

REFLECTING ON TWITTER: A PROTOTYPE FOR HYPERMODERN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Social scientists have been discussing the advent of an “information society”, as information technologies have started to dominate social life since at least the 1970s. The most important infrastructural element of this information society is the internet which enables dissemination of information in a very efficient and effective way, independent from the physical proximity between two networked computers. The internet is non-hierarchical (horizontal) in the sense that it does not have an ultimate power center which determines the structure of the networks and the contents that flow within and between networks. The formation of the networks and the content of information disseminated through them are shaped by the users. Hence, the interplay between internet and individuals is bidirectional; individuals structure the networks and the structure of networks, in turn, shapes the perception of individuals regarding self, community, and time. This paper analyzes how and why people use Twitter—both a social networking site and a micro-blogger; to what extent Twitter use reflect the constituting principles of contemporary society such as conception of time and how it may affect our notion of community and social relations. It argues that Twitter represents a replica of hypermodern society with the apprehension of time streaming embedded in its use, clustering of users around personal and professional communities and centers and the strategies that users develop in order to deal with the complexity of online hypermodernity. Twitter, and social network sites in general, are structured by the values and conceptions of the contemporary society and we need to consider them within a greater *zeitgeist*. The main function of these services is to reinforce and enhance the conceptions and experience of hypermodernity and to increase the rate of social change further.

Keywords: Information society, internet, social media, Twitter, modernity, hyper-modernity

TWITTER ÜZERİNE DÜŞÜNMEK: HİPERMODERN TOPLUMUN BİR PROTOTİPİ

ÖZET

Bilişim teknolojilerinin 1970'lerden itibaren toplumsal hayata egemen olmaya başlamasıyla birlikte, sosyal bilimciler ortaya çıkan yeni toplumsal formasyonu “bilgi toplumu” kavramı ile açıklamaktadırlar. Bu bilgi toplumunun en önemli alt yapı unsuru, birbirine bağlı iki bilgisayar arasındaki fiziksel yakınlıktan bağımsız olarak, bilginin çok verimli ve etkin bir şekilde yayılmasını sağlayan internettir. İnternet, ağların yapısını ve ağların içinde veya arasında akan içeriği belirleyen nihai bir güç merkezine sahip olmadığı için hiyerarşik olmayan (yatay) bağlardan oluşmaktadır. Ağların oluşumu ve ağlar aracılığıyla yayılan bilginin içeriği kullanıcılar tarafından şekillendirilmektedir. Bu nedenle, internet ve bireyler arasındaki etkileşim çift yönlüdür; bireyler ağları yapılandırır ve ağların yapısı da bireylerin benlik, toplum ve zamana ilişkin algılarını şekillendirir. Bu makale, insanların hem bir sosyal ağ sitesi hem de bir mikro blog platformu olan Twitter’ı nasıl ve neden kullandığını, Twitter kullanımının zaman kavramı gibi çağdaş toplumun kurucu ilkelerini ne ölçüde yansıttığını ve bunun topluluk ve sosyal ilişkilere dair kavrayışı nasıl etkileyebileceğini analiz etmektedir. Çalışma temel olarak, kullanıcılarının yerleşik zaman akışı anlayışlarını değiştiren, kişisel ve profesyonel topluluklar ve merkezler etrafında kümelenmelerini ve çevrimiçi hiper-modernitenin karmaşıklığıyla başa çıkmak için stratejiler geliştirmelerini sağlayan Twitter’ın hiper-modern toplumun bir kopyasını temsil ettiği argümanını savunmaktadır. Twitter ve genel olarak sosyal ağ siteleri, günümüz toplumunun değerleri ve anlayışları tarafından yapılandırıldığından bu gibi çevrimiçi platformlar, zamanın ruhu dikkate alınarak geniş bir perspektiften değerlendirilmelidir. Bu platformların temel işlevi, hiper-modernitenin bireylerce kavranışını ve deneyimlenişini güçlendirmek ve geliştirmek, toplumsal değişimin hızını daha da artırmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bilgi toplumu, sosyal medya, Twitter, modernite, hiper-modernite

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social science literature of the late 20th century is marked by the reconsiderations of the constitutive elements of modern society. Scholars of this literature have been investing heavily on analyses and explanations regarding the nature of social change which, for most, harbingered “something qualitatively new” (Hall et al., 1992). David Harvey (1989), for instance, underscores the way people experience time and space, and argues for “time-space compression” as a new turn for the capitalist society. Scholar like Daniel Bell (1976) and Alain Touraine (1971) put the emphasis on the structural changes in the organization of economy which called for the end of industrial society. Among others, Manuel Castells (1996) and Jean Francois Lyotard (1984) highlight the rise of information, information technologies and networks as the constituting factors of society. Perception of time, organization of work/production and the vitality of knowledge and information technologies for this constitution are all parts of a greater shift in the constitution of contemporary society, as scholars have already pointed out. Hence, although this paper is going focus on developments in information technologies, particularly on social network and micro-blogging sites and analyze a micro-blogging site, namely Twitter, as a venue of postmodern transformation of society.

