



Extended Abstract

Creating Alternative Communication Spaces: Resistance, Technology and Social Change

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Introduction

The debates on the Internet, as well as on ICTs, still largely revolve around the promises of a more democratic and better society, and inquiries whether these promises have proven true. Considering the fundamentally social nature of communication technologies, it cannot be claimed that there is an enclosed process for ICTs; even though the “profit-led” trends have predominant position over these technologies. As was emphasized by Raymond Williams, communication technologies are not static and totally predictable processes, rather they are shaped by social relations and struggles [10]. In this respect, manifesting emancipatory *praxes* in order to build “alternative” ways for communication and contributing to a critical understanding on the possibilities of ICTs in order to form a “counter-hegemonic” discourse are crucial. In this framework, the study examines *Çapul TV*, one of the non-profit “alternative” communication spaces/platforms of the *Gezi Resistance* in Turkey, by focusing on Raymond Williams’ understanding on the relationship between communication technologies and social change. This study aims to contribute to a Marxist materialist position on the relationship between communication technologies and social change in order to achieve a critical and holistic analysis on the emancipatory and revolutionary potentials of ICTs. Such a questioning seems especially important when the increasing academic inquiries on the relationship between “social movements” and “alternative” usages of ICTs are taken into consideration.

Gezi Resistance and its Communication Spaces/Platforms

The very beginning of a *social rebellion* was witnessed and experienced in the last days of May 2013 at the Taksim Gezi Park, which is one of the few green spaces left in the city center. On May 27th, with the entering of bulldozers into the Gezi Park to uproot the trees in order to begin the construction of a new shopping mall in Istanbul, a group of activists began to defend the park. A small-scale peaceful resistance was turned into urban uprisings by the violent attacks of the police. While Turkish media ignored what happened during the beginning and spreading of the resistance around the country, questioning about the legitimacy of the mainstream media was started. Mainstream media

became unable to fulfill its most fundamental function, which is to give information to people, due to the complex relationships based on financial gain between the ruling party and the media owners. In this respect, the information produced and distributed by the mainstream media depends on the interests of the cooperation between capital and political power, and is remarkably anti-labour in character [2].

Nevertheless, the resistance achieved to produce its own information and to distribute it. *Gezi Postası* (Gezi Mail) as the daily newspaper of the park, *Gezi Radyo* (Radio Gezi), *Revoltistanbul* and *direnisteyiz.net* are among the examples of non-profit alternative communication spaces/platforms of the resistance. Additionally, from the outset of the resistance, activists were using social media such as Facebook and Twitter in order to share information and to mobilize people, just like in the *Occupy Movement*, the *Arab Spring* and the other recent protest movements.

Korkut Boratav defines the *Gezi Resistance* as an “immature class reaction”, but he underlines that it was a *rebellion* of “working-class”, even though it did not display the common characteristics of “labour class movement”: Because there were skilled, educated workers and students, who will be a part of labour class or the reserve army of labour in the short run, and they were opposing the consolidation of political power and bourgeoisie that grabs the commons [3]. Therefore, *Gezi Resistance* was reactive in the sense that it was against to the existing economic, social and political structure characterized by “neoliberal authoritarianism”. It was a backlash against the cooperation between conservative political power and capital that penetrates directly into everyday life. Furthermore, it was a reflection of the dissatisfaction with the understanding of political participation process that is reduced to election periods. On the other hand, it was also proactive in the sense that it created “alternative” communication experiences. It was not just a protest movement; it was in fact a *social rebellion moment* which makes “social change” more visible. One of the crucial outcomes of the resistance is the creation of non-profit “alternative” communication spaces/platforms. *Çapul TV*, which was the only channel on air in the Gezi Park, is the unique example of these experiences and became the permanent channel of the resistance as well as other resistances around the country. Before delving into this ongoing *Çapul TV* experience, there is a fundamental question that needs to be answered: How a critical and holistic way of thinking on the relationship between communication technologies and social change can be achieved?

Raymond Williams’ Materialist Position on Communication Technologies

Williams’ conceptualizations of communication and communication technologies can be taken as a starting point to attain a critical and holistic comprehension on the question. Williams puts the communication and communication technologies question at the hub of the material and symbolic (re)production of social relations. He describes communication as a process which makes “unique experience into common experience” [12]. Thereby basic purpose of communication is “the sharing of human experience” [11]. He says that “the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to tensions and achievements of growth and change” [12]. The comprehension of “communication as a whole social process” [12] provides also an understanding of communication technologies as a process in which social relations are materialized, transformed and modified [4].

