SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE GEZI PARK PROTESTS

What was the role of social media during the Gezi Park protests?

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In this day and age, social media has become an integral part of modern society. Protest movements are utilising new media more than ever seen before, specifically social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter. This thesis provides an analysis of the role that social media played during the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, which commenced in May 2013. It has been highly debated that social media played an important role during the Gezi Park protests, with three distinguishing roles: a communication, an organisation and a mobilising role.

Methods of analysis include a mixed-method approach. This includes a documentary research and field research. Documentary research was achieved by conducting scientific books and articles in order to outline the connection between social media and the Gezi Park protests. Furthermore, in order to fulfil sufficient field research two Turkish social media managers were interviewed and in addition two Turkish university students who all participated in the protests, this allowed a greater depth of perspective and understanding of the case.

Parallel to the research, literature was studied. This literature review provided direction and guidance in the interpretation of the data obtained through interviewing.

Upon analysing the interviews, the results suggest that:

(1) Social media served as the main communication tool during the Gezi Park protests. The traditional media, i.e. newspapers and television channels, were not sufficiently documenting the protests due to restrictions placed upon them by the government.

(2) Social media appeared to be a significant contribution in the organisation of the protests. It is to be noted that all the announcements regarding location and timings were published onto such networks.

(3) Social media was the primary contributor in mobilising the protesters. Moreover, the distribution of information by family members or acquaintances is thought to have increased the speed in which the mobilisation process occurred during the protests.

The information obtained through the collection of documentary data, interviewing and studying existing literature has made it apparent that social media’s role during the Gezi Park protests was of major importance. However, as it is thought highly likely that new
media will continue to act as an important contributor in contemporary protests, additional research is required. This research cannot provide an answer to the question whether social media plays a significant role in protests as a whole. In order to provide a more in depth answer to this question, it is necessary that comparative studies are to be undertaken.

**Keywords:** Turkey; Istanbul; Gezi Park; Taksim; Protests; Social Media; New Media; Turkish Media; Press Freedom; Communication; Social Movements; Digital Activism; Internet Freedom
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1. Introduction

1.1 The Gezi Park Protest

The Gezi Park protests in Turkey started on 27 May 2013 (Vossers, 2013) as a peaceful protest of several environmental activists who were actively speaking out against Prime Minister Erdoğan’s plans to remove Istanbul’s Gezi Park. Gezi Park, one of the last parks at the European centre of Istanbul became the epicentre of the protests when activists began by having a sit-in at the park in Istanbul (De Standaard, 2013). Peaceful demonstrations continued and soon Taksim Square had been occupied, the police evicted those taking part in the sit-in held at the park using tear gas, water cannons and pepper spray (Watson & Tuysuz, 2013). After police withdrawal from Taksim square and Gezi Park on the first of June, the sit-in was restored and the park then became occupied with thousands of protesters (Watson & Tuysuz, 2013). However, on the 15th of June, the police attempted to remove those from Gezi Park again, using tear gas and water cannons (NOS, 2013). Nonetheless, the protests did not decrease after the police evicted the protests at the park several times. Instead, the number of protesters increased and the protests started to take hold of the whole of Istanbul, as well as to other cities in Turkey such as; Ankara, Izmir, Koaceli and Adana (Sonumut, 2013). According to Amnesty International, at least eight thousand people were injured and five people died during the demonstrations, of which three of them would have died as a result of excessive police force (Amnesty International, 2013). It has been noted that the police fired plastic bullets at heads and upper bodies of protesters and fired tear gas canisters directly into the crowd (Amnesty International, 2013).

Since 11th March 2014, tempers are seen to be running high again in Turkey as a fifteen year old boy died from the effects of the severe injuries sustained during a demonstration last June, even though he was not participating in the demonstrations (Reijner, 2014). The protests which happened last year caused by the original Gezi Park protests in Istanbul are not over, at least, not for the protesters who still have legal processes running against them.

1.2 Research and Sub-Questions

This thesis objective is to figure out the potential role that social media played during the Gezi Park protests. Therefore, the main aim is to establish the different roles of social media and how these roles affected the protests in Istanbul. Moreover, this thesis will be
guided by the following central research question: *What was the role of social media during the Gezi Park protests?*

The central question will be underpinned by the following sub-questions:

- *Did mainstream news media coverage lead to the use of social media?*
- *Was social media used for the production and provision of content and resources during the protests?*
- *Is social media contributing to a sense of unity at the core of the process of mobilisation?*
- *Did social media connect all different networks during the protests?*
- *How is social media contributing to coming together of the movement in public space?*

1.3 **Justification and Relevance**

In the direction of justifying the relevance of this thesis, one can argue that protests movements in the modern day are utilising social media more than ever. The purpose of this research is to investigate the influence of social media during the Gezi Park protests.

On an academic level, this thesis can contribute to the academic discourse. This subject is still current and despite the significant amount of literature written either on the role of social media, the Gezi Park protests or both, the topic has been widely discussed on a non-academic field rather than in academic literature.

On social level, this thesis is relevant as social media has become an integral part of modern society. Therefore, it is of great importance to get a clear understanding of the influences of social media during events of which we are exposed daily to through television, newspaper and the internet, as the effects of social media have to be correctly interpreted by society.

1.4 **Readers Guide**

This research is divided into four sections. Firstly, the research provides an extensive literature review and methodology accordingly. Secondly, the thesis includes the results retrieved from the interviews. In the third section of this research, an analysis of the results will be given. Finally, in the final section of this research, a conclusion of this research will be given.
2. Literature Review

The research topic is defined by the following research question: *What was the role of social media during the Gezi Park protests?* In this chapter, the literature review will be presented. The concepts and subject areas that are discussed in this chapter will be firstly, an introduction to new media and more specifically social media. Secondly, social media and its relation towards protests in general will be discussed. Additionally, media policy in Turkey will be shortly described and finally, the potential gaps will be clarified.

