ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS AND E-GOVERNMENT – A THEORETICAL DEBATE ON DEMOCRATIZATION, ETHICS, AND PRIVACY

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─Abstract ─

The advent of the Internet and following technological improvements in computer-mediated communication associated with Web 2.0 has created a new form of society consisted of networked people who could narrate their stories, experiences, thoughts in social networking sites, and reach a huge number of people, interact and communicate with them. Online social networks provide an interactive communication environment for the networked people where all individuals have their voices. The opportunities offered by technological developments has drawn attention of governments, and by structuring e-government, governments has begun providing services to their citizens and other stakeholders in digital mediums, and using the Web 2.0 tools to communicate and interact with them. Digitalizing government services means collecting, processing, and storing enormous amount of information; so this situation worries citizens about protection of privacy. In a networked society, it is expected that computer-mediated communication creates a liberal environment in which all opinions can be shared freely, citizen participation in government issues rise, and democratic values develop. The role played by the Internet and Web 2.0 platforms in democratization process, and governments' attitudes towards speech and communication freedom in cyberspace have been topics of academic debates. In this study, after given brief information on Web 2.0 technologies, online social networks, e-government, and democracy, ethical and privacy concerns resulted from e-government services, democratic possibilities provided by the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies, and the relationship between e-government and democratization are examined theoretically.

Key Words: *Social Networks, E-Government, Privacy, Ethics, Democratization*

JEL Classification: L81, L88, M39

1. INTRODUCTION

In modern societies, the intense use of online social networks has made the study of online social networks a vital tool to explain the change and complexity of citizens' behavior, lifestyles, and relationships. The impact of ICTs has lead to a new understanding of trust, institutions, value systems, networks, and information access.

The improvements in the Internet technologies has facilitated communication and interaction among individuals and made the Internet and digital social networks as a significant part of individuals' daily and business lives. Since online social networks have widely accepted by a huge number of users, researchers have focused on this field (Preibusch et al., 2007). Nowadays, online relationships among relatives, friends, professionals, and other community members are seen the main type of relationships in the societies (Müller, 1999; Pigg and Crank, 2004; Rheingold, 2000). Both online and physical interactions create a positive impact on social capital, and computer-mediated communication raises participation in all aspects of daily live (Hampton and Wellman 1999; Pigg and Crank, 2004; Wellman et al., 2001).

Increasing connectivity due to computer-mediated has given individuals an opportunity to share their ideas and opinions related to products, services, and/or any topic on blogs, forums, Twitter, and Facebook (Li and Bernoff, 2009). Brands, products, and services have been discussed on social networking sites by increasing number of people; so this situation can be benefited by companies to obtain profit and create opportunities. Interactivity provided by computer-mediated communication allows individuals to actively join communication process and control all stages of their access (Williams and Trammell, 2005). Individuals can share their opinions and experiences of products and services with other consumers through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM, word-of-mouse) communication and give information to the others; due to increasing level of communication and interaction, they can affect the acceptance and purchase of products and services.

As a global phenomenon, e-government has long been in the agenda of politicians, policy makers, and citizens. Huge financial and political commitments have been made by governments in the world to establish e-government. ICTs increase governments' abilities at all levels (local, municipal, state, and national) to interact with citizens and provide services. Services provided by e-government are not limited to only delivering the government services electronically; these services also cover relationships and interactions among governments, businesses, government bodies, and citizens. While establishing e-government the needs and interests of different stakeholders that operate in the political, business, or civic spheres of influence must be taken into consideration. The Internet together with Web 2.0 technologies allow citizens to find new ways of acquiring information on government services and to establish a different type of relationship with government by using computer-mediated communication.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Online social networks

In the beginning of development of the World Wide Web, the technology named Web 1.0 did not create an interactive medium for individuals; it only provided information to users as a static medium. The developments of technology has lead to the development of a dynamic and interactive platform, Web 2.0, which allows users to communicate and exchange information easily by creating user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Hastings and Saperstein, 2010). Social media has developed based on Web 2.0 technology, and lead to the emergence of OSNs (Online Social Networks). There exist some different forms of social media (Fischer and Reuber, 2011): wikis, blogs, microblogs (Twitter), social networking sites (Facebook), media-sharing sites (YouTube, Flickr, Instagram), consumer review sites (TripAdvisor), and voting sites.

