

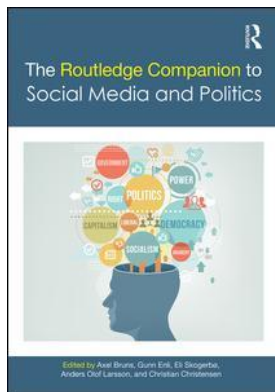
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SOCIAL MEDIA USE DURING POLITICAL CRISES

The Case of the Gezi Protests in Turkey

Lemi Baruh and Hayley Watson

Introduction

The widespread adoption of social media within the past two decades has led to an increased interest in how social media may transform the nature of communication during political crises. Researchers have investigated a number of questions related to how activists use social media for coordination purposes, such as social media's potential as a source of information and a platform giving voice to citizens (e.g. Allagui and Kuebler 2011; Allan 2009; Andén -Papadopoulos 2013; Castells 2012; Hänska-Ahy and Shapour 2013; Johnson 2011). Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to how social media users may exhibit different usage patterns during times of crises. This chapter aims to fill this void by providing findings from two studies that examined how individuals used social media during the 2013 Gezi protests in Turkey.

In Turkey, particularly since the 1990s, the consolidation of media has led to a significant decrease in the availability of diverse news/information sources. Since the current ruling party (AK Parti) came to power in the 2002, national elections, press freedom, and media bias have become heavily debated issues. Critics have frequently argued that during AK Parti's tenure, political pressure on the press has increased and the mainstream media have been quickly (re)configured to create what critics named *yandaş* media (a derogatory term for describing uncritical partisanship in favour of the ruling AK Parti; see Çarkoğlu, Baruh and Yıldırım 2014).

Within a context where homogenisation of content in mainstream media is increasing, the use of social media during the Gezi protests emerges as a key case study for understanding the roles that these media can play in political crises. The unrest started in Istanbul at the end of May 2013, when a small group of protesters against the removal of trees for the new redevelopment project in the Taksim square area was violently evicted by police. Following the police action, the protests spread around Turkey. The agenda of the protestors quickly evolved to include not only the redevelopment project in Taksim, but also related issues such as the increasing encroachment of the

ruling party into the private lives of citizens and threats to freedom of speech. Protestors and their supporters were highly vocal in their criticism of the lack of and bias in the news media coverage of the protests, resulting in an increase in the use of social media. For example, Topsy Labs (2013) reported about 10 million tweets containing hashtags related to the protests between 30 May and the 4 June 2013.

This chapter gives a brief overview of current research on social media during political crises. Moreover, as an addition to this area of research, we will summarise findings from two studies of social media use during the Gezi Park protests. First, findings from a survey on Twitter use during the protests and, second, results from a content analysis of blogs that citizens produced in order to share information and opinion about the protests. Both studies shed light on social media use in times of political crises.

Citizens and the Use of Social Media in a Crisis

Numerous studies have shown the potential value of social media in aiding communication efforts and enhancing situational awareness in a crisis (e.g., Starbird and Palen 2010; Watson and Wadhwa 2014). In the midst of a political crisis, new media technologies enhance individuals' abilities to network and offer new opportunities for citizens to organise, engage, and coordinate action as social activists. With the help of online networks, activists can locally and globally push grassroots ideas, organise and coordinate action (such as during the Occupy movements), and, crucially, through acts of citizen journalism, get their voices heard by the wider public (Anduiza et al. 2014; Castells 2012). Significantly, the use of network technologies have the potential to transform the organisational structures of activist networks in ways that may have long-term implications for the future of political organisations and participatory politics (Castells 2012; Juris 2005).

Social media have brought about new means through which citizens can produce, share, and gain access to information. This information includes, but is not limited to, information produced and shared by fellow citizens, and information shared by activists and organisations using social media platforms (Watson and Wadhwa 2014). The growth of social media platforms means that individuals are no longer merely consumers of information; rather, they can actively participate in the production, distribution, curation, and verification of information. As argued by Allan (2009: 18), citizens are able to 'bear witness' to unfolding events, thereby providing an additional lens to crisis reporting.

