







# Journal of Media Critiques

Social Media and Network Society – II:  
Culture, Identity, Politics  
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# PROLOGUE

## Postmodern Traces of Social Media

This book contributes to communication sciences with a collection of articles shedding light on the concept of social media and its various impacts on society. The widespread use of Web 2.0 applications has led to an interest in social media studies. Researchers have focused on many underlying questions to define the concept of social media as follows: “What distinguishes social media from mass media?”, “What are the dimensions of socialization in social media?” or “How does the use of social media influence our policies, economy, society and culture?”. Although the research in this field is relatively recent, it appears that it has already become a part of communication sciences studies.

Social media studies are generally conducted from an inter-disciplinary spectrum and on an empirical basis. Further, the theoretical framework of these studies can significantly be varied. The studies are explained or discussed mostly with the concepts of social sciences, but in particular of communication sciences. The most highlighted concepts in social media studies are identity performance (Goffman), social capital (Bourdieu and Coleman), gift economy (Mauss), surveillance society (Foucault, Lyon, Morozov and Niedzviecki), technological determinism (McLuhan), public and private spheres (Habermas, Boyd and Papacharissi), intimacy and narcissism (Lasch), virtual communities (Wellman and Rheingold) and network society (Castells). Such concepts have been introduced to put emphasis on the different dimensions of social media. Whether these concepts are sufficient to define social media, or as different from mass media, the position of social media studies in communication sciences should be discussed in a different context. Therefore, it may still be early to introduce the theories and the models similar to the existing ones in mass media studies, or entirely specific to the field of social media.

Another discussion has been going around the definition of social media. The discussions are centered on the questions, such as “Is social media a tool, a place, a content or a form of communication?” It also appears that it is difficult to introduce a holistic definition of social media in a “network society” (Castells), where digital communication technologies, designs and contents are rapidly evolving, digital applications refer to different social functions, and which is shaped by the activities of the internet users. Although there is no consensus on the definition of social media, researchers have agreed on some of its features. Mainly determined in accordance with Web 1.0, the features of social media can be illustrated as follows: (more) instant, (much) faster, user-generated content (i.e. productive consumer), self-sharing, collaborative, amateur, mobile, open to interaction and dialogue, horizontal, viral, imponderable, hard to control, responsive, daily, assembling individual and different voices, visible, hybrid, alternative, and participatory. It is possible to describe social media as a communicative field, which gives priority to identity-sharing and the freedom of expression. All these features give the impression that the power is centered

on the internet users, and they seem to be the new myths of an idealized, open and transparent world with considerably positive meanings. However, it is difficult to recognize social media as a sphere independent from social powers. As an example, governments are introducing more efficient ways to monitor their citizens. Besides, investment groups are creating new and softer strategies in order to extend colonization and consumption culture.

As the representation of inspection tools and monitoring hegemony of the previous-century nation-state and social structures, the prevalent communication practices of mass media industry with a dedifferentiation impact are likely to be the main reason of these concerns.

Media is one of the socialization tools, which allows an individual to socialize as an actor notably in mass market place. Further, it has an important role in the development of capitalist economy based upon capital accumulation; getting an individual to be a part of the system, and defining his/her sense of social belonging over consumption. As Jean Baudrillard states, “The consumer society is simultaneously a society of the production of goods and of the accelerated production of relations”. Therefore, the consumer society is indeed defined by the accelerated production of relations. In this respect, new media does not seem to be a separation from the old one. These are the efforts to accelerate the motion of a world of vital relations generated for the survival of consumer society. In connection with the developing capital accumulation, the production amount of communication content for consumption is required to increase. Ultimately, the relations will lose their inherent features, and become an agent of mass-produced consumer society.

Social media has been recognized as the primary tool of global capitalism. The statistical figures disprove the fact that generated by the social elites and the conventional media, the world of social media has influenced every aspect of social life and relations. Moreover, the current digital gap restricts the access to social media at different variables, such as international, national, regional and local levels along with sex, age and education. It is necessary to understand for what purposes the social media users use these technologies, and to what extent they can create an alternative world. As widely discussed within the context of Arab Spring, social media is considered as a user-generated platform, and is against the established social institutions, representative democracy, interaction and mass communication. Therefore, it is important to answer the question of whether social media can be used as tool for liberation, social transformation or – more assertively– for revolution. According to the views of the researchers saying “yes”, social media is regarded as a powerful tool, which allows the opposition to show its dissatisfaction and desire for transformation, and makes it more visible.

