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Topics to be discussed in this journal include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Applications, platforms, components, devices, and interfaces of interactive communication systems and technologies
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Reflections on the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election in the Turkish Blogosphere

Mehmet Yilmaz, Ordu University, Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The current study presents the results of a research investigation into the role of political blogs in the international political communication process by focusing on the 2008 U.S. presidential election and its reflection in the Turkish blogosphere. Four types of analysis were carried out in order to (a) evaluate the overall blogosphere's reaction in Turkey towards the U.S. presidential candidates; (b) measure the awareness of Internet audience in Turkey about the candidates; (c) identify the main themes of discourse in the Turkish blogosphere; and (d) determine the level of interactivity in blogs in the discussion of the candidates. A total of 205 political blogs were examined. The findings indicate that a direct relationship between the level of online activity of the candidates and the number of blog entries and comments.

Keywords: Blog Interactivity, Blogging, Comments/Entry Ratio (CER), Political Blogosphere, Political Blogs, Political Process, Presidential Election

INTRODUCTION

The spectacle of the U.S. presidential election of 2008 attracted enormous global interest (see, e.g., Ter Molen, 2011) due to the unquestionable impact of U.S. politics on the world and also because of the tangible electoral prospects for the first African-American presidential candidate in the American history. At the end of the heated presidential race Democrat Barack Obama was elected the 44th U.S. president, and became the first African American to win the presidency by completing a stunningly rapid

rise from being an obscure member of the U.S. Senate from Illinois straight to the Oval Office in the White House.

Turkish bloggers followed the electoral rhetoric of Barack Obama and John McCain very closely trying to uncover and interpret the hidden messages relevant for Turkish domestic and foreign politics. The bloggers were keenly interested in foreseeing how the future changes in the White House may possibly affect Turkey's position in the balance of power in the world and the political direction for their own country. The blogging community in Turkey was well aware that the possible changes in U.S. foreign policy would closely depend on the new President.

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Due to the enormous communicative power of the Internet, Turkish bloggers also had the chance to effortlessly locate and access a vast amount of information about the candidates in cyberspace and then share their insights and musings via the blogosphere.

In the global blogosphere, bloggers of various nations can easily follow and discuss political events happening around the world. Blogging begins to play a key role in forming a new dimension of political life, which can be referred to as "online political communication." In this new dimension, the barriers for getting the public's attention are overcome by the enormous outreaching capacity that the Internet offers for political communication activities (Coleman & White, 2008; Fenton, 2008). A remarkable increase in the use of this new web-based tool (i.e., blogs) in political communication marks the political blogosphere as a noteworthy research domain in political and communication sciences. The present study addresses the role of political blogging in facilitating international political awareness and enabling social interaction. Specifically, it evaluates the reflections on the 2008 U.S. presidential election in the Turkish blogosphere and traces how Turkish bloggers and blog readers followed and assessed the two main candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain.

BLOGGING AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS

There are several venues of blog research that provide insight into political blogs' communication function (Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005, pp. 551-555). First is the investigation of the blog as a social/political diary. The Internet empowers users to develop and maintain communities through multiple channels such as chat rooms, support groups, electronic mailing lists, personal web pages, and blogs. Blogs provide an opportunity for people to share their thoughts and experiences on the Internet (Deuze, 2003).

Second is the analysis of blogs as organizing tools, since blogs are often seen as motivational tools and participatory outlets. Third, blogs are viewed as a form of civic, participatory journalism. Balnaves et al. (as cited in Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005, pp. 551-555) considered blogs as a new form of participatory media that bypasses traditional gatekeepers and allow more individuals into public discourse (some might consider blogs a new form of participatory journalism). Finally, blogs can be viewed as a tool for opinion formation, as they are said to influence agenda setting and framing processes (Farrell & Drezner, 2008).

It is also possible to assume that the structure of the political arena is reflected in the composition of the blogosphere. According to Lawson-Borders and Kirk (2005), the blogosphere is the ever-expanding universe of bloggers who link to news sites and each other (p. 548). Blogs seem to set the preconditions for vast deliberative chambers and create the kind of forum or space which allows for the conversation and discourse required by deliberative democracy (Wright & Street, 2007, p. 851). Blogs as discussion venues can be conceived as democratic meeting places, or a kind of virtual agora. This perception has resulted in a number of different ideas or *e-conceptualizations* for forums, such as virtual Habermasian public spheres (Keane, 2001, p. 70; Sassi, 2001, p. 89), electronic commons (Abramson et al., 1988; Blumler & Coleman, 2001) and electronic Athens (Mulgan & Adonis, 1994, p. 2).

