

Equality through the Internet? Communicating Digital Inequality and the Identity of Youth in Turkey

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Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the literature on the relationship between the internet and youth, going beyond the binary axis of the opportunities and threats. The authors question the homogeneity of youth. The authors challenge both the protectionist mainstream understanding, which prioritizes protecting young people from the dangers of the Internet, and the discourse of ‘cyber kids’ celebrating the excellence of a new generation in new media use. Using readings of an advertisement by Turkish mobile operator Turkcell by young people from different social classes, this research analyzes references to the Internet and inequality as well as multiple identities: Turkish, Kurdish, American, Westerner, or Easterner. The article reviews the suggestions in the literature contextually and suggests connections with issues of social justice.

Keywords: Digital inequality, youth, new media, internet, advertisement

Introduction

This article will discuss the relationship between the Internet and young people on the basis of inequality and identity, going beyond the binary axis of the opportunities and threats. Digital inequality in this research is not limited to physical access. Instead, it is considered in the socio-cultural and political contexts of class structure and related to use, skills, and meaning-making processes through the reception of a television advertisement by a Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) company, Turkcell. The advertisement shows two young women: Emine, who goes to Harran University¹, Turkey, and Emily, at Harvard University², USA. While Emine immediately accesses a video conference from the web, Emily must wait. The ad presents this contrast as if all the adverse conditions for Emine presented on the ad have changed. The ad ends with this slogan: ‘Emine has equalized the opportunities. Turkcell is far ahead. Now it is Turkey’s time. Come on, Emine!’ After the comparison, the ad suggests that fast, personal access to the Internet resolves inequalities within the market that have been experienced so far.

By reviewing the literature on new media and the digital divide, the article challenges mainstream discourses on the relationship between new media and youth. It explains why the concept of digital inequality is preferred over concepts of a digital divide or gap. The issues of Internet access, its use, and its meaning in daily lives are addressed by studying the findings from questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group interviews. The article analyses the reception of the Turkcell ad by young people from different classes and ethnicity and reviews the suggestions in the literature and suggests connections with issues of social justice. In parallel with the work of Panayiota Tsatsou (2011: 319–20), we consider digital inequality as part of a broader social inclusion in relation to citizenship. The findings of this research contribute to literature on new media and inequality, poverty and, cultural difference.

‘This generation is gorgeous!’: Beyond the Discourse of the Cyber Kids/Youth

Interestingly, alongside the discourse about new media being harmful for children, an opposing discourse has also developed recently in Turkey: it sees the new generation as a homogeneous entity of digital natives and considers the only problems the gap between the

¹Harran University is a young university which was established 20 years ago in the city of Urfa in the region of Southeastern Anatolia.

²Harvard University was established in 1636 in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the northeastern part of the USA.

generations in terms of information, use, and skills. It is no surprise to see these two contrasting discourses: the ‘protective conservative mentality’ (Author, 2008; Author, 2009) and the ‘gorgeous kids’ are embraced side by side by some journalists, politicians and researchers in Turkey. However, there are inequalities in accessing digital opportunities at the global level (Tondeur et al. 2010: 163). Instant messaging, joining social networks, and digital creativity are far from common globally (Holmes, 2011:1107). Even though the digital gap has started to narrow in developed countries in terms of physical access, this gap continues to exist and even widens in terms of digital skills and use (Van Dijk, 2006: 221). The use of communication technologies differs as a result of inequalities and, at the same time, strengthens existing inequalities. Jostein Gripsrud (2010: 12, 16) focuses on two forms of connection between class and new communication technologies. According to him, while class structures form the access to computer technology, computer technology contributes to deepen and reproduce the differences. Nevertheless, we agree with Gripsrud that this relationship between digital technology and social class has not been examined sufficiently from a critical perspective.

