People Power PR: Recasting Activists as Practitioners

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Abstract
This paper examines the use of public relations tactics by activists and protesters during the 2013 Gezi Park uprising in Turkey. During the Gezi Park occupation in Istanbul, the crackdown by Turkish police and the subsequent nationwide protests across Turkey, activists used public relations techniques to confront and critique the dominant power structure of the Turkish government under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The author traveled to Istanbul in August 2013 and conducted interviews with mainstream and alternative journalists covering the unrest, as well as protesters and academics involved in the Gezi Park occupation and the nationwide demonstrations. Combining firsthand interviews, observation and research, the author concludes that activists have employed key components of successful public relations campaigns – controlled media, uncontrolled media and events – to advance their cause and forge networks of communication that circumvent government control and undermine the authority of Prime Minister Erdoğan. This conclusion works from the premise of Holladay and Coombs that the history of public relations has been distorted by an emphasis on corporate methods and outcomes. Only when theorists recast activism from the fringes of public relations to its center can they begin to examine how communication strategies function when they are not focused on consumption and production. This paper is an attempt to take a step in that direction, using the 2013 Turkish uprising as an example of how technology and social media have created a means for activists to circumvent mainstream media and create and maintain a national movement.

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INTRODUCTION

It is only in the last 20 years that public relations researchers and theorists have begun to consider the role of activists as something other than obstacles to successful public relations campaigns. Writing on her study of grassroots activism in Victoria, Australia, Kristin Demetrious, Ph.D., and author of "Public Relations, Activism, and Social Change: Speaking Up," states that activist campaigns "show that new communication practices and approaches are emerging, seemingly undescribed in public relations literature." [1] Timothy Coombs and S.J. Holladay likewise point out in their co-authored book, "It's Not Just PR: Public Relations in Society," that, while public relations was recognized as a component of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, it was not until the 1990s that researchers recognized that activists were utilizing public relations tactics and not just threatening social and economic stability. [2]

BACKGROUND

The occupation of Gezi Park in the summer of 2013 began when a small group of environmental activists tried to preserve the park from plans, backed by the government, to turn the public space into a shopping mall and a replica of Ottoman barracks that occupied the site in the early 20th century. Activists initially used the Twitter hashtag #ayagakalk (stand up). [3] An initial festival in April 2013 attracted several thousand activists and resulted in no clashes between protesters and police. But the following month, a similar occupation of the park became a sensation after two images showing aggressive police response were posted to social media and YouTube and went viral. The first was an image of an unarmed woman in a red dress being tear-gassed by police. The second was a video of police burning tents and clearing Gezi Park during the night.

For Ayşe Gül Altınay, activist and professor of anthropology and gender studies at Sabancı University, Istanbul, confronting the size and the diversity of the crowds gathered at Taksim Square was, at first, somewhat astonishing. "Initially, on May 31, when I was out on the street, trying to come to the park in an act of solidarity against the police attacks against the people who were here trying to protect the trees. It was totally shocking to see all kinds of people," Altınay said. "That was the first question we all asked, 'How did people know about this. How did we all come together?' And it was the Twitter, really. Even people who had not been using Twitter very regularly before that, on that day, they became Twitter addicts." [4]

The hashtag #direngeziparki (resist Gezi Park) was adopted, and Turkish celebrities, musicians and activists began to call on their supporters and followers to come to Gezi Park and join the demonstration. The image of the Twitter logo, a blue bird, was altered, maintaining the original design components, but augmented with a gas mask. This became a prominent symbol for the resistance, often accompanying both #direngeziparki as well as #occupygezi hashtags stenciled as graffiti, silkscreened on T-shirts, and used as a graphic in social media posts. This image was infused with meaning when Erdoğan, realizing the significance of Twitter as a primary channel of communication for the protesters, referred to it as a "menace" and social media at large, "the worst menace to society." [5]

Police responded to the growing protest with massive force, sometimes shooting tear gas canisters directly at individuals, which resulted in major injuries and several deaths. On June 2, 2013, a date when CNN International showed images of police using brute force to disperse demonstrators in Gezi Park and hundreds of thousands of people in more than 40 Turkish cities continued to protest, CNN-Turk showed a documentary of penguins. This action became a symbol for many activists of the level of incompetence and general disconnect between the people and the mainstream media. Activists adopted the image of the penguin as a symbol of defiance, satirically recasting the penguin in a number of comic social media posts, pointing to the close ties between media owners and the Erdoğan government. Prime Minister Erdoğan labeled protesters as "çapulcular" (looters), a phrase that was co-opted by protesters, who created the term “çapulling” (looting) to describe their resistance, adopting a rhetoric of mimicry to undermine a label meant to dismiss their self-willed defiance as acts of deviance.