It may be suggested that social media is mainly seen as the voice of “silent” masses, and a reflection of their problems to the society. Social media is a postmodern medium, which re-unite the individuals becoming stranger with each other for the fact that they commute between working and free time, filled with consumption activities. It is also committed to “safely” connect its users with their friends, and on a global scale with the others. Social media is tool for social solidarity and attachment even through the

“weak ties” (Donath and Boyd; Ellison), and the limitations of sharing are determined by the internet users, which makes it self-reflexive (Giddens). We have a new communication platform, in which not only online and off-line, but also public and private spheres continuously come into contact, and thereby their boundaries have been eliminated. This platform is based on the rationale of “to follow and being followed”. Considering its user-generated content, the form and the boundaries of this platform are uncertain. It is flexible, instantly changing, and has different cultural forms of usage, makes differences more visible, and finally creates its unique pattern while re-creating the social norms. In Serif Mardin’s terms, the features and the form of “community map” shared among the users, is changing in the course of socialization. The levels of social comprehension are extending, the implications of the map are instantly changed, and its image vocabulary is being developed by spreading a sense of isolation. The prevalent business practices of mass communication industry are under shock impact of social media, and there are uncontrolled penetrations in the image world generated by the ideological tools of governments ruling our meaning and value systems. Whilst the power centers and the prevalent content generation forces are relentlessly struggling under the outcry of “citizen journalism” and “alternative media”, the ruling icons have transformed by adopting “paradigm-shifting” discourses.

As above, the theoretical discussions about social media appear to shuttle between the ideologies of techno-optimism and techno-pessimism. However, another third theoretical aspect, which would eliminate this dichotomy, is necessary to properly analyse social media. The new communication tool of networking society is likely to be an indication of a new paradigm-transition period in communication. Therefore, social media analysis is becoming more important to understand today’s societies. It may well be argued that, in social media studies, the most crucial point is to consider social media as a community (i.e. a mirror which exists between the real and the virtual worlds, and allows the living individuals to express themselves, instantly share their feelings, status and opinions, and present what they have in mind through the virtual tools). In other words, to a certain extent, social media reflects the time-specific mental and mood status of a community in connection with their opinions and feelings. The current volume of the 7th Social Media and Network Society Book within the Media Critique Series draws attention to three main concepts, i.e. culture, identity and politics. An unusual sharing culture has been emerged by virtue of social media. The user-generated information has become worthwhile by sharing of the internet users, and virtual communities have been created by the individuals alike to each other. They are experiencing a kind of consensus and sympathy, and feel less alienated. Sharing opinions allows them to connect more people in the same view, and relieve their loneliness. Further, the users are now able to discuss the topics that they previously could not talk about in their limited friend circle. For instance, in Twitter, the social media users can see the hundreds of unfamiliar people’s political views, and become a part of the virtual community, an active agent of politics. On the other hand, the users are able to re-unite or develop new relations with their old peers, to manage their relationships or create new strategies of intimacy in semi-public social networks, such as Facebook. In turn, our friends can learn about our different features, and follow the

normally restricted parts of our lives on these networks. The more we share, the more information we receive from each other, and the more we could satisfy our curiosity. In this particular context, Şafak Erkeyhan takes a closer look from different perspectives at the cultural dimension of preferences in social media use by focusing on the cultural problems in his chapter “Network Culture and Social Media on Global to Local Scale”. Following this, Ali Barış Kaplan traces the historical background of this cultural dimension. In the light of anthropological studies, he investigates social media based on a comparative study on the psycho-social behaviours of modern internet users and primitive cultures. Then, Cengiz Erdal draws attention to the present indications of social media by analyzing its importance in human life; how it fulfils the user needs and how it came into existence; how the current and pro-sharing applications have created and shaped this platform; how some of our obsolete habits and values have been transformed; and how sharing has become a new habit of today’s people thanks to new communication tools.