By participating in the construction of news, and moreover, consuming news produced and published by other citizens, individuals may be able to bypass the traditional gatekeepers, such as mainstream news media sources. User-generated content provides an alternative voice to mainstream media, thereby contributing to the democratisation of the news (Reese and Dai 2009; Young 2009). The increased role that citizens play in production and dissemination of information not only create new opportunities but also pose new challenges. For example, while citizen engagement may help dissemination of information and democratisation of access, it may also exacerbate problems related to distribution of misinformation (Andén-Papadopoulos 2013; Kuhn 2007; Watson and Wadhwa 2014).

A useful framework for understanding the interactions of citizens with news and information through social media is the uses and gratification theory (UGT), which holds that media users have an active, rather than passive, relationship with the media

(Newbold et al. 2002). As such, media users actively seek, or indeed create, content that will satisfy their needs.

In the last two decades, increased use of the Internet has led to a surge in the application of functional approaches in media studies, such as the UGT, for understanding users' interaction with interactive media, including, but not limited to, social networking sites (Chen 2011). Examples of such studies include why people use the Web for accessing political information (e.g. Kaye and Johnson 2002); individuals' motivations for using social media (e.g. Bazarova and Choi 2014; Joinson 2008; Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012); and how social media use contributes to enhancing social capital (e.g. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007).

With respect to Twitter, Chen (2011) conducted a study using UGT to understand how Twitter was perceived to have satisfied the need for connecting with others. The findings from this study indicated that the more time individuals spent on Twitter over a longer period (months), the more they fulfilled their need for connecting with others. In addition, actively participating in a conversation played a significant role in satisfying the need for connectivity. More recently, Hughes et al. (2012) utilised UGT to investigate the differences between uses of Facebook and Twitter. They found that those who used Twitter for gathering information did so for its "utilitarian value and cognitive stimulation" (Hughes et al. 2012: 567).

While UGT has provided important insights as to how and why people use social media, less attention has been paid to the use of social media during political crises. Until recently, studies that examined social media use in a crisis mostly focused on crises relating to *natural* disasters (e.g. a study of social media use following the Haiti earthquake by Yates and Paquette 2011). Lately, however, a number of studies have investigated the use of social media during political crises such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements (e.g. Anduiza et al. 2014; Juris 2012; Tüfekçi and Wilson 2012). For example, Tüfekçi and Wilson (2012) examined the role social media played in informing individuals of the protests as well as enabling them to participate in the demonstrations in the Tahrir Square in the Egyptian capital Cairo in 2011. Other studies, such as those by Castells (2012) and Garrett (2006), focused on how online media facilitated formation and organisation of new social movements.

Yet, given the potential of social media applications to allow users to not only seek information but also produce and disseminate information, a more comprehensive understanding of the role of social media during crises would require that we investigate a wider range of uses of social media in the context of political crises. As such, our study seeks to understand different patterns of social media usage in a political crisis, moreover, how user motivations may influence behaviour. The next two sections will aim to accomplish this goal by first summarising results from a survey that mapped Twitter usage types during Gezi protests. Then, we will summarise results from a brief content analysis of citizen-generated content during the protests.

Study 1: Use of Twitter during the Gezi Protests

Participants and Method

The survey was administered online between 10 and 29 June 2013. Respondents (adults older than 18) were recruited using a snowball sample through invitations sent via email, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. As such, the results of the survey are not

statistically generalisable to the larger population, but provide a picture of how users gained information about the Gezi protests.

Out of 890 respondents who started the survey, 240 completed it. On average, the survey took about 20 minutes. Two-thirds of the respondents were women, and their mean age was 28 years. Approximately half of the respondents indicated that they were students at a higher education institution (undergraduate or graduate). On average, the respondents reported using the Internet for about four hours per day for purposes other than school or work. More than half of them reported visiting news websites (69 per cent), instant messaging (60 per cent), visiting video sharing sites (58 per cent), and using Facebook (77 per cent) at least once a day. A considerably smaller percentage of respondents reported using the Internet at least once a day for writing blogs (13 per cent).