During the initial stages of the protest, widely different constituencies occupied the park and displayed banners denoting their party or affiliation. Realizing this display had the potential to cause strife between protesters, while providing ammunition to pro-government media who were trying to label the movement, protesters agreed to remove all banners. The one exception to this rule was the rainbow flag symbolizing gay, lesbian and bisexual equality. As the only exception to the restriction, the rainbow flag became a unique symbol for the resistance not only within Gezi Park but across Turkey, where rainbows were painted into public steps and on the sides of buildings as a symbol of solidarity with the protesters.

Protester Erdem Gündüz created another potent symbol of resistance when he stood and stared at the Turkish flags on the Ataturk Cultural Center in Istanbul for eight straight hours, beginning late Monday, June 17 until early Tuesday, June 18, 2013. Other protesters took up this “standing man” protest in Gezi Park and elsewhere across Turkey. Protesters also used Twitter and Facebook to boycott businesses that had failed to open their doors to protesters during the police crackdown, as well as boycotting media outlets that had largely ignored the attacks.

Outside of Turkey, in New York, a group of Turkish Americans who supported the protesters launched an online crowd-funding campaign, running from June 2-9, 2013, successfully raising over $108,000 to buy a full-page advertisement in the New York Times (published June 7, 2013), engaging their funders in helping to create the ad and voting upon what to do with surplus funds. The resulting advertisement advocated for an end to the police crackdown, the establishment of unbiased media coverage, an investigation in “the government’s abuse of power and loss of innocent lives.”

After the Gezi Park occupation was dispersed in June 2013 by a massive police response, activists continued to keep local residents up to date and engaged by holding regular public forums in parks and other public gathering spots across Istanbul and in other Turkish cities. The forums act as an open debate about the state of affairs in Turkey and featured speakers from different religions and backgrounds who share their perspective and concerns. The forum location and times are communicated and promoted via social media, including the establishment of dedicated Facebook pages. The Twitter hashtag “#direngezi” became a global

trending topic, solidifying international support for the Turkish protesters and activists.

As with the Occupy Movement, the Turkish resistance has maintained an appearance of transparency and inclusiveness that has contributed greatly to its popularity, despite mainstream media and government attempts to label protesters as extremists influenced by foreign elements. Although the occupation began primarily with the support and involvement of university students and environmental activists, it has spread to include people of all ages from different religious backgrounds, and members of traditionally oppositional political parties, and an assortment of supporters from varied socio-economic backgrounds. Testifying before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on European Affairs July 31, 2013, Boston University Social Anthropology Professor Jenny White said the protests' effect of bridging the gaps between different opposition groups in Turkey was its most important outcome. "It is the first time in Turkish history that such masses of people have come together without any ideological or party organization." [6]

Each death resulting from police attacks has been publicized using social media and public forums to create a martyrdom effect that continues to reinforce the message of the protesters and bolster their cause among a diverse demographic. At a public forum in Göztepe Park on Sept. 12, 2013 in Istanbul, I witnessed a gathering of more than 130 people of all ages, from families with children to the elderly. Park benches were rearranged in rows facing a makeshift stage area, which featured a banner, "Bağdat Caddessi Forumu," and two Turkish flags, one depicting Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Photos of dead protesters were displayed on the grass and illuminated by candles. Many of those arriving to take part in the night's debate started by walking past the memorial and "paying their respects." The evening's discussion was hosted by an M.C., who explained he'd been elected by the people in attendance during a previous forum. Several people stood and spoke, most standing near where they were seated.

Like the protests, the forums were live events, a form of public relations where people gather and exchange ideas. In addition, the forums featured several pieces of controlled media – printed materials, such as signage, to identify the function of the event, as well as to communicate essential information and intentionally politically persuasive messages. Sometimes forums were attended by members of the media, either as invited speakers or as observers / reporters. But different from the protests and other demonstrations, the forums' emphasis were on what J. E. Grunig defined as two-way symmetrical forms of communications in which the exchange of opinion and commentary could be contentious and controversial, but which relies on open and mutual two-way communication, focusing on mutual respect and understanding, rather than one-way persuasion messaging.

