

NEW MEDIA, VISIBILITY & #OCCUPYGEZI

INTRODUCTION

This research looks at activists engagement with media technologies during the 2013 Gezi Park protest in Istanbul. The protests began after the government proposed to turn Gezi Park into a shopping mall and residential flats. Environmental activists gathered for a peaceful sit-in at the park but police used excessive force to evict them. Although the protest was initially censored by the mainstream media, on the ground real-time images showing police setting fire to the tents of protesters occupying Gezi Park were spread across social media and an increasing number of people joined the resistance. Many activists engaged with new media to document and disseminate digital material from the protests in Gezi Park across social networking sites, much of which was accompanied only by the text #OCCUPYGEZI to simultaneously digitally archive and reaffirm solidarity with the protesters. Research into the visual aspect of contemporary mediascapes is essential to understanding citizen media in the 21st century, in particular the ways in which mediated visibility has become a powerful strategic tool for political and social change. (Thompson, 2005) (Hjarvard, 2008)

AIM

Through drawing on the collective experiences of activists and academics who attended the Gezi Park protests, this research aims to contribute to the body of work concerning activist use of new media technologies and visual protest material.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out in Istanbul over a four week period in the summer of 2014, one year on from the Gezi protests. Upon arrival I met with two individual gatekeepers who had previously helped to arrange initial contact with activists. From there snowball sampling was used to obtain interviews with activists. Qualitative research methods were used to conduct interviews. Through this method the details of the individual's experience of *media practice* (Couldry, 2012) was not lost. Research was carried out by conducting 15 semi-structured qualitative interviews ranging from 40-90 minutes each with activists and academics. This is to allow for *flexibility* (Bryman, 2012) for the participant to discuss and frame their particular experience of the protests. Parallel to those interviews ethnographic observation of the activists and their on-going new media related practices was carried out. In total 12 hours of interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Following this, the data was analysed and key themes are identified.