Results

Almost all the respondents were Twitter users before the Gezi Park protests. During the protests, respondents on average spent approximately two and a half hours per day on Twitter and logged into their accounts about eight times per day. Slightly more than half of the respondents used their smart phones to access Twitter during the protests, whereas about a third used personal computers and a few accessed social media by tablets (10 per cent).

In terms of uses and gratifications of Twitter in general, we measured four types of uses of social media (e.g. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007; Chen 2011). First, using Twitter for surveillance (e.g. 'To be up to date about news'), second, for relationship maintenance (e.g., 'To stay connected with people I know'), third, for connectivity (e.g., 'To expand my social circle') and, fourth, for self-expression (e.g., 'To make others understand me better'). Overall, respondents had significantly higher scores for using Twitter to fulfil surveillance needs than for self-expression needs, relationship maintenance needs, and connectivity needs.

Respondents also completed an open-ended question regarding why they used Twitter during the protests. Their answers were initially analysed via a grounded theory approach, using an open (substantive) coding of the responses (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Following the open coding, the 10 most frequently occurring categories of responses were formalised into a content analytic coding scheme. The ensuing coding scheme measured the absence/presence of each of the categories in the open-ended responses (each response could potentially be coded for all relevant categories). Two coders (the first author and a graduate student) coded each response independently from each other. With the exception of 'feeling of comradeship' and 'wanted to gauge public opinion' categories, the intercoder reliabilities for the categories were higher than Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.67$, the minimum acceptable level according to Krippendorff (2004). In cases when there were disagreements about the codes assigned to a given response, the differences were resolved through discussion between the two coders.

Accordingly, respondents predominantly indicated that Twitter was useful for getting up to date information (see Figure 13.1). In addition, 10 per cent of respondents reported that they were able to get first-hand information from peers who were actively participating in the protest via social media. For example, one respondent indicated that "the only way to attain true information was to get it first hand from people" and at many times, social media, despite issues regarding reliability of information, "were the only sources of information." Relatedly, close to 40 per cent of the respondents

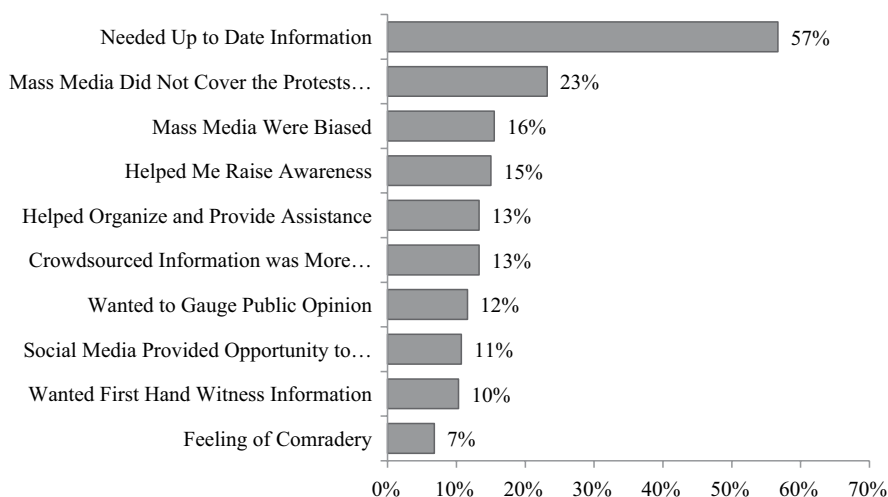


Figure 13.1 Reasons for Using Twitter during the Gezi Protests, by Percentage, 2013, $N = 233$

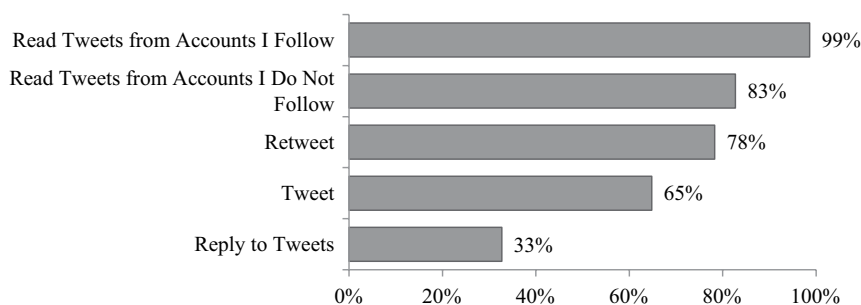


Figure 13.2 Activities Performed on Twitter during Gezi Protests by Respondents for at Least Half the Time They Logged on to Twitter, by Percentage, 2013, $N = 239$

indicated that they did not trust the mainstream mass media because they found coverage inadequate (23 per cent) or biased (16 per cent).

