Hyperlinking: External Hyperlink Utilization of Turkish Political Parties' Websites[*]

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Özet

Bu çalışmada, 2007 Türkiye Genel Seçimleri ortamında Internet kullanımına bağlı olarak oluşan yeni siyasal davranış biçimlerinin sorgulanması hedeflenmektedir. Siyasi iletişim yapılarını çözümlemek için Link Ağları Analizi araştırma metodu olarak kullanılmaktadır. Bu genel çerçevede, Türk siyasal parti web sitelerinin dış link bağlantılarının incelenmesi temel araştırma alanı olarak belirlenmiştir. İkna süreçlerinde, link bağlantılarıyla ağ oluşturulmasının stratejik bir anlam ürettiği ve siyasal tutuma bağlı olarak ikna sürecinde bir iletişim tercihini gösterdiği varsayımından hareketle sorgulama gerçekleştiril-mektedir: Siyasi partilerin web sayfalarına hangi aktörler dahil ediliyor? Seçim kampanyası döneminde dış linkler aracılığıyla hangi politik ve sosyal özdeşleştirmeler parti web sitelerinde oluşturuluyor?

anahtar kelimeler: siyasal iletişim, internet, ağ, link analizi, siyasal parti

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Résumé

L'objectif de ce travail est d'étudier les nouvelles formes de comportement politique développées par Internet pendant les élections générales turques en 2007. L'analyse est basée sur l'étude des réseaux des hyperliens externes formées entre les sites Web des partis politiques. L'hyperlien externe est consideré dans cette étude comme une nouvelle stratégie pour structurer la communication politique. L'analyse des hyperliens, permets à éxaminer le caractère stratégique de la structure du Web. Autrement dit, ils permettent de créer des connections entre différents acteurs en exposant un choix stratégique, qui reflète le comportement politique pour créer le réseau. Les questions du travail sont : Quels types d'acteurs sont impliqués dans l'environnement des sites Web des partis politiques? Quelles associations politiques et sociales sont créées par ces sites Web pendant des périodes de campagne électorale?

mots-clés : *communication politique, Internet, reseau, analyse des hyperliens, parti politique*

Abstract

The purpose of this work is to study new forms of political behavior developed by the Internet over the persuasion process preceding the Turkish General Elections in 2007. The analysis is based on external hyperlink connections as indicated on the Turkish political parties' websites. This study defines an external link as a new strategy for structuring political communication. Through hyperlinks analysis, the study interrogates the strategic character of the Web structure. As a navigation element, the external link permits creating connections between different actors by exposing a strategic choice, which reflects a political behavior to create certain network connectivity. The questions in focus are: What types of actors are involved in the environment of a website? Which political and social associations are created on political parties' websites during campaign periods?

keywords: *political communication, Internet, network, hyperlink analyze, political party*

The Internet presents different opportunities for political communication. Unlike traditional media, on cyberspace there is no limit on communication and political parties are in complete control of their own sites organization. They can diffuse different types of information which is not restricted to political issues; they can communicate directly with citizens, and use interactive features as persuasive strategy. The basic element of this new communication channel is the *hyperlink*. On Web pages, a hyperlink can either be text, a graphic element, an icon, or a word in a file that, when clicked with the mouse, opens another file. By connecting different actor's websites, hyperlinks expose a specific sphere of information and communication. Hyperlinks are the navigation elements to inform and to lead the user. They permit to exchange information, develop cooperative relationships and delete the boundaries between organizations. Hyperlinks offer a new strategy for structuring bilateral communication. In this way, hyperlinks are not to be conceived "simply as a technological tool but as a newly emerging social and communicational channel" (Park & Thelwall, 2003). Especially for political actors, the technological capability to link with other specific Web sites or Web pages presents a new form of communication within the public sphere.

Ted Nelson used the concept of *hypertext* the first time in his book "Dream Machines" (1978) for describing the interconnectedness of ideas in types of links. Web studies since the mid-1990s accord a considerable part to hyperlinking practices with different questions: Jackson (1997) focuses on the associations created within a collection of information through links. Burbules and Callister (2000) presume that hyperlinks are more than a way of organizing information, they structure associative relations. Hine (2000) examines by an ethnographic approach, strategies of identity construction processes of websites producers as they are liaised through hyperlinks. Adamic and Adar (2001) suggest also, that links are more than associations between different information and they are capable to create some kind of social relationship between the producers of the links. Based on Jackson's (1997) approach, Park (2003) proposes a method of identifying structures of links which he calls "Hyperlink Network Analysis". Kleinberg (1999) questions the relationship between hyperlinks and the level of prestige or trust. Another remarkable study examines the credibility among websites and the desire to advance certain dimensions of credibility (Park, 2003). In his study, Halavais (2000) analyses the role of geographic borders in cyberspace using the hyperlink patterns of 4,000 websites. He analyzed their external hyperlinks, determining the total percentage of links from the sites to various countries and found that websites were most likely to link to another site in the same country.