The M.C. at the Bağdat Caddesi forum, Ahmet Guvenc (a pseudonym), described the function of the forums and protocols employed, clearly in line with Grunig's characterization of the symmetrical model of PR. "First of all to create a discussion culture in a positive way, that's my priority actually," Guvenc said. "Because in our community in Turkey, sometimes we don't know how to discuss, then we don't respect others' ideas. …Actually, myself, I try to change this culture, listen to other's idea. Not necessarily accepting the other's idea, but tolerating and respecting ideas." [7]

At one outdoor concert and demonstration in the Kadikoy neighborhood of Istanbul, which I witnessed Sept. 15, 2013, the crowd carried life-sized photos on sticks depicting the faces of six protesters killed by police. On a building across the street, a former hotel under reconstruction, a large banner depicted all six protesters. Police, arriving by the busload, surrounded the area. The tension was palpable.

In March 2014, new protests erupted in 31 Turkish cities after a teenager injured in the protests of the previous summer died. The boy's story was widely circulated on social media and the framing of his circumstance added to the growing sense of injustice. Fifteen-year-old Berkin Elvan, it was reported in The New York Times, was struck in the head by a tear-gas canister while fetching bread for his family. [8]

RESULTS

The outcome of the public relations efforts tied to the Gezi Park protest has been multi-faceted and has international implications. Olympic organizers listed the protests as one reason Istanbul was not awarded the 2020 Summer Olympics. The widely publicized police crackdowns in 2013 and 2014 have been condemned by Western nations and human rights organizations. European Union foreign ministers postponed EU membership talks with Turkish officials and raised doubts about whether Turkey will be admitted as a new EU member.

Within Turkey, Prime Minister Erdoğan's plan to enact a new constitution based on a presidential system has taken a serious blow and many believe his administration is at a crisis point, especially after corruption charges in December 2013 against high-level officials and businessmen with close connections to the government. Turkey's tourism industry suffered significant declines in revenue and several countries, including the U.S., issued warnings for tourists considering travels to Turkey. On the fourth day of nationwide protests, June 3, 2013, Istanbul's stock exchange suffered its largest one-day loss in a decade, down 10.5 percent. [9]

ARGUMENT

The study of public relations efforts of Turkish protesters illustrates how activism can play a central role in a campaign that is structured not through the corporate frame of consumption and production, but through a moral framework whose purpose is to expose injustice and to expand human rights, not to maintain organizational sustainability and status quo or increase company profits. On this subject, Christopher Spicer, author of "Public Relations in a Democratic Society: Value and Values" writes that, "Public relations should ensure equal access to the process and equal participation in setting ground rules that ensure goodwill as witnessed in speaking and listening civilly. In essence, public relations should serve as the referee for the often contentious problem-solving conversations necessary for a democratic society to thrive." [10]

Whereas sociopolitical movements, such as the Gezi Park uprising, do not traditionally benefit from the work of a team of PR practitioners hired to manage communication efforts and the reputation of the organization, activists involved in a movement – to the extent they choose to participate – often serve as a make-shift brigade of DIY PR agents. Yet, due to a pervasive societal assumption that PR

professionals are disingenuous communicators who stand to profit from manipulating their publics, activists often reject the notion that their communications efforts fall under the rubric of public relations work. This has been especially true for Occupy Movements whose participants reject both corporate ethos and top-down governmental dictates in favor of a horizontal democratic structure where decisions are made collaboratively and individuals involved are reticent to speak for the group at large.

Todd Gitlin, writing in 2012 about the Occupy Wall Street movement, commented upon the organizational structure and communication efforts of activists: "The encampments were consistently unwilling to make the effort to coalesce around what would conventionally be called demands and programs," Gitlin said. "Instead, what they seemed to relish most was themselves: their community and esprit, their direct democracy, the joy of becoming transformed into a movement, a presence, a phenomenon that was known to strangers, and discovering with delight just how much energy they had liberated." [11]

During the initial days, the occupation of Gezi Park took on much of the same characteristics as the Occupy movement in the U.S., as activists formed an inclusive community. As Altınay recalled, "Living in Gezi, it was really kind of a Utopian state where everything was free. The food was free. People did all the tasks together, from cleaning to preparing food. There were libraries. There was free education for children and young people. And art programs for children. It was this wonderful site where people shared everything, and in this sharing that people came together with other people that they had feared the most or hated the most until that moment. It really changed everyone's attitude towards each other. And helped produce an incredibly transformative public space that was inclusive of all kinds of identifications and experiences and so on without any judgment." [12]

It is in this context of an open, equitable social structure that communication efforts are not experienced as exclusive to predetermined members of an organizational hierarchy. Communication and the flow of information becomes something in which everyone can participate. Demetrious argues that, "Only when we are 'disarticulated from productive forces' can we achieve a new version of communication." [13] Likewise, Derina Holtzhausen, author of "Public Relations as Activism: Postmodern Approaches to Theory and Practice," discusses the possibilities of the practice to "bring about a more just and egalitarian society." [14]