Blogs, which originally functioned as personal diaries that were shared with the public, have evolved into online commons where people throughout the world can read and comment on each other's opinions about the news of the day, learn about events that might be underreported by other media outlets, or simply argue about current events. As they have grown, some of these blogs have turned into powerful political forces in their own right, forcing campaigns and the news media 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).

Finally, blogs can be conceptualised as opening up potentialities and opportunities in the realm of formal politics and informal political processes including protest social movements. Blogs are relevant and important for social movements in three ways: (1) as a tool to organize social movement organizations at a national and above all trans-national level, (2) as a tool to mobilize online as well as offline, and (3) as a tool to enable the mediation of interactive discussion/debate and thereby potentially contribute to an emerging trans-national public sphere. The “trans-national public sphere” is understood as an open space where conflicting discourses about trans-national issues are being developed and debated (Curran, 1994, p. 27). The trans-national function of blogging became a point of departure for the current study which focused on the U.S. presidential election of 2008 and the way it was reflected in the Turkish blogosphere.

Research Question and Hypothesis

As noted, the current study examined how the Turkish bloggers followed and assessed the two main candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain. More specifically, the researchers asked:

RQ1: What were the reflections of the 2008 U.S. presidential election in the Turkish blogosphere?

The authors hypothesized that:

H1: The basic motivation that would shape the attitudes of Turkish bloggers towards running U.S. presidential candidates (in favour of a particular candidate, neutral, or in opposition) would be driven by the alignment of the content of electoral discourse by the candidates with Turkish national interests.

STUDY METHOD

Data Collection

The 56th consecutive quadrennial United States presidential election was held on November 4, 2008. Democrat Barack Obama, a novice U.S. Senator from Illinois, was facing Republican candidate John McCain, a seasoned U.S. Senator from Arizona. The data collection for the study ran parallel with the election timeline. Researchers examined the most popular political blogs in Turkey between August and November of 2008 for related information. A total of 205 blogs were evaluated.

Study Design

The study was performed in four stages. In the first stage, a quantitative content analysis was carried out to evaluate the Turkish blogosphere’s reaction towards the presidential candidates from two major political parties—Barack Obama and John McCain. During the second stage, researchers examined the Turkish blogging community’s general awareness in of the U.S. presidential candidates and their electoral campaigns using a comparative analysis of blog entries. The purpose of the next stage of research was to identify the most prevalent discussion themes and to determine how they related to the domestic political agenda. In the fourth and final stage, the analysis determined the level of interactivity in blogs by comparing the ratio of blog entries to comments for both candidates.

Measures

In this study a blog entry was defined as the main topic or news item on a specific subject that initiated discussion; blog comments were defined as discussion items which clustered around the main topic of discussion or blog post. Blog popularity was determined using the Alexa® Internet Rating System. Bloggers’ reaction towards presidential candidates was classified according to three major categories, namely, as favorable, neutral, or opposing. Fi-

nally, interactivity was defined as the level of interactions that occurred in the examined blogs, e.g., exchange of political ideas, comments and evaluations, and was measured utilizing the Comment/Entry Ratio (CER). According to Uluc, Yilmaz, and Isikdag (2010), the CER value can be found using the following formula:

$$\text{CER} = \frac{\text{Average number of comments per blog}}{\text{Average number of entries per blog}}$$

STUDY Results

Research Question 1 focused on the reflections of the 2008 U.S. presidential election in Turkish blogosphere. Four types of analyses were carried out and aimed to (a) explore the variation in views and attitudes of Turkish bloggers; (b) measure the awareness of Turkish bloggers about the candidates; (c) identify major themes of discourse; and (d) determine the level of interactivity in online discussion of the candidates. The results of the analyses are graphically depicted in five figures. Figures 1 through 4 illustrate the blogosphere's reaction towards the candidates. Figure 5 compares the common themes expressed in the discussion of two presidential candidates running for the White House.