There are also a limited number of studies, which have analyzed hyperlinks to explore the structure of political communication on the Internet. Foot and Schneider (2003) have analyzed linking practices of candidates' sites in the 2002 US Electoral Web sphere. They focused on the extent and

development of outgoing links from websites to other types of political sites, such as civic and advocacy groups, political parties, government agencies, and press organizations. Furthermore, they have examined the effect of the characteristics of candidates-party type, incumbency status, level of competitiveness, and office sought-on the deployment of linking practices. Another considerable study examines the communicative agendas of politicians, as represented by their out-linking practices in South Korea and the results of the survey are interpreted from the perspective of political communication values (Park & Thelwall, 2006). Rogers and Marres (2000) found distinctive linking styles among corporations, government bodies and non-government organizations. They advocate that hyperlinking among organizations is a sign of recognition and a way of involving other parties in the circle of debate on the Internet. Some others studies argue that hyperlinks don't necessarily mirror the positive relevance of sites involved, nor that the relationships among different players and political hyperlinks may be based upon hostile relations rather than cooperative alliances among website producers (Sunstein, 2001). Park, Thelwall, and Kluver (2005) suggest that hyperlinks help define political communities by demonstrating relational and/or issue affinity among South Korean political actors. In their recent research, Soon and Kluver (2007) focus on how political groups use the Internet to build communities, reproduce alliances in Cyberspace and notice the relationship forged by Singapore political websites through an analysis of their hyperlinking patterns.

The common point of all these studies is that they consider hyperlink connections created between different texts to provide a "meaning" for social and political research questions. As Garrido and Halavais (2003) state: "since establishing, a hyperlink is a conscious social act executed by the author of a website, we may assume some form of cognitive, social, or structural relation exists between the sites".

In electoral campaigns, we suppose that the political parties' websites lead the public by hyperlinking to types of websites, which authorize and argue relational and/or issue affinity and associated ideological characteristics. A link, therefore, is strategic. As Rogers and Marres (2000) observe, we presume that "to link is to recognize". This web-based orientation can symbolize political behavior. Strategic character of Web structure means that link utilization reflects a communicative choice. The possible variations for structure are shaped by ideological or persuasive ends, rather than technological means. The questions in focus are:

What types of actors are involved in the environment of a website?

How are political parties using the Web to connect with others groups?

Are some parties getting more prominent through their use of links?

Are hyperlinks focusing on information itself or on the creation of ideological associations?

To specify, this paper asks following question: How can we characterize existing hyperlink network relationships between Turkish political parties and the relevant institutions in their environment? The underlying idea is that external hyperlink networks exist between these various organizations and that they reflect some particular persuasive strategies. Which political and social associations are created on political parties' websites during electoral campaign periods?

Turkish political parties' communication practices on the Internet

The evaluation of political communication in Turkey was late in its adaptation of marketing techniques compared to European countries. The election of 1987 is considered to be the first election involving campaigns founded on professional strategies. In prior elections, the communication between political actors and the public sphere was interrupted or limited with the political interdiction. To provide a considerable example of this limitation, we can mention image interdiction on political posters between 1950 and 1977. As of today, the given multiplication of communication channels, the availability of new technologies and especially the Internet, promise some communication freedom in Turkey. Besides, the Internet as a less controlled channel compared to other media, still cannot provide total freedom of expression.

It is important to make an observation of the Internet use in Turkey in this particular political context. In contempt to the economic and social progress made in the last years, the process of political participation and mobilization assured by the Internet has not advanced in a similar scale as in European countries. The development of the Information Society in Turkey remains uneven. Turkish businesses have a high level of Internet use, motivated to a large degree by the desire to further increase their capacities. As a State policy, Government E-Services are promoted in the public to encourage utilization. However, compared with the European Union countries, the individual Internet usage is relatively low in Turkey, at 14% compared to 47% in the European Union. Furthermore, the difference in the number of households with Internet connections is even bigger, only 9% in Turkey. Also, Turkey has significant divides between urban (19%) and rural areas (6%), and between men (19%) and women (9%) using the Internet (OECD, 2007). Turkey's basic communication infrastructure is the telephone line network, reaching almost all 15 million households and providing potential access to the Internet via dial-up modem and DSL connections. However, this has not resulted in a high number of households with Internet access (9%). This is in part because Internet access costs – measured as Internet subscriptions as share of average monthly income – are considerably high.