Using a 5-point scale that ranged between 'almost every time I log onto Twitter' to 'never' respondents also reported the extent to which they engaged in other activities such as tweeting about the protests, reading tweets published by other people, or retweeting or replying to others' tweets (see Figure 13.2). In line with the reasons of use reported above, respondents were more likely to use Twitter for information or opinion seeking than for sharing purposes.

We used an open-ended question to investigate the ways in which respondents verified information they received from Twitter: the most frequent method of information verification was direct contact with friends who were in the protest zone (see Figure 13.3).

THE GEZI PROTESTS IN TURKEY

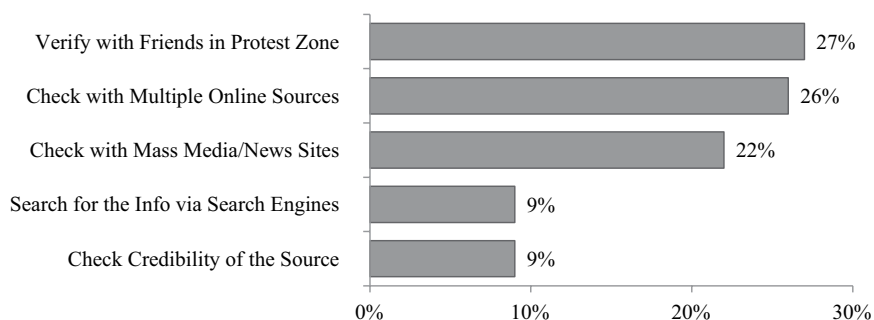


Figure 13.3 Activities Performed on Twitter during Gezi Protests by Respondents for at Least Half the Time They Logged on to Twitter, by Percentage, 2013, $N = 239$

Gezi Protests and Comparison of Twitter Usage Segments

For the segmentation analysis, respondents were asked to complete two questions (using a 9-point scale) to indicate the extent to which they would categorise their use of Twitter during Gezi Protests as oriented towards:

1. 'voicing your opinions' (1) . . . (9) 'share news/updates'
2. 'sharing updates/opinions' (1) . . . (9) 'following updates/news from others'

For both questions, approximately 30 per cent of the respondents categorised themselves as being in-between the two extremes. In line with the previous results, twice as many respondents were likely to categorise themselves as using Twitter to learn about opinions and updates from other people (46 per cent) than sharing their own opinions about the protests (23 per cent).

To segment the respondents in terms of Twitter utilisation orientations, a two-step cluster analysis using the Schwarz's Bayesian information criterion (BIC) was performed on the responses to these two questions. The results of this cluster analysis revealed four segments of Twitter users (see Figure 13.4):

- *Update seekers*: This segment comprised users who overwhelmingly reported using Twitter for news and updates and for learning about what others have shared.
- *Update hubs*: Close to half of the respondents in this segment were oriented towards news and updates rather than opinions. The majority of respondents reported maintaining a balance between sharing and learning about what others have shared.
- *Opinion seekers*: A large majority in this segment reported that for them Twitter was useful for learning about what others have shared.
- *Voice makers*: All members of this segment reported that they used Twitter for sharing their own opinions.

We observed no statistically significant differences between the segments in terms of using Twitter to fulfil surveillance (information seeking), self-expression, and relationship maintenance needs. However, the voice makers were more likely to use Twitter to expand their networks than members of other segments, i.e. the update hubs, update seekers, and opinion seekers members.

