Reflections on the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election in the Turkish Blogosphere

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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.
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
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