Handbook of Research on Social Interaction Technologies and Collaboration Software:
Concepts and Trends

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Volume I

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As a federal law, the 1996 Communications Decency Act (CDA) criminalizes any offensive content posted on a computer server that is operated by an Internet Service Provider (ISP). The law exempts ISPs and other "users" from any liability for the illegal content that is posted by third parties as long as they make a "good faith" effort to restrict the information. Plaintiffs, who claim to be victims of offensive messages and sued ISPs, consistently lost their court cases. District and appellate courts have upheld Section 230's provisions and Congress's authority to regulate in this area of online communication. The CDA applies to many forms of Internet communication: for example, websites, chat rooms, discussion forums, wikis, and blogs. This chapter reviews the law, examines how federal and state courts have interpreted the CDA regarding ISPs, describes under what conditions an ISP can be held responsible for illegal content, analyzes the "user" portion of the law, and presents the legal dangers of providing immunity for "users" who post illegal content online.

Chapter 33

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.

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Wiki journalism is a format of participatory journalism in which citizens are encouraged to add to, or modify, a wiki-based news story. Although the process is relatively new and the mainstream media still seem wary to accept the concept, the public has begun to recognize the potential of wiki journalism as a form of reporting. Wiki journalism has claimed success in the primary coverage of large news stories (for example, Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007) and in being the first source to provide images, sound, and first-hand accounts. The technology is already in place for citizen-

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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

blogs to be "the most hyped online development" (Chin, 2003). According to Drezner and Farrell, the public's interest in blogs has remained high, and blogs "appear to be a staple of political commentary, legal analysis, celebrity gossip, and high school angst" (2008, p. 1).

As to Lawson-Borders and Kirk (2005), the *blogosphere* is the ever-expanding universe of blogs and bloggers who link to news sites and each other (p. 548). A *blogger* can be viewed as the omnipresent and omniscient diarist. Bloggers are seen as the "fifth power" that increasingly occupies the control function of the mass media, contrasting established news sources with a more personal, direct, and often location-specific style of reporting (p. 505).

Originating as personal diaries, blogs have evolved into online commons where people throughout the world can read and comment on other people's opinions about the news, learn about events that might be underreported by other media outlets, or simply gossip about current events. As they have grown, some of the blogs have turned into powerful political forces in their own right, forcing politicians and the media pundits to monitor them, occasionally interact with them, and respond to them. This has created a particular subset of politically savvy, motivated partisans who have been able to connect with each other in ways they never have before (Pirch, 2007, p. 2). Political blogs have become influential in that they provide information sources that are openly and habitually disclosed (Woodly, 2008, p. 116).

Media and communication scholarship has brought to light several dimensions of the blogosphere and offered helpful insight into understanding the role of blogs as a communication channel (Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005, pp. 551-555):

• Investigation of blogs as personal diaries. The Internet empowers users to develop communication communities through multiple channels: such as, chat rooms, support groups, electronic mailing lists, personal web pages, and blogs. The electronic posting of blogs provides an opportunity for people to share their thoughts and experiences on the Internet (Deuze, 2003).

• Analysis of blogs as organizing tools. The blog-speech is important for organizing groups since blog-speech is short and emotive. Thus, blogs are often seen as motivational tools and participatory outlets.

• Examination of blogs as a form of civic and participatory journalism (Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005). Blogs are viewed as a new form of participatory media that bypasses traditional gatekeepers and allows more individuals into the public discourse.

Focusing on the political realm, Gordon-Murnane (2006) proposed to classify political blogs into different categories: national political blogs (blogs with a national audience), national committee blogs (blogs of party bureaucracies), incumbent blogs, candidate/challenger blogs, local blogs, community blogs, and individual blogs:

Some provide a watchdog and fact-checking role, making sure that facts cited are correct and quotations accurate. Others engage in heated and passionate commentary, analysis, and opinion about issues, events, and news. Yet others provide a current awareness function by linking to other blogs and news sources on political topics covered by both mainstream media and citizen journalists. Many local political blogs build grassroots awareness and inspire local activism on issues relevant to a specific community by focusing on issues and candidates at the local, state, and national levels. These local political blogs can build a voice for candidates running for state and national office. (p. 49).

Although the proposed classification is far from being all encompassing, and a consensus has yet to be reached upon the method for evaluating the multiple functions of political blogs, it shows

how deeply blogs have been entrenched in the political arena.

