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Myth or Fact? Echo Chambers in Online Political News Consumption

Mit Mi Yoksa Gerçek Mi? Çevrimiçi Siyasal Haber Tüketiminde Yankı Odaları

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Abstract: The dissemination of information through digital media has changed the process of being informed about current political events. Previous research evidence extends in two opposite directions: Digital platforms improve the functioning of democracy through amplifying of information sources while they may serve as echo chambers allowing people to easily seek out information complementing their opinions, thereby generating political polarization. This study integrating theories of selective exposure and uses and gratifications seeks to explore selective exposure in digital media and users' motivations to consume and share information reinforcing their views. The study was approved by the Beykent University Social and Human Sciences Etthics Committee decision dated 11.01.2021. A maximum variation sample of 20 politically interested individuals explored their political news consumption habits and motivations under conditions of selective exposure through 5 synchronous online focus groups in a 2-month period. The data was analysed utilizing a thematic approach. Two main themes emerged. (i) Selective exposure to political news and motivations: access to unbiased political information was identified as the main motivator of selective exposure. Guidance was found to be the key motivator to obtain political information. (ii) Online echo chambers: The vast array of political information sources may increase online polarization. Respondents' political news consumption behaviour and attitude towards people holding opposing views may demonstrate the existence of echo chambers along with political bullying.

Structured Abstract: Digital media providing a vast supply of information is considered to change the political information landscape and increase public awareness of the political system which is required for democratic citizenship. On the other hand, unlike mass media providing homogenous content, online media facilitating access to wide array of information allow people to select messages reinforcing their opinions thus may generate polarization. Therefore new communication technologies has shifted the focus of selective exposure which addresses the idea that people tend to select information complementing their ideas to online media. Previous research carried out to explore selective exposure online has revealed inconsistent findings; although some scholars asserted that digital media improve the functioning of democracy as it amplifies political information sources, some stress the threat of echo chambers which may emerge as a result of isolation from disagreeable information. This qualitative study integrating theories of selective exposure and uses and gratifications aims to investigate users' political information seeking behaviour and their motivations to selective exposure to political information as well as exploring the existence of online echo chambers. We conducted synchronous online focus groups to gather data as they allow in-depth discussion. The research was approved by the Beykent University Social and Human Sciences Etthics Committee decision dated 11.01.2021. We used web conferencing service, Blackboard Collaborate to conduct focus group discussions and provided each participant with a link to enter the online room. This research received ethics approval from the ethics committee of the researcher's university. A set of five 60-min focus groups were conducted in January and

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February 2021. There were 4 participants in each group selected through maximum variation sampling technique. Anyone who was 18 years older, consumed political news, and provided informed consent were allowed to participate in focus groups. We prepared a semi structured question sheet focusing on the key topics which are political news consumption and engagement in opinionated news online. The researcher moderated all discussions in Turkish and recorded them. In order to achieve consistency, a separate translation was conducted by a professional translator. We transcribed recorded interviews verbatim and looked for the themes emerged in sessions.

The participants' ages ranged from 19 and 59 years and the mean age of participants was 33.3 with a standard deviation of 12.09 years. Of the sample, 45% (n = 9) were male and 55% (n = 11) female. Most of the respondents had at least a high school education. Of the participants, 25% (n = 5) high school education, 40% (n = 8) had bachelor's degree and 35% (n = 7) had an advanced degree (master's and PhD). We explored political information seeking on both online and conventional media as conventional media are still significant and whether online or offline, political information consumption behaviour may lead to echo chambers online. The responses given for political information seeking behaviour led us to explore political sharing behaviour in detail. Therefore, we made a distinction between political news consumption and sharing as the former addresses a passive act of political involvement while the latter refers to a more active behaviour to provide continuance of echo chambers. Two major and four subthemes emerged during the analysis were presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus Group Themes

Main Themes	Sub-themes
<i>Selective Exposure to Political News and Motivations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political News Sharing • Media Bias • Information Explosion • Disinformation
<i>Online Echo Chambers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political Bullying • Political Polarization

The first research question addresses political information seeking behaviour online and offline. Nearly all participants reported that the digital media was the sole source of political information. For all participants, trust in the conventional media was particularly low. Twitter was reported to be the prominent platform to obtain political news and was followed by Instagram and Facebook. Many participants reported to use online news sites as well. The reported reasons to use Twitter for political information included: overall confidence in Twitter users, exposure to different political opinions and access alternative news.