Stage 1: Analysing the Blogosphere's Reaction Towards Presidential Candidates

In this stage, a content analysis of popular Turkish blogs was performed to identify the attitudes of Turkish bloggers and blog readers towards the presidential candidates. Emphasis was placed on the overall reaction in the blogosphere towards the presidential candidates (in favour of a particular candidate, neutral, or in opposition).

Figures 1 and 2 show the results of the analysis of blog entries ($n = 141$) and comments ($n = 181$) in different political blogs related to Barack Obama. Figures 3 and 4 similarly present a summarised view of entries ($n = 77$) and comments ($n = 56$) about John McCain. A

time-based approach is illustrated in Figures 1 and 3, while in Figures 2 and 4 the results were obtained using a content-oriented approach.

Figure 1 presents the frequency distribution of blog posts and readers' comments about Barack Obama between August and November of 2008 by month. An increase in the number of entries and comments was observed in October, the closest month to the Election Day. The number of postings and comments gradually increased from August to October and decreased after the election in November. The highest number of favourable entries and comments was recorded in October. It is evident that the attitudes of blog writers and readers towards Obama's candidacy became more positive as the election date became closer.

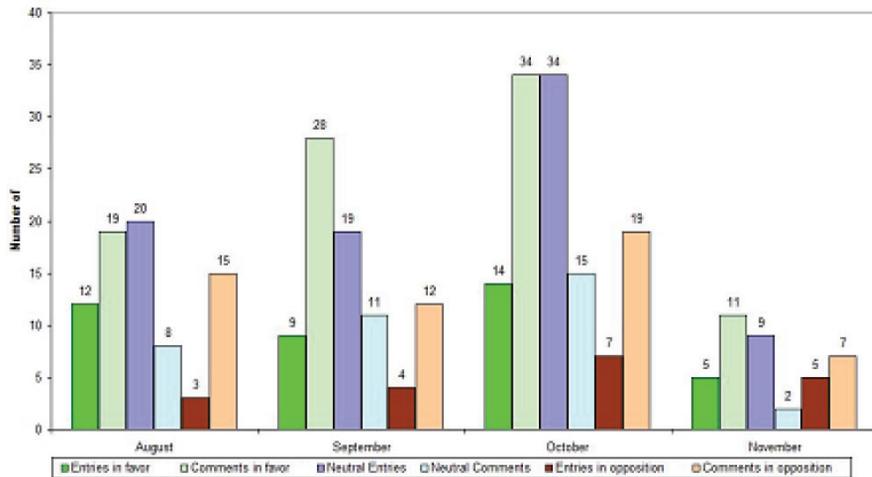
As depicted in Figure 2, the total number of entries and comments supportive of Barack Obama were more numerous than negative. One should also not underestimate the number of neutral comments about this candidate.

Figure 3 demonstrates the distribution of blog posts ($n = 77$) and comments ($n = 56$) related to John McCain in August-November 2008 by month. An increase in the numbers of postings, especially in neutral entries, was evident in October. The number of entries continued to increase until October, with neutral entries being on the rise. The number of entries and comments decreased shortly after the election month, November, similarly to the Obama case.

As it appears in Figure 4, the number of negative blog entries and comments related to McCain was higher than positive. However, a large number of Turkish netizens stayed in the "middle-of-the-road" regarding this candidate.

The reaction of the blogosphere towards presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain is illustrated in Figure 5. Comments in support of Obama ($n = 40$) were much more prevalent than the comments in favour of McCain ($n = 15$). Interestingly, the number of comments in opposition to Obama ($n = 53$) was much higher than the number of comments in opposition to McCain ($n = 18$). One conclusion that can be derived from this fact might be that a candidate who gets more attention from

Figure 1. Number of blog entries ($n = 141$) and readers' comments ($n = 181$) about Barack Obama during August-November 2008 by month



traditional media becomes more recognized and more debated both positively and negatively in the blogosphere. The findings obtained during Stage 2 and Stage 4 also support this conclusion.

Stage 2: Evaluating General Awareness About Presidential Candidates

Figure 6 demonstrates the distribution of blog entries and reader comments made between August and November of 2008 by candidate. The results indicate the general awareness of Turkish bloggers about the candidates.

