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New Media Control and Capital: Commercialization of Privacy and the Problem of Access

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Öz Abstract

It is widely accepted that Internet and new media sites weaken the traditional obstacles to freedom of expression and democratic participation. Internet is seen as a revolutionary and participatory progress in the sphere of communication. It is generally argued that online networks can be used for a variety of social and individual aims and that people may use online networks without revealing their privacy. The most common view is that people express themselves more freely and easily in Internet. However, not everybody has unlimited access to Internet and in terms of literacy, capability, speed, etc. there are significant inequalities

and differences among those who have access. Based on these discussions, the main questions sought answers in this article are: What are the main problems of new media in relation to online access and privacy? How can we understand the current forms of access and privacy, considering the dominant modes of surveillance and capital accumulation through new media? Based on the answers to these questions, can we consider new media as a real progress in the sphere of communication? This article evaluates the theoretical approaches to Internet and new media with a focus on the critical views about access and privacy.

Yeni Medya Denetimi ve Sermayesi: Gizliliğin Ticarileşmesi ve Erişim Sorunu*

İnternet ve yeni medya sitelerinin ifade özgürlüğü ve demokratik katılımın önündeki geleneksel engelleri zayıflattığı yaygın olarak kabul edilmektedir. İnternet, iletişim alanında devrimci ve katılımcı bir gelişme olarak görülmektedir. Genel olarak, çevrimiçi ağların çeşitli toplumsal ve bireysel amaçlar için kullanılabileceği ve insanların kendi gizliliklerini açığa vurmadan çevrimiçi ağları kullanabilecekleri düsünülmektedir. En yaygın görüş ise insanların İnternette kendilerini daha kolay ve özgür bir şekilde ifade ettikleridir. Bununla birlikte, herkesin İnternete sınırsız erişimi yoktur ve erişimi olanlar arasında okuryazarlık, kabiliyet, hız vs. açısından

önemli esitsizlikler ve farklılıklar bulunmaktadır. Bu tartışmalara dayalı olarak bu makalede şu sorulara cevap aranmaktadır: Çevrimiçi erişim ve gizlilik açısından yeni medyanın temel sorunları nelerdir? Egemen gözetim biçimlerini ve yeni medya vasıtasıyla sermaye birikimini dikkate alarak gizlilik ve erişimin mevcut biçimlerini nasıl anlayabiliriz? Bu sorulara verilen yanıtlara bağlı olarak yeni medyayı iletişim alanında gerçek bir ilerleme olarak görebilir miyiz? Bu makale, İnternete ve yeni medyaya kuramsal yaklaşımları gizlilik ve erişimle ilgili eleştirel görüşler üzerinde odaklanarak değerlendirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler Keywords

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Introduction

Can we consider new media as a real progress when we pay attention to access and privacy? There is no doubt that internet technologies in general and new media technologies in particular have transformed the conventional structure of communication. They not only indicate a revolutionary step in relation to face-to-face communication but also demonstrate a totally new phase of mediated communication in human history. How should we interpret this development in relation to the communication technologies, when we consider the issues of access and privacy? New media is seen as a progress since it is thought to contribute to democratic participation through the freedom of expression that new media platforms are believed to offer. In this sense new media platforms are viewed as creating a free environment in which people can easily express their thoughts at the same time protect their privacy. However, this view is very controversial since there are considerable inequalities in terms of having internet access and preserving personal privacy in the internet.

Above all, although subordinated people may use new media in order to express their problems, it is also an instrument of the powerful actors to consolidate their positions. Rather than representing the whole society, new media significantly contributes to the already existing power relations in society. Secondly, privacy is also a critical issue in terms of new media. People give personal information while they are joining new media platforms and after membership these new media platforms monitor users' actions. Personal information of users is also being used by advertisers. A critical approach to new media can reveal some of the basic problems connected to access and privacy. Although there is a widespread view that sees new media as a progress, this view is very problematic when we consider the commercial aims of the owners of new media sites and the surveillance of the activities of users of new media platforms.

