WHAT IF YOU CANNOT ACCESS THE INTERNET IN THE SURVEILLANCE SOCIETY? INDIVIDUALS’ PERCEPTIONS RELATED TO THE INTERNET CENSORSHIP AND SURVEILLANCE IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

Widespread usage of the Internet services in all over the world has resulted in implementation of the Internet censorship -restrictions on what can be publicized or viewed on the Internet- and the surveillance society in many countries. The Internet access restrictions and censorship are being used by some governments to control and suppress individuals’ sharing and reaching information on the Internet. In this study, following a theoretical discussion based on the review of relevant literature, individuals’ perceptions related to the Internet censorship in Turkey is demonstrated based on a qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study revealed that the Internet censorship is considered as a major obstacle restricting individuals’ freedom of getting information, sharing their opinions and communicating with others. Furthermore, internet users implement self-censorship while posting their opinions about especially political issues since they feel fear, anxiety and pressure stemming from restrictions and surveillance.

Keywords: Internet Censorship, Freedom of Speech, Online Communication, Internet Access, The Surveillance Society.

INTRODUCTION

Based on the developments in computer-mediated communication after the advent of the Internet with Web 2.0 a new form of society consisted of networked people has created. These networked societies have led individuals to narrate their stories,

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experiences, and opinions on social media and reach other networked people to interact and communicate with them. The interactive communication environment provided by online social networks let all individuals have their voices. Increasing digital citizenship has drawn attention of governments to opportunities offered by computer-mediated communication; e-government structures have been built to provide services to citizens and other stakeholders in digital environment. Digitalizing government services have caused collecting, processing, and storing enormous amount of information, including sensitive information, therefore it has raised concerns related to privacy, ethics, and surveillance. The network culture emerged as a result of developments in information and communication technologies and dissemination of social media have made almost all societies in the world surveillance societies. Security concerns have lead the governments to record, store, process and retrieve insignificant aspects of daily lives of ordinary people such as banking, traveling, using the phone and using the Internet and social media regularly (Lyon, 2008).

The Internet has a potential to promote democracy and economic growth, and social capital by increasing digital citizenship. Digital citizenship is an expression which is used to identify membership of a networked society. These individuals use the Internet intensely in daily basis effectively and efficiently (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal, 2008). In theory, the Internet and computer-mediated communication have been expected to provide many opportunities and freedom to opponent people to share their opinions, resist, conduct a campaign against a government practice, and organize social movements, and mainly offered a possibility to democratization as “during 1990s, technology companies had trumpeted the wonders of borderless world and the power of information technologies to collapse authoritarian regimes and bring down the walls” (Klein, 2008: 302). However, in practice, it has not been the case; since governments in all over the world use the Internet and information technologies for surveillance. Activities of citizens on the Internet have been monitored, and in networked societies information and communication technologies have usually been used to exercise repression, censorship, and surveillance instead of supporting freedom of speech and democratization. Internet censorship can be defined as the planned damaging or blocking of access to certain websites, contents considered as harmful by proposing some reasons such as protecting national security, maintaining social order, protecting minors and families, protecting individuals from harmful content to legitimize the practice (Aceto & Pescapé, 2015).

Intense usage of technologically mediated surveillance and the Internet censorship by governments invokes images of the Big Brother state of George Orwell’s famous novel Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) and is perceived as a significant threat to privacy and liberty (Garfinkel, 2000). During recent years, especially after Law No. 5651 (Regulation of Publications on the Internet and Suppression of Crimes Committed by means of Such Publication) came into force in May 2007, the restrictions on access to various social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, throttling at the ISP level to slowdown the Internet connection, restrictions on messaging services such as WhatsApp, Skype, and Instagram, banning and blocking different websites, and full Internet shutdowns have seemed to become routine practices of the Internet censorship in Turkey.
The focus of this study is to explore perceptions of Turkish individuals related to the Internet censorship and surveillance in Turkey. In order to identify perceptions and reactions of individuals related to the Internet censorship and surveillance, in-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected frequent users of the Internet.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Individuals' attitudes towards the Internet censorship and surveillance are determined based on their perceptions of these practices (usefulness, goals achieved, and desirability of these practices); depth and intensity of surveillance; and level of exposure to surveillance (Murakami Wood and Webster, 2009). National security, fight against crime, enhancing quality of government services, increasing citizens' accessibility to better, effective and efficient services, protection of minors or society, protection of social order are some concerns which are used in order to legitimize the Internet censorship and technology mediated surveillance in the minds of citizens.

