thought that this does not conform to a real democratic understanding. In this sense, though there are different attitudes towards the state policies such as restricting and blocking access to digital social platforms, it is thought that the essential thing is to expressing opinions in a way without any provocation, manipulation and conflict. In short, it is emphasized that the resources or facilities offered by the digital world may positively contribute to democracy and freedom in real terms as long as people and other internet stakeholders such as governments, policymakers are acting responsibly.

Actually, despite all the positive qualities mentioned by cyber-utopians, it can not be argued that democratic development, political participation, problems between citizens, the interaction between citizens and politics will become completely hassle free only through the activities in digital social platforms. Technologies alone are not a solution to ensure more freedom of expression, conscious citizens and a dynamic democratic society. One of the main issues related to the freedom of the internet, expressed by social media users, is the question of how technology can be brought in line with the real nature of communication which is dialogical in essence. The developments in social and political life depend on the ability of individuals to act as responsible citizens rather than innovations in communication technologies. The resources or facilities offered by digital social platforms for individuals may have positive or negative social outcomes, but the point that needs to be taken into consideration is how and for what purposes people use these platforms.

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