The relatively low share of Internet access in Turkey represents a barrier to the take-up of the political use as well as the development of E-campaigns. On the other hand, Turkey was rather fast to adapt new technologies as strategic means of political persuasion. Turkey met with the Internet on April 12th, 1993 with the Ankara - Washington connection in the TR-NET project extent. The first websites of Turkish political parties date from the end of the 1990s and today all political parties are represented on the Internet. In July 2006, Turkey's public sector had 10,667 websites, 3,812 of which were belonging to the Central Government (OECD, 2007). This large number of websites makes it more difficult for users to find information and services. Turkey is currently building a national portal to help users find information and access services; the new portal will also include several E-Services.

Despite all presently given limitations, this new mode of political exchange represents various opportunities, in particular it represents a new form of expression for the Turkish political context. Especially in 2007's General Elections, for the first time, many of the political parties have campaigned over the Internet. In many ways limited in comparison to European Countries, Turkish parties have realized some creative strategies on the Internet, notably on www.youtube.com. (the People's Republican Party offered 4,000 videos, the Justice and Development Party 3,000 videos and the National Action Party 1,000 videos).

In 2007's General Elections, 14 political parties and a significant number of independent candidates have participated. Generally, the front pages of political parties' websites are linked to campaign promotional material, election content, biographical information, the party's organizational units, calendar/list of events, media interaction and E-Bulletins. Political parties use the new medium according to the traditional communication process, most commonly by putting TV Ads or speeches on their websites and referring to press articles. We can state that informative features dominate and interactive features are limited. Turkish political parties' websites are focused heavily on information. Schneider and Foot (2006) define and examine four practices in Web campaigning: informing, connecting, involving and mobilizing. This distinction supposes that informing practices invoke the classic transmission models of communication, in which a communicator or producer transmits a message to a receiver. Informing was the first campaign practice adapted on the Internet. In terms of Turkish political parties, the inadequacy of "involving" and "mobilizing" practices of the political parties' websites can be explained as part of the retard to combine technological features with the electoral campaign process. On the other hand, the Turkish political context still does not experience this type of web-based electoral campaign. Some parties use the connecting practices to create an online structure that serves as a bridge between the user of the site and a "third" political actor (Schneider&Foot, 2006). By connecting to another website, mostly to another political actor or social organization, press

organization or government agency, the campaign predicates the strategic use of its Web presence.

Methodology

The sample for this study contains external hyperlink connections, as indicated on Turkish political parties' websites. The present analysis is based on the July 22nd, 2007 General Election Campaign period. The political parties' candidate websites were examined during six weeks between June and July 2007. The official electoral campaign started on July 15th, 2007 and ended in the evening of July 21st, 2007. We were interested in examining the development of hyperlink connections over the pre-campaign and campaign periods. This approach allowed us to measure changes in the linking practices of political parties' websites during the electoral campaign. The survey concluded that the external hyperlink connections were not updated and exposed a static connection network. At the beginning of the study, our research question was: How does a political party represent the strategic use of linking in web-based communication? The update default discovered by the present research provides important indices for answering the question. We have to state clearly that this research is inapt to explain the evaluation of linking practices as persuasion strategies. As a result, our basic question is: How do political parties demonstrate symbolic representations of their alliances through their selection of hyperlinks? Otherwise, the data collected allowed only exposing the political actors and targeted groups or organizations. Therefore, in this research, we will examine questions such as: "Does a political party's website link to civic groups?" The quantitative approach demonstrates also statistically significant factors such as: "What kind of social or political group was mostly represented by the party?

A total of 14 political parties were represented in the Turkish General Election 2007, and their websites are: Justice and Development Party, www.akparti.org.tr; Republican People's Party, www.chp.org.tr; Nationalist Movement Party, www.mhp.org.tr; Democratic Party, www.dyp.org.tr; Enlightened Turkey Party, www.atp.org.tr; Independent Turkey Party, www.btp.org.tr; Labor Party, www.emep.org; Young Party, www.gencparti.org.tr; People's Ascent Party, www.hyp.org.tr; Worker's Party, www.ip.org.tr; Freedom and Solidarity Party, www.odp.org.tr; Liberal Democratic Party, www.ldp.org.tr; Felicity Party, www.sp.org.tr; Turkish Communist Party, www.tkp.org.tr. Independent candidates' web sites have not been analyzed in this study.