Commercialization of Users and Control in New Media

The world wide web sites, which are called as new media are thought to have features that enable collaborative content creation, navigation, and user-generated content. Taking at face value, such features can be evaluated in favour of users. Indeed, the dominant perspective in the new media studies argues that the development of Internet technologies leads to a more democratic society through democratic participation of the users (Fuchs, 2013: 25-26). Based on such and similar reasonings, new media sites are seen as contributing to a more democratic society and the users of new media sites are considered as active participants, rather than passive recipients. In this way, one of the most prevailing perceptions about these platforms is that they have liberated people from the constraints of society over communication, that were dominant before the advent of Internet and new media platforms. But, against this dominant view there are quite a few theorists who argue that new media is creating new forms of social, economic and cultural dominations and inequalities in society. One of them is Zhou who suggests that "new media can be regarded as a form of capital because of their potentials in being transformed into other forms of capital, such as financial capital and social capital, upon their adoption and utilization" (Zhou, 2011: 136). We cannot understand new media in its own right as an independent entity. We should approach it by looking at its place within the whole society. This is because the techno-cultural developments are parts of the political and economic structure of the whole society in consideration.

Criticizing the dominant participatory approaches to Internet in general and new media sites in particular, Christian Fuchs maintains such a wholistic perspective. In this respect, Fuchs



appeals to Giles Deleuze's consideration about the character contemporary capitalism, especially Deleuze's view that in the present situation "humans increasingly discipline themselves without direct external control". Deleuze calls this new phase the "society of (self-) control". This control society includes a participatory strategy, promotion of the use of incentives and integration of play into labour. It requires that "work should be fun, workers should permanently develop new ideas, realize their creativity, enjoy free time within the factory, etc. The boundaries between work time and spare time, labour and play, become fuzzy... Working time and spare time become inseparable". Then Fuchs argues that "exploitation of users in Internet by corporate new media is an aspect of this transformation". In this situation it is play, entertainment, fun end joy motivates private Internet usage that is a way of the exploitation of labour. In this context, private Internet usage "produces surplus value for capital and is exploited by the latter so that Internet corporations accumulate profit. Play and labour are today indistinguishable" (Fuchs, 2013: 37-38). As a conclusion he asserts that "corporate new media are not a realm of user/prosumer participation, but a realm of Internet prosumer commodification and exploitation". In his view, although the alternatives are possible, the corporate domination will not be successfully resisted (Fuchs, 2013: 39). In this sense, non-commercial Internet platforms resisting the corporate domination are very limited both in numbers and in extent. Although there are some attempts to offer an alternative medium to the media domination of large capital owners, it does not really provide so much opportunity, because of the capitalist nature of the whole society. For example, Wikipedia is the only non-commercial platform among the global top 100 Internet platforms (Fuchs, 2013: 41). Another non-commercial and ad-free social networking sites project is Diaspora. This site project is trying to develop an alternative open source to Facebook. It is supported by donations, not based on advertising. In addition, the terms of use have been designed to make it easy for users to make changes in their own way (Fuchs, 2013: 42). Apart from this social networking site, there are very few no ad revenue and no profit-oriented platforms that give users the right to set rules. For example, even the Change. org site, which is based on signature aggregation on social issues, helps sponsors to earn money.

The owners of new media platforms aim at making profit over the use of these platforms. In this sense, to increase the number of users of these new media sites is their top priority. The time spent by and the activities of users in these platforms constitutes the source of profit for the corporations. In this sense, in Fuchs's terms, the users of these sites are productive "in terms of Marxian class theory" and "this means that they also produce surplus-value and are exploited by capital as for Marx productive labour is labour generating surplus". In this context, for example, in the sites like Google, Facebook, MySpace or YouTube the surplus value is significantly created by those users producing user-generated content, beside the paid employees. But users are not paid for producing this content. It is an important strategy of the corporations "to give free access to services and platforms, let them produce content, and to accumulate a large number of producers that is sold to... advertisers. The more users a platform has, the higher the advertising rates can be set". In this process, the users become an audience commodity sold to advertisers. So, there emerges a difference between the audience commodity in old media and on Internet; they are content producers in the latter but not so in the former. Because of this situation, in relation to Internet Fuchs concludes that "the audience commodity is a produser commodity". Then, Internet and new media sites indicate the complete "commodification of human creativity" rather than being democratic and participatory platforms (Fuchs, 2010a: 147-149).

Users of the new media sites are often referred to as 'hobbyists', 'amateurs', 'unpaid labourers' and 'volunteers' rather than professionals (Van Dijck, 2009: 49). This is because of



the fact that users, by joining a site, by spending time, and by their activities on a site, produces profit for corporations, but their production for the corporations is not discretionary, i.e. they do not realize this production willingly. They think that they are attempting to realize their own will. Then there is a contradiction here; the personal choice of the of the user does not indicate a personal benefit, but a benefit for the companies. The personalization of the advertisement on the internet expresses this contradictory situation. This situation indicates that technological capacity permit corporations to observe the personal details in the aim of increasing their profit. In Fuchs's view, this new situation signifies a difference between old media and Internet. Internet and new media sites contain more personalized content and advertisement in comparison with old media; on internet "the commodification of audience participation is easier to achieve than with other mass media" (Fuchs, 2010a: 149). Beside containing a contradiction between the benefits of users and corporations, personalization of advertisement shows the inventive aspect of capitalism in developing its productive forces. Therefore, "Many corporate new media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Weibo, Foursquare, LinkedIn or Pinterest, use targeted advertising as their capital accumulation model. In this model, all online activities on a specific platform and on connected platforms are stored, assessed and commodified" (Fuchs, 2014: 112). Therefore, it can be said that a platform should not be based on advertising in order not to become an extension of capitalism.