The communication strategies of the Turkish demonstrators incorporated key components of a successful public relations campaign. This is especially evident in their response to restrictive government decrees and police brutality toward demonstrators, events that escalated the nontraditional and traditional media attention and immediately increased the reach of movement's message as well as its constituency. However, whereas the traditional organizational PR approach champions the practitioners' attempts to stabilize, support, and/or reassert the established organizational hierarchy, especially within the dynamic of a PR crisis (where the organization may experience an "attack" of some kind), the activists' role in the sociopolitical movement is to subvert and destabilize their opposition while building consensus among their publics.

To accomplish this, protesters established their own networks to promote their campaign, especially through Facebook and Twitter. The fact that these outlets have become powerful is reinforced by repeated attempts by the Erdoğan government to block social media in Turkey, as well as ongoing monitoring by police of popular Twitter hashtags and Facebook sites as a way to respond to and anticipate nightly demonstrations and protests.

Media beyond the control of protesters was co-opted for their purposes. During the massive police response to the Gezi Park occupation in June 2013, one Twitter user posted an image showing what was on television on six of Turkey's primary stations and the message: "Right now the TV channels." None of the stations was covering the protests, a fact that was utilized, promoted and shared by protesters as further evidence of the mainstream media's failure and their ties to the dominant paradigm promoted and maintained by the Erdoğan government. During the Gezi crackdown, another protester Tweeted, "Seriously, CNN-Turk is airing a show on penguins." [15]

Protesters recognized and promoted the absurdity of this contrast between what was happening on mainstream media and what was happening on the streets of Turkish cities by broadcasting the "realities on the ground" via YouTube. Supporters around the world lived the raw moments of the Turkish protests and the police response through graphic videos and images that portrayed unarmed individuals standing up to battalion lines fully armored police protected by shields and wielding batons and military vehicles, known as "Tomas," that shot high-powered water canons at unarmed protesters. These images succeeded in portraying Turkish demonstrators as the victims of oppressive force and reinforced the validity of their cause.

The lack of an identifiable hierarchy and organizational structure made the protests more difficult to dismantle by the dominant power structure. Despite attempts to imprison protest organizers and silence journalists, the government response seems incapable of having any effect on the uprising other than fanning the flames. Erdoğan's own efforts to respond on Twitter have been ridiculed and his public dismissal of the protest's legitimacy has fueled increased solidarity and commitment by a growing disgruntled Turkish populous. (In an attempt to improve the government's image, Erdoğan reportedly recruited 6,000 people to tweet on behalf of the ruling AKP party.) [16]

Coombs and Holladay point out that activists have taken the lead in terms of adopting digital technology and utilizing new media to communicate and frame their message: "Activists consistently are early adopters of websites, discussion groups, and various social media channels to disseminate information, recruit members, mobilize supporters, and solicit donations." [17]

The use of social media as a communication tool, which began with the Occupy Movement and advanced and morphed into the Arab Spring, has come to a new level with the Turkish resistance. During the height of the police crackdown in Gezi Park, at least two million Tweets with hashtags related to the protest were posted during a 24-hour period. [18] Unlike similar uprisings, a majority of those Twitter feeds came from the demonstrations, rather than from international supporters. A study by two New York University graduate students found that 90 percent of geolocated tweets came from within Turkey and half of the tweets were from within Istanbul. In

contrast, the study notes that only 30 percent of people tweeting during the Egyptian revolution were located within the country. [19]

In March 2014, Turkey blocked the use of Twitter. A week later, the government blocked YouTube. According to the International Federation for Human Rights, more than 2,600 people were detained across Turkey in the wake of the police crackdown in Gezi Park. According to the International Federation of Human Rights, forty-eight of those detainees were arrested because of the Twitter messages they sent. [20]

Events supporting the Turkish protests have been largely organized and promoted using social media. The protester's cause has been publicized using creative forms of nonviolent public expression – such as the "standing man" protest, the proliferation of anti-government graffiti (often incorporating humor) and by painting stairways in rainbow colors, all examples of controlled media PR tactics that seek to co-opt government messages, and actions, that attempt to either discredit or halt their own.