The Internet, Inequalities and Developments in Digital Divide Research

It is possible to trace the history of research on the digital divide starting from diffusion of innovations in the 1950s and the 1960s (Tsatsou, 2011: 321) and later to American theories and research on the ‘knowledge gap’ in the 1970s (Hüsing and Selhofer, 2002). According to Jung et al. (2001: 509), this early work, in general, is based on dichotomies such as haves/have nots and access/non access. Digital divide work was located in the social inclusion politics of the centre-left in the 1980s and 1990s (Selwyn, 2004: 341). As Castells argues, the information age does not have to be the age of increasing inequality, polarization, and social inclusion. However, for the moment, this inequality is the case (Castells, 1999: 403, cited in Selwyn, 2004: 342).

In the 2000s, more attention was devoted to the social, psychological, and cultural backgrounds. While the concept of access was broadened, the issues of use, applications, digital skills, and competencies arose. Access for specific purposes, motivational access, strategic skills, and use were examined (Van Dijk, 2006: 223–4, 228–9). Since technology is not used by all people to the same level (even among those who access it), the necessities of considering social context and the quality of technology use are underlined. Instead of

measuring the speed of connection to the internet, research began on what was being done on the Internet (Jung et al. 2001: 509). For example, it was revealed that young, upper-class users are more successful in accessing the information they seek on the Internet while others use more indirect ways to achieve access (Cho et. al. 2003, cited in Livingstone and Helsper, 2007: 674). The new concepts are developed to differentiate the scale and efficiency in use and skills (Wilhelm 2000: 73–76, cited in Jung et al. 2001: 512).

What do all these discussions in the last decade show us? Do they undermine and ignore the issue of inequality? Or, as Selwyn (2004: 394) states, “do they lead us to make a more elaborative analysis by inviting us to approach digital inequality from a broader perspective? After conceding that exclusion from digital opportunities does not end simply when users access technology and equipments (Norris, 2001, cited in Tsatsou, 2011: 321), can we see the complexity of the issue so that we do not celebrate projects such as one computer for one student? We argue that these discussions do not seek to deny the inequalities. On the contrary, the level and content of inequality has been investigated in a more sophisticated way. Those studies that include context and consider the issue as part of social inclusion can especially contribute to citizenship and deliberative democracy (Tsatsou, 2011: 319–20).

Research on digital inequality can benefit from the sociological work on social justice. The concept of social justice, we argue, can help us focus on the relationship between digital inequality and identity. According to Nancy Fraser (1995), justice can be achieved through both redistribution and recognition. For the former, reorganizing the division of labor, subjecting investments to democratic decision-making, or transforming other basic economic structures is necessary; for the latter, cultural or symbolic change which recognizes cultural diversity and transforms the existing patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication is a remedy. In the later article (2000) in which she reconsiders her model and names it as status model, Fraser underlines the increasing concerns over identity at the expense of redistribution and differentiates her model from identity politics, which is silent on economic inequality.

Interestingly, these issues are being discussed separately in media studies as well. The issues of ‘redistribution’ and ‘socio-economic justice’, in Fraser’s terms, have been the topics of critical political economy though the themes of inequality, access, ownership, and control.

The issues of ‘recognition’, ‘cultural or symbolic injustice’ and identity have been the topics of cultural studies through studies that reveal the representation and reception of racism and sexism. While it is possible to say that a divide has existed between these two, media studies and cultural studies, there have been also attempts to integrate them holistically, similar to Fraser’s attempt. Many scholars in media studies admit that access, ownership, control dynamics, policy, representation, and audience are all interlinked. We have learned from scholars in critical political economy in the last several decades that what matters is not only the economic but also social power relations; the interplay between economic and symbolic; and the connections among production, distribution, representation, and consumption (Golding and Murdock, 1991; Mosco, 1997).

Even though cultural studies has focused mostly on the polysemic nature of text and audience reception, it is possible to connect media meanings and reception with the larger contexts. Stuart Hall (1984), the leading theorist and researcher from the cultural studies tradition, continues to inspire research on unequal power relations. The typology he suggested enables readers to decode a text in three different ways. A reader occupies the dominant hegemonic position when decodes the text as was coded. In the negotiated position, another decoding position, a reader accepts the basic assumptions of the preferred meaning yet negotiates differently according to his/her own personal context and contradictions. An oppositional, counter-hegemonic reading is the one in which a reader realizes and challenges the dominant one. We will use this typology in the decoding of a TV ad in the following pages of this article as well.