In this research, political parties' external link connections were categorized into nine broad types, which reflect ideological and persuasive indices of the electoral context in question: *Media Organizations*, were defined as all organizations, which produce and diffuse news and information such as TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, news agencies at national and local level;

Central Government, containing the state presidency, ministries, magistrates and Turkish embassies abroad; *Local Government*, were presented as municipalities' official sites; Public Services, is a general categorization which includes all non-profit public services. This category includes bureaucratic affairs, e.g. the General Directorate of Tax Accounts and different information services, e.g. the Turkish State Meteorological Service; *Private Companies*, were defined as profit organization, e.g. private banks; *Civic Groups*, were defined as national or local level non-profit organizations with political or social emphasis, e.g. Gallipoli veterans related sites or environment protection sites; *Military Organizations*, represents official sites of the Turkish Military Forces; *Research / Academic Organizations* include universities, libraries and research centers; *International Political / Social Organizations* contain transnational political and social organizations as well as economic unions, e.g. the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Finally, we have to be precise regarding the type distinction of this research. Hyperlinks may be divided into two general types: internal or external. An internal hyperlink leads the user to another document or another page within the same website. In this research we will focus only on external links to expose communication networks. The data collected for this research is founded exclusively on external links, which take the user to another website under the control of a different actor.

Analysis Results

There are 7 political parties' websites out of the 14 samples sites, which do not contain any external links (see Table 1). These websites include the Justice and Development Party, the Enlightened Turkey Party, the Independent Turkey Party, the Labor Party, the Worker's Party, the Felicity Party and the Turkish Communist Party.

Among these parties, the case of the Justice and Development Party is apart from the others. As the governing party since November 2002, the Justice and Development Party obtained a great victory by results in the 2007 election. The data collected shows that the party's website does not offer any external links. Ideologically defined as a party with Islamist roots, which claims a conservative democratic orientation, the Justice and Development Party preferred in their campaign strategy to link only to groups and organizations, which are under direct party control. The Justice and Development Party's website uses the highest number of internal link connections. In this controlled area, a wide range of party organizations and different campaign material replaced external links. We can presume that being the governing party provides the benefit of a large political and social organization network and offers a navigation system limited exclusively on self presentation and expression.

Soon and Kluver examined in their study the relationship forged by Singapore political website through hyperlink analysis and develop a remarkable approach for a similar case: They state that the People's Action Party (PAP) is linked only to the groups and organization, which are fully under the party's umbrella and jurisdiction. "It can thus be deduced that PAP does not forge any alliances with any other organization through hyperlinks to further reinforce its position or promote its agenda in cyberspace, because it is the ruling party which holds the majority seats in Parliament" (Soon & Kluver, 2007: 253)

Table 1: External links total number and their distribution in categories

22 July 2007 Turkish General Elections Participating Political Parties	External Hyperlink Connections	Variety of Categories
Justice and Development Party	0	0
Republican People's Party	113	4
Nationalist Movement Party	412	9
Democratic Party	546	8
Enlightened Turkey Party	0	0
Independent Turkey Party	0	0
Labor Party	0	0
Young Party	87	1
People's Ascent Party	495	5
Worker's Party	0	0
Freedom and Solidarity Party	3	2
Liberal Democratic Party	16	3
Felicity Party	0	0
Turkish Communist Party	0	0

Table 1 exposes that the website of the Democratic Party contains the highest number (546) of external hyperlink connections. As an exceptional case, this data does not expose a political behavior of the party, due to the fact that external hyperlinks are determined by suggestions of website visitors. The visitors of the Democratic Party's website reflect their personal interests by suggesting links or may even appear by themselves in the party's platform. In fact, the Democratic Party's website permits the visitor to create his/her own navigation map. The party composes a kind of forum for information sharing. Research shows that Internet user's satisfaction with navigation increases when a website offers a greater level of involvement (Kamali & Loker, 2002). As a result, we argue that the Democratic Party uses their external hyperlink network as an interactive platform to persuade. As Table 2 illustrates, private

companies and civic groups are largely represented in the Democratic Party's network connections compared to other political parties,