Internet Forums

An *Internet forum* is a web application for holding interactive discussions and posting user generated content. Technically, an online discussion forum is an asynchronous electronic bulletin board for communication and collaboration, where participants can post and respond to messages on the Internet (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003, p. 237). Internet forums are also commonly referred to as: *discussion groups*, *discussion forums*, *message boards*, *discussion boards*, *e-bulletin boards*, or simply *forums*. The terms *forum* and *board* may refer to the entire community or to a specific sub-forum dealing with a distinct topic. Messages within these sub-forums are then displayed either in chronological order or as threaded discussions. Online forums seem to create the conditions for vast deliberative chambers and provide the kind of forum (or space) which makes possible the forms of conversation (or discourse) required by a deliberative democracy (Wright & Street, 2007, p. 851).

Both blogs and web forums create a new space and structure, and open new opportunities in the realm of informal political processes and social movement organization:

- As a tool to organize social movement at a national and, above all, trans-national level.
- As a tool to mobilize online as well as offline.
- As a tool to enable the mediation of interactive discussion/debate and thereby potentially contribute to an emerging trans-national public sphere (Curran, 1994, p. 27).

For example, Hindman, Tsioutsiouliklis, and Johnson (2003) analyzed some of the main topics

in the political blogosphere, including the issues of abortion, gun control, and death penalty. In another effort, Cross and Butts (2005) studied the response of political blogs to polling data and election campaign events. Welsch (2005) categorized online neighbourhood networks of the popular liberal blog of "Atrios" and a popular conservative blog of "Instapundit."

Although Internet forums and blogs share a great many features, there are unique differences between them (Holzschlag, 2008). First of all, forums intend to be public – they represent places in which people come specifically to interact with groups of people sharing similar interests. Typically, forum software offers many of the features similar to those of blogs but requires advanced customization. On the server-side, an authorization system along with other means of keeping the forum secure is the basic feature of most Internet forum packages. Security of blogging software often relies on how various servers are configured and whether any additional security must be customized to the individual scenario.

Another technical difference is that with most electronic forums one can create an unlimited number of discussion groups, but blog hosting services may limit the number of blogs one can create. From the member profile pages to private messaging, users have a lot more to do on forums than they might do on a blog. Probably, a distinction between forums and blogs is that the forums and their comments can be accessed linearly or in a threaded way -- but this option is rarely found in blogs.

While web forums can be considered as advanced electronic message boards, blogs can be described as posts to websites presented in reverse chronological order (Coates, 2003). In both blogs and forums, one can read a news item, leave a comment related to that item or topic, and comment on other comments. A forum has a highly structured and categorized tree-like architecture. A blog is also structured; in fact, it is even more centric. However, the primary focus of a blog is

content presentation. The purpose of a forum is to facilitate commentary and interaction among users.

ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL BLOGS AND FORUMS IN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
The Presidential Election Process in Turkey

Since the birth of the republic in 1923, the Turkish presidency has been viewed as the bulwark of the nation's secularism and laicism. The 11th presidential election in 2007 became one of the most controversial and debated in the nation's history. Between April and August 2007, the country witnessed a confrontation between the secularists and followers of the Islamist movement in parliament, in courts, and in the streets. The tensions flared when the governing center-right Justice and Development Party (AKP) nominated Abdullah Gül, a politician who was involved with political Islam in the past, as a presidential candidate. AKP was founded in 2001 by a group of moderate members of the Islamist movement; it quickly turned into a major player in Turkish politics both on the national and provincial levels. The opposing center-left Republican People's Party (CHP) accused AKP and its leader, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan, of intensions to undermine the secular state in Turkey. As a result, the CHP boycotted the elections. Subsequently, a major political conflict emerged as the public could not determine whether the AKP candidate would act as an impartial president if elected. In addition, a close political relationship between Gül and Erdoğan at that time was also regarded as a matter of concern by the opposition.

Prior to the constitutional referendum of October 2007, members of the Turkish parliament elected the president in several rounds by secret ballot. Parliamentary law specified a qualified (two-third) majority or 367 votes for the president to be legiti-

mately elected. If the aim cannot be achieved during the first two rounds, two additional votes have to follow. After failing to reach consensus and elect a president, the parliament has to be dissolved and an early general election to be held. In the first phases of the presidential election in April 2007, the AKP parliamentary majority proceeded with the vote without meeting the quorum criterion since the opposition boycotted the election. Before the election went into the final stage, the CHP appealed to the Constitutional Court of Turkey requesting to nullify the voting results and arguing that a parliamentary quorum of 367 members was necessary to start the election process.