Research: The Internet and Youth from Harran to Harvard

Research on the digital divide in Turkey is generally based on the evaluations of statistical data produced by official institutions (for example, Bostancı Ege, 2008; Küçükçınar et al., 2000; Öztürk, 2002, 2005; Sütçü and Akyazı, 2006), while a few studies investigate the relationship between some segments of the society such as youth and access and use of the information technologies (Aktuğlu and Eginli, 2006; Bilgel Aşıcıand Koçak Usluel, 2013; Binark and Sütçü, 2006; Önur, 2006, 2007).

The pioneering statistical work in this area has been the field work carried by the Turkish National Science Academy, TÜBİTAK in 1997 as a part of the TUENA project. This study

investigates the digital access and use by relying on the geographical and socio-economic parameters (TUBİTAK BİLTEN, 1999: 11-2). The second TUBİTAK study in 2000 is more encompassing and detailed since it includes both the conventional and new media access and use (TUBİTAK BİLTEN, 2001: 9-10). The age variable in this study existed only in the use of mobile phones. According to the study, more than half of the mobile telephone users are between 16-34 years old (TUBİTAK BİLTEN, 2001: 32). These findings have been confirmed by the Turkish State Statistics Institute's work in 2004 on the basis of computer and Internet use. The biggest group again is the group aged 16-24 in both men and women even though men access and use these technologies more than women (TÜİK, 2005). According to EU Kids Online Research Project (<http://eukidsonline.metu.edu.tr/>) in 2010, 40 % of children have their own computer, and 52% of children access the Internet at home and share with other family members (39 %) in Turkey, whereas in other European countries 94% of children have a home connection. TÜİK's research in 2013 expanded the group by including a group aged 6-15 (TÜİK, 2013). According to this research, 25% of children do not have access computer, 50% of them do not use the Internet and 75% do not have a mobile phone. There is no official statistical research focuses on the youth's use of the new technologies in detail although all the studies reveal that youth use these technologies the most.

Methodology

This research aims to interrogate how young people differing in terms of age, ethnicity, and class use the new media and how they make sense of the digital inequality differently. This research not only considers digital inequality as physical access but, beyond that, considers participants' use, skills, readings and meaning-making processes in relation to class, socio-cultural and political contexts. Thus, digital inequality is evaluated from a critical perspective by using both quantitative and qualitative data.

Research on the digital divide often uses quantitative techniques to show the big picture, but the data does not explain everyday life (Van Dijk 2006: 232). Agreeing with this statement, we decided to use interviews and focus groups, following up on small-scale, descriptive, open-ended questionnaires. These techniques are more suitable for work with young people since interviewing allows them to use their own words and views, as 'active subjects'(Darbyshire et al. 2005). The Turkish mobile operator Turkcell's television ad,

which was broadcast throughout 2012, was seen as important material to start and stimulate discussions with young people on the issues of new media and inequality. The questions on new media use and meanings in the television ad were raised with three separate groups of adolescents and young people who had watched it in Ankara from September 2012 to November 2012.

In total 102 young people were reached. Research techniques used were a small-scale questionnaire including open-ended questions along with individual and focus-groups interviews. The groups, all in Ankara, were chosen separately to understand the differences based mainly on age and class. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the analysis, they were translated into Turkish.

The first group comprises 39 undergraduate students around 20 years old from the Faculty of Communication, Ankara University, and third year. This is where the researchers work as well ('U' is used for university in the text).

The second group comprises 15 students aged around 15 and 16 years and in the 10th grade of a private school. The school's monthly fee is around US\$750, which is almost double the minimum monthly wage in Turkey. Therefore, this group covers upper-middle class and wealthier people ('P' is used for private in the text).

The third group comprises 48 students from grades 10 to 12 from different public high schools. The university students who were trained also conducted face-to-face individual interviews ('H' is used for them in the text).