2.1 New Media

New possibilities in the field of media are called new media. The transfer of digital information and the use of satellites is renowned for new media. Therefore, new media has the ability that people can quickly communicate and that information is immediately available worldwide. New media comes under different terminology, when it is associated with protests: e-protest, web 2.0 and cyber activism are some of the terms used.

Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, and Kelly (2009, p. 13) tried to define the characteristics of new media. According to them, new media has caused a wide range of changes in media production, distribution and use (Lister et al. 2009, p. 13). In addition, Lister et al. provided six characteristics of new media which can be distinguished, namely: digital, interactive, hyper textual, virtual, networked and simulated (Lister et al. 2009, p. 13).

2.1.1 Social Media

The article by Mayfield (2008, p. 5) defines social media as a group of new online media which have most or all of the following characteristics:

- Participation: Social media promotes contribution and feedback from users who are interested in participating; therefore it blurs the line between media and the audience.

- Openness: Social media is accessible to people, it does not have any sort of barriers that prohibit access to users.

- Conversation: Two-way communication is what makes social media stand out from the traditional media.

- Community: Social media provides people with a platform to share common interests which promote sense of community amongst the users. And;
Connectedness: Links to various sites, people, networks etc. promote social media's ability to connect its users to various areas of interest.

(Mayfield, 2008, p. 5)

A similar definition of social media derives from the article of Ahlqvist, Bäck, Heinonen, and Halonen (2010, p. 13) as they define social media as follows: “social media refers to the interaction of people and also to creating, sharing, exchanging and commenting contents in virtual communities and networks” (Ahlqvist et al, 2010, p. 4).

The user is the central point of social media as they create the content, spread the content and they have a critical role in the filtering and selecting the content. This interactivity is explained by Rafaeli and LaRose as follows: “Collaborative mass media systems, in which the audience is the primary source of media content as well as its receiver, represents a new and significant departure from mass media forms. They expand the very definition of mass media from “one-to-many” to “many-to-many” communication” (Rafaeli & LaRose, 1993, p. 277). In this research, specific attention will be given to the social media websites Facebook and Twitter. As the definitions and characteristics of new and social media have been clarified, the following step is to elaborate on Facebook and Twitter.

2.1.2 Facebook
Created in 2004 at Harvard by Mark Zuckerberg as a social network website, Facebook now has approximately 802 million daily active users and 609 million mobile daily active users in March 2014 (Facebook, 2014). Each user of Facebook can create a personal profile with which they can invite other Facebook users as their friend. Facebook users communicate with each other through public or private messages. Each of these messages can be about what the user is doing, what he is thinking or about his opinion. Besides sending messages, users can are also join particular groups of their interest. Facebook is dominated by the age group 18-24, followed by the age group 25-34 (Social Bakers, 2014). In 2013, Turkey had 32 million active Facebook users (Ergürel, 2013).

2.1.3 Twitter
Twitter, a micro blogging service, created in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, has now approximately 255 million monthly active users of which 78% are mobile users (Twitter, 2014). With Twitter, users can communicate very quickly by sending “tweets”, short messages of 140 characters maximum. In those tweets, “hashtags” can be added with which a tweet becomes categorised. For example, by adding a word: i.e. #GeziProtest. Clicking on a
"hashtag" will show a list full of messages that have the same hashtag. In 2013, Turkey had 9.7 million active Twitter users (Ergürel, 2013).

### 2.2 Social Media in Relation to Protests in General

This research will include studies that show how powerful communication is, and in particularly the power of social media in relation towards protests. According to Chadwick (2006, p. 92) the reason why new media could promote political activism “lies in the idea of autonomous spheres of communication in which citizens can freely engage in reasoned debate away from the controlling influence of the state, large media corporations and structures of social inequality that impinge on their daily lives” (Chadwick, 2006, p. 92). However, besides the potential power of social media, social media is also characterised as ineffective (Gladwell, 2010). As Gladwell point out: "The platforms of social media are built around weak ties" (Gladwell, 2010).

According to Demirhan (2014, p. 289) and Melucci (1996), social movements can be characterised as “processes of mobilization, organizational forms, […] and forms of communication […] – these are all meaningful levels of analysis for the reconstruction from the within of the action system that constitutes the collective actor” (Melucci, 1996, p. 4). These three levels will also be applied to characterise the roles of social media as is pointed out in figure 2.

**Figure 2 Roles of Social Media**

- Communication Role
- Organizing Role
- Mobilizing Role

#### 2.2.1 Communication Role

Studies find that communication is an important role of social media during protests (Gerbaudo, 2012; Srivastava, 2013). As Gerbaudo (2012, p. 3) indicates in his book Tweets and the streets ”modern media has always constituted a channel through which social movements communicate”. More specifically, it means that websites like Facebook and Twitter can “enable communications and discussions on public forum, spread awareness and provide instant news and information” (Srivastava, 2013, p. 162). Kavada mentions the importance of Twitter as a communication tool as follows: “The emergence of blogging tools and micro-blogging platforms like Twitter have further expanded the potential of the Internet for circulating information” (Kavada, 2010, p. 107). Furthermore,
she mentions the importance of Facebook groups as these groups “help to create inclusive communication networks that allow anyone interested in the movement to be informed about activities and to come in contact with other participants” (Kavada, 2010, p. 208).

In addition, several studies demonstrated that social media is used as an alternative or new system for political communication as it allows citizens to bypass the problems with news coverage in their home country, which was the case during the Egyptian Uprisings (Kavada, 2010 p.106; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 365; Tunç, 2013, p. 161; Zhuo, Wellman, & Yu, 2011). However, bypassing mainstream news does not always have to create a positive effect. Shirky (2011) argues that “the use of social media […] is just as likely to strenghten authoritarian regimes as well as to weaken them” as the “state has not lost the power to react” and as a result the government could start to act more controlling than ever (Shirky, 2011).

Social media is a communication tool in which information can be easily spread. In general, “the growing technical capacity of activists to report on their own actions has created unprecedented parallel public records of events” (Bennett W. , 2003, p. 164).