The results of comparative analysis of blog entries and blog comments demonstrate that the awareness and recognition of Barack Obama was higher. American political observers acknowledged that Obama's online campaign was omnipresent on YouTube, MySpace, Flickr, Twitter, and Facebook. Obama and his mainly volunteer staffers successfully mobilised numerous backers and organised them into local and regional communities. They registered a total of 1.5 million volunteers through the web site myBarackObama.com and raised around \$600 million in political donations from 3 million people (Kiss, 2008).

Barack Obama's website enjoyed more hits than his competitors' in his own and opposing party, but his real dominance was in the social networks Facebook and MySpace. He was also leading in political micro-blogging on Twitter. In addition, a viral social media campaign offered myriad ways to propagate Obama's electoral messages, unfiltered by mainstream press. Obama's campaign staff instantly posted the candidate's speeches and interviews online, linking them to multimedia content generated by supporters (Talbot, 2008). All these factors dramatically raised Turkish bloggers and blog readers' awareness of Barack Obama and his electoral campaign.

In the court of Turkish bloggers' opinion, John McCain clearly had a disadvantage because of his affiliation with the Republican Party. U.S. foreign policy outcomes in the Middle East left by President Bush became a proverbial political albatross for McCain; this situation created a biased attitude in the Turkish blogosphere and decreased the general attention to the Republican candidate. In particular, President Bush's policy in Iraq, which led to a problematic period in Turkish-U.S. relations, diminished the attention value for McCain. Moreover, McCain was perceived as a Bush heir, an indication of the

Figure 2. Number of blog entries (n = 141) and readers' comments (n = 181) about Barack Obama during August-November 2008 by type of content

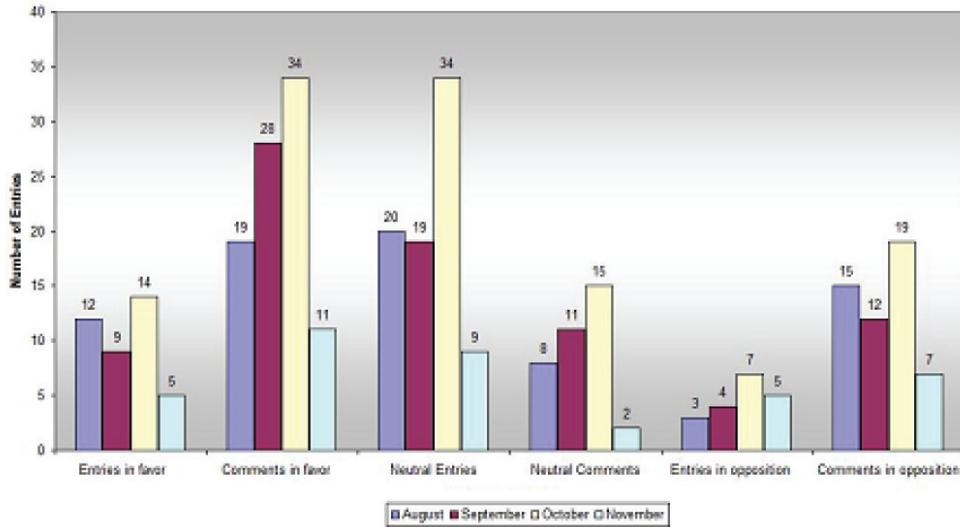


Figure 3. Number of blog entries (n = 77) and readers' comments (n = 56) about John McCain during August-November 2008 by month