In the new media sites, users become commercialized in a variety of ways through being exposed to direct or indirect commercial activities. Here, two main forms of commercialization are the point of attention. The new media sites are rated according to the number of its users by the advertisers. In this way, mostly unacknowledged by the users, they are considered as commodities. When their number in general or their personal characteristics and dispositions are known by the advertisers, they become the direct target of the advertisement.

According to Fuchs, "Facebook prosumers are double objects of commodification. They are first commodified by corporate platform operators, who sell them to advertising clients, and this results, second, in an intensified exposure to commodity logic. They are permanently exposed to commodity propaganda presented by advertisements while they are online. Most online time is advertising time" (Fuchs, 2010b: 146). The main purpose of Facebook is to reach more users and make these users spend more time on these platforms. The purpose of many other new media applications is similar. Facebook is a model based on targeted advertising and it profits on this. Targeted ads carry certain products, so users receive these specific products (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013: 258). Facebook users are creating use-value for themselves and others and serve for the advertising industry. Users not only satisfy their own needs, but also the commercial needs of the advertisers. As a result, we see "the double character of Facebook's use-value: on the one hand, users produce use-values for themselves and others, they create a social relation between users and public visibility. On the other hand, users produce use-values for capital, i.e. targeted advertising space for the advertising industry.... users' own social needs and the commercial needs of advertisers" (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013: 260).

Also, another issue that needs to be considered is that digital capitalism brings the play together with labor. In the past, fun, sex, and so on were common in the leisure time of capitalism and were separate from labor [Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013: 264], but today these two concepts come together. People are working at the same time as they are having fun. Google's fun-themed offices also reveal this fact. People who spend time on new media platforms by having fun and socialize, actually work without payment for the big companies. In this sense, capitalism has become much easier to perform itself today. When people are enjoying themselves, they are actually becoming producers for the profit seeking organizations.



New Media and Inequality of Access and Privacy

Inequality of access and privacy is a result of the operation of capital and control in the current society. First, access is not only related to have Internet connection. On the one hand, a user can have a perfect Internet connection and but still may have a very limited access, only to those permitted on the Internet platform. For example, s/he does not have access to the owner of the platform, and s/he cannot see the owner as much as s/he wishes to see. But on the other hand, owner of a new media platform has access to the user, s/he can see as much as s/he wishes to see.

While critically discussing new media environments, it is essential to discuss the issue of access as it is regulated within the present society as a function of capital and control. Primarily, it can be emphasized that the current form of access is a result of the dominant form of the capital accumulation on the one hand and the form of control on the other hand. In this sense, the fact that there is no equal access to internet resources indicates the existing inequality in society, and it demonstrates that the structure which is based on class inequality still exists. Of course, access to the Internet is not only based on class inequality, but it constitutes an important part of the topic. "Access to the Internet reflects existing inequalities in society, even in developed nations, with key social and demographic factors affecting adoption patterns" (Haight et al, 2014: 507). And a study in Canada shows that the digital divide still exists and one of the main factors is education (Haight et al, 2014, 508). It seems to be a bare fact that not everyone has equal access to Internet. There are important inequalities between the countries and within the countries. Internet access shows significant inequalities between genders, between different age groups, and between different socio-economic groups.

In the 1990's, the studies which were associated with the digital divide were usually related to the presence of computers that people can connect Internet at home. However, today the digital divide is not only related to Internet access, but also to access to social networking sites and to the way these sites are used. In this sense, when it comes to digital access, both people's access to the Internet, their online activity levels and the use of social networking sites should be examined (Haight et al, 2014: 504).

Micheli's study is based on the economic aspects of the use of social networking sites. Micheli compared the use of social networking sites among low-income youth and high-income youth. He says that young people with different income levels have different uses. Social networking sites are like a coffee shop for people with high incomes, people exchange ideas and make business negotiations on these platforms. For low-income people, social network sites are like nightclubs, where they meet new people and have fun. The social background determines the use of social networking sites. For low-income teens, Facebook is a more attractive place for socializing with their peers (Micheli, 2016: 577). This study shows that there are inequalities in terms of access, among the same age people who have different income levels.