Surveillance in modern societies is pervasive and ubiquitous, and in fact more intense than it is realized. Both public and private sector organizations collect and store large amounts of information related to individuals credit history, purchasing habits (via stores' loyalty cards, 'air miles' schemes, and so on), travel patterns (via GPS and mobile phones), telephone and e-mail usage. In the networked societies, all interactions produce vast amount of information about an ordinary individual's daily routine, some of this information is shared by individuals voluntarily as in the case of loyalty cards, or involuntarily; however, all of the information collected is stored, processed, and used. In daily routine of individuals' lives, people may not notice the intensity of surveillance; however, an individual may turn into a suspect due to his/her suspicious behavior or just to be different. Sensitive information about a person could be misused and may create unwanted and harmful consequences for this person. Therefore, technology mediated surveillance invokes issues regarding responsibility of information protection, privacy, freedom, and ethics.

Before the ICT revolution, censorship was the problem of traditional media; however, in today's networked societies the Internet has been the target of widespread censorship implementations at different levels in various countries. Some countries in the world such as China, Iran, and Turkey have long been criticized due to severe censorship and surveillance practices on the Internet (Arsan, 2013; Wojcieszak & Smith, 2014; Taneja & Wu, 2014, Akgül & Kirlidoğ, 2015; Wang & Mark, 2015; Liang & Lu, 2010; Stevenson, 2007; Chu, 2017; Xu, Mao, & Haldeman, 2011; Köse & Özen, 2010; Ozkan & Arikan, 2009), today pervasive surveillance and censorship have become significant issues of all users of the Internet everywhere, even in democratic countries (Brown & Korff, 2009; Bitso, Fourie, & Bothma, 2013; Fuchs, Boersma, Albrechtslund, & Sandoval, 2011; Wright and Breindl, 2013).

In Turkey, Law No. 5651, entitled Regulation of Publications on the Internet and Suppression of Crimes Committed by means of Such Publication came into force in May 2007. Despite the oppositions to Law No. 5651, child pornography (protection of minors, families, social order, and values) was proposed by the help of the widespread media coverage in order to legitimize the Internet censorship, to repress opponents, and disguise the real scope and context of censorship. Since then, access to a huge number of websites (including well-known sites such as YouTube, Geocities, DailyMotion, and Google, Turkish news sites, Turkish online gay community sites) have been occasionally
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Law No. 5651 lists the followings as catalogue crimes under Article 8 of Law No. 5651 (with the reference to the provisions of the Turkish Penal Code -TCK) which allows to block access to a website if there is a "sufficient suspicion" that these crimes are committed on a website (Akdeniz, 2010; Akdeniz & Altıparmak, 2008; Akgül & Kırlıdoğ, 2015):

1. encouragement and incitement of suicide (TCK -Article 84)
2. sexual exploitation and abuse of children (TCK -Article 103)
3. facilitation of the use of narcotics (TCK -Article 190)
4. provision of harmful substances for health (TCK -Article 194)
5. obscenity (TCK -Article 226)
6. prostitution (TCK -Article 227)
7. facilitation of gambling (TCK -Article 228)
8. the crimes against Atatürk (Law No. 5816)
9. betting /gambling (football and other sports) (Law No. 5728, Article 256)