The field of communication has been affected and changed by the invent of the Internet; in consumers' information search and decision-making, computer-mediated communication has become the most significant and effective factor (Dellarocas, 2003; Kozinets, 2002). Combined with ICTs, the social, cultural and educational dimensions of the sociocultural animation, as a structure of people centered activities and procedures aimed at activating a community or a group,

provide a background for development of computer-mediated communication and marketing (Foth, 2006; Godin, 2001; Goldsmith, 2002). OSNs have appeared to be as innovative knowledge sharing networks where individuals could share knowledge on products, trends, and brands in the form of reviews, experience sharing, narratives, written and visual materials, and interact and communicate with others (Inversini and Masiero, 2014; Uhrig et al., 2010). Increased connectivity by broadband connections and rich content of user-generated media – narratives, comments, opinions, podcasts, blogs, videos, and photographs- allow individuals to communicate anything in their minds and have an impact on shaping and changing public opinions and perceptions related to products, services, companies, organizations, and people (McConnell and Huba, 2007). The interactive communication medium provided by OSNs has empowered ordinary people, so any individual could affect public opinion, consumer preferences, and culture.

In online social networks, people who have similar tastes and share common interests gather; therefore a collective decision is made whether the network members would adapt an opinion, a product, or a service (Rosen, 2000). If a product or a service is adapted by the majority of social network members, positive network externalities make the product or service perceived as more valuable by group members (Alkemade and Castaldi, 2005; Haruvy and Prasad, 2001; Van Hove, 1999). Not only consumers own preferences, but also the opinions of their connected others in social networks affect consumers' purchase decisions. This situation leads to a ''bandwagon effect'', a collective action; inside a group individuals' decisions are determined by others' decisions, and individuals do not commit to action before observing that the others have already committed (Chiang, 2007:48).

Computer-mediated communication has increased the number of information sources and interactions among people; therefore, in addition to advertisers and marketers, individuals' connected others (family, friends, members of social networking sites, and even strangers) could affect and individual's decisions on products, services, brands, and vote choice (Thorson and Rodgers, 2006). The impact of personal contacts on changes opinions and behaviors of people was noticed by Brooks in 1957 (Brooks, 1957). The first studies on dissemination of communication, impact of communication diffusion on new product adoption, and

communication process and transmission of messages inside groups dated back to 1950s (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Coleman, Katz and Menzel, 1957; Coleman, Menzel and Katz, 1959).

Crowdsourcing, as a collective mobilization of resources such as ideas, time, expertise, or funds is the practice of engaging a 'crowd' or group for a common goal, often innovation, a cause, problem solving, or efficiency by the help of digitized networks –social media, Web 2.0 (Crowdsourcing Week, 2016). The word is a combination of the words "crowd" and "outsourcing" (Bratvold, 2016). Any type of project can be outsourced to a crowd of networked individuals, so organizations can benefit from access to new ideas and solutions, deeper consumer commitment, opportunities for co-creation, optimization of tasks, reduced costs, and new ways of collaborating and creating value (Crowdsourcing Week, 2016). Governments apply crowdsourcing to empower citizens, increase citizen participation and allow them to be heard by people.

2.2. E-government and democratization

The maturing of e-commerce and improvement of its tools and applications has led public institutions and governments (country, state, city, etc.) to use e-commerce applications to progress their businesses. E-government can be defined as "*the use of information technology in general, and e-commerce in particular, to provide citizens and organizations with more convenient access to government information and services and to provide delivery of public services to citizens, business partners, and those working in the public sector*" (Turban et al., 2006:330). The use of technology in public sector means the advent of a new form of government and the birth of a new marketplace. There exist various definitions of e-government in the literature. While some definitions only focus on the ICTs usage, particularly the Internet, to deliver government services more efficiently and effectively, others concentrate on transformation of government to governance.