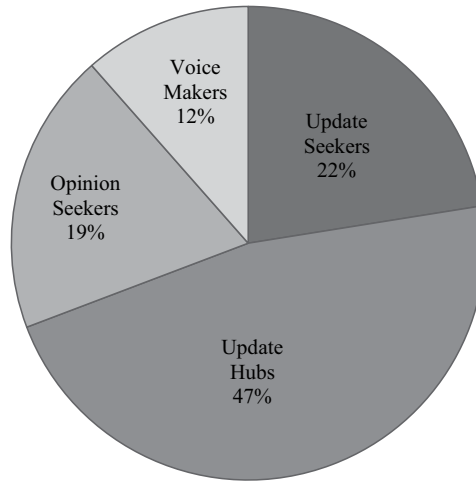


Figure 13.4 Twitter Usage Segments, 2013, $N = 218$

Table 13.1 summarises the comparison of the segments in terms of Twitter-related activities. The percentages reflect the shares of the respondents who indicated that they engaged in the activity in question at least half of the time that they logged onto Twitter. Update hubs and voice makers tended to write tweets and retweet others' tweets more than the other segments. The results show that close to half of the respondents in the voice makers segment replied to tweets at least half of the times they logged on Twitter compared to a third of the respondents who belonged to other segments.

Table 13.1 Comparison of Usage Segments in Terms of Activities on Twitter during the Gezi Protests, 2013, by Percentage, $N = 217$

	Update seekers	Update hubs	Opinion seekers	Voice makers	χ^2
Read tweets from accounts I follow	98	100	95	100	5.444
Read tweets from accounts I don't follow	90	81	81	80	2.241
Retweet others' tweets	69	86	69	80	8.112*
Write tweets	50	74	59	68	8.836*
Reply to others' tweets	33	30	29	48	3.328

Notes. $N = 217$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Table 13.2 summarises the extent to which different segments utilised the most common three information verification techniques. First, opinion seekers were least likely to directly contact people from the protest zone and verify information (7 per cent). Second, update hubs (35 per cent) were more likely than other segments to cross-check information with multiple sources.

Table 13.2 Comparison of Usage Segments in Terms of Information Verification Techniques, by Percentage, $N = 217$

	<i>Update seekers</i>	<i>Update hubs</i>	<i>Opinion seekers</i>	<i>Voice makers</i>	χ^2
Verify with friends in protest zone	34	31	7	39	8.765*
Check with multiple online sources	21	35	29	4	9.162*
Check with mass media/news sites	18	15	29	30	3.674

Notes. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Study 2: Blogging and Content of Citizen-Generated News

As discussed above, particularly during political crises, social media can help provide alternative spaces for individuals to bypass mainstream media as gatekeepers of information. The data that we collected about Twitter usage indicate how general mistrust of mainstream media may have contributed to the use of social media as a source of information. Our data demonstrate that in the case of the Gezi protests, users were more likely to use Twitter for receiving and forwarding information and opinions rather than to generating news. Our second study took this as a starting point and focused on how citizens utilised blogs to generate and share information about the protests.

Method

We carried out a content analysis on citizen-journalism articles that were retrieved online from blogs of individuals. Entries in five blogs, altogether 25 blog articles, were analysed. We used ‘paragraphs’ as a unit of analysis. This resulted in 289 units (paragraphs) that were coded by three independent coders who were trained for this purpose.

The content analysis focused on the following variables: Types of news sources utilised (e.g. mainstream media, wire services, identified news sources); quotations and citations of news sources; use of audio-visuals; the balance between information vs. commentary; utilisation of episodic vs. thematic frames; targets and sources of criticism (i.e. who voices criticism about whom). The intercoder reliability of the items were higher than Krippendorff’s $\alpha = 0.67$. Disagreements about the codes were resolved through discussion between the coders and the first author.