Findings

Internet Access, Use, and Meaning in Everyday Life

This study draws a more optimistic picture than does the EU Kids Online Turkey Project <http://eukidsonline.metu.edu.tr/>, which includes data on 1018 children's computer ownership and Internet access. Yet, important differences still exist between public and private school students in terms of access. For example, while 11 public school students have no computer and seven of them share one with siblings and use Internet cafes, all private school students have computers and Internet connections, and all are Internet users. Private school students can use the Internet (mostly through their mobile phones) 1-3 hours every day.

Both the opportunities and threats (Livingstone et al., 2011) in using the digital media are seen in this research as well. However, the opportunities do not constitute a long list. Uses for school, general information, gaming, messaging, and e-mailing (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007: 676) are likewise listed in our research. The most frequently mentioned uses are communicating in the social media, researching for essays and homework and entertainment (watching film, gaming, listening to music, etc.). This finding is also consistent with the Istanbul Youth Research of 2006 (Nalçaoğlu, 2007).

If we follow Wellman et al. (2001), this research shows that adolescents and young people use the new media mainly as ‘network capital’ for belonging to groups and connecting emotionally with their friends. In parallel with earlier research in Turkey (such as Binark and BayraktutanSütçü, 2007), young people communicate with those they already know in cyberspace. Thus, as Zuckerman (2013) argues, the increase in our technological skills does not necessarily mean an increase in our human interaction. Similar to behaviour in off-line environments, we continue to interact with those who have similarities to us in the on-line environment.

Lacking among our research participants in their use of the Internet was participation in politics and volunteering activities, such as participation in on-line petitions. The fact that this finding is also consistent with earlier research carried out in Turkey (Binark and Bayraktutan-Sütçü, 2007) can be related to the limits of democratic participatory culture in Turkey.

The possible harms or threats of Internet use listed by the participants from all the groups are false information on the net, addictive use, and threats to privacy and personal information. It is very striking that the biggest common point was the necessity to limit time devoted to the Internet by families who saw it as an obstacle to homework, whether students attended public or private school or university. Wasting time was mentioned by users themselves as one of the main threats, and they offered reducing time spent as a solution. In a way, it sounded as if they were voicing their parents’ concerns.

In general, they heard about but did not know how to apply specific ways of protecting themselves on the Internet. More than half of the participants replied, ‘I do not know’ while some suggested reducing their time using the Internet as a way to protect themselves from

harm. Even those who mentioned that they knew ways to protect themselves listed general ideas instead of specific measures. This generality was valid for all the groups being interviewed.

The research certainly revealed the need to improve digital media literacy skills. As far as we can understand from the interviews, computer courses at school are very limited and students learn information about computers and the Internet from their peers instead.

The Internet is seen as a way of communicating and even a mode of existence by our participants. Connection speed is very important, which explains the positive response and dominant decoding to the ad that emphasizes speed, as we will see below. Zhou (2011: 134–5) mentions that new media are a part of economic capital (purchasing equipment), but also serve as cultural and symbolic capital (taste, skills, etc.). Use of new media functions as a status symbol. One participant expresses this idea very well: If you do not have a Facebook account, if you do not have an Internet connection, you almost do not exist in social life... It affects a person's psychology... Since we do not have an Internet connection at home, I cannot meet with my friends sufficiently. I cannot text them. My telephone being slow takes too much of my time. Our age is the age of speed. The faster you do things, the further ahead you are. The slower you do things, the more you are left behind. There are many people out there. It is important to pass them and move further on (H5).

Digital access, as this research reveals, almost means social existence today. These statements are similar to the findings of earlier studies that reveal the subjective dimension of poverty, the emotional and symbolic violence that youth in poverty experience (Aktaş-Yamanoğlu, 2010, Erdoğan, 2007). This issue has also been discussed theoretically by media studies researchers. Murdock, for example, writes that being 'off-line' means depriving someone of the right to participate in e-society (2002: 386–8).

Equalizing Conditions with the Internet? Reading a Television Ad and Reading Inequality

According to the television ad described above, the two girls, who were born at the same time – one at Harran in Turkey and the other at Harvard in the USA – grew up in completely different conditions of health and education. One was born at home while the other was born

at a hospital; one goes to school on foot along muddy roads while the other goes by car. While the American girl has fun with her friends in her spare time, the other works in the fields.



