Chapter 33

Blogs and Forums in a Presidential Election Process in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Internet forums and weblogs have been institutionalized as an integral part of the political communication system. Political candidates, interest groups, and other political actors increasingly employ the Internet as a communication tool. Weblogs and online discussion forums are recognized as new democratic meeting places. This chapter investigates the role of political blogs and forums in the 2007 presidential election in Turkey and focuses on the interaction between political actors and the citizens. The content of 270 top-rated blogs and 15 discussion forums posted between April and September of 2007 was analyzed. The findings indicate that blogs and forums function as enablers of political dialogue and facilitate political participation and civic interaction. The conclusion is drawn that blogs and forums have emerged as innovative modes of political communication in Turkey resulting in a broad interchange of diverse political opinions in the political arena.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Internet has been increasingly utilized by political candidates, interest groups, and other political communication actors as a medium for facilitating political communication and dialogue. Web forums and the blogosphere have been viewed as an extension of the political arena. At a time when political deliberation becomes extremely partisan, people may be tempted to ignore arguments that are at odds with their views. Thus, they risk becoming insulated in information "echo chambers." In contrast, citizens with access to the Internet tend to be more aware than non-Internet

users of all sides of the argument (Horrigan, Garrett, & Resnick, 2004).

The study of political communication in cyberspace is regarded as a novel research area at the intersection of communication and technology. Political communication is characterized by the rivalry between various political actors and competing political messages, where access to information resources is a critical factor of success. Today, political communication and technology are becoming permanently interlaced, as Web 2.0 brings an enormous capacity to create interactive spaces for political communication activities.

This chapter reports the findings of a research project which focused on the role of political blogs and Internet forums in the 2007 presidential election in Turkey. The purpose of this study was to determine whether blogs and online discussion forums facilitated the political communication process and functioned as enablers of the interaction between political actors and citizens. The research was carried out in four stages. Before the project started, a comprehensive review of existing research on the role of the Internet in political communication was completed. During the first stage of the study, the level of interactivity in blogs and online forums was determined. The second stage examined how blogs and forums were used for communicating political ideas and for interacting via entries and comments. The third stage of the project involved a content analysis of entries and comments that appeared on blogs and discussion forums during the election process. In the final stage, the researchers performed an analysis of the most commonly used terms or keywords on the subject.

BACKGROUND

As the Internet continues to expand, thousands of new blogs appear every hour. As of December 2008, Technorati[1] has indexed 133 million blogs since 2002. Internet forums are expanding in numbers and popularity; for example, in the United States nearly 30% of Internet users read or contribute to them (Li & Bernoff, 2008, p. 42). Parallel to these developments, the level of interest in the political process has also grown. Specifically, many citizens go online to obtain political information and engage in interactions with others. The number of political actors and political information seekers who integrate online discussion forums and blogs into their political activity and daily lives has steadily increased. Almost every political candidate today maintains a vigorous online presence. Blogs and Internet forums are seen as democratic meeting places, akin to a virtual agora. This perception has resulted in a number of conceptualizations, including "the virtual public sphere" (Sassi, 2001, p. 89; Keane, 2001, p. 70), "electronic commons" (Blumler & Coleman, 2001; Abramson et al., 1988), and "electronic Athens" (Mulgan & Adonis, 1994 p.2).

Blogs

Relatively new to the political campaigns, the words *blog, blogger*, *blogging,* and *blogosphere* are quickly becoming the part of a common political lexicon. *Blogs* (short for *weblogs)* are defined as online journals or diaries where information is electronically posted, frequently updated, and presented in reverse chronological order (Blood, 2005; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Keren, 2004; Welch, 2003). These electronic journals are similar to paper based versions but have the added dimension of allowing response from readers. Blogs can be regarded as a tool for opinion formation since they are said to influence agenda setting and framing processes (Drezner & Farrell, 2004).

Blogging emerged in 1999 when California-based Pyra Labs created Blogger, a blog publishing system. This user-friendly software that permits information to be frequently updated and provides templates for user ease started a blogging revolution (Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005). In December 2003, the *Editor & Publisher* website declared

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