According to Washington DC-based advocacy group Freedom House’s Freedom on the Net Report on Turkey (Freedom House, 2016), Turkey's Internet freedom status had changed from “partly free” to “not free” in 2016. The reasons behind this status change can be summarized as follows (Freedom House, 2016): (1) Restrictions on connectivity (mobile and Internet connections were suspended in the southeast of the country) (2) Blocking and filtering (Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube were temporarily blocked on numerous occasions such as after the terrorist attacks (3) Content removal (almost 90 percent of all content locally restricted by Twitter in the second half of 2015) (4) Media, diversity, and content manipulation (progovernment trolls have escalated their campaigns to harass opposition voices and organizations on social media through smear campaigns and fake accounts) (5) Prosecutions and detentions for online activities (several individuals including journalists, public figures, and young students received lengthy prison sentences for “insulting” public officials or spreading “terrorism propaganda” (6) Technical Attacks (A 14-day cyberattack brought almost 400,000 Turkish websites offline and temporarily suspended retail banking services.

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted in order to receive the Internet users’ opinions about the Internet censorship thoroughly. Qualitative methods are used necessarily in order to collect rich data and reveal the silenced voices need to be heard when trying to bring a deep understanding into a complex issue (Creswell, 2013).

Table 1 shows the participants' demographic characteristics. Participants were a purposive sample of active Internet users with different demographic profiles and a total of 15 participants were interviewed. A balance was also tried to be maintained in terms of participants' gender, marital status, occupations, etc. Eight of the participants were female and the average age was 36. Eight of the participants had children.
Data collection of the study was based on semi-structured interviewing in order to enable a flexible interview setting that facilitated deeper investigation of specific concepts and issues raised by participants. In-depth interviews were conducted between the dates 15 Feb 2017 and 15 March 2017 and interview sessions ran for approximately 30-45 minutes. All interviews were recorded with a voice recorder by the permission of participants and then transcribed. In order to ensure the reliability of the study, the raw data was read and coded by all three members of the research. Content analysis was used to classify the answers and identify emerging themes.

The questions were formed after the review of literature on Internet censorship and a total of 16 questions and related follow-up questions were asked to the participants. The findings were reported according to certain themes addressed by research questions. Accordingly, Internet usage habits of participants and their opinions on censorship, methods to overcome it, self-censorship, harmful content on the Internet, control mechanisms and the impacts of censorship decisions on daily lives were revealed in the study.

**FINDINGS**

**Internet Usage Habits**

Most participants use the Internet from an hour to a few hours on daily basis. The most visited websites by the participants are social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, various news websites, professional websites related to their
occupations and other hobby related websites. Additionally, it was revealed that some participants shop and watch movies online.

Participants also reported that they prefer to follow and read the websites rather than post or share something online. Most participants pointed out that, at present, they post or share less content on internet when compared to the past.

**Opinions on the Internet Censorship**

When asked about their opinions on the Internet censorship, participants mostly complained about restrictions on their freedom to get information and news. Most participants indicated that they are unable to reach up-to-date, reliable and objective information from the Internet, which was an alternative information source when censorship occurs since they do not trust in mass media in Turkey. Participant 15 shared her opinions:

For example, you can find some news on the web, which you would not be able to read or hear about on the newspapers or on TV because they are censored due to jurisdictional decisions or political connections. Therefore, internet censorship, primarily restrains you from learning!

The Internet censorship also affects participants' abilities and intentions to share their opinions and other contents. Firstly, when a website is blocked or Internet connection is down completely, they cannot reach websites and post anything materially. On the other hand, they hesitate to share because of fear and anxiety stemming from censorship related pressure.

Additionally, some participants stated that they are worried that unfortunate things are happening in the country which caused the censorship, even if they do not know the reason. Thus, it could be stated that censorship attracts attention of people and makes them curious about the reasons.

Although most participants find the Internet censorship unfair, disturbing, frustrating and useless; some participants support the practices of censorship as long as it is beneficial for the country's interests. On the other hand, one participant stressed that, as a consumer, she cannot get the service she already paid for when the censorship is applied. To sum up, most participants complained that whatever the reason behind the censorship is, their daily lives are influenced negatively.