The second research question addresses the reasons why they purposefully select political information reinforcing their views. Access to unbiased political information and guidance emerged as the main motivators of selective exposure. Some respondents also reported to use information sources supporting opposing views to verify their own political opinions. Most respondents felt that expansion of political content online did not lead to an increase in opinion diversity. Rather online media made political polarization visible. While they actively seek out political information for guidance, they select political information sources reinforcing their own opinions as they reported to find them more objective and trustworthy. Although not explicitly stated by many, they were observed to define objectivity within their own political view. Furthermore, some respondents reported that they select information supporting opposing views to verify their own. Respondents also expressed their concern on widespread mis/disinformation online and reported that disinformation made people blindly believe in anything. When compared with news consumption habits, a lesser amount participants spent on political information sharing. The main reason reported by participants for why they refrained from sharing or commenting on political posts was the avoidance of getting into argument. This indicated fear of sharing ideas which may lead to fear of isolation to set the spiral of silence into motion. However, there were still a few participants trying to break the spiral.

The third research question focuses the existence of online echo chambers and respondents had different opinions on the issue. Most participants reported to obtain political information from news sources holding different political views and nearly all participants stressed the negative effects of extreme political

polarization both in conventional media and online. Even all participants reported to rely on internet media as it offers multi-optional and less biased information, they tended to choose political information both in conventional media and online which is in accord with their existing political beliefs. Although respondents avoid reporting to be exposed one sided news coverage, the motivators reported very much reflected online forms of the political polarization in the country. Although online media may not cause extreme polarization, considering it as a reflection, the existence of echo chambers is not a myth either.

Keywords: Communication, echo chamber, political news consumption, online media, polarization

Öz: Dijital medyada bilginin yayılımı kişilerin güncel siyasal olaylara ilişkin bilgilenme sürecini değiştirmiştir. Yapılan araştırmalar iki karşıt doğrultuda sonuçlar ortaya çıkarmıştır: Dijital ortamlar bilgi kaynaklarını çoğullatırarak demokrasinin işleyişini olumlu yönde etkilemiş, kişilerin kendi görüşlerini destekleyen enformasyonu arama sürecini kolaylaştırırken, siyasal kutuplaşmayı ortaya çıkararak yankı odaları olarak da işlev görmelerine neden olabilmektedir. Seçici maruz kalma ve kullanımlar ve doyumlar teorilerini birleştiren bu çalışma, dijital medyada seçici maruz kalma ve internet kullanıcılarının görüşlerini destekleyen siyasal haber tüketimi davranışlarını ve motivasyonlarını ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın etik kurul onayı, Beykent Üniversitesi Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler için Yayın Etiği Kurulunun 11.01.2021 tarihli kararıyla alınmıştır. Siyasete ilgi duyan ve maksimum çeşitlilik örnekleme yöntemiyle belirlenen 20 kişi, iki aylık süre içinde gerçekleştirilen 5 çevrimiçi senkronize odak grupta seçici maruz kalma durumunda siyasal haber tüketim alışkanlıklarını ve motivasyonlarını tartışmışlardır. Elde edilen veriler, tematik analiz yöntemi ile incelenmiştir. Gerçekleştirilen analiz sonucunda iki temel tema ortaya çıkmıştır. (i) Siyasal haberlerde seçici maruz kalma ve motivasyonlar: tarafsız siyasal bilgiye erişimin, seçici maruz kalmaya motive eden temel unsur olduğu görülmüştür. Siyasal bilgilenme davranışını motive eden ana faktörün, rehberlik sağlama olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır. (ii) Çevrimiçi yankı odaları: siyasal bilgi kaynaklarının çoğulluğu politik kutuplaşmayı artıran bir etken olarak değerlendirilebilir. Araştırmaya katılanların siyasal haber tüketim davranışları ve karşıt düşünceye sahip olan diğerlerine ilişkin tutumları, çevrimiçi mecralarda siyasal zorbalıkla birlikte yankı odalarının varlığına işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İletişim, yankı odası, siyasal haber tüketimi, çevrimiçi medya, kutuplaşma