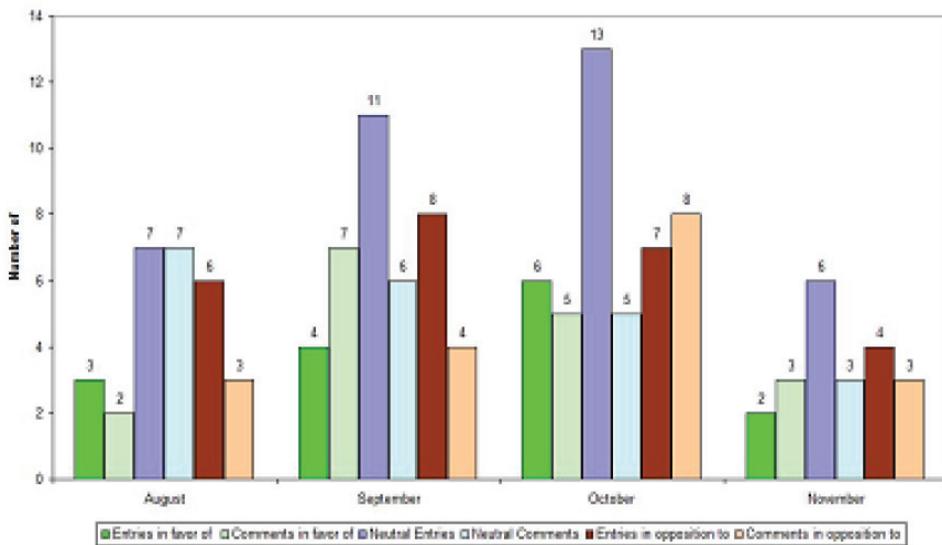


Figure 4. Number of blog entries (n = 77) and readers' comments (n = 56) about John McCain by type of content

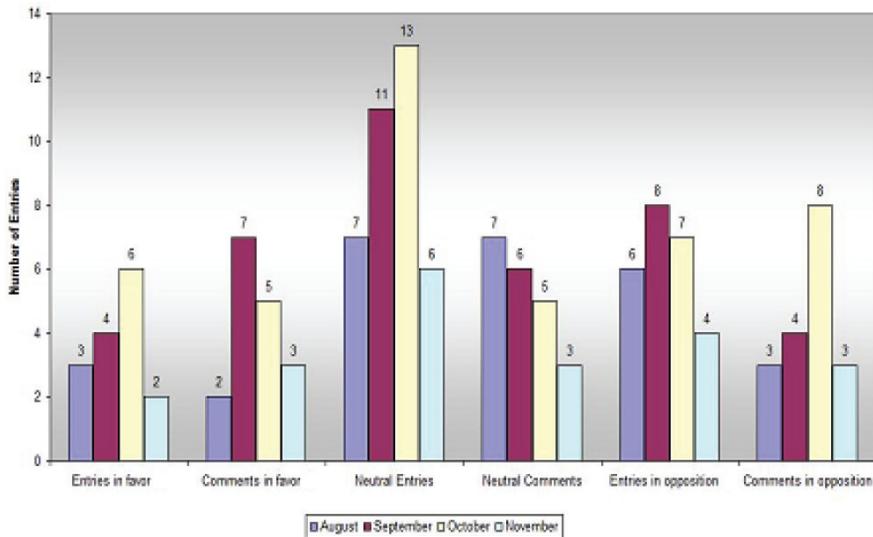


Figure 5. Number of blog entries (n = 218) and readers' comments (n = 237) about presidential candidates by type of content

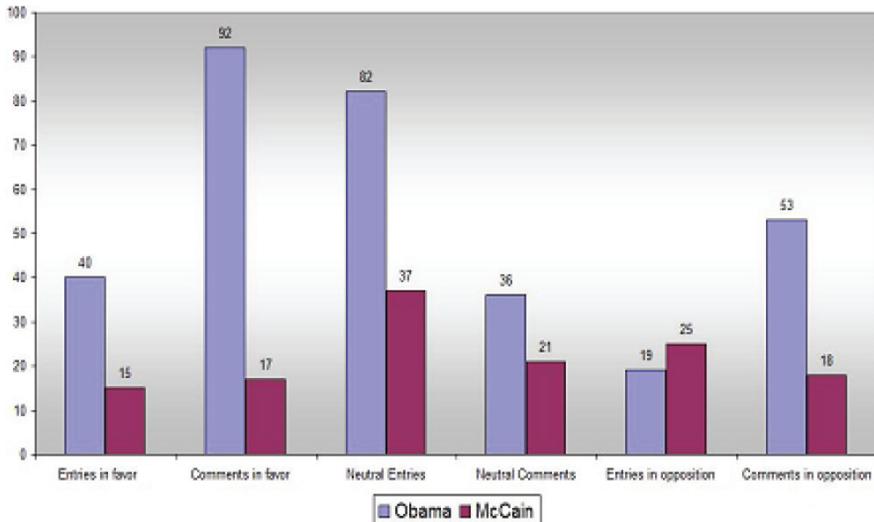


Table 1. Common themes in the discussion of presidential candidates in the Turkish blogosphere (August-November 2008)

Barack Obama	John McCain
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Armenian claims: There is perception of danger among the Turkish citizens that Obama’s election would open a road to supporters of these claims. ➤ Iraq policy: The election of Obama would bring a withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. ➤ Relations with the Muslim world: The election of Obama will improve the relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Armenian claims: McCain will continue the Bush policy in this issue. ➤ EU Support: U.S. supports Turkey in joining the European Union and this trend will continue. ➤ Iraq policy: American troops will continue their presence in Middle East. ➤ Iran policy: Tensions between the U.S. and Iran will continue.

possible McCain political actions in a presidential capacity, and Turkish bloggers actually didn’t wish to seek more detailed information about this candidate.