Figure 1: Birth (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZD3LbxOvj8>)



Figure 2: Going to elementary school (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZD3LbxOvj8>)



Figure 3: High school period (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZD3LbxOvj8>)

Then, Emine goes to Harran University while Emily goes to Harvard. While both start downloading a conference video, Emine is immediately able to open the document, while Emily keeps waiting.



Figure 4: University period and the Internet

The text of the ad which lasts 1 minute and 36 seconds, is as follows:

Emily from Harvard was born in a hospital.

Emine from Harran was born in her midwife grandmother's house.

Emily from Harvard went to school, 5 miles away, in her mother's jeep.

Emine from Harran, on the other hand, always walked to the school 5 kilometers away.

Accessing information from the Internet was like drinking water for Emily from Harvard in her high school years.

In contrast, Emine from Harran worked in the agricultural fields during summer vacation from high school and did not encounter the Internet at all.

Then, Emily entered Harvard University while Emine entered Harran University. One day, both of them pressed the same button to download a video of a conference on the Internet. Emine could download very fast while Emily kept waiting and waiting. Emine is faster than Emily in accessing worldwide information. Emine equalized the conditions. Emine is far ahead with Turkcell. Come on, Emine. Now is Turkey's time.

The advertisement assumes that Emine is a representative of Turkey while Emily is of the US. Thus, by ignoring the inequalities in each countries, the advertisement focuses on comparing the two countries. The polarization is also increased through the use of differing emotional music and visuals (see Appendix, Figures 1 to 4). The polarization 'against' Emine ends after Emine starts using her laptop and clicks on the conference visually. The advertisement shows Harran almost the same as Harvard: a crew shell is passing by on both university campuses. The inequalities, the advertisement suggests, are solved through fast Internet connection. The advertisement assumes that Emine is connected to the Internet with her own laptop and can understand the language of the conference. Through the character of Emine, the advertisement addresses Turkey and nationalist sentiments. Even though people are not born equal, the advertisement implies, they can be made equal through the magic of the market. Through comparing small town Harran in Turkey with the mighty Harvard in the USA, Turkcell seems to suggest that almost all the inequalities experienced were solved by the market through fast Internet access.

All participants watched this television advert and were interviewed to understand their meaning-making process. Hall's (1984) decoding positions (dominant, negotiated and oppositional), explained earlier, were used to categorize readings.

The common characteristic for all groups is that the dominant reading constitutes the reading of the majority. 60 participants made a dominant reading; 19 made a negotiated reading; five readings were neither dominant nor negotiated but descriptive; and only 22 were critical. This article focuses on dominant and critical readings. The differences in the readings derive mainly from social class. Ethnic differences also affected the readings, but the emphasis on Turkey was more prominent. Analyzing the reading types according to the groups shows that

the private school students decoded mainly from the dominant perspective while critical readings formed the majority among university students.

Dominant Reading as Binaries: ‘Easterner and Poor but Happy’

Dominant readings are seen as binaries such as Eastern versus Western or poor versus rich. The binary of Westerner but unhappy Emily versus Easterner but happy Emine is the one most repeated by the students at public schools and the university. The striking thing here is that, while public school students identify with Emine, the private school students identify with Emily:

Q: Who is Emine and who’s Emily here? Who is the one you identify with?

All: Emily (from the focus group meeting).

Some of them said that this view is the case since their school is a private one. While private school students identify with Emily and do not consider Emily’s life luxurious, poorer students do consider Emily’s life as one of luxury.

A person’s subjective perception of his or her status can be different from the objective situation (Zhou, 2011: 134–5). This was the case among our participants, who hold to a belief in optimism, upward mobility and promotion through hard work and individual struggle. Praise of poverty was common in our research. This phenomenon, according to Erdoğan (2007: 34, 51), is the binary of poor versus rich – attributing negative characteristics to the rich (in our research, Emily) while picturing the poor as fully equipped with moral and humanistic values and virtues. This common belief can also be seen as a weapon which makes people put up with material and immaterial hardships.