**Opinions on the Internet Censorship Methods**

When comparing the Internet censorship methods, throttling of Internet connection was the mostly complained one. Participants said that throttling affects all of the websites and therefore their daily internet-related works are interrupted. Some of them pointed out that throttling is a kind of latent censorship which the Internet users cannot react directly since it is not accepted by authorities. They also admitted that they cannot come up with a solution for throttling while they can overcome other censorship methods such as blocking a specific website. Participant 13 complained about throttling of Internet connection:

Most disturbing one is throttling! It is even worse than cutting it completely or blocking. It annoys you more because you cannot even give a reaction to it. They claim it is not throttled. Most people cannot notice slowness of the connection. So it is a kind
of latent censorship. You can talk and complain about open censorship but you cannot talk about the latent one. Because they will not accept it!

Cutting the Internet connection completely, blocking a website and removing a specific content were other censorship methods addressed by participants. Some participants told that they feel uncomfortable with the complete cut off because nothing can be done and no websites can be accessed. On the other hand, blocking a website was the least complained method because some additional solutions can be adopted to overcome the blockage.

**Overcoming the Internet Censorship**

All participants reported that they are aware of the programs and techniques in order to overcome the Internet censorship such as using VPN, changing DNS settings, entering through proxy websites and other programs and applications. While some participants told that they use these techniques and programs only if they are free of charge, some other participants mentioned that they buy various applications in order to enter the restricted websites.

However, not all of them are using these programs or techniques. Interviews especially with elder participants showed that individuals are not comfortable with these kinds of solutions. Some of them find these programs or techniques complicated and state that they do not know and understand how to use them. On the other hand, some participants reported that although they have knowledge about overcoming censorship, they prefer not to use any of them since they consider this process as a waste of time or they just simply do not care and prefer to wait until censorship is removed.

**Implementing Self-Censorship**

Most participants remarked that they implement self-censorship while posting or sharing any content on the Internet for various reasons. The most common reason behind self-censorship is fear of getting arrested or punished because of sharings related to politics. Other reasons include families’ concerns and warnings on this matter. Sometimes participants want to protect their families, especially their children, and sometimes their families want to protect them. Participant 7 revealed her concerns:

> Especially, as a mother with a child, I cannot be reckless. If I were younger, single, without a child I would say “what the heck”. I would fight for my ideals. But now there is a human being committed to me. So whenever I need to make a decision, my priority has always become my son. That’s why I am controlling myself.

Additionally, some participants stressed that they do not trust in legal system and they worry that their "legal" sharings might be considered "illegal" in the future. Therefore, participants generally avoid posting or publishing any other kind of sharing on political issues. Even if they post anything on politics, they try to choose their words carefully. Usually, they prefer to share casual and funny contents which are considered as "harmless".

On the other hand, self-censorship is sometimes caused by social pressure. Most participants stated that they choose the subjects they intend to share carefully since they do not want to disturb followers. They try to avoid negative reactions and aim to protect some of their followers (like children) from the potentially harmful effects of the content. Concerning this issue, some of the participants do not post or share content on
sensitive issues such as moral, religious, ethnical, sexual issues, etc. Participant 12 reflected that:

I am implementing self-censorship. For example, my son’s friends, at the ages of 13-14, are following me on Facebook and Twitter. I do not share the things that are written very detailed or explicitly because they can read everything I write. I am concerned that children would read those sharings.