Table 2: Political parties' external links in categories

	Republican People's Party	Nationalist Movement Party	Democratic Party	Young Party	People's Ascent Party	Freedom and Solidarity Party	Liberal Democratic Party
Media Organizations	72	24	231	87	427	0	0
Central Governement	0	121	55	0	11	0	0
Local Governement	34	16	0	0	0	0	0
Public Services	0	103	38	0	20	0	0
Private Companies	0	15	75	0	0	0	0
Civic Groups	4	2	65	0	0	1	7
Military Organizations	0	13	11	0	0	0	0
Scholar-/ Academic Organizations	0	100	66	0	0	0	6
International Pol. & Soc. Organizations		18	5	0	2	2	3
TOTAL	**113**	**412**	**546**	**87**	**495**	**3**	**16**

In general, connections to media organizations were the most common type of external links utilization (see Table 2). About 50 percent of all political parties' websites linked externally to *Media Organization*, compared to about 2 percent linking to *International Political and Social Organizations*. This finding is further accentuating some parties' cases. The Republican People's Party website is linked by 63 percent to *Media Organizations*, compared to 2 percent links to *International Organizations*. This respective percentages are 42 percent compared to 1 percent for the Democratic Party and 86 percent compared to 0.4 percent for the People's Ascent Party. The Young Party, which limited their external links only to different media organization sites, constitutes an extreme case. The Young Party's website functions as a news agency based on media network connectivity.

In general, the next most preferred external links were those directed to *Central Government, Public Services* and *Scholar/ Academic Organizations*. As we can state in comparison with external linking to media organizations, connection with international organizations are limited. The Internet is often seen as an inherently international medium that may enhance informative and communicative exchange across national borders or even transnational

communication by constituting a transnational platform of exchange independently from nation states. As Halavais (2000) noted, geographic borders are a determinant indication in cyberspace for using hyperlink patterns. Turkish political parties prefer to stay in the national network connectivity. The given limitation of external links to international organization is mostly based on ideological associations, even organic liaison between the actors, e.g. the Freedom and Solidarity Party to the European Left website. Also, except the Democratic Party and Nationalist Movement Party, privates companies and military organization are not targeted by external links

We suggest distinguishing between informative associations and ideological associations in the analysis of Turkish political parties' external links utilization. In general, we found more information content than ideological affiliations in the political parties' websites. Therefore, we presume that as electoral persuasion, the parties propose their website as an information platform which is not restricted to political issues and includes different social and economic activities. Furthermore, we presume that as society continues to move into the information age, politicians are positioning their websites as a portals for the general public (Park& Thelwall a.l. 2005).

We observed also ideological associations with other organizations through hyperlinks in political parties' websites. The most significant illustration reveals the network through hyperlinks between the military organizations and two parties on the right side of the political spectrum, the Nationalist Movement Party and Democratic Party (see Table 2). In order to illustrate correctly, we have to clarify the particular political description of the *Military Organizations* in the Turkish political context. The Turkish military founded the modern Turkish Republic, and considers itself as the protector of the Republic and its secular principles. The Turkish military has been instrumental in the ouster of four civil governments since 1960. The military consistently ranks first in any public opinion poll of the most respected institutions in the country. We presume that the Nationalist Movement Party and Democratic Party websites contain hyperlinks to military organizations as representatives of Turkish nationalism. Besides military forces, privates companies are targeted also only from those two right tendency parties.

Another party which reflects ideological associations with targeted websites is the Republican People's Party. Perceived as the Kemalism ideology defender and a social democratic party, the party is linking externally with *Local Government* and *Civic Groups'* websites based on political objectives' similarity. The party is linking externally to 34 municipality websites, indicating the determination of choice by political identification. In fact, among the 9 broad categories defined for our research, external links to *Civic Groups* are merely used because of ideological similarity.

Conclusion

This analysis supports that national political culture is the determining factor in using technological tools. In Turkey, the relatively low share of Internet access is one of the major obstacles for the development of E-campaigns. Being present on Cyberspace, represents for most political parties a symbolic meaning which symbolizes modernity and progress. Furthermore, the most remarkable reason of this retard resist in the communication application between the public sphere and political actors in the past. The Turkish political culture has the tradition to expose unilateral communication under the official state ideology's survey and intervention. This analysis of Turkish political parties' external link utilization confirms this political communication culture. The majority of analyzed political parties utilizes a limited number of external link connections or doesn't use any external links at all. The parties prefer to stay in the controlled website context. The remaining parties using external links expose more information content than ideological or issue affiliations. The data collected reveals that Turkish political parties' websites create an informative communication channel through external hyperlinks. They don't expose sufficient data to state the existence of an explicit online network community.

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