According to Sourbati, access to the Internet for people with disabilities is also a topic that should be taken into consideration. In his study Sourbati examined "the relationship between disability and social and technological infrastructural constraints on media access by looking into how Internet access of disabled people compares with Internet access by people without disabilities; how disabled people's Internet access relates to their access to the physical, digital, human and social resources required to develop media literacies; and how the attitudes of disabled non-users of the Internet compare with the attitudes of non-users without disability" (Sourbati, 2012: 577). And he finds that "people with disabilities are less likely to use the Internet and more likely to rely on government services and on welfare support compared to people



without disabilities" (Sourbati, 2012: 573). People with disabilities are subject to structural inequalities, such as depriving the necessary education, staying out of work life, or living in remote neighborhoods and they are also experiencing physical difficulties in accessing Internet (Sourbati, 2012: 577).

In addition, according to Sourbati, socio-economic and geographical factors, and the neighborhoods are a barrier not only for people with disabilities but also for all people (Sourbati, 2012: 579). In short, there are inequalities in access to the Internet and the use of the Internet in every part of the society. Age, physical obstacles, education, income level and many other factors are creating and maintaining these disparities.

We discussed new media platforms by considering advertisement industry, digital labour and access. However, another important issue that needs to be considered is privacy. In this sense the most important development is the decline of the division between public and private domains of life that was a characteristic of the society with old media and face-to-face communication. The technical capacities of new media give way to the possibility of restructuring public and private in completely new ways. These two domains have been merged, but at the end privacy have been reduced to a minimum. Now it is the commercialized control and obedience that defines privacy. This is a long debate, but here suffice it to say that information technologies in general and new media technologies in particular represent the new ways of inventing the details of private life for commercial purposes and for the purpose of controlling individuals. With the help of these technologies capitalist accumulation and obedience are realized in an automatic manner.

In the new media sites privacy and self-presentation are dependent on personal preferences as well as on the technical possibilities. Privacy is not static, rather it is a dynamic process through which users invent and apply new ways of relating his/herself with his/her intended audience. According to Georgalou, "as time passes and users become even more dexterous with new technologies, they will invent new, more innovative and witty ways to shield their privacy" (Georgalou, 2016: 60). It can be said that privacy will be an even more important issue for users in the future, because we can expect that in the future internet and new media technologies will develop in a level that will provide users more desirable privacy settings on the one hand, and make it for the companies more easy to gather personal and private information on the other hand. On the side of users such a technological advance is pleasurable since privacy is something to be decided personally, this is also true for self-presentation.

In this sense we can mention a study carried by Quinn who utilized a uses and gratification perspective to understand "how privacy concerns and privacy behaviors intersect with underlying social media uses" (Quinn, 2016: 81). In the study it is found that "privacy activities follow a logical pattern that mirror hierarchical levels of online activity". On the ground of this study, Quinn concludes that specific uses of new media are associated with certain concerns about privacy and indicates privacy behaviors (Quinn, 2016: 83).

It can be said that in new media users are inclined to consider privacy and self-presentation in a peculiar manner. Beside self-presentation, privacy is an inseparable part of personal identity. By deciding what is to be presented user at the same time decide what is to be private. In this sense Georgalou clarifies that "By valuing privacy, both personally and socially, users value their identity. Protecting their informational privacy is equal to asserting control over their self-presentation, that is, control of how they wish to present, stage and craft themselves; to whom they want to do so; to what extent, in which contexts and under which circumstances" (Georgalou, 2016: 59).



Privacy in new media is an issue that cannot be understood without considering the system of capitalist market. Privacy is an inseparable aspect of individualism predominant in the competitive market economy. In such an economic reality, "commodification of privacy" serves to maintain targeted advertising for profit accumulation (Allmer, 2013: 78). Therefore, commodification of communications and the accompanying forms of network capitalism determine the extent to which the new media "technology is absorbed into everyday contexts" (Chiristensen, 2016: 181). Also, capitalist market gives way to commercial surveillance as a part of data capitalism that involves the commoditization of user data (West, 2017). Moreover, it is argued that the emerging forms of surveillance leads to "a form of a soft sell, more specifically the soft sell that social media surveillance and the associated loss of privacy is inevitable. In other words, social media surveillance is a reality which cannot be avoided" (Schyff, Flowerday & Furnell, 2020).