I think everything is ready for Emily in her life. Since she has not experienced any difficulties, she is not content. Emine, on the other hand achieved everything through her own efforts. She is happy since she succeeds completely through herself (H39). The girls’ futures are seen as similar in the dominant readings. Most public school students made a dominant reading of the advertisement text, which overcomes inequalities with the speed of the Internet. One said alike many others:

Where we were born and what kind of education we receive are not important. If a person wishes, she or he can reach any position. Even though Emine has not grown up in good conditions, they are almost at the same level. With Turkcell, Emine goes even further. I like

the advertisement. It is very good. It wants to tell us that conditions and opportunities are not important (H40).

Unstabilizing Equality with Identity: ‘Not all Turkey is like Harran’; ‘Not all the Southeast is the Same’

Before the students’ reading of the television advertisement, even the information about where Harvard and Harran are revealed differences in the students’ lives. Four university students and seven public school students thought that Harvard was in Europe while all private school students knew where Harvard was. Some private school students even listed other prestigious universities such as Columbia and let us know that they were informed about these. On the other hand, while all students at public schools and universities had heard of Harran University, the majority of private school students declared that it was the first time they had heard of both Harran and its university.

The even more striking thing here is that the children of families from the ‘Southeast’ (of Turkey) did not talk about their origin and even mentioned during the focus group interview that they felt disturbed about the way the ad represented the Southeast and Southeasterners. The differentiating factor in this group, which has a class structure in common, is ‘being a Southeasterner’. All students were tense while talking about this subject. The tension can partly be explained by the fact that there was an ongoing war and conflict in the region, and also by the hegemony of Turkishness for several decades. Even though the focus group moderator encouraged students to talk openly, they hesitated to admit they were from the Southeast and certainly to talk about Kurdishness.

Thus, this research tells us once more that even though the main reason for social exclusion is poverty, it is not the only reason. Social exclusion occurs not only due to a lack of social and political rights, but also due to a lack of cultural rights (Adaman and Keyder, 2006; Yentürk, 2008).

While many private school students made differentiating and othering comments about Southeasterners, the Southeasterners replied that the whole region is not like that and that many people there live better than those in Istanbul. Some students from the region, including the one who initially did not want to say that her family was from the Southeastern region,

reacted to these statements. Thus, cultural differences, and ethnicity specifically, are important factors that destabilize the dominant readings and similarities of the students in terms of class.

Some students seemed disturbed about the television ad, stating that it represented Turkey in such a negative way: If they ask someone who has no idea about Turkey to watch that, then there will be prejudice. In that case, then they might think badly about Turkey. This idea remains with them. It is hard to change after that (P6).

They can make a very good advertisement differently, I do not know, but for example they can show Reina night club in Istanbul. They can show entertainment places. Turkey has many good places to show (P5).

Here it is interesting that some students suggested luxurious night clubs in Istanbul as an ideal representation. They are too young to enter such places. Celebrities are shown in all their glamour on the main news bulletins everyday (Author, 2004), so students do not actually need to watch the special paparazzi programmes to know about these places.

Limits of Critical Position

Only 22 participants in a total of 102 made a critical reading. It should be mentioned that critical remarks occurred more in the conversations. Some changed their positions at the end of the interview and shifted to critical positions during or after the questions. The biggest common point in critical readings was developed as a result of projections of the possible different futures of Emine and Emily. While students identified Emily with a good life, Emine's inequalities would continue, according to critical readings.

The attempt to show both young women in a similar way (a canoe team is passing in both Harran and Harvard after Emine's use of the Internet) could be realized by featuring only two students. Only a few participants questioned these assumptions of the advertisement: Emine is connected to the Internet with her own laptop. Again, only two students questioned the realism of her having a laptop and using the Internet, understanding the language of an international conference.

Few participants mentioned the class inequalities and criticized the advertisement industry. While most of the critical readings were made by the university students, they occurred only among high school students who were more politicized and activist and whose families were also politically engaged. These students did not find the advertisement realistic. Interestingly, even those who gave critical readings emphasized that this ad downgraded Turkey. The emphasis on Turkey and Turkishness that was seen above could be seen even in the critical readings:

Turkcell downgraded its own country in order to praise itself (D45)

Question: Downgraded Turkey?