Results

As discussed above, an important potential benefit of citizen-generated content is its ability to democratise access by providing voice to alternative sources of information. As such, one of the key variables that the content analysis focused on was the extent to which various news sources (including the blogger as a witness of the events) were utilised by the five bloggers. Figure 13.5 summarises the distribution of news sources. Accordingly, blog entries frequently referred to either confidential news sources or did not identify the source of the information. Also frequently, more than a third of the blog entries provided first-hand updates about events that were in progress. This is

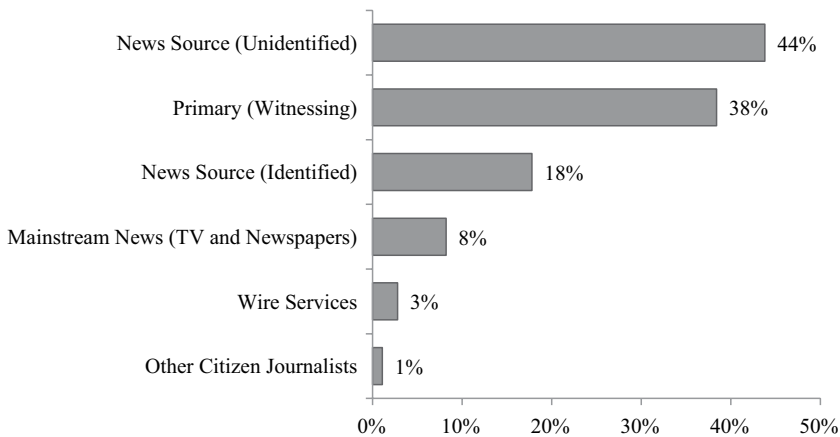


Figure 13.5 Information Sources, 2013, $N = 281$

indicative of the prevalence of ‘witnessing’ as an element of citizen journalism during emergencies. Third, news sources such as citizens, government sources, experts, were referred to in a fifth of the units analysed. In contrast, and importantly, mainstream media sources, such as television channels, news sites, or wire services, were rarely sourced by the bloggers.

Next, we will discuss the types of news sources that are included in the category ‘news source—identified’. As can be seen from Figure 13.6, while government sources, as is the case in mainstream media, are frequently quoted, bloggers tend to give considerably more standing (voice) to citizens as protestors and eyewitnesses. Unlike mainstream media, who frequently quotes elite sources and experts, citizens seems to be given a voice in their capacities of being participants in the Gezi park-events.

Related to witnessing is the use of citizen-generated audio-visuals to substantiate a claim. The sources of such audio-visuals may include other citizens, mainstream media, or, increasingly, audio-visuals recorded by citizens themselves. Audio-visuals were highly prominent in the bloggers’ coverage of the Gezi protests: More than three quarters of articles on witness accounts contained audio-visual evidence. Although we did not do a systematic analysis of the images, we observed that many of these audio-visuals (including photographs) supported what can be named as a ‘sousveillance’ function (ordinary citizens doing the watching, particularly to engage in inverse oversight of those in power; Mann 2009). They contained content that was to substantiate claims about police violence during the protests (e.g. injured citizens, police aiming gas canisters directly at protestors).

As the analysis has shown, social media can be a key outlet for the dissemination of opinions, or more precisely, alternative ways of making sense of events. Citizens engaging in reporting will be less likely to be constrained by commercial imperatives or editorial pressure that may limit the choice of frames, and, connected to that, an important question concerns whether this relative freedom will translate into their use of alternative and oppositional news frames that open for other ways of making sense of the Gezi events. Particularly, as Iyengar (1991) notes, use of thematic frames, which focus on the context and not just the incident, may help readers make sense of factors



Figure 13.6 Distribution of Sources Quoted for 'News Sources—Identified' Category, $N = 54$

that may have contributed to an incident. Conversely, use of episodic frames, defined as those focusing on concrete, isolated events, would be considered more in line with a detached 'just the facts' approach that is often adopted by commercial news outlets (Tiegreen and Newman 2008).

Our analyses indicate that during the Gezi protests, bloggers were much more likely to have provided commentaries (63 per cent) rather than straight news and information (37 per cent). Likewise, a large majority of the units analysed adopted a thematic frame rather than an episodic frame while describing the protests. Related, a considerable proportion of the content generated by bloggers contained criticism of various institutions. Namely, close to half of the units contained some form of criticism targeting government and about one fifth of the units criticised commercial media companies. The most common form of criticism that was present consisted of criticisms raised by politicians, followed by bloggers' own statements (46 per cent), and criticism voiced by citizens.