Williams rejects simple cause and effect explanations of technological determinism, but he also recognizes the hegemonic position of technological determinist thinking. Therefore he warns us against the resurgence of technological determinism that comes with every new technology [7]. Additionally, he is against “the notion of a determined technology”, which closes off all alternative meanings and usages of new technologies [10]. Another important point is his rejection of “the idea that technologies would necessarily be used in the precise ways envisaged by the developers” [5]. He emphasizes that both communication process and communication technologies have social complications which are not totally predictable [9]. There is a clear example of this: In the 19th century, religious and political authorities were “arguing that the poor must be able to read the Bible, as a means to their moral improvement, overlooked the fact that there is no way of teaching a man to read

Bible which does not also enable him to read the radical press” [9]. Williams reminds us the emancipatory potentials of communication technologies for alternative and democratic usages, even those technologies are predominantly intended to fulfill the priorities of dominant groups.

Williams’ materialist position on the relationship between technology and social change must be associated with his understanding on the notion of “determination” as “setting bounds or limits and exertion of pressure” [8]. This understanding also makes possible his rejection of both technological determinism and the notion of determined technology. At this point, reminding Henri Lefebvre’s definition for *determinism(s)* seems important in order to achieve a clear comprehension on the dialectic relationship between *mechanisms* setting bounds and *praxes*. Lefebvre defines *determinism(s)* as following: “[They] are inherited from the past; they are forms, systems, structures that somehow survive more or less intact and have yet to be superseded or have as yet been only incompletely superseded: they continue to exert an active influence upon the present. Determinisms do not rule out accident, contingency, or creative efforts on the part individuals and groups to do away with such survivals” [6]. Therefore, that allows us to claim that social processes as a whole are shaped by dialectical relationships. Such materialist position makes also possible to shed light on the complex nature of communication technologies as a dialectic process in which the spectrum of technological possibilities are marked by the interest of dominant groups, but also can be formed by social struggles. Furthermore, that provides us a critical framework for understanding contemporary communication technologies with their emancipatory possibilities.

Questioning the “Alternative”: *Çapul TV* versus *Penguins* of Mainstream Media

In this part of the study, there will be an effort to answer the following fundamental questions in order to critically evaluate and understand the emancipatory and revolutionary possibilities of ICTs: What are the main aspects of this “alternative” communication space/platform experience? How the actors of those experiences define their positions? How they include communication technologies in this process? How can we describe and conceptualize such communication space/platform experiences and practices? Can the concept of “alternative” provide an inclusive framework? How can we evaluate those experiences and practices regarding to the emancipatory potential of communication technologies?

Even though, to some extent, the concept of “alternative” seems inadequate to describe such experiences and practices, it may provide a plausible and inclusive framework to define those practices as an exploration for communication spaces/platforms. As was mentioned by Funda Başaran and Önder Özdemir, founders of Association of Alternative Media (AAM) and *Çapul TV*, *Çapul TV* emerged and started to live broadcast as a result of the need for a medium to inform people about what was going on at the Gezi Park, while leading news channels ignored the resistance and penguin documentaries were on air [1-2]. However, *Çapul TV* is an outcome of more than ten years of non-profit “alternative” media experiments, such as sendika.org, live broadcasting of TEKEL workers’ resistance via sendika.tv, International Labor Film & Video Festival [1]. The main aspects of *Çapul TV* experience can be listed as the following: At the hub of those experiences is to produce and distribute the information of people who are ignored by the mainstream media. The actors of those practices define themselves as “activists” and they emphasize that they are not just the witnesses of the events but also the subjects of the events [13]. They describe their activities as a part of class struggle. Furthermore, they include communication technologies in this process as a part of class struggle.

There is not a simple answer for the questions elaborated in this paper. Given the conceptualization of Williams, we should not expect such answers. Nevertheless, this does not mean that social experiences such as *Gezi Resistance* cannot show us the path of emancipation.

References and Notes

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13. The part of the study is based on the discussions of Alternative Media Workshop which was held within the *LaborComm-2015*, International Labor and Communication Conference, on May 09-10, 2015.