**Usage of Personal Information When Sharing**

Most of the participants indicated that they use their personal information (name, surname, age, occupation, etc.) on social media sites, forums and other user-generated content sites. As stated in the previous findings, participants restrict themselves due to pressure stemming from both authorities and society. Therefore, their using and sharing behaviors are influenced from being associated to their real identities on the Internet, so they don't feel comfortable when posting and sharing content. As a result, they prefer to limit their followers and prevent anonymous users from reaching their profiles and posts. Participants also remarked that they also carefully choose the subjects on which they make comments or share contents as their identities were known. Sometimes they limit themselves from making detailed comments and from posting too much. Participant 14 explained the reasons behind his hesitation:

Now, I refrain myself from criticizing anything. Maybe this process just happened by itself. I bristle with thoughts such as ‘Don't intervene with people’, ‘Just share about work’, ‘Do not share your opinions’, ‘Do not share anything at all’... I think the basic reason behind it is the sanctions!

Most participants indicated that they use only their real identities and object to posting anonymously under a nickname. However, a few participants stated otherwise and reported that they do not use any personal information on any website, including social media sites, because they feel anxiety and fear.

**Opinions on Harmful Contents on the Internet**

When participants were asked if there is any content, they believe that should never be allowed on the Internet, the answers were detailed and varied under different categories. First of all, most participants emphasized the importance of protecting human lives and rights. According to them, any content which exposes private lives, targets specific individuals, insults or dishonors them and threatens people’s security and quality of life should not be allowed on the Internet.

Some participants indicated that internationally accepted crimes such as human trafficking, child pornography and pedophilia, illegal drug use, sexual abuse and rape and illegal arms trade should never be on the Internet. Moreover, some participants remarked that sensitive contents such as hate speech containing religious, ethnic, racist, sexist elements and appraisal of Nazism should also be restrained.

In addition to those categories mentioned above, some participants reported that violent and aggressive contents related with war, terrorism, torture, etc. should not be allowed because they might encourage, spoil or traumatize people, especially children. Participant 6 revealed her opinions about harmful content:
I believe that some contents, especially those about child abuse, should not be on the internet. Because internet is now used by people at very young ages. There may be children aged 11-12 who can see these harmful contents.

In accordance with this issue, one participant contradictorily suggested that the contents of the related news should not be banned, because they continue to occur in real life and people should be aware of the events and their consequences. However, disturbing images might be removed or filtered not to influence people's psychology negatively. Participant 3 explained her opinions from a different perspective:

I also do not want to see racist speeches and I do not want to see tortured animals on the Internet but this kind of things still exist in real life even if I do not want to see them. So that kind of content must also be shared so that people can take precautions against them. By this way, people can react and find a solution.

Opinions on Control Mechanism on the Internet

Most of participants reported that they consider the Internet as a part of daily life, so it should be controlled likewise. Participant 10 associated the rules on Internet with the rules in daily life:

For example, there are inspections on the roads related to traffic, that have emerged because of certain needs and are being implemented. And there are certain places and times that you need to throw your garbage. Can you leave the garbage in the middle of the road? This is forbidden. You need to follow the rules in daily life. The Internet is also a fundamental part of today's life. I do not think that today's world is a real world, internet environment is a virtual world. Yes, there are some places, some parts which are virtual, but the internet is a part of our lives. So there should also be rules and orders on the Internet. It should be controlled appropriately.

In accordance with this view, all contents which might constitute a crime should be controlled carefully. On the other hand, some of the participants suggested that the Internet should also be controlled to maintain more qualified content in order to avoid misuse.

A few participants did not support the idea of their actions being controlled on the Internet. According to them, there is no need for a control mechanism since the Internet users are of rational minds. Subsequently, individuals can apply their own filtering for specific reasons, especially in order to protect their children.

When the participants were asked how control mechanism should be maintained, answers varied on who should be responsible for this practice and how it should be applied. Those participants, who think that there should be no censorship at all, claimed that control should be under the initiative of the Internet users. Other participants, while having different opinions on the management of the censorship council, mostly pointed out that whoever would be responsible for this assignment should be objective, neutral, independent from politics and fair to all parties. Participant 4 explained how the control mechanism should be in his ideal world:

In my opinion, the Internet must be audited by an independent institution. The most distressful problem is that this audit is made by the government. Sometimes governments apply this audit to limit criticism made to themselves. Therefore, a supervisory board should be established and should be fully independent. Audits should be made only in accordance with the constitutional provisions and laws.
While some participants think that censorship should operate locally, others defend that an international control board on censorship would be more effective. Most participants indicated that there should be a local multilateral platform formed by all local stakeholders such as civil society organizations, the Internet users, government officials, members of opposition parties, representatives of websites, etc. On the other hand, some participants remarked that all countries should act together against malicious contents on the Internet and therefore an international umbrella organization should be formed by all related parties.