MAP OF RESEARCH AREA & LOCATION OF GEZI PARK

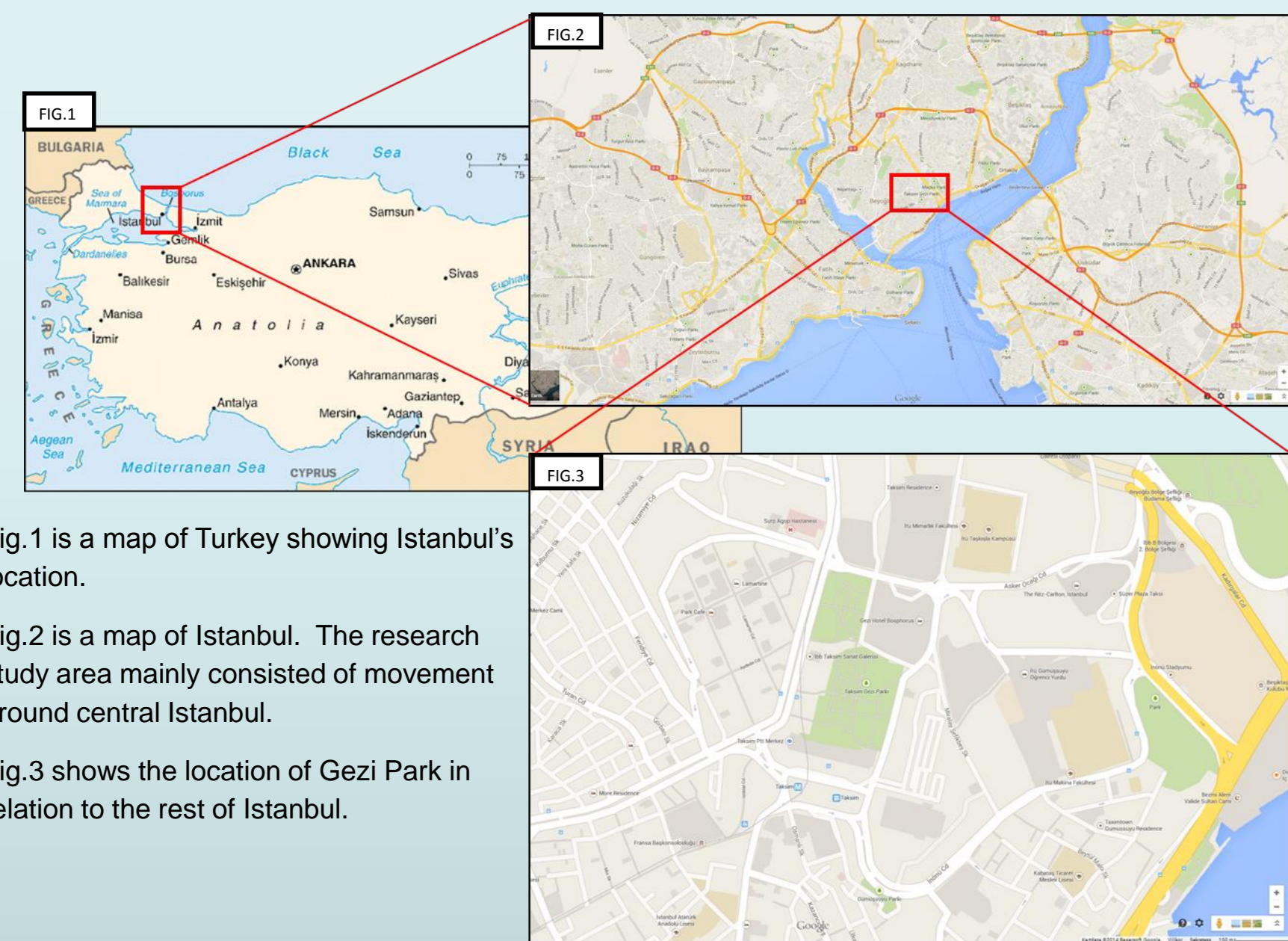


Fig. 1 is a map of Turkey showing Istanbul's location.

Fig. 2 is a map of Istanbul. The research study area mainly consisted of movement around central Istanbul.

Fig. 3 shows the location of Gezi Park in relation to the rest of Istanbul.

REFERENCES, FUNDING & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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 Hjarvard, S. (2008). The Mediatization of Society: A theory of media as social and cultural agents for change. Nordicom review, 106-112.
 Thompson, (2005). The New Visibility. Theory, Culture and Society, 31-51.
 *All quotes are from qualitative interviews conducted with participants during the research period.

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VISUALS, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND MOBILISATION

Graphic images of police violence towards the protesters were shared across activist's new feeds, many activist's claim that these images of police violence are what mobilised them to attend the protests.

"Another friend of mine he saw (an image on his Facebook newsfeed of) the man being hit by a water cannon and spinning in the air and he thought, I have to go out now, (on to the street) that's enough." Participant 5*

For many activists it was the *witnessing* of all the events online/offline that was really important especially in the absence of mainstream media coverage.

"People were re-tweeting, pictures, visuals, graffiti on the walls, but especially police violence because of the lack of coverage in the mainstream media they had to trust something. You know, the witnessing of all the events was really important." Participant 7*



EXCLUSION, SURVEILLANCE & PROSECUTION

"For the first time the political establishment of the government understood the value and significance of social media." Participant 11*

The technology of the camera phone is normalized and thus has become "invisibilised" in the context. Yet not all activists are comfortable with the mediatization of protests. Some activists were aware of the potential for images being used as evidence against activists in prosecutions. Activists claim their online accounts had been targeted, hacked into after sharing Gezi related content online.

"Everyone had phones, people we know, people we don't know, journalists, civil police – so he was kind of worried at some points, are our faces getting filmed by police? So it was a bit of a risky thing." Participant 3*

Activists are also aware of danger and set back of social media: misinformation in framing of images and exaggeration in accompanying slogans. Activists also talked of the digital manipulation of the pictures.

"Some of the graphic images were actually from Palestine. We had to use Google search and other services to verify images." Participant 5*



ACTIVIST COMMUNICATION/MAPPING & DOCUMENTATION

Activists compared their physical experience of the protests with what was being reflected in the mainstream media.

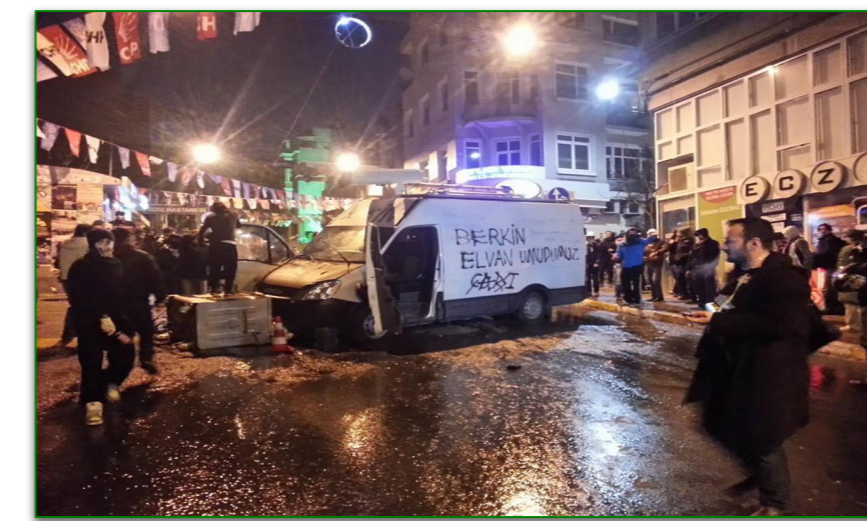
"Look we are on the street and there is nothing on the screen!" Participant 4