Stage 3: Analysing Common Themes in the Discussion of Candidates in the Blogosphere

In this phase, the keywords extracted from the content analysis of discourse in political blogs were examined. The researchers categorized these keywords according to their semantic dimensions and based on frequency of use. At this point the authors performed a qualitative analysis, which focused on finding common themes. The results in Table 1 summarise the identified themes associated with both candidates during the August-November time period.

For Obama, the first theme could be perceived as negative; consequently, Turkish bloggers followed him with caution. On the other hand, Iraq policy and Obama’s Islamic connotations (as well as his African-American roots and his Arabic middle name) were advantages for winning the sympathies of Turkish bloggers.

For McCain, in contrast to Obama, indifference to the Armenian claims theme was an important positive feature. Support of Turkey’s bid for joining the European Union was another positive attribute of McCain’s political image. However, McCain’s policies on both Iraq and Iran did not find support amongst Turkish bloggers.¹

Stage 4: Determining Blog Interactivity

As introduced by Uluc, Yilmaz, and Isikdag (2010), the Comment/Entry Ratio (CER) can be used to measure interactivity in blogs. In this analysis, the Comment/Entry Ratio was 1.2836 for Obama and 0.727 for McCain (Figure 7). These values indicate that discussions related to Obama in the Turkish blogosphere can be regarded as more interactive. Thus, the interactivity of blogs related to Obama appeared 1.76 times higher than the interactivity in blogs discussing McCain. The general attention of mainstream media to Barack Obama seemed to affect the interactivity level of the blogosphere.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The current study focused on the reflections of the 2008 U.S. presidential election in the Turkish blogosphere. The results go in line with other scholarly investigations into the role of the political blogosphere in promoting global awareness in the political process as well as its enabling potential in facilitating political communication and interaction among global netizens (Coleman & White, 2008; Park, 2009; Perlmutter, 2008). Overall, the results indicate that: (a) there is a direct relationship between the candidates’ online activities and the number of blog entries and comments in

Figure 6. Total number of blog entries (n = 218) and comments (n = 237) by candidate

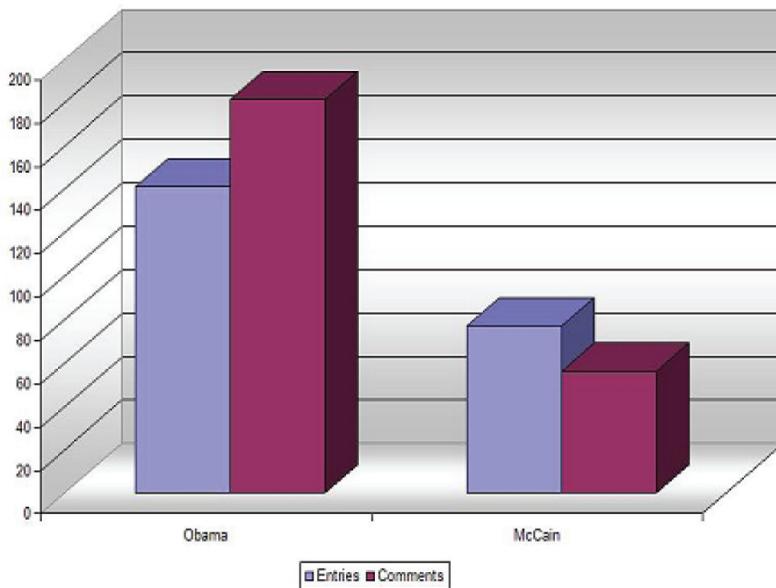
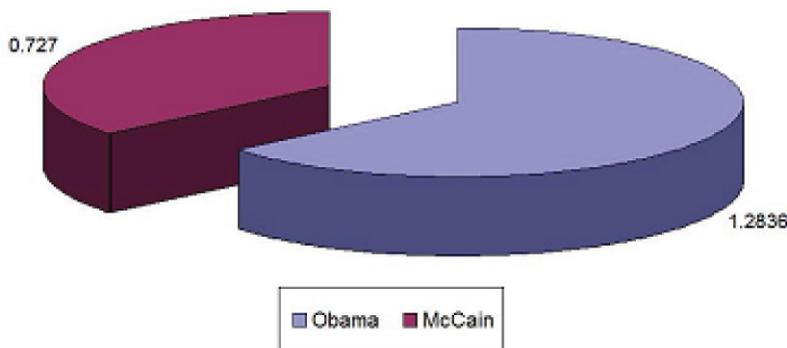