In this context, for example, Facebook is central in the discussions which are related with consumer privacy because of its aggressive marketing and data collection practices (Montgomery, 2015: 771). In the last decade Facebook has benefited from some innovations in several areas such as e-commerce, applications, and marketing tools in order to maximize its profit. And the Company faced many oppositions concerning privacy issues which include boycotts and lawsuits. To sooth the oppositions, the founder of the company Mark Zuckerberg communicates with the users and promises that they will ensure the appropriate environment for privacy. However, the company has an unending struggle with users and policy makers because a new privacy issue emerges immediately. In all this it is seen that as the technological innovations offered new opportunities for the new media site, Facebook has constantly changed its privacy policies in favor of its use of personal data (Montgomery, 2015: 772-773). More specifically, in 2013 in a class action lawsuit, Facebook was accused of utilizing the information of young people by using their likes, check-ins and situations and turn them into advertisements. As a case result, Facebook paid several million dollar and announced a change to its "Statements of Right and Responsibilities" and "Data Use Policies". However, it did not stop "the practice of Sponsored stories" and it adopted a new language granting Facebook permission to gather private data of the users (Montgomery, 2015: 772).

In short, companies use and sell private information of the users in the new media sites. Most significantly, the data that companies are using and even selling consisted of the information necessary to give while joining most social networking sites. It is often realized in such a way; social networking sites often sell the personal data to advertisers, so that targeted ads are presented for the users. In other words, companies use the private data of their users, without informing users with a clearly understood language and without an absolute consent of the users given to them. The mind of the users is confused by the play with the word strategy of the owners of new media sites. So, the status of the user alternates between user and consumer.

Most significantly, young people and even children today are new media users who devote hours of their time to Internet and new media platforms. According to Montgomery, new ideas should be developed about preserving the privacy of young people's use of new media (Montgomery, 2015: 771). Of course, the issue of privacy should be considered much more carefully when the users are children or young, because the use of their private and personal data by other people or by the companies can have more undesirable consequences for them.



Conclusion

It is a widespread view among academic circles and ordinary people that Internet especially new media makes free. In this way, Internet and new media platforms are presumed to be some kinds of medium through which people can easily express their thoughts, come up with different views and way of life. Indeed, such a presumption is very controversial. Although we see a speedy development of technologies that allow for freedom of expression, to the same degree we see a rapid development of the surveillance technologies that affect freedom of expression in a negative way.

The surveillance and control over the freedom of expression and over privacy in the current Society constitutes the main reason why we cannot consider the current new media as a real progress. On the one hand, the online activities of the millions are observed and conditioned by corporate organizations owned by a few people, on the other hand the privacy of these few owners are protected. First and foremost, the corporative character of Internet and new media platforms is the main reason impeding free communication. The freedom in new media is appraised as freedom so long as there is a marginal benefit in it for the operation of the corporation. This is the way how freedom is instrumentalized and commodified. Moreover, this gives way to a kind of 'reality divide' for the users and owners. Corporations commodify the users and their time spent on and through them, even though users purport to spend that time for their own sake. For example, the new media user and the owner of the corporation assign different meanings and values to the 'same' reality of sharing a picture.

Within the current capitalist social setting, communicative access and privacy are regulated by the requirements of the capital accumulation and control. Even though individual users of new media have an access permitted for them by the owners of these media, the owners of such media have an incomparable and independent access. Online activities of new media users are observed by the corporations for making profit. In this context, privacy is utilised as a source of profit. Corporations aim at profit by invading the privacy of the user, though the user aims at realizing his/her free will. This indicates a contradiction in the nature of the present technologies of communication.

Because the prevailing new media sites have a tendency to approach the users as a source for profit, it is argued that an alternative to the commercial new media is needed. It is emphasised that there is a need for new media platforms by the people for the people. In this sense Fuchs properly states that "The contradictions of the corporate Internet can only be resolved in a framework of society that overcomes inequalities. An alternative Internet requires an alternative societal setting: a solidary, co-operative information society - a participatory democracy" (Fuchs, 2013: 42). Though the resolution of contradictions and overcoming of inequalities are significant hopes for the future society, there should be plausible ways of explications about how to achieve such a society.

Though new media increased the technical opportunities for communication through new media platforms, the current forms of access and privacy sustain the already established inequalities among the members of the society. So, in this context, online individual and his/ her freedom, activities, access and privacy are constructed, controlled, regulated, commodified and reproduced by the unacknowledged operations of capital and control. For a media to be considered as a real progress, it must give an end to such systemic manipulations over the communicative freedom individuals.



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