2.2.2 Organising Role
Another important role of social media during protests is that social media is used as an organising tool (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Srivastava, 2013; Zhuo, Wellman, & Yu, 2011). According to Gerbaudo (2012, p. 3) and Srivastava (2013, p. 162), social media is used as an organisational tool in order to organise social demonstrations and collective actions. Likewise, the article of Bennett, Segerberg and Walker (2014, p. 235) argues that whenever peoples want to organise, they tend to make use of social media platforms and channels like Facebook or Twitter. More specifically, social media is also used as a platform to ”make announcements, post calendar items and send messages to all members of the group” (Castells, 2012, p. 175). The power of social media in the organising role of protests lies in the fact that “they allow any activist with a laptop and a mobile phone to spread the word about the movement without having to go through more formal organizational channels” (Kavada, 2010, p. 108). Furthermore, social media channels are able to organise protests fast (Bennett W. , 2003, p. 164) and with low costs (Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2009; Kavada, 2010, p. 107). “On a community level, the organizing features of these sites lower the transaction costs for finding and connecting with others who may share one interest or concern but differ on other dimensions” (Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2009, p. 6).
“Many activists cite the importance of personal digital media in creating networks and coordinating action across diverse political identities and organizations” (Bennett W., 2003, p. 144). Gladwell (2010) also described Facebook and similar as “tools for building networks” as they are “effective at increasing participation by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires”. Gladwell gives the examples of networks like Wikipedia and the Facebook page of Safe Darfur Coalition which has a lot of followers (Gladwell, 2010).

Three organisation processes can be defined which ultimately lead to coherent organisation, namely: production, curation and dynamic integration (Bennett et al. 2014, p. 239). Whereas production is focussing on the creating and sharing of assets within a network through online media, curation involves the safeguarding, maintenance, and sorting of the assets which are created in the previous production process (Bennett et al. 2014, p. 239). Dynamic integration facilitates contact, transmission and switching among different actors, networks, platforms and technologies (Bennett et al. 2014, p. 239).

2.2.3 Mobilising Role
The internet plays an important role in mobilising people (van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002, p. 480; Howard & Hussain, 2011, p.47; Kavada, 2010, p. 108; Zhuo, Wellman, & Yu, 2011). According to Garrett (2006, p.3) “Mobilizing structures refer to the mechanisms that enable individuals to organize and engage in collective action, including social structures and tactical repertoires” (Garrett, 2006, p. 3). Therefore, in addition to the previous organising role, the use of social media has also become a tool for mobilising social campaigns and mobilising citizens during protests (Srivastava, 2013, p. 162). In other words, social media has the important but yet difficult task of “getting people on the streets” (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002, p. 480; Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 3).

A way of “mobilizing people for the good cause is to give them the opportunity to join or to support the organization” (van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002, p. 481). As people have joined an organisation, they are already engaged in the situation and it becomes much easier to reach more people as they “can email mobilization messages to members of their social networks, asking them to forward the information to as many people as possible” (Kavada, 2010, p. 108). Furthermore, spreading information within an existing group is much more likely to be effective instead of spreading information towards strangers as “people are more prone to read messages from those that they know and trust. They are also more likely to participate in a protest when they know that their friends will also attend” (Kavada, 2010, p. 108).
Dissemination of information creates a platform for mobilisation (Kavada, 2010; Zhuo, Wellman, & Yu, 2011). The importance of video and photo-sharing sites, such as Facebook, in mobilising peoples appears to be of great importance as these sites “helped activists to upload visual material both before and after the protest. Transcending linguistic barriers and eliciting strong emotional reactions, the role of videos and photos is crucial for mobilization and for building a sense of collective identity” (Kavada, 2010, p. 107). In a similar way, Twitter was used “to disseminate the latest news about the protests, to convey their impressions from the street, and to send messages of solidarity” (Kavada, 2010, p. 107).

2.3 Media Policy in Turkey

2.3.1 Social Media

Turkish citizens are active users of social media. Websites such as Facebook and Twitter are used on a daily basis. With the emergence of the Gezi Park protests, the use of Facebook and Twitter increased enormously. At the time of the demonstrations, Turkish protesters used the hashtags #direnGezi and #OccupyGezi to inform Turkey and the rest of the world about the protests which were held in and around Istanbul (Aral, 2013). The numbers of daily Tweets in Turkey during the protests were up to 1 million 563 thousand tweets per hour (Aral, 2013).

The way in which social media was used in the protests at Gezi park can be described as participatory journalism. According to Bowman & Willis, participatory journalism is a form of journalism in which citizens are “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires” (2003, p. 9). Deutsch Karlekar and Radsch formalised the concept of participatory journalism, also known as citizen journalism, as “an alternative and activist form of newsgathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as a repose to shortcoming in the professional journalistic field, that uses similar journalistic practices but is driven by different objectives and ideals and relies on alternative sources of legitimacy than traditional or mainstream journalism” (2012, p. 16). The reason why participatory or citizen journalism was used can be explained by how the traditional media in Turkey is structured.

2.3.2 Traditional Media

In order to understand why the Turkish citizens extensively used social media, the traditional media in Turkey has to be examined. Traditional media can be seen as the
media that existed before internet age. Examples of traditional media are television, radio, newspapers, magazines and books. In order to research the sub-question ‘did mainstream news media coverage lead to the use of social media?’ the focus lies in this subsection dominantly on Turkish television and printed media.

In Turkey many large private companies own the traditional media and this results in limited opinions that can be presented in the media (Library of Congress, 2008, p. 23). The limited view of the media became evident when the demonstrations exploded and Turkish leading newspapers did not pay any attention to the protests (Zalewski, 2013). Caroll and Hackett mentioned in their article Democratic media activism through the lens of social movement theory (2006) the following: “In pursuing collective action an important strategic relation is that between movements and media, as the former attempt to ‘get the message out’ while the latter strive to maximize profit and market share through capturing audiences” (Carroll & Hackett, 2006, p. 87).