The Constitutional Court recognized the appeal and ordered the election to be suspended. Because the deadlock could not have been overcome within the existing structure of parliament, an early parliamentary election was held in July 2007. As a result, the Justice and Development Party increased its majority in parliament from 34% to 47%. The presidential election process was re-initiated in August 2007. After the Nationalist Movement Party helped AKP to meet the quorum criterion, Abdullah Gül was elected the 11th President of the Republic of Turkey. In October 2007, the constitutional charter of the republic was amended and the election of the President of the Republic of Turkey by popular vote was introduced.

Study Methodology

As noted earlier, the present study examined the role of forums and blogs in facilitating political communication and interaction during the 2007 presidential election in Turkey. The content of 270 top-rated blogs and 15 forums posted between April and August of 2007 was analyzed. The popularity rankings of blogs and forums were determined by the Alexa® Internet Rating System (2008).[2]

Barber (1998) emphasized a legitimating function of interactivity in political communication, stating: "There can be no strong democratic

Figure 1. Interactivity (Blog vs. Forums)

Figure 2. Interactivity (Average number of entries/ comments in Blogs vs. Forums)

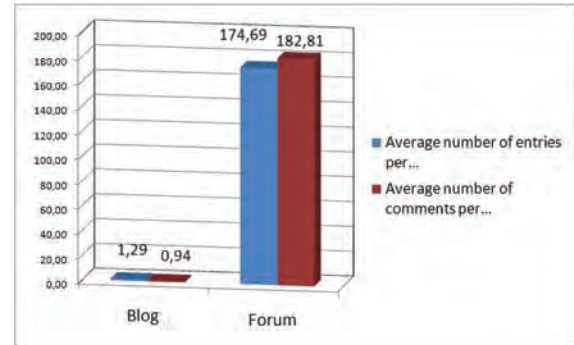most commonly used keywords.

Study Results

legitimacy without ongoing talk" (p. 174). In line with this notion, the present study first aimed to determine: (a) whether there was a difference in the levels of interaction provided by blogs and forums, and (b) which of these two mediums enabled greater interactivity. Interactivity was measured as the ratio of comments to entries. An entry was categorized as the top news item or a post on a specific subject that initiated a discussion. Comments were classified as discussion items clustered around a particular entry or main topic.

The purpose of the second phase was to explore whether blogs and forums could act as catalysts of the political communication process. In this phase, an analysis was carried out to evaluate how a popular discussion in the political environment or arena influences the content in blog and forums. The ratio of comments to entries on the subject (namely, the presidential election process) to the overall number of issues discussed was determined during the next phase of the analysis.

To understand how accurately blogs and forums reflected the public opinion during the debate, a content analysis was carried out during the third phase. This analysis determined the distribution of entries and comments, in support of and in opposition to the presidential candidate. The final stage of the research included a keyword analysis. The keyword analysis focused on identifying the

In the first stage, analysis was carried out to determine the level of interactivity in blogs and forums. Although the number of analyzed forums (n = 15) was 18 times smaller than the number of blogs (n = 270), the number of entries and comments in forums appeared as 10 to 15 times higher (see Figure 1).

The average number of entries per blog and forum is shown in Figure 2. It should be emphasized that the average number of entries vs. comments is significantly higher in forums than in blogs. In addition, because the number of pages in a typical forum is also higher than in a blog, the average number of entries per forum or blog cannot be used as a basis for further analysis.

On the other hand, the comment-to-entry ratio (CER) can be employed to assess the degree of interactivity in forums and blogs. The CER value can be found for each of these communication tools using the following formula:

The comment-to-entry ratio (CER) was found as follows: 0.73 for blogs and 1.05 for forums. This demonstrates that in the context of this research, forums can be regarded as more interactive environments within the political communication process. This can be explained by the difference in