Social media is a leading form of media in which the concept of “identity (-ies)” popularizing with the postmodern society are presented. Each sharing on social media reveals some clues about our identity. Although the problem of self-presentation is not unique to social media, it has been legitimized through this platform, and the desire for sharing our life with others has become a continuous activity. Niedzviecki observes that mankind maintains its existence by presentation because people feel like a true individual when they present themselves, and their sharing are followed or liked by the others. In consideration of identity performance in social network sites (Zhao et al.), the users do not show their true or covered identities, but rather create an identity admirable for the others. As an example, they are struggling to look more popular, successful, charismatic or hilarious in order to get social acceptance. Besides, location-based applications allow us to show our social status and life styles, and they have become a location-customized form of conspicuous consumption. Boyd describes intimacy as a sense of control over our personal information. That feeling may get stronger by the fact that we are able to decide the extent of information and with whom we would like to share. It is also possible to attribute this to the success of social networks, such as Facebook. Many internet users consider Facebook as safe harbour far away from the anonymous and “open to danger” environment of the internet. The users are able to decide to accept friendship requests or not, share the information as much as they want, and present a controlled overview about themselves. In this respect, Ozlem Oguzhan asserts that Facebook is a communication medium developing the condition of narcissism. She presents an eye-opening research on Facebook from the point of the critique of modernity. Moreover, Gordon Alley-Young discusses the identity creation of female Muslims in social media, and focuses on the analysis of three ideologies in female Muslim representation and their implications as follows: (1) cultural insurgents, (2) Good Muslim Sister and (3) the Western’s fantasy. Gülüm Şener and Yelda Özkoçak argue that the idealized image of an individual on Facebook is re-generated in line with the celebrity images circulated through the popular culture. Şener and Özkoçak investigate the different functions of photos on Facebook and the self-presentation strategies of its users. In her article, “A Critical Perspective on the Female Identity Generated in Television and Virtual World”, Neşe Kaplan investigates

the discourse of female identity representation in television and virtual world, and departs from the question of whether female identity is a part of the dominant discourse or is generated as a representation of the opposing identity. In their research analyzing the behaviours of the university students from Honduras on Facebook, Whitney Coyle et al. demonstrate some empirical findings with respect to the creation of social reality among the youth through Facebook.

It appears that social media has significantly transformed the field of politics. The political powers continuously use social media as a new monitoring technology, notably for following the demonstrators of social movements through social media. “Global panopticon” is shutting down the voices of opposition groups in coordination with governments. However, the “strict” political institutions have resorted to create new policies in order to “become flexible” in social media based on dialogue and responsive communication. Social movements and the forms of opposition have been transformed by social media, and a new resistance culture has emerged in the cyber platform. Social movements are able to create their own alternative media, which in turn have made alternative political identities more visible, and the movements have gained a global perspective. Further, alternative and global public spheres have emerged thanks to the dissemination of different views; the posts shared before, during and after demonstrations are able to maintain their influence and continuity; online and off-line organization and demonstration practices have been integrated; and finally it is possible to organize the “disorganized” masses through the viral messages of opposition groups in social media. In this context, the preliminary general framework was introduced by David J. Gunkel. Gunkel investigates social media with a focus on political theories. In his study, Gunkel makes an analogy between Hobbes and Locke’s “social contract” theories and the “Terms of Service” released by the social networks. Following this general outlook, Perrin Öğün focuses on the opposition groups in her article “Is Opposition Progressing through the Networks? Or Getting Stuck Between them?”. Öğün explores cyber-democracy and the relation between online and political participation from the point of cyber platforms which have used as a demonstration area for new social movements, and created a promoter influence on them. She also points out how the access to IT technologies forces the users to fulfill civil responsibilities. Similarly, Gülüm Şener illustrates the opportunities and the limitations of social media in terms of social movements with current examples. Afterwards, Eva María Ferreras sheds lights on the relations between social media and social movements with a recent concrete example. Ferreras introduces a comprehensive analysis on how Spain-based 15-M Movement, which initially started at national level and created a global impact, shaped social media use, notably in Twitter from its early days to present. Finally, Savaş Çoban reminds us the fact that social media has become an influential monitoring tool for government and political institutions rather than a tool for promoting liberation. In his article, he adopts a skeptical stance on the roles of social media in social movements by describing it as a political spy.

I would like to express my gratitude to the authors who contributed to this book with the above-summarized useful chapters. Besides, my sincere thanks go to Can Bilgili for his continued support and guidance throughout the preparations. I wish that this book will contribute to the recently-started social media studies in Turkey, and will be a reference source to all people, students and researchers interested in this field.

Gülüm Şener  
Istanbul, 2013