Governments benefit from web-based Internet applications, digitalize their services and variety of government services are provided to citizens via the Internet. E-government, as a form of e-commerce, makes interaction between government and citizens more efficient and easier, and provides an opportunity to

build improved relationships between government and its stakeholders. According to Layne and Lee (2001:134) three fundamental issues should be taken into consideration: *"(1) universal access, (2) privacy and confidentiality; and (3) citizen focus."* E-government services should be accessible by a great percentage of citizens. Governments should assure privacy and confidentiality of data provided the citizens to access e-government services. Citizens' interests should be the primary concern in structuring e-government.

Social media platforms and Web 2.0 technologies provide interactive tool to governments to enhance relationships and interaction with stakeholders, and increase effectiveness and efficiency of government businesses and practices (Bonsón et al., 2012). Government services could be offered to both government's customers and suppliers by the help of huge potential provided by the Internet and web-based technologies. The administrative potential of digital technologies allows governments to create interconnected networks, deliver their services, do business effectively and efficiently, build interactive relationships with stakeholders, decentralize and attain transparency, and accountability (Yildiz, 2007:650).

Table 1: Subdomains of E-Government

ACTORS	CHARACTERISTICS	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Government-to-Government (G2G)	Communication, coordination, standardization of information and services	E-administration	Establishing and using a common data warehouse
Government-to-Citizen (G2C)	Communication, transparency, accountability, effectiveness, efficiency, standardization of information and services, productivity	E-government	Web Sites of government organization , e-mail communication between the citizens and government officials
Government-to-Business (G2B)	Communication, collaboration, commerce	E-government E-commerce, E-collaboration	Posting government bids on the Web, e-procurement, e-partnerships
Government-to-Civil Society Organizations or Government-to-Nongovernmental Organizations (G2SC) or (G2N)	Communication, coordination, transparency, accountability	E-governance	Electronic communication and coordination efforts after a disaster
Citizen-to-Citizen (C2C)	Communication, coordination, transparency, accountability, grassroots organization	E-governance	Electronic discussion groups on public issues

Source: Yildiz, 2007: 651.

E-government services and practices can be categorized based on the actors who take part in relationship and interaction with government. The traditional categorization covers of Government-to-Government (G2G), Government-to-Citizen (G2C), and Government-to-Business (G2B). Changing structure of societies and improvements in web-based technologies necessitate inclusion of two more categories to this taxonomy: Government-to-Civil Societal Organizations (Nongovernmental Organizations (G2CS/G2N) and Citizen-to-Citizen (C2C).

There are three main differences between e-commerce and e-government: access, structure, and accountability (Carter and Bélanger, 2005). When businesses start e-commerce, they freely determine to which group of customers they provide products and services. However, governments are not allowed to choose to whom government services are provided; any individual who has a right to benefit from government services should be given access to government services. The structure of a government organization is different than the structure of a commercial business; the differences are seen especially in decision-making processes, authority, and centralization. In government organizations, the decisions related to allocation of resources must be made to keep public interest. In addition, unlike businesses, government organizations have a political nature and sometimes obligatory relationships are built in government organizations. The similarities between e-government and e-commerce are found in users' attitudes towards technology acceptance, their readiness to adopt electronic services, diffusion of communication, and consumers' characteristics affecting their perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes in online environments (Carter and Bélanger, 2005).

E-government development has been examined based on models of development stages. The first model presented by Layne and Li (2001:124) suggested that e-government development evolved in four stages, from basic structures to more integrated and complex structures. The second five-stage model was suggested by the United Nations and the American Society for Public Administration (2002:2), and this model has some similarities with the four-stage e-government development model suggested by Layne and Li (2001). Then, Schelin (2003:129) suggested a five-stage model which combined both of the previous models. However, it is argued that staged development models of e-government evolution does not reflect the real development of e-government, since stages do not need to

follow one another, and sometimes requirements of all stages could be performed simultaneously (Yildiz, 2007:652).