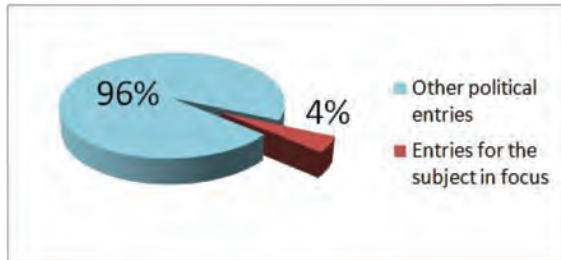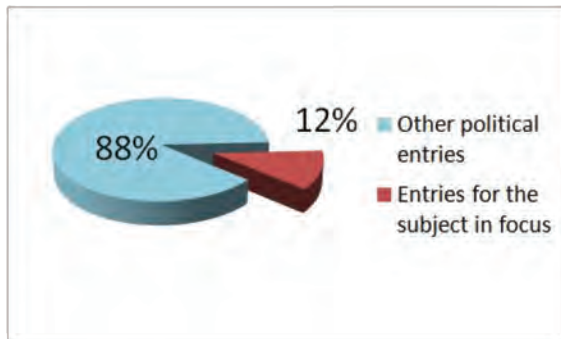*Figure 3. Percentage of political entries vs. other entries in blogs*

Figure 4. Percentage of political entries vs. other entries in forums


the overall structure of blogs and the high amount of information contained in every blog entry.

The second stage of the analysis determined the ratio of overall political entries to the entries on the main subject (i.e., the presidential election) in both blogs and forums. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, the distribution of forums entries was significantly higher than blogs entries.

The findings of the second stage of the analysis indicate that forum participants were more focused on the main political debate in the country or the political arena than bloggers. The results also illustrate that the issues discussed in forums and blogs were diverse. Neither forum members nor contributors to blogs stayed focused on a single political debate, even when the topic of the debate was a highly discussed political issue.

The third stage of the research included a content analysis that concentrated on the examination

Figure 5. Distribution of entries vs. comments in blogs
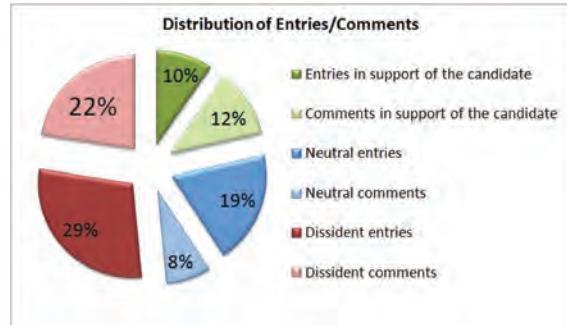
of entries and comments that appeared in selected blogs and forums during the election. Figures 5 and 6 depict the results of this analysis.

The results showed that the number of blog entries and comments in support of the presidential candidate was smaller than the number of dissident entries. In forums, there was a balance between the entries supporting and opposing the candidate.

Another conclusion that can be derived from the analysis is that the percentage of neutral entries and comments was higher in blogs than in forums. This demonstrates that bloggers and blog readers tended to express more balanced views than members of forum discussions. This can be partiality related to the overall structure of blogs and the way they present information.

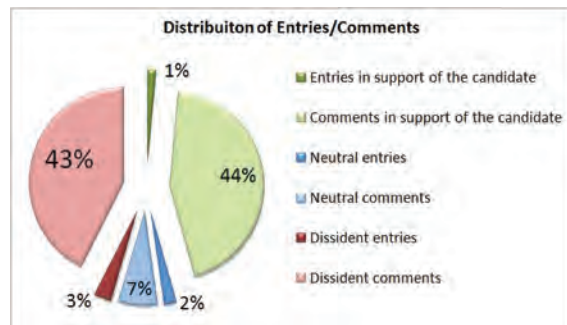*Figure 6. Distribution of entries vs. comments in forums*

Figure 7. Number of entries and comments in blogs (April-August 2007)

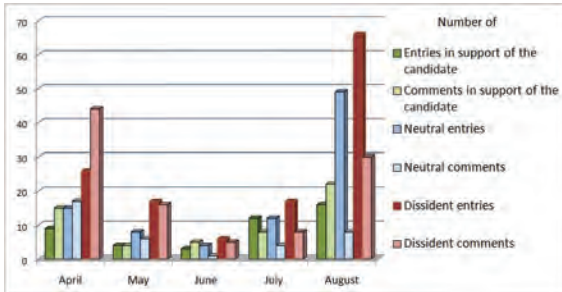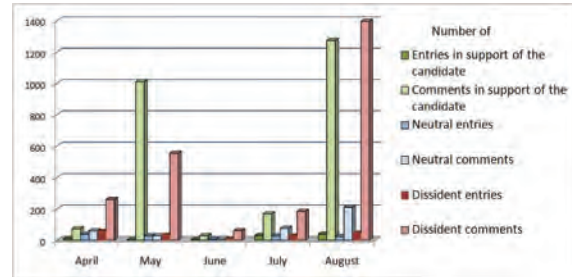*Figure 8. Number of entries vs. comments in forums (April-August 2007)*

Figure 7 reveals the number of entries and comments in blogs related to the subject during the period between April and August 2007. An increase in the number of entries and comments was observed in April; the increase corresponds to the initiation of the presidential election process. The number of entries and comments decreased after the presidential election was suspended in May and remained low during the general parliamentary election process in June and July. The number of entries and comments increased abruptly with the re-initiation of the presidential election process in August 2007.