Moreover, on the first of June 2013, CNN Turk, one of the leading broadcasters showed a penguin documentary when at the same time the demonstrations were exploding in Istanbul (Zalewski, 2013). In addition, if notion was made of the event, the official guideline of the government was followed (Bozdag & Warnier, 2013).

The 2014 report on freedom of the press by the Freedom House states the following:

“Constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press and expression are only partially upheld in practice, undermined by restrictive provisions in the criminal code and the Anti-Terrorism Act. Turkey remained the world’s leading jailer of journalists in 2013, with 40 behind bars as of December 1, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The press freedom climate deteriorated sharply during the year as journalists were harassed and assaulted while attempting to cover the Gezi Park protests that broke out in Istanbul in May, and dozens were fired or forced to resign in response to sympathetic coverage of the protesters’ demands. […] The firings highlighted the close relationship between the government and many media owners, and the formal and informal” (Freedom House, 2014, p. 11-12).

Because the Turkish media is defined as not free (Freedom House, 2014, p. 11), social media started to play a bigger and bigger role every day during the Gezi Park protest. Otherwise, as Kuymulu states in his article Reflections on the urban uprisings in Turkey (2013): “civic mobilization was almost exclusively organized through social media, while
mainstream media was cooperating fully with the AKP government and imposing a media blackout of the event” (p. 275).

In June 2013, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Tayyip Erdoğan, was interviewed by a Turkish television channel. Within this interview, Tayyip Erdoğan declared the following:

“There is now a scourge that is called Twitter. The best examples of lies can be found there. To me, social media is the worst menace to society.” (Huffington Post UK, 2013)

For the Prime Minister, there were several reasons for his decision to state the previous quotation. Tayyip Erdoğan realised that with social media, the Turkish citizens bypassed the traditional media which were following the official guideline of the government.

2.4 Potential Gaps

This thesis will examine the role of social media during the protests that broke out at Gezi Park, Istanbul, Turkey. Although there has already been research done on the role of social media towards protests in general, the role of social media during the Gezi Park protests has not yet been adequately defined. The articles which have already been published on the role of social media during the Gezi Park protests demonstrates mostly the general role of social media in the Gezi Park protests, but are not very specific. Therefore, there remain gaps in the existing literature concerning the protests in Istanbul.

Three main roles of social media have been defined: firstly, the communication role, secondly, the organising role and finally, the mobilising role. Based on these three roles, interviews were held with Turkish citizens since what is known about social media in relation to the protests in Istanbul is largely based upon studies that investigate what the role of social media was. This indicates a need to understand the various perceptions of roles of social media that exist among Turks who participated in the protests or among scientific researchers who are specialised in protests.
3. Methodology

In the previous chapter, the literature review was presented. Subsequently in this chapter, the methodology will be explained. In order to investigate the research question thoroughly, a specific research methodology was chosen in order to facilitate the collection of sufficient data to answer this central research question. The methods have been aligned with the aims and objectives of this research. At the end of this chapter, research ethics will be discussed.

3.1 Research Question

This research’s aim was to examine whether social media played an important role during the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul and to address the different roles of social media during these protests. Therefore, the central research question of this research is defined as follows: **What was the role of social media during the Gezi Park protests?**

The phenomenon of the usage of social media in Turkey during the Gezi Park protests raised several sub-questions which fall under the three roles of communication, organisation and mobilisation.

- Did mainstream news media coverage lead to the use of social media?
- Was social media used for the production and provision of content and resources during the protests?
- Is social media contributing to a sense of unity at the core of the process of mobilisation?
- Did social media connect all different networks during the protests?
- How is social media contributing to coming together of the movement in public space?

3.2 Research Design

For this research, a mixed method approach has been chosen in order to acquire new knowledge concerning the role of social media during the Gezi Park protests through a combination of different approaches (Gilbert, 2008, p. 127). These different approaches entailed two methods, namely documentary research and field research. Field research was done in the form of in-depth interviews and documentary research was done in the form of academic books and online sources. These methods have been adopted to collect necessary data, which was required to address the central research- and sub questions.
3.2.1 Secondary Data
The use of documentary research was transformed to fit the interest of this research as it gave information in order to outline the connection between social media and the Gezi Park protests. Literature was selected by using Google scholar, searching in library databases and by investigating the references of previous studies.

Desk research has been used to collect and analyse data in order to explain the Gezi Park protests and to find a concrete definition for social media. Besides this, secondary data has also been used to a certain extent to find out whether mainstream news media coverage led to the use of social media and it provided direction and guidance in the interpretation of the data obtained through interviewing. More specifically, scientific books and articles on the usage of social media during protests, and on the general role of social media during protests have been used.

3.2.2 Primary Data
The use of field research was desired to provide primary data which is fine-gained and that has in-depth perspective. Interviewing was relevant as this allowed a greater depth of perspective and understanding of the case. Therefore semi-structured, qualitative interviews were held with Turkish citizens who participated in the demonstrations and who used social media extensively. With a few in-depth interviews, multiple issues were covered as they had more to say than “one sub-question” over the Gezi Park protests and the role of social media during these protests.

With qualitative interviewing, according to Bryman, “questioning must cover the areas that you need but from the perspective of your interviewees” (2012, p. 473). Therefore, there had to be a structure in the interview. Thus, an interview guide was created in order to provide the researcher a list of the questions/topics that had to be covered (Bryman, 2012).

For this research, four interviews were conducted. Two Turkish social media managers and in addition two Turkish university students were interviewed who all participated in the protests. After the interviews were carried out, the interviews which were held via Skype or those which were held face-to-face were being transcribed. The transcriptions of the interviews were analysed by using a thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012, p. 578). Thematic analysis was applied as emphasised what was said, and not how. Moreover, thematic analysis provided a framework for categorising the content derived from interviewing (Bryman, 2012, p. 580). Whilst categorising the data derived from interviewing, emphasis to was given on repetition (Bryman, 2012, p. 580). The interview guide and the transcripts can be found in the appendices.
Table 3.1 shows the basic information of all the interviewees. In this table, six aspects are written down, namely the interviewee’s initials, the date on which the interview was held, the gender, the medium, the duration of the interview and the profession of the interviewee. Before each interview, the interviewee was asked to sign an informed consent form. For that reason, their names have been changed into their initials.

