Chapter 5
Reformulating Government–Citizen Relations in a Digitally Connected World: The Twitter Ban Phenomenon in Turkey

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ABSTRACT
This chapter analyses the effects of social media on political communication and the role they play in government-citizen relations by focusing on the Twitter ban phenomenon in Turkey in March 2014. The chapter asks the reasons of government intervention in social media, particularly Twitter. It argues that Twitter makes, on the one hand, a significant contribution to the evolution of political participation as it diversifies the process and methods of political communication. On the other hand, it introduces a new type of security dilemma which encourages governments to consider taking measures against social media to protect their authority.

INTRODUCTION
The rapid rise of social media is one of the most prominent developments of the last two decades not only because it represents an advancement in communication technology but also because of how it impacts the way people interact with each other and with political actors and institutions (Gainous & Wagner, 2014, p. 4). In this regard, there is a close link between social media and political communication.

Graber (2005) defines political communication as “the construction, sending, receiving, and processing of messages that potentially have a significant direct or indirect impact on politics” (p. 479). The growth of social media provided a new environment for political communication in which such messages can be constructed, processed, sent, and received by anyone, including governments, politicians, interest groups, activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens.

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By lowering the cost of information acquisition, social media made it easier for citizens to follow the news and to become immediately aware of national and international issues. Several case studies show that the more people use online social networks, the more political awareness increases (Kanagavel & Chandrasekaran, 2014, p. 78; Reuter & Szakonji, 2015, p. 48). For instance, the results of Parmelee and Bichard’s (2012) US survey of 426 people over 18 who were following at least one political leader on Twitter indicates that 89.2% of respondents were researching on the information given in the tweet posted by their political leader on Twitter. Of these, 60.7% retweeted the information and 61% took action, such as contributing to a campaign or signing a petition (p. 105). This proves that social media not only informed those people about political issues but also stimulated their political engagement.

The interactivity provided by social media has increased the demand for more democratic and accountable governance as digitally interconnected citizens, who now have the ability to generate and spread information quickly and easily, started questioning political decisions in cyberspace. Ordinary citizens could freely voice their opinions about public issues by tweeting or posting messages on other social media platforms. They could communicate with others with similar or different opinions. Social media provided an alternative way of criticizing political decisions and decision makers other than waiting for the next election to show their dissatisfaction. Many recent global social movements, particularly those in developing democracies such as the Arab Spring countries, illustrate how social media can help civil society groups and activists report on human rights violations, campaign across borders, access global information, and gain support to strengthen their position (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 121).

Policymakers have also discovered the power of social media as a political communication tool. Many political parties and leaders, including US President Barack Obama (@BarackObama; https://www.facebook.com/barackobama), Indian Prime Minister Pranab Mukherjee (@RashtrapatiBhvn; https://www.facebook.com/presidentofindiarb), Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto (@EPN; https://www.facebook.com/EnriquePN), and Rwandan President Paul Kagame (@PaulKagame; https://www.facebook.com/PresidentPaulKagame), have social media accounts to increase their support and popularity, share their political activities, run their campaigns, and communicate with the electorate. The concern about losing prestige and authority by drawing the reaction of mobilized masses through social media can also be considered a source of motivation for decision makers to be more accountable.

As elsewhere, the use of social media in Turkey is growing rapidly and is shaping political life (Turk-Stat, 2014; We are social, 2014). Since the establishment of the Republic, the elitist nature of Turkish political culture, which has given priority to citizens’ responsibilities to the state rather than their rights and freedoms, has resulted in the passive political participation of citizens and a weak civil society. However, this has changed, mostly due to Turkey’s candidacy for EU membership. As part of the harmonization process, the government launched several constitutional reform packages in the early 2000s because Turkey, as a candidate for EU membership, was obliged to adopt EU laws, known as the acquis communautaire. The reforms included lifting the state of emergency and the death penalty, broadening freedom of expression, and prioritizing supranational treaties over domestic law (Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2012, p. 7). In this context, social media can contribute to the development of civil society and political participation in Turkey by improving the diffusion of information and mobilization.

Recent evidence of the increasing effect of social media on political participation was the use of Twitter to mobilize and organize demonstrators during the Gezi Park events in Istanbul in 2013, which started as an environmentalist protest against the removal of the park to build a shopping mall. This initial protest turned into a wave of nationwide anti-government demonstrations. During the events, for the first time in