Figure 7. Comment/Entry Ratio (CER) by candidate



the blogosphere; (b) blogs are increasingly becoming a means of facilitation of online political communication; (c) as the Turkish blogosphere continues to evolve, it will likely begin to function as a platform for political deliberation in the future.

While prior research noted that bloggers tend to positively react to online activities of political candidates running for office, the present study found that there is a direct relationship

between the candidates' online activity and the number of entries and comments in the blogs under consideration. Because the most closely followed and debated candidate by the Turkish bloggers in the 2008 U.S. presidential election won the election, one can conclude that the outcome might be an indication not only of a maturity of political blogging in Turkey, but also that the level of blogging activity and success in online campaigning are related. However,

more research is needed to examine such a relationship in greater detail.

The online political activity that occurred during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign clearly affected the attitudes of Turkish online audiences towards the running candidates, and their major concerns were tied with the possible outcomes of the presidential election in the U.S. for their own country. The bloggers expressed their wish for the emergence of a more multi-dimensional and close partnership between the U.S. and Turkey as a result of the change in the White house administration (Dincer, 2008). The hypothesis that the major motivation that shaped the attitudes of Turkish bloggers towards the U.S. presidential candidate was driven by the alignment of the content of the electoral discourse of the candidates with the Turkish national interests was confirmed.

The United States is currently leading the rest of the world in adopting new technologies of social interaction for political communication. According to *The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008* report of the Pew Research Center (Smith, 2009), three-quarters (74%) of online users (or 55% of the adult population) in the U.S. went on the Internet to get political news, receive campaign information, and share their thoughts about the candidates. It appeared that Barak Obama's supporters were more adept in new media deployment (Smith, 2009; Smith & Rainie, 2008). During the Obama presidency, the White House communication staff perfected the use of social media technologies to establish a direct communication link with Americans, as well as bypass the editorial gatekeepers of the traditional media.

For example, in January 2011 the annual State of the Union presidential address was not only broadcasted on TV, but also streamed live from the White House web and Facebook pages. More than 40,000 questions were submitted to President Obama via YouTube before the speech. After the most important and interesting questions were selected by vote, the President answered them in an interview after the speech, and the video with the answers was immediately released on YouTube. Also following the ad-

dress, a panel of senior representatives of the Obama administration answered all related questions to the presidential address submitted through the White House web page, Facebook, and Twitter in a live session. Although such technological innovations in political communication would take time to be adapted around the world, there is reason to believe that similar practices would be closely observed and possibly emulated.

Taken as a whole, the political blogosphere has the potential to extend public communication by removing the boundaries between people, places and ideas, and to change the global political environment by performing the following functions:

- Improve understanding between Internet users representing diverse cultures and political views,
- Strengthen the insight and respect in arguments
- Support the development of self-regulation and good online behaviour in the cyberspace.

It is likely that online political discussions will transcend the geographical limits of nation-states and become global within both thematic and reflection dimensions. While political blogs alone are unlikely to bring an instant democratic change, they might shape the global public sphere of the 21st century by fostering democratic debate, providing information allowing citizens to voice their opinions and interact with each other. It also appears that because of its reflexivity, blogging is already becoming an essential part of e-deliberation; blogs are a perfect means to channel public deliberation on a global scale. Finally, blogging may act as a key medium for facilitating new ways of political communication in the political arena through an exchange of rich multi-media content and the creation and mining of multi-dimensional political information. Overall, political blogging—along with other forms of technology-mediated political communication—is expected to have an important impact

on the development of the political dimension of the global society of the future.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ The authors would like to note that the themes and issues mentioned only reflect the views expressed in the blogs under examination.

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