Introduction

Being politically informed is considered an essential aspect of political participation and democratic citizenship. Digital media providing a vast supply of information have changed the political information landscape and increased public knowledge and awareness of the political system. Access to a wider and more diverse information sources online is assumed to ensure less biased and better-informed individuals. However, some scholars stress the threat of online echo chambers. Individuals may be selective in the information they obtain and digital media allow individuals to easily seek out information reinforcing their opinions. In the pre-internet era, people were mainly dependent on mainstream media through which political information reached individuals after gatekeeping process and people were exposed to more homogenous content. However, digital media allowing users to reach increasingly polarized news sources and isolation from disagreeable information may give rise to political polarization.

Recent research has increased debates about whether digital media has led to political polarization as it facilitates access to a wide array of information sources reinforcing one's political opinion. political information sources. This research therefore aims to contribute to the literature on echo chamber thesis through integrating theories of selective exposure and uses and gratifications rather than the impact of digital media on increasing polarization and it will be of importance to scholars of communication studies as it provides a qualitative approach. The first section of the article defines the concept of selective exposure to reframe echo chambers online through providing the results of recent research as well as some critiques launched against digital platforms. The second section identifies the research methodology. We conducted a qualitative research in which we gathered data through synchronous online focus groups with politically interested individuals. The

third section reports the results under two main themes and is followed by discussion and conclusions section.

Literature Review

Selective exposure, the idea that individuals purposefully select information complementing their beliefs found theoretical grounding in cognitive dissonance theory developed by Leon Festinger. Cognitive dissonance refers to some sort of psychological discomfort which occurs when people hold behaviours contradicting their beliefs. In order to eliminate this easiness, people try to reduce the dissonance or avoid situations and information increasing dissonance (1957, pp. 1-3). Selective exposure therefore relies on a dual process: When people seek information which are in accord with their attitudes and behaviours, they decrease the dissonance and increase the proportion of consonant material (Bardin, Vidal, Facca, Dumas, & Perrisol, 2018, p. 1) Over the years, selective exposure mainly focused on media and communication has brought in theoretical extensions. Pioneering survey-based research in election campaigns revealed a correlation between partisans' attitudes and selective exposure to information they agree in advance (Lazarsfeld, et.al., 1948; Schramm & Carter, 1959; Stempel, 1961). Selective exposure put a limitation on theorizing about powerful media effects in mass communication research as cited in (Sears & Freedman, 1967, p. 196) Klapper explains, "people tend to expose themselves to those mass communications which are in accord with their existing attitudes." Rather than attitude formation, media reinforce audience attitudes. However, not all early research supported the hypothesis that attitudes are the sole motivation for selective exposure (Feather, 1962; Sears & Freedman, 1967). Inconsistent findings among early studies on the notion of selective exposure identified some methodological issues such as experimental settings inspiring less selectivity (Cotton, 1985, p. 18). It would be difficult review extensive literature on selective exposure in the field of mass communication so we decided to include the findings of some studies within online media as selective exposure theory has driven renewed research attention with the advent of digital media.