Central to the current structure of production process and the formation of social relations is production and consumption of information. The most important infrastructural element of this *information society* is the internet which operates as a “horizontal and de-territorialized” network system (Hardt and Negri, 2000). The internet enables dissemination of information in a very efficient and effective way independent from the proximity between two networked computers. More importantly, the internet is horizontal in the sense that it does not have an ultimate power center which determines the structure of the networks and the contents that flow within and between networks. Therefore, the formation of the networks and the content of information disseminated through them are shaped by users. Yet, “[n]ew uses of the technology [internet], as well as the actual modifications introduced in the technology, are communicated back to the whole world, in real time” (Castells, 2001: 28). Hence, the interplay between the internet and individuals is bi-directional; individuals structure the networks and the structure of networks, in turn, shapes the perception of individuals regarding self, community, and time. Thus, the analysis of Twitter in this paper is going to focus on how and why people use Twitter—both a social networking site and a micro-blogger. It aims to explain to what extent Twitter use reflect the constituting principles of contemporary society such as conception of time and how it may affect conceptions of community and social relations.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The contemporary society is commonly characterized with the term “post-modernity”. However, it is not always clear what differentiates modernity from post-modernity and whether post-modern society stands for a social formation that is “qualitatively different” than what is referred to as modern society. Therefore, it is important to clarify these concepts before delving into an analysis of information society and Twitter. To begin with, scholars often associate modernity with a certain peculiar conception of time. Jurgen Habermas, for instance, refers to the etymological roots of the word and points out that consciousness of being modern has been molded by a retrospective glance at older epochs to differentiate conditions of the current society from earlier ones. With the onset of the Enlightenment, this consciousness of being modern acquired a new meaning with a belief in progress and advancement in knowledge, morality, and life conditions in general (Habermas, 1981:

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3-4). Consciousness of being modern was accompanied by a set of new conceptions about time and the self that are constantly flowing and changing without any control of single individuals over its motion. Hence, for Marshall Berman

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own (1982: 13).

Berman draws attention to mental burdens of modern consciousness on individuals who experience modernity along with the sense of losing the ground beneath one's feet. As social environment around individuals is in constant transformation, individuals become more and more obsessed with the present time and the present condition of their own selves.

The obsession with the present that modernity has created is, in fact, the necessary condition for the advent of post-modernity first in the architecture and fine arts then in other domains of social life. Individuals who share the obsession start to reflect on their own place within the flow of time and are increasingly drawn into activities that enabled them to have an "authentic self-experience" in their lives (Habermas, 1981: 6). Hence, while many scholars argue that post-modern condition offers a radical break from the modern society by pointing out the disappearance of the ideals of progress and advancement in knowledge, morality, and life conditions (Habermas, 1981; Lyotard, 1984), post-modernity may be seen as the ultimate point of modernity in that individuals' experience of the world, their conception of time, and their self-placement within social formation have not fundamentally changed. Although the change that modern society has been undergoing since the 1970's was perceived as a qualitative shift in the structure of society by many scholars such as Touraine (1971), Bell (1973), and Harvey (1989), what has really been changing, as this paper argues, is the rate of change which took a new pace in the late 20th century. Therefore, this study rather uses another term, i.e., "hyper-modern", to refer to the contemporary society because of the conceptual baggage of post-modernity. Studies in existing literature put post-modernity in contradistinction to modernity which may fail to highlight certain continuities between the experience of modernity with the social conditions shaping Twitter and other social networking sites—especially in the processes of rationalization, individualization, and time-apprehension.