Whether intentional or the outcome of the context of the communication efforts, activist groups, particularly those that fall under the umbrella of Occupy Movements, do not place formal restrictions on branding efforts among their participants. Nor do they dictate what messages should be shared or which social media platforms should be used. Furthermore, there isn't likely to be hard and fast rules set about the nature of demonstrating, or what can and cannot be said when engaging with traditional media. Yet, to an extent, there may develop a kind of casual agreement, or even a status quo as to what may or may not be acceptable and/or appropriate in order to advance the cause, such as the Gezi Park participants' agreement to discontinue carrying flags and displaying banners that would signify their allegiance to specific political parties or causes; yet, they made an exception for the rainbow flag as a symbol of unification. Also, participants informally adopted the penguin as a symbol of the disenfranchisement, and many co-opted the term "çapulcular" to undermine the government's power to shame and dismiss the protesters.

The strategic use of words, images, and events to communicate a message in order to engage, persuade and attract an audience is the primary objective of public relations professionals in paid settings. As a society, we've come to have expectations for public relations practices. We understand the PR materials themselves as signifiers of the organization producing it, based, in part, on the quality, cost, and, to an extent, the style of the productions of those materials. Publics are inclined to reject PR efforts that are insufficient, overdone, on in some other way inconsistent with the organization producing it. For example, nonprofits could risk jeopardizing their relationship with members who have a stake in how the budget is spent if their PR efforts are seen as too extravagant given the context. Likewise, an activists' constituency, particularly in a sociopolitical context, will be put off if the "branding" becomes too consistent, if the messaging is repetitive, if the voice is too unified, and if the leadership becomes exclusive and the symmetry of the exchange within the movement begins to shift.

CONCLUSION

The Gezi Park occupation and the subsequent nationwide movement were spurred by what Dozier and Lauzen call "irreconcilable differences" between activists intent on

having their voices heard and a government intent on silencing them. Dozier and Lauzen argue that PR methods cannot "adequately accommodate social movements because such movements simultaneously involve deep psychological issues (at the microlevel) that are acted out at the societal level (at the macrolevel)." [21] But by adopting the activists' perspective and applying PR techniques as part of a larger communication strategy, it is possible to analyze their methods without defaulting to an organizational framework, which Dozier and Lauzen rightly point out is inadequate to examine activist publics.

Profit-driven PR campaigns must be brand specific to compete in a marketplace of production and consumption. While a corporate message should be unified and concise, the activists' form of branding should be inclusive and broad. In the case of Gezi Park protesters, the activists have managed, primarily through social media, to keep their message and the spirit of their resistance unified. As long as protesters are perceived as maintaining a moral high ground and standing peacefully in the face of police aggression, both the movement and the international community will continue to side with the resistance. With activists, the message is less controlled, but the political context has the effect of focusing the message and unifying the movement.

The influence and impact of Turkish protests nationally and internationally has been based on public relations campaign that is both strategically reactive and proactive, communicating with a targeted local, regional and national demographic as well as reaching out to an international audience to draw attention to attacks on their democratic status as citizens, build consensus and form an active coalition of resistance. Protesters have utilized controlled media, generating and "publishing" their own campaign materials; uncontrolled media, utilizing traditional outlets (those not aligned with the government or its party, the AKP) to communicate their message though journalist gatekeepers; and events – protests, forums, performances and all forms or artistic expression in a manner consistent with traditional practices. While organizational PR traditionally operates within the dominant framework as a force to stabilize, activist PR often aims to destabilize an oppressive status quo. These examples illustrate a means of viewing public relations outside the traditional corporate framework and moves toward the re-imagining of the field suggested by Coombs and Holladay. [22]

By operating through social media channels, protesters were able to mock mainstream media coverage of their cause, communicate instantly with supporters and plan nearly spontaneous gatherings and demonstrations. Despite government and police attempts to detain and jail key activists, the nonhierarchical structure of the movement has made it nearly impossible to topple by removing the perceived "leaders." In fact, most government efforts in this regard have backfired, although a number of activists remain imprisoned.

The ability of Gezi Park protesters to promote their cause through social media and inspire international coverage of their movement has effectively broadcast and called attention to the instability of what had been one of the world's most stable Muslim countries. The protest that began as an effort by environmentalists to protect a neglected city park in Istanbul has, in response to each dictate and overt action of their government, evolved to into a grassroots PR campaign where each demonstrator and sympathizer serve as a conduit for spreading a narrative of injustice compelling

enough to break through the noise. Furthermore, the collective force of the demonstrators and movement sympathizers is powerful enough to circumvent those vehicles capable of delivering their message but politically ill-suited to do. As Author Elif Shafak pointed out in an editorial in The Guardian in March 2014: “While Turkey’s mainstream papers and TV channels are reluctant to give full coverage to these tragedies, the internet is awash with public anger. Via YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, Turkey’s young, urban population is increasingly voicing its discontent and frustration.” [23]

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