**Effectiveness of the Internet Censorship Practices**

Finally, participants were asked whether the Internet censorship practices achieve expected goals or not. Most participants mainly indicated that censorship reaches its primary goal since it restrains people from reaching the news and other prohibited contents. They suggested that even if a minority of the Internet users can overcome censorship, most of the community cannot reach the content. Thus, by implementing censorship on specific contents, public reaction would be postponed, softened and even eliminated by making people forget about it. Moreover, participants claimed that since censorship practices and related sanctions cause feeling of pressure and fear among the public, self-censorship is implemented by users and this helps authorities to reach their goals even without the need for more severe censorship. In addition, some people might get tired of looking for various methods to overcome censorship, they finally might stop fighting.

On the other hand, those participants who think the Internet censorship practices do not achieve the goals suggested that the Internet users can overcome censorship and the specific contents subjected to censorship would be found out eventually.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This study's major contribution was the exposing of Turkish individuals' perspectives towards the Internet censorship and surveillance. Firstly, the Internet censorship is considered as a major obstacle restricting individuals' freedom of getting information and news, sharing their opinions and experiences and communicating with others. Consistently, the Internet should be accepted as a service provided within the scope of digital citizenship as a requirement of a modern and social state (Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal, 2008). One of the most stressed issues by the participants was the disruption of their daily lives due to various censorship implementations, especially throttling of the Internet connection by authorities. While some of the participants use various programs or techniques such as using VPN, changing DNS settings, entering through proxy websites in order to overcome the Internet censorship, the majority thinks that it is a waste of time and prefers to wait until censorship is removed.

Most of the participants implement self-censorship while posting their opinions and feelings on especially political issues because they feel fear, anxiety and pressure stemming from restrictions and surveillance. These findings are consistent with previous researches proving that the Internet users self-restrict their postings due to fear of punishment or even imprisonment (Aceto & Pescapé, 2015; Arsan, 2013; Bitso, Fourie & Bothma, 2013). In addition to self-censorship, individuals hesitate to share their personal information on social media websites, forums and other user-generated content.
sites and limit both their followers and anonymous users to reach their profiles and sharings due to similar reasons. Most of the participants think that the Internet should be a platform providing freedom of expression and enabling users to connect alike ones. However, they necessarily suggested that there should be rules, restrictions and related sanctions in order to maintain a secure and safe platform for society as it is a part of daily life. The Internet users think that any content which exposes private lives, insults and dishonor individuals, and threatens people's security and quality of life should not be allowed.

While some participants think that the Internet censorship should operate locally, others mostly defended that an international control mechanism should be maintained in order to prevent harmful contents on the Internet. It was noted that the management of the censorship council should be objective, neutral, independent from politics and fair to all parties. If the Internet is controlled locally, all stakeholders such as civil society organizations, the Internet users, government, opposition parties, websites, etc. should be taken into consideration. The study has identified a need for an open global dialogue on online privacy and security in order to ensure an effective fight against catalogue crimes such as child porn, drug trade, human trafficking and hate speech on religious, ethnic and sexist elements. In addition, findings suggest that an international consensus should be maintained for a global understanding and cooperation on human rights, freedom of speech and democracy.

The study's findings should be considered in the light of a number of limitations. The sample had similar social statuses in terms of their education levels and occupational clusters, since snowball sampling method was used in this study. A future research could be performed with a larger sample size consisting participants from different education levels and political opinions in order to assure and expand these results.
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