Conclusion

The increased penetration of social media applications into citizens' daily lives may present important opportunities for communicating in a crisis. One such opportunity concerns the incorporation of citizens into the communication mix, both as consumers of information, and as potential producers and disseminators of information via social media. As such, this chapter has aimed to provide a summary of how individuals utilised social media during a political crisis: the 2013 Gezi protests in Turkey.

The chapter reported findings from two separate studies. First, we summarised findings from a survey conducted on a convenience sample of Internet users that focused on how individuals utilised Twitter during the Gezi protests to get access to information, share information and opinions and verify information. The findings from this study suggest that particularly in the case of this political crisis, mistrust in mainstream media,

desire for access to direct information, and willingness to spread information and voice opinions were the main factors that led to increased reliance on social media. Indeed, a significant proportion of participants in the survey indicated that one of the main reasons why they utilised Twitter (and social media in general) was their mistrust of conventional sources of media. Yet, our findings also suggest that this preference for using Twitter did not necessarily mean that users trusted social media as a source of information. Consequently, they utilised different methods for verifying information and crosschecked information across multiple sources.

The segmentation analysis performed on Twitter users underlines the existence of four segments of Twitter users who differed in terms of key activities engaged on Twitter (and motivations for them) and information verification techniques. In terms of motivation, we observe that while all segments were equally motivated by “getting information,” the update hubs, who valued both getting and relaying the information (by retweets and tweets), were also motivated by expanding their own networks. This may explain why acting as a hub was useful for them. Like update hubs, members of the voice makers segment were highly likely to tweet and retweet but (possibly) since they were oriented towards sharing opinions rather than information they were much less likely than the other segments to crosscheck information with multiple sources.

Our study supports the findings of others, such as Yates and Paquette (2011), who found that in times of crisis, one key use of social media is for information gathering. In addition, our study shows that, crucially, users are also (albeit to a lesser extent) using Twitter as a means for having a voice. Our findings emphasise the need to investigate the possibility that the complementarity of roles (e.g. sharer, acknowledge, reader) factor into the sustainability of networks on Twitter and other online social networks. Finally, the findings from the first study imply that functional approaches to understanding Twitter users’ motivations and gratifications (e.g. Chen 2011; Johnson and Yang 2009) would benefit from further refinement based on usage types.

While producing information did not stand out as a major driver of Twitter use in our first study, social media, as noted by a number of researchers (e.g. Allan 2009), present opportunities for individuals to challenge the control that mainstream media have over gatekeeping and sense-making functions. As such, the second study entailed a content analysis of blogs produced by individuals during the protests.

The results of the content analysis underlined a number of key points that are indicative of the potential of social media as a platform for dissemination of alternative voices. First, the findings suggested that citizens reporting about the events were more likely to report what they witnessed rather than recycling content from mainstream media. Second, an indication of what may be considered as a ‘democratisation’ of access was the extent to which citizens were cited or quoted as information sources by bloggers. Third, as discussed in the preceding sections, freedom from commercial concerns and editorial constraints can potentially enable citizens to adopt writing styles that are less likely to be present in mainstream news outlets. To some extent the use of news frames by bloggers reflected this potential. Namely, we observed that bloggers often utilised ‘thematic’ frames, which provided contextual information that can help readers understand the context of the event.

When considered in conjunction with each other, the findings from the survey and the content analysis are indicative of how users utilised online forms of communication to fill what they perceived as a void in mainstream media during a political crisis like

Gezi protests. For Twitter users, the platform provided an opportunity to get up to date information at a time when mass media coverage (or lack thereof) were considered as a symptom, if not a factor leading to, a democratic deficit. In many respects, by collecting and passing information to others, the largest segment of Twitter users (i.e. update hubs) were seeking to act as an information filter. Likewise, the findings from the content analysis that bloggers predominantly gave voice to other citizens and employed thematic frames underline how a sense of disillusionment with the coverage in the mainstream media may have contributed to the content of blogs.

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