3. TWITTER AND CONCEPTION OF TIME

Twitter is an internet-based software that enables users to post text messages up to 280 characters. It is one of the most popular social networking and micro-blogging sites launched in 2006. According to its own metrics, Twitter has more than 200 million active users world-wide and everyday thousands of new users sign up (Aslam, 2022). The remarkable growth of its user number is accompanied by the growth of activity as well. It took three years to reach the billionth tweet after it was launched, yet now in a single day half a billion tweets—the short text message which users post—are uploaded (Ibid.). A comparison between Twitter and another blogging site Blogger, for instance, gives an insight into individuals' preference of Twitter, and micro-blogging in general, over blogging. Number of unique Twitter site visitors is significantly greater than, for instance, the number of unique Blogger visitors, although Blogger is the most popular blogging site. Why, then, Twitter is so popular? What are the reasons for individuals' preference of Twitter over other social networking sites? What does

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Twitter offer for its users? In answering these questions, I will be trying to show how the popularity of Twitter is related to the dynamics of postmodern society.

First, Twitter offers what hypermodern individuals are mainly looking for: time efficiency. Or, at least, this is what Twitter users say about it most frequently. For one thing, Twitter restricts its users within a text up to 280 characters. Although users developed common lexicons to deal with the problems of restriction—people split longer texts into smaller parts by adding (X of Y) or (X/Y) at the end of each part, their posts (tweets) usually remain within the boundaries of the imposed limit (Gruzd et al., 2011: 1302). This, on the one hand, prevents users to exert themselves to organize their message which may take longer time as in posting a blog; and on the other hand, it allows them to pass through between tweets and to receive the intended message quickly. One of the informants of Zhao and Rosson in their study of Twitter use among employees states he can post 280-character texts better than composing a longer blog every day. Hence, they conclude as “[t]he easy access to Twitter services encourages people to twitter about interesting things as they happen, rather than waiting and writing a perhaps longer and more reflective message later on” (Zhao and Rosson, 2009: 246).

Furthermore, 280-character limit expedites the task of the reader, as well. According to another informant from the same study, “[b]ecause of the format in Twitter, it is so easy to read, and I filter through it very quickly and determine what’s going to provide me value immediately and can simply scroll pass the rest of it” (Ibid., 248). Writing a post and reading others’ posts on Twitter, then, is more convenient for the individuals. This is one of the most frequent and dominant reasons of why Twitter has been adapted very quickly and enthusiastically. Twitter is convenient in the sense that it allows users to save their time who are in a “sense of always being short of time” (Shove, 2003: 171-72). Following Berman (1982) again, this is a part of everyday life maelstrom that modern individual experiences and is increasingly felt by hyper-moderns too (15).

Another time-related aspect of everyday life maelstrom upon individuals is the pace by which the time flow and the urge for multitasking because of swiftly flowing time. As Heidegger puts it “[a]ll distances in time and space are shrinking... He [man] now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all” (Heidegger, 1971: 163). Internet has further multiplied the rate of change and the amount of information that individuals receive instantly. As mentioned, on average 500 million tweets are posted every day on Twitter. Although most of the posts are related to the mundane activities and instantaneous feelings and thoughts of users, a substantial number of tweets are about news and events; and news agencies and portals with lots of followers actively use twitter to propagate their news. Thus, Twitter users are exposed to an information overload in every moment they are on-line. Users deal with the information overload by constantly updating themselves and replacing old information with new one. “Twitter exaggerates “presentism”: the belief that only things that are happening now are what matters. Two hours ago, is normal reading time; a day ago is a longtime; a month ago is ancient history” (Gruzd et al., 2011: 1303). As Harvey points out, in relation to the value of recent over the outdated, ‘instantaneity’ and ‘disposability’ are the “conditions of postmodernity” (read hypermodernity here). Although he derives his conclusion from the process of commodity production, these two principles apply to the social norms and values, interpersonal relations, lifestyles, attachments as well as knowledge (Harvey, 1989: 290). In this manner, Twitter use is a typical hypermodern practice in which

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information comes and goes instantly and people are forced to accommodate to the situation by constantly disposing the old information.

