

Social Media for Political Opinion Making: A Comparison of Germany, Turkey and the USA

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1. Abstract

Social networking services have become important platforms for political opinion making. Even politicians and parties have noticed the possibilities social networks offer, using them primarily for self-promotion especially during election periods and by that have the opportunity to directly communicate with potential voters without the help of traditional journalism. This work is going to present factors on social networks that are considered to have influence on people’s opinions focusing on Twitter and Facebook to then find out what kind of political participation can arise from it. The research issue will be examined for Germany, Turkey and the USA separately to then compare the results. Events like the US-American presidential elections in 2012 and the Turkish Gezi park protests in 2013 are going to be analyzed in detail as examples for how social network users can be mobilized for political participation, regarding the case of media censorship in Turkey.

Keywords: social networks, political opinion making, political participation, censorship.

2. Introduction

The World Wide Web has come a long way from what it used to be in its beginnings to now, being an essential part of everyday life. Technological progress enabled people all over the world to use various offers of the internet, like news pages, blogs and social networks. The latter case especially, has strongly developed over the last decade.



Figure 1: Number of Social Network Users Worldwide
(Source: Own representation based on Statista D 2015)

As shown in Figure 1, the world's social network using population has doubled since 2010 from 1 billion to around 2 billion users with increasing tendency and due to these high numbers, social networking services have taken on a whole new meaning.

When social networks were firstly introduced to the public, people created accounts to mainly socialize with others by sending friend requests, upload pictures, comment and share postings of friends and exchange private messages. Nowadays, the technical structure enables users to do much more. As social networks are platforms for communication that has become more complex and participatory, the online population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech and the ability to take part in political and social events like demonstrations, elections, etc. Therefore they have become an important factor for the complex process of opinion making and spread of opinions.

Politicians and parties have noticed the possibilities that social networking services offer, using them primarily for self-promotion especially during election periods. Facebook, Twitter and other networks provide the opportunity to directly communicate with potential voters without the help of traditional journalism. An example for that are the election results of the German presidential elections in 2009 that came out before the official announcement because members of the parliament posted them on Twitter¹.

Even news provider and other interest groups have joined these platforms to spread their news and reach a broad mass of people that share and comment on it.

Thus, social networks have become an integral part of public opinion making that, on the one hand, allow a large variety of opinions. On the other hand, the technical structure restricts communication in some parts. The programmers of Twitter for example limit the messages users can send to each other to 140 characters and by that also limit the flow of thoughts. Also the "Edge Rank" function on Facebook decides on the contents users can see in their "top news".

Various researchers all over the world carried out studies and surveys about factors that influence people's opinions on social networking services and came to different results.

This work is first of all going to give an overview about the development of the Web 2.0 and with that of social networks (Section 3). After that it will give a short review of the state of research of different factors that influence the opinion making on social networks in general but especially in a political context as the focus of this work is the political opinion making. The personality of users and their motives to enter social networks are an important aspect of the process of opinion making, but also the external influences like the technical structure, content that is being shared, users in opinion leading roles and the online presence of politicians and parties are going to be analyzed (Section 4).

¹ Cf. Wiegold 2009

Moreover, this work is going to examine if and how political opinions on social networks can result in political participation. Events like the huge success of US-president Obama at the presidential elections in 2012 by campaigning on social networks, or the Gezi park protests in Turkey two years ago where millions of people were mobilized on Facebook and Twitter to attend protests, are excellent examples for results of political participation online and are going to be examined in detail. A clear distinction between the use of social networks in Western democracies like Germany and USA and the “less democratic” Turkey has to be made (Section 5).

This work will focus on Facebook and Twitter for they are two of the most commonly used social platforms in these three countries.

Additionally, a total of 20 qualitative interviews were conducted, asking ten German and ten Turkish social network users of different ages, professions and levels of political interest about how they believe social networks influences them and their political participation to compare the results of studies explained in the previous sections and determine differences and similarities (Section 6).

The ambition of this work is to show if and how today’s social networking services have an impact on people’s political opinion making in Germany, Turkey and the USA and also on political participation referring to examples from the past few years.

Research issue: What influence do social networks have on political opinion making and do they induce political participation?

3. Web 2.0 - Development of Social Networks

The internet today is an essential technology for information, communication and social interaction all over the world, but looking back at the internet history this was not the actual intention of the inventors.