Table 3.1 Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee’s initials</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UO</td>
<td>15.5.2014</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>27:28 min</td>
<td>Turkish University Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOP</td>
<td>20.5.2014</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>32.57 min</td>
<td>Social Media Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GK</td>
<td>26.6.2014</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>34.16 min</td>
<td>Social Media Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HO</td>
<td>07.8.2014</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>45.52 min</td>
<td>Turkish University Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.3 Limitations of the Research
The main research limitation was that the researcher was not in Turkey during this research. Even though there were sources on the internet about this subject, doing qualitative research was necessary in order to get answers to the research and sub questions. Consequently, this research was not easy, because collecting information derived from active users of social media during the Gezi Park protests was very challenging.

3.3 Considerations on Research Ethics
According to Gilbert (2008, p.146) “Ethics is a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others”. In order to secure this right during this research, The American Psychological Association Ethics Code and The Hague University guidelines were well considered. Every interviewee was asked for their informed consent before they took part in the interview. In addition, all interviewees were informed about the aim of this research, to be exact, all interviewees were asked to sign an informed consent form which was provided by The Hague University of Applied Sciences, in which the interviewees declared that they were taking part in the research on the basis of the guarantees explained in the form. These specific forms can be found in the appendices.
4. Results

In the previous chapters the literature review and subsequently the methodology were discussed. In this chapter, the main results of this research will be presented.

4.1 Roles of Social Media

This subsection will embody the different roles of social media within the Gezi Park protests. As described before, the data for this research was gathered through in-depth interviews. In order to fully evaluate the role of social media during the Gezi Park protests, the interviews were transcribed and analysed. The transcriptions of the interviews were analysed using the Thematic Analysis (Bryman, 2012, p. 578). The analysis of the transcriptions of all the interviews yielded three roles of social media that were of importance to all the interviewees. These three roles can be defined as follows:

- Communication role
- Organising role
- Mobilising role

The following subcategories will outline each role of social media within the protests, which emerged from the interviews that were held. In addition, each role will be clarified using quotes of the interviewees. Table 5.1 shortly presents how the interviewees perceived the different roles of social media during the Gezi Park protests. This table was very helpful in coding and analysing the different roles of social media within the Gezi Park protests.

### Theme: Roles of Social Media

Table 5.1 Perceived Roles of Social Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee 1: UO</th>
<th>Communication Role</th>
<th>Organisation Role</th>
<th>Mobilising Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing information</td>
<td>Making announcements for place and time on social media, gathering of people</td>
<td>Encouraging Turkish citizens to participate in the protests</td>
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</table>
### 4.1.1 Communicating Role

Throughout the interview discourses, interviewees were asked questions about their ways of communicating with each other. Over-all, the results suggest that the protesters used social media as the main tool for communicating with each other. A general example of what interviewees were saying about their ways of communicating with each other during the Gezi Park protests was:

*During the Gezi protests we needed communication, because the government didn’t show any reality from anywhere. I mean the TV channels and the internet channels are restricted by the government. So, we had to do something and the best way was to share our stories by social media.* (GK)

Alike, one interviewee explained:

*During those times, there was a media blackout in Turkey. When you just turned on the TV, and looked at the most popular and most watched TV channels all you could see was just a penguin documentary and unrelated TV series, there was nothing at all and the press was showing the protesters as the violent, as the traitor and like people who showed disobedience to the government and people who betrayed their country. That is what the press showed because most of the time, the owner of the press companies like the channels, the newspapers and stuff were...*
cooperating with the government so in order not to lose money, they were trying to cover what the government wants them to show. (UO)

Consequently, he emphasised the importance of the use of social media during the Gezi Park protests, as he stated:

We also said that the revolution is not going to be televised it is going to be tweeted. So it’s more about Twitter, Facebook, from the social media wherever you can get but as long as you are watching TV, it is like there is no city called Istanbul in Turkey. It’s more like they are showing something different. It seems like there is no protest in Turkey. But if you look at Twitter you see how rootless it was, you see how violent it was. (UO)

Most of the interviewees shared the same opinion about the traditional media, which was that they did not do much effort to cover the Gezi Park protests. An example can be given of one interviewee who explained the neglect of the Turkish Media:

The protests were really huge like, there were tens of thousands of people on the streets but most of the people in Turkey were not even aware that there was a protest. Because, the national media did not publish anything for the first days. They did not even give a news story about that. (IOP)

Even though the answers of most interviewees included a blackout of events by traditional media during the protests, one interviewee described that every traditional media source has its own way of broadcasting the news and dealing with the government restrictions by making use of social media:

I can say that at some point, traditional media tried to ignore the content of social media but after that they had to react to the fact, which was, people were getting information from there. But the reaction varied from different traditional media sources. For example, some of them just declared social media as the source of lies and propaganda and this information is misinformation. Some of the media used social media as the source for, for example, some traditional media, some television channels and some of the newspapers and some of the journalists used social media as a second screen for their broadcast, or their role as information spreading. (IOP)

In order to bypass the traditional media, social media became the main tool in order to know what was happening, as one interviewee said:
So the social media, I mean Facebook and Twitter, seemed the best way to spread the word. (GK)

Furthermore, one interviewee stressed the importance of social media as a communication tool with which they could spread all kind of information, as he said:

So, for example the first day, many people learned how to protect themselves from the teargas from social media, from peoples Facebook posts. So, it was a very interesting source of information. You could find anything there and people just took information and shared it with their friends (...) It was so vital. It was the spine of the protests I think. (IOP)

Likewise,

But we young people were using Twitter, especially Twitter, not Facebook so much. You could just give quick information, useful information like: there are cops don’t go there, and the protests are coming here, and there is someone who is arrested and come here, and there is someone who is wounded, like you are calling the doctors and stuff, ambulances and stuff, on Twitter! (UO)