In addition to adapting instantaneity and disposability, Twitter users need to accommodate to multitasking as well. Java et al. (2007) identify three types of user intention: information sharing, information seeking and friendship-based (60). Nevertheless, they identify these categories through a content analysis of different networks existing within Twitter which does not necessarily imply exclusive categories for users. That is, individuals may appear in more than one network and have more than one intention. A user might be an information provider in a network and an information seeker in another one. The informant of Zhao and Rosson (2009) report that they use Twitter for mainly “(1) keeping in touch with friends and colleagues; (2) raising visibility of interesting things to one’s social networks; (3) gathering useful information for one’s profession or other personal interests; (4) seeking for helps and opinions; and (5) releasing emotional stress” (245). The variety of purposes is a reflection of multitude of social affiliations hypermodern individuals have. This pattern of affiliations that Twitter users engaged in has parallels with Georg Simmel’s insight on the pattern of modern group affiliations which Simmel linked to individualization. Almost a century before the inception of Twitter, Simmel (1955) says “individualization proliferate[s] into infinity ... the same person can occupy positions of different rank in the various groups to which he belongs” (151). Following Simmel’s argument for the dynamic of the relationship between the individual and the group, it is possible to suggest that Twitter acts like a web of social relations and augments individuals’ consciousness by allowing them to participate into various networks. This also consolidates the perception of simultaneity in the sense that users can be imposed to information regarding diverse matters at the same time. In a way, Twitter reinforces the modern apprehension of time as a “‘homogenous, empty time,’ in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked...by temporal coincidence, and measure by clock and calendar” (Anderson, 1983: 24). An individual can receive information about his/her friend’s engagement; his/her cousin’s traffic accident as well as a social uprising sprang up in some part of the world and a game of her favorite tennis player all at the same time.

4. CONSIDERATIONS ON SELF AND COMMUNITY ON TWITTER

Excessive number of users and tweets, pace of change in the content and the outrageous diversity of user interest and tweet contents force Twitter users to develop their own strategies to deal with this tumultuousness or, at worst, to be indifferent to the information flow. In other words, Twitter implicitly encourages its users to develop a kind of attitude in their on-line life that is akin to what Simmel characterized as ‘blasé attitude’ in order to reduce the complexity of modern urban life and to protect their individual autonomy (Simmel, 1971). This indifference, and to a certain extent complacency, is reinforced by the ease of posting a tweet and the voluntary readership. As mentioned before, what is convenient about Twitter is the fact that users do not need to make an effort to compose a tweet which at most consists of 280 characters. An informant of Zhao and Rosson makes it clear that saying or sharing something in Twitter which, for him, is simply “selecting the content and copying and pasting it in a window and hitting ‘send’”. According to the same informant this process takes only two seconds (Zhao and Rosson, 2009: 248). Moreover, voluntary readership in Twitter does not require users to reflect heavily on what they say or share. “Because people can choose to read it or not,” another informant says “I am able to use it much more informally, and simply use it

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as a form of expression, where it is not expected and anticipated that someone would reply to that message” (Ibid.). Hence, it reduces the weight on the shoulders of users and they can freely express their opinions, feelings and, thus, their identities.

Although user purposes are very diverse, one of the common points in Twitter use for all is to express their selves and maintain their cyber-presence. As part of protecting and manifesting individual autonomy, users would like to feel that they are “out there”. “The dream is to achieve a sort of virtual omnipresence” (McFedries, 2007: 84). Yet, there is another tension in users’ endeavor of maintaining a cyber self in Twitter since it consists of multiple networks to which users attached themselves. In real-life experiences, individuals may exhibit different behaviors and attitudes in everyday life interactions as they assume different roles in different networks. Explaining this contextual and situation-based differentiation of roles and statuses, Erving Goffman divides front stages of everyday life where individuals perform different formal roles in different networks and the backstage of everyday life where individuals reflect on their different roles and prepare themselves to different situations and performances (Goffman, 1959). Social network sites, Twitter in particular, require individuals to organize their everyday life as if they were constantly in the front stage as they are in the virtual presence of other individuals in their networks. However, since an individual has multiple fronts—that is to say that users have more than one network affiliation within Twitter, and since all the affiliated networks overlaps in a single Twitter account, users face with problems in organizing their front stages. The cognitive difficulties in dealing with more than one front stems from the multiplicity of roles an individual perform in different front settings. In Twitter, individuals have their family members, college friends, relatives, co-workers and all sorts of people whom they are connected through different links and activities. Therefore, overlapping networks force them to organize their virtual front stage so that their discrepant roles would not contradict with each other.