During the Cold War between the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the 1950’s both governments were competing in science and research to gain advantages over one another. When the USSR sent the first ever satellite called “Sputnik” into space in 1957 the US government immediately after founded the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) as a military research division of the Department of Defense (DoD). The ARPA supported scientific projects and technologies in institutes and universities to later use the results for military purposes. Back then computers already were integrated in research facilities but electronic data interchange (EDI) to simplify the scientific

information about different kinds of events can reach many people within hours. Similarly to these results, the Pew Research Center found out in a representative telephone survey in 2012 that every third US-American participant shares political content to encourage others to vote or act in any other political context. Another Pew study, carried out one year later, showed a strong correlation between political participation in social networks and participation offline. In addition to that, in the German Bitcom study (2013) one third of all participants stated they would have taken part in election campaigns on social networks and almost 40 per cent believed that social networks influence the outcome of elections. Only three of the German interviewees stated that political content on social networks has motivated them to participate in a political event while on the other hand six interviewees from Turkey took part in political events. Three of them mentioned having participated in the Gezi protests. This indicates the differences in the interviewees' urge for political participation.

Even though six German and also six Turkish interviewees said that political content on social networks can represent a danger listing arguments like manipulation, provocation, insults etc., neither of them believed that censoring social network would be a solution. German participants argued that it would be incompatible with the Basic Law that ensures freedom of opinion and that a censorship of social networks would only cause political communication to shift to another place whereas Turkish participants who already experienced censorship stated that it only shows the governments fear of public opinion.

7. Limitations and Conclusions

With the appearance of Web 2.0, citizens have become more and more actively engaged in political issues, more empowered considering the ubiquity of information and also more demanding to spread their opinions. At the same time, they have become more interested in the political views that other citizens express online. Therefore, they use social network accounts on behalf of the right to information and to express their appeals. Not only user-generated content on social networks but also technical features and the presence of politicians and parties that use official accounts for self-promotion and political campaigns can influence public opinion. The US-American presidential election in 2012 is a good example of how social media can influence and support political participation. Barack Obama's great success was based on his social media activity and serves as a model for international political campaigns. In addition to that, the Pew Research Center carried out various studies showing that many people perform political activities on social networks and also encourage others to do so. These results were also proven by the outcome of the interviews in Germany and Turkey. Moreover, the interviews confirm the fact that Germany and Turkey have different political and social structures. While the German participants mentioned the terms "freedom of opinion" and "democracy" several times, the Turkish participants, in contrast, explained that they are dependent on social networks to receive information that is covered by traditional media, whereby some of them repeatedly expressed their fear of possible consequences for posting political content. Considering different studies from Germany and the USA, it can be stated that in Western democracies, social networks are not mandatory for the expression of opinion and reception of information as they usually grant their citizens

legally protected freedom expression and press. Their citizens have the freedom to gather any information from different media to inform themselves about different kinds of political events, but still many use social networks to debate and to actively participate in political matters. For Turkey, considering the political situation, social media and the internet represent the main source of information.

Based on own observations, it can be said that Turkish Facebook users post much less political content and join less debates on political issues than German Facebook users which is confirmed by the interviews.

Furthermore, in the interviews no evidence neither for regional differences within a country nor age or educational degree related differences among the participants was found.

I believe that opinion making is a subconscious process and is similar for all people that use the internet. Still, the political or social situation influence the degree of which people are interested in these matters, that was also confirmed by the interviews.

These studies do not consider any cultural differences between the countries USA, Germany and Turkey that might also influence the formation of political opinion on social networks, as it would have exceeded the time frame. Yet, especially in Turkey cultural aspects should be subject of future studies. In fact, there are many research gaps in the field of opinion making on social networks and its impact on political participation. Partly because of this, it was hardly possible to compare own results with those of other studies for all factors in all three countries. Especially in Turkey, this area of study has not yet attracted the attention of researchers.

Furthermore, all mentioned factors that influence political opinions should be further examined in order of the weight of their impact to find out which factors dominate in the process of opinion making and political participation.

To facilitate a direct comparison between the interview results and the effect of social networks on public opinion in the USA, another qualitative survey in the USA needs to be conducted. Due to tight deadline restrictions, the USA could not be included into this study. Additionally, a bigger number of samples for the qualitative research can achieve more precise results considering regional, age-related, and degree-related impacts on political participation.

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