Democracy is a concept which is considered as measurable; there can be varying levels of democracy based on some measures defined by some organizations such as the US-based Freedom House organization and The Economist Intelligence Unit. Elections are the most significant indicator of a democracy, but there are other indicators which determine the existence of democracy in any country. According to Freedom House (2006) the standards in determining the existence of democracy are: (1) A multiparty political system, a competitive political environment; (2) Freedom of voting for all eligible matures; (3) Fair and secure elections conducted in regular basis; (4) A free communication environment for all parties to conduct election campaigns and transmit their messages to the voters. The Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index is based on five categories; and the measurements in these categories define the level of democracy in a specific country (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016): process of election and pluralistic system; civil rights and liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture.

3. E-GOVERNMENT, SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND DEMOCRATIZATION

In today's societies, social networking sites have offered new tactics for democratization movements, since social media provides many opportunities to opponent people, who want to share their opinions, resist, conduct a campaign against a government practice, and organize social movements. Networked individuals are provided digital platforms where they can share their opinions freely as liberated citizens. However, in reality it is not the case; governments in all over the world try to monitor their citizens' activities on the Internet, and instead of supporting freedom, usually exercise repression, censorship, and surveillance.

There are some minimum conditions for a system to be called as democracy such as right to vote, elections, political parties, and accessible media sources, but to establish a true democracy; these conditions must be complemented with the existence of political and civil rights, the respect for freedom of speech,

expression and thought, and human rights. In order to distinguish any other regime from a democracy, some conditions should be sought and realized in a political system (Terchek and Conte, 2001:133): *"(1) Control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in elected officials. (2) Elected officials are chosen frequent and fairly conducted elections which coercion is comparatively uncommon. (3) Practically all adults have the right to vote in the election of officials. (4) Practically all adults have the right to run for elective offices in the government. (5) Citizens have a right to express themselves without the danger of severe punishment on political matters broadly defined, including criticism of officials, the government, the regime, the socioeconomic order, and the prevailing ideology. (6) Citizens have a right to seek out alternative sources of information; and alternative sources of information should exist and be protected by law. (7) To achieve their various rights, citizens also have a right to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including political parties and interest groups.*"

Governments have adopted information and communication in their activities and these technologies are now transforming the way governments' services are organized, communication with all stakeholders takes place, and government business is done. The computer revolution has raised a number of moral issues in societies. The social impact of transformation of government to e-government and changes in societies due to information and communication technologies raise many moral issues namely (De George, 1999:329): (1) the displacement of government officials by computers that causes unemployment (partially questions of business ethics, partially questions of social practice); (2) computer crime; (3) responsibility for computer crime; (4) protection of computer property, records, and software; (5) privacy of government, officials, and citizens. Information and communication technologies allow for storage of more data and easier manipulation of that data. Collection of information about individuals has always invoked issues of privacy (Hiller and Bélanger, 2001:163). It is possible to collect, use or disclose information about an individual without knowledge.

The widespread adoption of the Internet with the advent and growth of social media has led an expectation that computers and networked digital technologies more generally would create new forms of civic participation and citizen engagement in the policy-making process (Kreiss, 2015). Policy-makers and

researchers have worked on to find new ways of using and increasing effectiveness of social networking sites to raise civic participation and citizen engagement in the policy-making process. Crowdsourcing municipal services to soliciting public input onto the workings of the legislative and executive branches could be given as examples of these efforts (Kreiss, 2015).