Despite these mental difficulties in maintaining the individual unity, it seems that Twitter users do not hesitate to connect to different networks in accordance with their social identities, political alignments, hobbies, lifestyles and other individual interest. Another informant of Zhao and Rosson reports that she follows people “so that I know what’s on their minds, you know, what they are attending, listening to, or reading. These people often twitter about articles with URLs about industry status. So, by subscribing to their updates, I can keep current on industry status without having to go out and look for information” (Zhao and Rosson, 2009: 247). It is a sense of self-reflexivity that hustle individuals to “keep the current” and to be informed about everything happens in their mental proximity. Gershon, although drawing his analysis based on Facebook use, associates this reflexivity with neoliberal values of self-management and business management. Adopting his framework to Twitter allows me to argue that through Twitter “people can practice US neoliberal techniques for valuing, enhancing, and managing their alliances” (Gershon, 2011: 867). The primary motive of users is to enhance their social capital and extend and expand their networks through Twitter. It is evident in the sense that people tend to cluster around specific interest areas (Gruzd et al., 2011: 1309).

Hence, Twitter provides a virtual sample of neoliberal society through increased individualization, expanding networking and the urge for enhancing social capital. In a sense, Twitter represents a “super-highway” of information and communication that enables transition from mass media to an age of customized media and individual choice (Morley and Robins, 1995: 14). Yet, to

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what extent is Twitter environment different from the real-world social networks and interactions? Do we lose the sense of humanness in our virtual interactions through engaging more and more in mechanical and purely rational interest groups? Leaving aside phenomenological discussions on being a human and embodiment, I would like to focus on the nature of Twitter interactions and the sense of community in answering these questions. As stated above, Twitter networks do not only comprise of groups that users seek information regarding their interests; friendship-based networks are a part of Twitter world too. In their analysis of a Twitter community in which people share information about computer games, Java et al. notice that “users in this community also share with each other their personal feeling and daily life experiences in addition to comments on ‘gaming’” (Java et al., 2007: 61). Thus, these interest groups are venues for socialization which may enhance the sense of community in addition to their primary function of information dissemination.

Gruzd et al. points out the affinity between Twitter community and Benedict Anderson’s characterization of the nation as an imagined community. Anderson (1983) argues that nations are imagined in the sense that nationals never know most of other fellow nationals in person but have an image of them as belonging to the same communion (6). Similarly, Gurzd et al. (2011) presents how Twitter can be imagined like a community. Accordingly, although people do not follow each and every Twitter user and read only a portion of the posts available in Twitter, “it is impossible for them to be on Twitter and not to be aware of other residents of this virtual place” (1298). Therefore, Twitter consists of users who imagine a community of Twitter users even though they do not interact with every one of the members of this community. The sense of community is, first, based on an apprehension of time which is discussed in the previous section. Other components of this community are the common lexicon that Twitter users develop and high centers around and under which the society. The high centers of Twitter, according to Gruzd et al. (2011), are the popular organizations and individuals which users overwhelmingly follow (1303). Although the primary mission of Twitter is to enable people to share what they do or think or feel instantly, individuals transform Twitter environment community of multiple networks through which users share information and develop personal ties as well.

5. CONCLUSION

Inspired by a diverse body of works in modern and postmodern social theory literature, this paper offered a reflective glance at Twitter. Despite discrepancies and disputes between these two bodies of literature, there is a certain continuity between societies usually depicted as modern and postmodern. As it is elaborated on in the conceptual framework of the paper, arguments of modernity, as in Simmel, Berman, and like-minded scholars of modernity, are still competent in explaining the individual experiences of social processes at a time social scientists have been characterizing as post-modern. Accordingly, the social change in the late 20th century that social scientists have observed was not in the direction of a general trend but in the rate of social change. That is, if modernity is the personal experience of social maelstrom, as Berman states, we are experiencing fundamentally the same maelstrom with a much more profound articulation. Hence, Twitter, this paper argues, represents a replica of hypermodern society with the apprehension of time streaming embedded in its use, clustering of users around personal and professional communities and centers and the strategies that users develop in order to deal with the complexity of online hypermodernity. Finally, an important implication of this main argument is that Twitter, and social network sites in general, are

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structured by the values and conceptions of the contemporary society and we need to consider them within a greater value system of our time. The main function of these services is to reinforce and enhance the conceptions of hypermodernity and increase the rate of social change further.

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Çatışma Beyanı: Makale yazarı bu çalışma ile ilgili taraf olabilecek herhangi bir kişi ya da finansal ilişkileri bulunmadığını, dolayısıyla herhangi bir çıkar çatışmasının olmadığını beyan eder.

Destek ve teşekkür: Çalışmada herhangi bir kurum ya da kuruluştan destek alınmamıştır.

Etik Kurul Kararı: Bu araştırma, Etik Kurul Kararı gerektiren makaleler arasında yer almamaktadır.

Katkı Oranı: Makale tek yazarlıdır.