Yes.

Question: In what sense? How?

Turkey's situation is not that bad. Nor do all children abroad go to school in their mother's Jeep. Turkcell exaggerated in order to promote their campaign. While praising itself, the advertisement humiliates Turkey (H45).

Perhaps the main reason for the limited number of critical readings is this: The emphasis on 'us' as Turkey. As Füsün Üstel (2008: 455) argues very well, the dominant narrative of the organic nation (Muslim and Turkish) in the educational system in the last two decades should have influenced many people who are now between 15 and 35 years old. As she mentions, many students grow up with a perception of threats from internal and external enemies of the country and with the warning that they should be alert every moment against 'divisive and destructive elements'.

Conclusion and Suggestions

We often hear discourses celebrating adolescents and youth as cyber natives, emphasizing the differences in skills between generations. This construction seems more positive than the protective discourse, although both exist side by side in Turkey. However, this celebration hides the serious issue of the inequality experienced and makes producing policies to reduce inequality irrelevant. Also, it is impossible to talk about a homogenous generation. Our research shows that young people, differing in class, ethnicity and age, have different degrees of access to digital media and differing views on and perceptions of digital inequality. The participants saw themselves in the advertisement used in the research. The poor identified with Emine while others identified with Emily. The common point, though, has been the

emphasis on Turkey and Turkishness. Critical readings were limited to a great extent by nationalist sentiments. Ethnic differences were not expressed openly while these differences divided students in an otherwise similar situation. The study also revealed that the participants' digital media literacy skills are insufficient and should be improved. In fact, during the interviewing process, all participant students were informed about protection on the Internet. They were also given the text of the UN Convention on The Rights of Child. Thus, the study did not just treat them as research participants but also tried to empower them.

The findings of this research may contribute to literature not only on new media and inequality, but also on poverty and cultural identity. In fact, these topics should be considered together rather than taken as separate concerns of different disciplines or approaches, as our research shows. This research considers digital inequality broadly defined: young people's use, skills, readings, and meaning-making processes are considered in relation to class, socio-cultural, and political contexts. There are already some suggestions developed in the literature about lessening digital inequality, such as the need to develop public policy and digital media literacy programs. These will be reconsidered in the Turkish context here.

Some policy suggestions prioritize public policy over the market for better access and efficient use of the new media by citizens. However, this policy-making can take the shape of authoritarian state regulations in Turkey. Also, such policy regulation can be efficient only if it is taken as a part of broader social inclusion, as mentioned by Tsatsou (2011).

The second suggestion, developing digital media literacy programmes, is related to the first suggestion above. What does it mean to claim such a program as an essential human right and communication right (O'Neill, 2010: 323) in a country where citizenship rights are not institutionalized and internalized? What does making informed choices mean where freedom of expression is not fully guaranteed? The current media literacy programs run through the partnership of the National Education Ministry and the Radio and Television Authority have already been criticized for valuing the state and conservative values instead of citizenship (Author, 2007; Author, 2008). What is urgently needed is teaching children and young people that they and others have rights in cyberspace (O'Neill, 2010: 335–6). However, the general environment should also support this training about rights. The process should be non-didactic and creative and allow youth to create and distribute their productions. Currently, the

initiatives for disadvantaged youth are tending to increase worldwide (Livingstone et al., 2005: 308, Messenger Davies, 2010: 191), however insufficient they are.

In conclusion, our suggestion is to approach digital inequality as a matter of social justice. Access and efficient use of the Internet should be seen as the right of young people by reducing inequality and recognizing the diversity of the identities as the constitutive dimensions of ‘social justice’ (Fraser, 1995; Adaman and Keyder, 2006). In the meantime, the protectionist mentality that supports conservative values should be abandoned, as well as the celebratory discourse on technical skills. In fact, in the Turkish context, the opposite of what has been done so far should be the solution: young people should be free politically while being supported economically.

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