Privacy is relative term and notions of privacy vary from society to society and used to cover great variety of actions and cases. Two kinds of privacy called information privacy and electronic privacy are considered to have relevance with intense use of information and communication technologies. While information privacy refers to a claimed right on the part of individuals to keep information about them private, electronic privacy refers to the use of e-mails and the Internet by employees at the work place (De George, 1999:346,351). In designing e-government, citizens' privacy concerns must be taken into consideration by government officials, since sensitive information such as social security number (SSN), personal identification number, information on the identification cards, or salary is provided by citizens to access e-government services. Moreover, in order to provide better services to all stakeholders, governments digitalize and store large quantities of sensitive and private information gathered from their citizens. The decisions on sharing information collected from citizens with other government organizations and varying privacy concerns and requirements of citizens increase difficulties in handling privacy problem of e-government. Security and privacy are tightly interconnected issues, but "*secure e-government infrastructures do not necessarily ensure privacy*" (Bouguettaya et al., 2004:559) Security protection mechanisms such as authentication or encryption to prevent unauthorized access could be used to secure the sensitive information, but some officers may find ways to access the sensitive information. In this case, ethical principles are needed in order to secure private information.

In social networks, individuals voluntarily share some sensitive information about their private lives and share their opinions with other individuals. In their relations with e-government, individuals expect to access some information about them on e-government websites to make some transactions. Politicians try to reach their voters by using social networks such as Twitter and give information on their activities, demand their voters' support on specific subjects, and listen to their voters' opinions. While building e-government technical infrastructure, some

precautions may be taken to approach privacy in web services. Government can communicate with its citizens by encouraging its officers to join to a social network to give citizens information and listen to their opinions. However, social networking by government officers should not be used to collect information on citizens without knowledge. These platforms may provide an opportunity to government to create a more democratized environment for its citizens by contacting them more transparently. Digital divide should also be taken into consideration in building e-government.

4. CONCLUSION

The United Nations E-Government Survey has been published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) since 2001. The ninth edition of the Survey provides an analysis of progress in using e-government and how it can support the realization of the internationally agreed development goals and help address emerging public administration issues (United Nations, 2016). The Survey highlights the importance of human rights, privacy concerns of citizens, and security issues in success of e-government practices, in addition to ICT infrastructure and other tangible requirements of e-government structure. Government institutions should effectively use resources for development and strengthen the fundamental values of a democracy: freedom, political equality, justice, respect for human rights, and human dignity (United Nations, 2016). Otherwise, citizens may lose their confidence and trust in the government.

Public perceptions and concerns about privacy and security of information on the Internet should be taken into consideration while designing e-government services. Individuals provide sensitive information while using web-based government services; based on their perception of privacy, then, individuals demand different level of privacy protection. The concerns about the party who receives sensitive information, how and where the collected information is used, who can reach and use the information shared with e-governments bodies can be considered among factors which affect the individual’s perception and needs of privacy.

Governments should find the proper ways to benefit from social network to communicate their citizens and make use of these mediums to create a more democratic society. Communicating with the citizens in social networks should not be considered as a practice of judging the citizens' opinions. The arguments on government's applications in social networks could guide government officials to make needed changes. By listening to citizens and asking them their opinions, governments can foster democracy in the societies. For governments, taking place in social networks should not mean to limit and prohibit their citizens' activities on the Internet or search for potential criminals in social networks. Creating a democratic environment on the Internet may help to build democratic societies in the real world.

In order to build and apply more effective and efficient e-government strategies, governments should try to understand real requirements and expectations of their citizens, the structure and mechanism of digital social networks. Citizens' concerns about privacy, security, and democracy must be the main points in e-government practices, otherwise trust cannot be build between the government and citizens. Dissemination of information and communication technologies sometimes causes fear of living in an environment described in George Orwell's famous novel called 1984.

If a series of research on the privacy perception of Turkish citizens related to e-government services, the impact of social networking sites on democratization in Turkey, Turkish citizens' perception of and attitudes towards e-government services, and the development of networked society in Turkey, this will provide valuable information on the relationship among privacy concerns of citizens, online social networks, e-government and democratization to researchers and government officials.

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