Similarly, interviewee 4 explained:

They were sharing medication, they were sharing Wi-Fi passwords, internet passwords, internet codes, and they were sharing: the police are coming on this street, you must escape, do not come here... All announcements were held on social media. Social media became the most important communication device at that moment. (HO)

During the protests, the way in which Twitter was used as a communication tool was preferably by retweeting, or as one interviewee said:

The Gezi Park protest retweets were everywhere. Because all I wrote were retweets because I was trying to spread the news and everybody did the same. Because they didn’t write their opinion after some while, but they were just sharing what’s going on. Like retweeting and retweeting and retweeting and keep the timeline going and the news everybody can see. (UO)

Additionally, one interviewee mentioned the importance of sharing messages online as he stated:
Social media is the biggest catalyst. [...] they shared it and they posted it on Facebook and it got shared by other friends of them. The chain has completed. [...] That is the point, it has no limit. (HO)

However, although all the interviewees stressed the importance of social media as a communication tool, some of the interviewees explained that most of the time, social media was not used during the protests itself. He said the following:

When you go to Taksim or any area where the protests are happening you could see that the internet was gone. So you could not communicate at all on internet during the protests. You communicated on internet before and after the protests. During the protests, people were face to face, there was nothing else. (IOP)

Additionally, another interviewee explained that when the internet was cut off, other ways of communicating arose, as she expressed:

So we used SMS or if possible WhatsApp on 3G line. (HO)

Summarising the results related to the communicating role of social media, it has been shown that the interview results disclose a major role for social media in communicating during the Gezi Park protests. It appears that the black out of events by the traditional media is of major importance, however other reasons have been mentioned by the interviewees as well. For instance, Twitter and Facebook were used as the main communication tool with which protesters could disseminate information quickly.

4.1.2 Organising Role

When asked about possible organising roles of social media, most of the interviewees revealed that people got organised mainly through Facebook and Twitter. One interviewee mentioned that Facebook and Twitter were “the basis of the protests when they were being organised” (IOP). Additionally, he said:

The organisation was spread on social media, actually. There was no other way to know when the next protest was. (IOP)

Alike, he stated:

Well, it would be impossible for people to organise for the protests because most of the protests were organised on Twitter, on WhatsApp groups. (IOP)

The importance of social media was also emphasised by another interviewee who explained why people got organised by reading messages on Twitter. He clarified:
You just shared something on Twitter and people came there. Because after some while as people saw how violent it was, how the cops, the Prime Minister and the major were treating innocent people, people got there by reading news from Twitter because it was really against the human rights in the end. (UO)

In addition to the previous mentioned, concrete announcements on social media regarding location and timings has been indicated as a very important aspect of the organising role as well. For example, UO, stated the following:

If there is a protest to be held, they announce the place and time on Twitter and people get together there and go to protest. (UO)

Furthermore,

They were discussing and they were deciding some meetings and stuff and they were releasing those news to people on Twitter. (UO)

Additionally,

So I think social media had a very, very important role here because it enabled people to organise without looking at the media, without talking to each other, face to face. (IOP)

Within Twitter, the hashtag of “OccupyGezi” was very active, as one interviewee mentioned. Furthermore he added that although the hashtag of Occupy Gezi was the most mentioned and most followed Twitter and Facebook page, everything related with Gezi was, to a lesser extent, active too.

Social media made it also possible to “organise much faster” and to “reach much more people”, as one interviewee argued. Specifically, she added:

Some people created Facebook events to invite people to protests. In this way, we can reach much more people than we did with words. (GK)

With the use of social media, many people were reached. Even people with extreme different ideologies, as one interviewee said. Alike, one mentioned:

I have never seen such a thing before, this kind of co-existence. I have never seen such a thing in my 28th years. (GK)

Two interviewees exemplified the way Turkish citizens cooperated with each other with the example of Turkish soccer teams. As one interviewee said:
Football is a really big thing in Turkey. We have three big teams in Istanbul which are really fighting each other during the games but during the protests times, there was a football team called Istanbul United. Those three teams were fighting each other during the games, but came together during the Gezi Park protests. (UO)

Another one mentioned;

All the groups were mixed together. Like, there were soccer fans, and they were very prominent in the protests, but many people were mixed without supporting the same team. So, there were socialist groups, there were for example white colour, city workers, and they were moving together. They were just talking to each other because they were experiencing the same thing. (IOP)

Nevertheless, it was not only the soccer fans who were cooperating with each other. In a similar way, one interviewee mentioned the importance of the role social media played in organising the protests where in different groups of ideologies participated:

Thanks to social media people learn that other groups, other people are very, very similar to them. They saw that people are protesting for the same thing. For example, you could see nationalists with Kurdish groups together at the protest and they are really very, very huge enemies of each other but during the protests they were moving together and were helping each other. Thanks to social media they saw that the other group is sharing the same thing. Without social media, they could not talk to each other. For example on Twitter you would see a group talking about something or a person talking about something. You would ask him what is his political tendency and that might surprise you because it might be the opposite of what you have so people learned that others are very similar so they came together. (IOP)

Correspondingly,

A lot of extremely different ideologies were staying together. For example the Kurdish separatists people and the Kemalist, these groups were staying together and in the end there were some arguments of course about the flags and stuff and but eventually they could get together because this is not about ideologies anymore. Like, whatever is necessary to overthrow the violator is okay. People were getting together, that is what it is. (UO)
By contrast, although the previous interviewee mentioned the importance of social media in organising protests in which all different groups of peoples participated, his opinion was not shared by every interviewee as one mentioned:

*Social media is not the thing that called us to unite*

*Me: but do you think it played a part?*

*Yes, but a small part. I mean, for example, we showed people that we can stay together but not much more. (GK)*

In the end, when asked if during the protests there was a sense of unity, one interviewee explained:

*There was unity but that was a very fragile unity. Because that unity was from the basic principles, like it was based on the willingness to stop state violence and the worry about people their own lives, their own lifestyles so all these people, I think, came together to protect what they have. This is, you know, their property, their life and their future. So that was the unity but it was not a political unity. It was just an emergency. (IOP)*

Similarly, another explained:

*Turkey was unified under one roof, one single idea: discontent of execution, discontent of government and we can say almost 90 percentage of protestors were unified under one single aim. (HO)*

To sum up the results relating to the organising role of social media during the Gezi Park protests, it has been shown that Facebook and Twitter were the basis of organising the protests as issues like time and place were announced on these social media pages. More specifically, the hashtag of “OccupyGezi” was very active during the protests. It appears that social media made it possible to organise much faster and to reach much more people. In addition, people with extreme different ideologies were reached and to a certain extent they participated in the protests as a unity, for the time being.