Supplementary analyses conducted during this stage showed that in the blogosphere, the content was greatly influenced by the mainstream media and most of the entries related primarily to the main subject (i.e., the debated issue). There might also be a directly proportional relationship between the topics presented in the mainstream media and blog entries. Further research is needed to test this relationship.

Figure 8 summarizes the number of entries vs. comments in forums during the April-August 2007 period. There has been a noticeable increase in the number of comments in favor of the candidate in May 2007, just after the Constitutional Court suspended the presidential election. The number of dissident comments also increased at the same time, but they were the comments written in reaction to the comments in favor. Similar to blogs,

a sudden increase in the number of entries and comments was observed with the re-initiation of the presidential elections in August 2007. The results demonstrate that in online forums the public reaction to a political phenomenon can be monitored more closely. The final stage of the analysis revealed the most commonly used terms or keywords: *secularity concern*, *regime is in dange*r, *edict of the public*, and *democratic requirements*.

FUTURE TRENDS

Political blogs, forums, and other forms of social interaction technologies can serve as a means of facilitating civil society. While political blogs and forums are unlikely to be directly linked to the level of democracy in society, they may play a vital role by providing information, fostering the debate, and allowing citizens to organize and bring about political change through a collective action. In the foreseeable future, users of political blogs and forums are likely to achieve a reasonable level in constructive commitment and respectful listening. The proliferation of blogs and Internet discussion forums may lead to a growing rational deliberation enabled by instrumental rationality and interactivity of the emerging social interaction technologies.

Consistent with the trend of globalization, the nature of the political discourse is likely to

become more open. Political blogs and forums will continue to extend public communication by effectively removing the boundaries between people, places, and ideas:

- Improve understanding between diverse cultures and political views
- Strengthen insight and respect in arguments
- Support the development of self-regulation and good online behavior in cyberspace

In addition, forums and blogs will be actively used by citizens in a local political environment. Overall, blogs and forums would act as key mechanisms for facilitating new ways of communicating in the political arena by enabling the exchange of rich multimedia content and by creating and mining multidimensional political information.

CONCLUSION

The present chapter investigated the role of online blogs and discussion forums in enabling political communication during the 2007 presidential election in Turkey. The findings indicate that blogs and forums have emerged as innovative tools of political communication resulting in an increasing interchange of diverse political opinions between information seekers and information providers in the political arena.

Although forums appear to be more interaction-friendly than blogs, the results of the present study demonstrate that both online environments support the interaction of political actors and citizens. Another finding indicates that the content of the majority of entries and comments on both platforms can considerably deviate from the main topic of the debate.

Considered as communication tools, forums have an advantage of being able to focus on a single political topic, while blogs maintain a more diverse and broad coverage of the political events. Another

finding emphasizes that the blogosphere is more prone to borrowing the themes and ideas from the mainstream media than discussion forums. The results of the study demonstrate that as a form of political debate, forums reflect the immediate reaction of the public; yet, blogs provide a more nuanced picture of public deliberations. Finally, the study concludes that both forums and blogs can accurately reflect political life; however, further research is needed to support and generalize these findings. In the foreseeable future, they can act as online platforms for facilitating political participation and interaction.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Weblog or Blog: An online, personal diary in which the information is presented in reverse chronological order.

Blog Entry: A news item or a post to a blog on a specific subject.

Blogosphere: A global online network of blogs, people, and ideas.

Comments: Discussion items clustered around a particular blog entry or main topic.

Comment-to-Entry Ratio (CER): A metric, proposed by the authors, for measuring interactivity in blogs and forums (CER = Average number of comments per blog /Average number of entries per forum).

Forum: An open (online) discussion platform accessible through a web browser. Forums sites are usually designed/constructed in the form of a bulletin board.

Political Communication: An intersection of communication and political practices.

ENDNOTES

[1]   See http://technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/, accessed December 1, 2008.

[2]   See http://www.alexa.com, accessed February 25, 2008.