In response to this, mainstream media censorship activists began documenting the protests on social networking sites. Activists also uploaded images in real time, mapping locations using @ hyperlinks. These were to inform other activists of on the ground activity such as tear gas clouds, police swarm locations and activist barricades. (All photos below taken from research participant's Facebook page)

"Under national gas @Istiklal street"



"Making the Barricade @Taksim"



Activists become reliant upon online communication methods. In the case of jammer (governmental blocks on networks) loss of power. They are unable to communicate.

"They couldn't always reach us. We were (...) on Facebook calling for help, but when there was a jammer we were defenceless we couldn't defend ourselves." Participant 3*

CONCLUSION

From the analysis of the data, it is apparent that new media played a pivotal role in the Gezi resistance both for activist communication and for documenting what was being censored by mainstream media. The methodology allowed for the successful collection of data in difficult conditions. However the main challenges of this research were in time constraints and in accuracy of translation. Further research into the area would be most valuable in gaining a deeper understanding into the ever emerging uses and developments of new media technologies. This is especially relevant as activists become increasingly more technology literate and creative in their use of new media.

DIGITAL ARCHIVES

Activists turned to digital documentation when it became apparent that their physical practices and environments (park, workshop spaces, protest graffiti, blockade sculptures) were being destroyed/erased by the authorities.

"I saw that what I first wrote on the wall with spray, the day after, it was erased. I couldn't see my writings they were erased. So I thought I have to document these kind of things" Participant 7*

Activists create online digital archives as reference points so that their resistance is not forgotten. The online sphere allows activists to mark the resistance without (physical) space or place. Images from these archives are redeployed by activists to sustain consciousness of the resistance.

"We have a hashtag remind Gezi. Every time we feel hopeless (...) someone anonymous makes that hashtag remind Gezi, and everyone posts and re-shares." Participant 3*

"Images are melancholic nostalgia. But when the time comes they are all redeployed. I remember the anniversary and the amount of Gezi hash tags that appeared and images"



(All directly above images taken from participants digital archives)

Left is a graffiti of a penguin which became symbolic of the mainstream media censorship after CNN Turk aired a penguin documentary instead of showing the protests. The gas mask represents the widespread use of tear gas by police. Center is the iconic woman in the red dress. Right is a culture jam featuring the iconic Duran Adam (Standing Man) a performance protest.

DOCUMENTATION AND ACTIVIST IDENTITIES

Self-documentation was an important part of shaping activists identities. As their resistance developed visual protest material became part of their online identities on social networking sights. Activists used Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and others to upload self-documentation, partly to inform people what was happening on the ground but also to re-affirm their evolving online/offline activist identities.

"I think it was a historical moment, so to show their kids and their grandkids I was there, I think they sensed it, they had a hunch. This is the social media itch, everybody is trying to prove their existence." Participant 9*

Given the context of the protests and the government's attempts to police women's lifestyles, the presence and documentation of female protesters was important in symbolising their resistance.

"I think that the barricades, that is visual imagery for empowering people. (...) Maybe it's also an equalizing effect, I mean men always talk about their mandatory military service and girls do not have such a memory and now they have one. The photos they have taken are an interesting contribution to their self-making." Participant 10*

(Above: top of the page) is a self-portrait/Facebook profile picture by a research participant/activist entitled "Talcid man" this image became part of his online profile reflecting his newly formed activist identity as the iconic Talcid man. (Talcid- substance activists used to neutralise tear gas.)

VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION

As part of the research visual ethnographic documentation of on going activist practice was made. These two photos (right) were taken during the second week of research when I attended Gay Pride 2014. Many activists spoke of the importance of Gezi for the LGBT community in terms of increased visibility.

"Gezi made a big difference for the Gay community. I was at gay pride 3 years ago but it was small, there is 15 million in the city only 10,000 gathered but last year, after Gezi 100,000 people came (...) The gay community took part in Gezi, they were so brave, people were like "look at that transgender. WOW!" participant 6*