### 4.1.3 Mobilising Role

During the Gezi Park protests, Turkish citizens mobilised at a great extent. When asked about possible factors for this mobilisation, most interviewees referred to social media as the main reason for mobilising. One interviewee argues that the protesters became mobilised because of the content they were seeing on social media pages. He noted:
"I do not think people would get mobilised that much but when they saw, not on TV again, not on the newspaper again, but when they saw some pictures and some casualties, some videos about Gezi protests on Twitter and Facebook, like how people were treated, it was like what are you doing to our people? Who are you to treat our people, our sons, our children, our daughters like that? Even the mothers and fathers were going there after some while because they were seeing on Facebook what was happening. Because during those times, the news of Twitter was increased in Turkey highly, so so so so much. And so the people could see more and more what is going on. And people were getting there but its more about seeing what's going on in the park, not politically, but what is really going on. Because when you see something like the cops are treating bad to the intellectual young people, this is wrong. You should listen to the people." (UO)

Additionally, another interviewee stated the following:

"Well social media makes it possible to spread any news without any control. So any person, if he or she has any important news it can be published. It can be spread, if other people think that it is important. So there is no control there is no chief reporter there is no board of journalists, there are just people spreading each other news. I think it was very important for these protests because most of the information was coming from ordinary people. If there wasn't social media, those people would not have any tool to spread those news. It would be impossible for them." (IOP)

One interviewee stressed the importance of mobile devices, when she was asked what role social media could have played in the mobilisation for the protests. She stated:

"People mobilised by using mobile devices. It was inevitable too, because you feel that you have to do something and you feel that you have to follow what is happening. When you look at the TVs you just saw penguin shows and films etcetera. But on the other side, you hear the bombs from your house. So you feel that you have to follow what is going on. So you have to use something. This is internet mostly, and most of us have a smart device so we started to use them." (GK)

Many interviewees explained that it was only because of extensive use of social media, the protests have become this big. Furthermore, social media can be seen as a catalyser of the timeline of events during the Gezi Park protests, especially when the news came from the protesters themselves, people got moved, as one interviewee said:"
I think it would be impossible to have this protests without social media. Because I remember how people learned about the police violence on the environmentalists, it was all on social media. There was no other source. There would be other sources but people, for example, I do not trust some newspaper which are constantly, effortlessly, just mindlessly against the governments, I do not trust them so when they tell about the police violence against environmentalists, say, well, it's just another story from those guys. But when it came from people around me, it was credible and it moved me. It moved people. These protesters, we had some credible news sources for the first time and it were real people so I think that was what moved the people and what made them participate in the protests for the first time. Without social media they would not know what other ordinary people believed and what they wanted. (IOP)

Additionally, another interviewee indicated:

Of course people will rebel against the government without social media. But I think social media is the biggest catalyser. It has speed up the revolution, it has speed up the rebellions. Without social media there would be 200.000 people, not much but with social media there were 3 million people gathered in the same place. This is the importance of social media. (HO)

Moreover,

Extensive use of social media definitely effects these revolutions. Without social media, it would happen but not at this big scale. (HO)

Furthermore, this interviewee made notice of the fact that a larger part of the Turkish population uses of social media, which could be very beneficial for mobilising for protests, as he noted:

We must look at the statistics as well because half of the Turkish population use social media, Facebook and Twitter, very frequently, which means a great possible mobilisation by the social media could be achieved and this happened in Gezi.(HO)

Summarising the results related to the mobilising role of social media, it has been shown that the interview results disclose a major role for social media in mobilising during the Gezi Park protests. It seems that the content which was spread on social media is of major importance, as well as the use of mobile devices that were facilitating the use of social media pages. In addition, social media can be seen as a catalyser of the timeline of
events during the Gezi Park protest. The results suggest that without social media, mobilisation would not have occurred as at the extent it did during the Gezi Park protests.
5. Discussion

The main aim of this research was to discover and explain the role that social media played during the Gezi Park protests. The results of this research confirm that social media, and specifically Twitter and Facebook played an enormous role in the protests. In opposition to the speculation about the limits of social media (Gladwell, 2010), this research shows that social media was very active in communicating, organising and mobilising Turkish citizens during the Gezi Park protests. This resonates with the characterisation of social movements in general, as articulated by Melucci (1996, p. 4).

5.1.1 Communication Role

First of all, this research shows that social media served as the main communication tool during the Gezi Park protests, since the traditional media, such as the television channels and newspapers, were hardly covering the protests due to government restrictions, if they were covering the protests at all. Therefore, the usage of social media was necessary in order to inform the Turkish population about the events that were happening at the moment. This resembles the findings of Srivastava (2013, p.162) who described social media as a tool to spread awareness and provide instant news and information.

In addition, as previously mentioned, mainstream media coverage was actively leading to the use of social media. This replicates the findings of a study conducted by Aslı Tunç who stated that “social media proved to be one of the best tools to bypass the problems of the mainstream media […]” (Tunç, 2013, p. 161). As the protesters were documenting images, information and stories about the Gezi Park protests, it became slowly evident that Facebook and Twitter became a channel for participatory journalism and the protesters were functioning as participatory journalists (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 9).

However, as Shirky (2011) stated, "the use of social media […] is just as likely to strengthen authoritarian regimes as well as to weaken them". It seems that in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests, the Turkish government has put bans on social media networks like Youtube following up the scandals on recent corruption.

This research result shows that Twitter and Facebook were the main communication tools during the Gezi Park protests, which resembles Kavada’s (2010, p. 107) point of view on these social media networks.
5.1.2 Organising Role

Secondly, interview analysis shows that social media appears to be a significant contribution in the organisation of the protests. All the announcements regarding location and timings were published onto Twitter and Facebook in order to inform the Turkish population where the next protest would be held. This resembles the findings of Bennett, Segerberg and Walker (2014, p. 235) who also stated that Facebook and Twitter are important actors in the organisation aspect of the protests.

Furthermore, this research is showing that social media made it possible to organise much faster and to reach much more people, as one interviewee mentioned. This resonates with the article of Bennett (2003, p.164), who also mentioned that social media channels are able to organise protests fast. However, as several academics mentioned a “low cost” reason for using social media during the organising process (Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2009; Kavada, 2010, p. 107), interviewees did not mention this aspect. However, this could be a reason for using social media. Nevertheless, it was not mentioned during the interviews held about the Gezi Park protests.

Interview analysis is showing that during the protests, people with extreme different ideologies were protesting together because they shared the same experience and protested for the same cause. Although there was a sense of unity during the protests, one can argue that this was only the case during the protest as they had one single aim during the protest. Therefore, it can be stated that there was no political unity.

5.1.3 Mobilisation Role

As a final point, this research shows that social media was the primary contributor in mobilising the protesters. On Twitter, for example, messages were posted on what was really going on in the streets of Istanbul and it were these messages who pulled the people to the streets. This resonates with the article of Kavada (2010, p. 107) who stated that the dissemination of information, especially on video and photo-sharing sites, creates a platform for mobilisation.

Interview analysis is showing an important reason why activists became mobilised, as one interviewee mentioned: “we had some credible news sources for the first time and it were real people so I think that was what moved the people and what made them participate in the protests for the first time” (IOP). Literature review supports this result as “people are more prone to read messages from those that they know and trust. They are also more likely to participate in a protest when they know that their friends will also attend” (Kavada, 2010, p. 108). In other words, the distribution of information by family members
or acquaintances is thought to have increased the speed in which the mobilisation process occurred during the protests

Furthermore, this research shows that social media has accelerated mobilisation during the Gezi Park protests to a great extent. One interviewee exemplified this by mentioning the concept of sharing: “and they shared it and they posted it on Facebook and it got shared by other friends of them […] that is the point, it has no limit “ (HO). This resonates with the following citation of Kavada that people “can email mobilisation messages to members of their social networks, asking them to forward the information to as many people as possible” (Kavada, 2010, p. 108).
6. Conclusion

The main aim of this research is to discover and explain the role that social media played during the Gezi Park protests by using a mixed method approach. In particular, by using a thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions as well as using documentary research. Taking a mixed methods approach proved beneficial for defining the different roles of social media during the protests and for figuring out why social media was used so extensively during the protests. In order to give an answer to the central research question: ‘What was the role of social media during the Gezi Park protests?’ a number of sub-questions have been addressed.

In response to the first sub-question, to be exact ‘did mainstream news media coverage lead to the use of social media?’ the results show that the traditional Turkish media, i.e. newspapers and television channels, were not sufficiently documenting the Gezi Park protests. In line with what previous studies have suggested, inadequate coverage by mainstream media appears to be of major importance for the usage of social media.

The sub-question ‘Was social media used for the production and provision of content and resources during the protests?’ is also explained by outlining Turkish media policy. The problems of Turkish traditional media can be defined as the reason why Facebook and Twitter were used as much as they did during the protests. As mainstream media was hardly covering the events, it seems that information had to be exposed through social media channels, in particular by using Facebook and Twitter. On these social media channels all kinds of information was published, from Wi-Fi passwords to the location of the cops.

Concerning the sub-question ‘Is social media contributing to a sense of unity at the core of the process of mobilisation?’ this research concludes that overall, interviewees agree with the fact that there was a sense of unity during the protests. However, it seems that this unity was very fragile as it was formed out of necessity. Furthermore, answering the question if social media played a role creating this unity is a difficult task, as the answers from the interviews differed from one another. Whereas one interviewee mentioned a visual role of social media in showing the Turkish population that everyone was unified under one single aim, another interviewee was opposite the idea that social media called people to unite.
Referring to the sub-question ‘Did social media connect all different networks during the protests?’ this research suggests that through the use of social media, numerous people were reached. In addition, not only people with the same ideology were reached but also people with extreme different ideologies were connected. The way social media reached all those different networks was by announcing time and place through social media and people would show up.

This is also the case for the last sub-question ‘How is social media contributing to coming together of the movement in public space?’ Social media pages such as Facebook and Twitter were the main places for protesters to announce time and place for the protests to be held, as there was no other way to know where and when the next protests would be held. Besides the announcements that were placed on social media pages, images and videos were shared on these pages too. By watching these images and videos on Twitter and Facebook, the Turkish population became aware of how the protesters were treated during the Gezi protests. As the Turkish population became discontent, they decided to participate as well.

This thesis has made it apparent that social media played an important role during the Gezi Park protests. However, as it is thought very likely that new media will continue to act as an important contributor in contemporary protests, further research is needed since this research cannot provide an answer to the question whether social media plays a significant role in protests as a whole. Therefore, in order to get deeper in on this question, it might be interesting in future research to design comparative studies in which other protests around the world, that are dealing with all kinds of regimes and, which are employing social media in various ways are examined with the aim of identifying new insights. Although the conclusion given at this point is a very suggestive one, it nevertheless offers a beginning for further investigation on this matter.

In the end, one can argue that social media’s role during the Gezi Park protests was of major importance. Or to put in the words of the interviewees:

“If there was not Twitter and Facebook, this protests would not have happened. I am pretty sure, never ever”
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