Prior to the advent of the internet, people were depended on mainstream media. They were exposed to homogeneous content giving balanced attention to political parties. Given digital media's importance in ample means of political information, news sources have been getting increasingly polarized. Although it was difficult for people to access overtly partisan sources of information in the past, today people can easily seek out information which is consistent with their beliefs (Bennet & Iyengar, 2008, s. 717-720) It is therefore Sabbah suggested that as cited in (Castells, 2008, p. 454) new media should not be considered mass media as online media offer the audience to select its messages and information sources thus increasing segmentation. These online digital platforms once regarded a boon to democracy, have been started to be considered leading to echo chambers and filter bubbles (Sunstein, 2001; Pariser, 2011) which empower individuals to avoid politics and causing them to have less information concerning political system and less likely to vote-all are considered threats to democracy (Dubois & Blank, 2018) Isolation from disagreeable information, thereby generates political polarization. According to Sunstein (1999, pp. 22-23) there has been a growing concern among researchers regarding online media where people interact with like-minded others. This may result in increased extremism. Additionally, polarization is intensified as digital media enable anonymous communication and highlight group membership. The growth of digital media has shifted the research focus of selective exposure mainly addressing individuals' political information seeking behaviour to online media offering multi-optional news sources. In a study exploring how individuals expose to information during political campaigns, researchers distributed a multimedia CD providing extensive information about two candidates and measured their exposure to information. The results revealed that people preferred to access information related to the candidates or issues they are concerned about (Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008, p. 195) Another study investigating selective exposure online foreign news consumption during the conflict with Iraq, US citizens were likely seek information which was consistent with their attitudes toward

the war. People who were opposed to the Bush administration tended to obtain information through foreign news sources (Best et.al., 2005, p. 62) which demonstrates opinion-reinforcing information is a more important predictor on selective exposure (Garrett, 2009, p. 275)

Recent research appears to be divided concerning whether online environments cause extreme polarization or not as a considerable number of studies has proposed that online media prompt most people to expose to different views, thereby not causing echo chambers. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2016 (Duggan & Smith) Facebook and Twitter users report that they follow a wide variety of users with differing political opinions and are exposed to considerable amount of political information from people holding different political views. A remarkable proportion of users do not attach importance to political views of others in their networks. Another study investigating web-browsing histories for 50,000 US-based users who regularly read online news found that although users tend to prefer polarised information sources, there is evidence of exposure to a variety of news sources they are exposed to a variety of news sources from their less preferred side of the political tendency, refuting claims of online echo chambers (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016, p. 298) Furthermore polarization can occur within groups least likely to use online media (Boxell et.al., 2017, p. 3) The results, have indicated however that, digital media would cause extreme polarization seems to be exaggerated although containing an element of truth.

Based on previous literature discussed above, we formulated following research questions:

RQ1: How do people seek political information online and offline?

RQ2: What motivations do respondents report on selective exposure to political information?

RQ3: Do online echo chambers exist in online political news consumption?

Research Methodology

Design

This is a qualitative exploratory study, to gain an in-depth understanding of political news consumption and selective exposure behaviour of individuals consuming political news offline and online. The study also aimed to explore users' motivations to consume political information reinforcing their opinions through integrating theories of selective exposure and uses and gratifications, addressing an approach to understand people's media use (Katz et. al., 1973) In order to collect data, we utilized synchronous online focus groups. This methodology was chosen for the study as they allow in-depth discussion which allows "discovering unanticipated findings and exploring hidden meanings" (Schutt, 2012, p. 310) "through group interaction on a topic...locating the interaction...as the source of the data." (Morgan, 1996, p. 130) So, the data gathered can present a wider range of opinions to address our research questions than gathered through quantitative methods. New communication technologies have led to changes in research techniques. Focus groups which are held face to face can also be carried out online through digital platforms. Online focus groups can be held in synchronous or asynchronous formats. Traditional face-to-face focus groups are conducted synchronously as the respondents interact in real time unlike asynchronous ones which do not require respondents to be online at the same time thus allowing them to participate at their leisure (Morgan & Lobe, 2011, pp. 201-202). We chose to conduct focus group sessions synchronously with an appropriate online platform as it offers flexibility for location of participants. Besides, we had to because of social distancing measures. We used web conferencing service, Blackboard Collaborate and provided participants with a link to enter the online room. This research received ethics approval from the ethics committee of the researcher's university.

Study Sample

Quantitative research aims to generalize findings to populations they focus on so they try to obtain large and representative samples. However, qualitative researchers whose goal is to gain insights within a specific group, focus on their data and the sample they directly study (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, pp. 106-107). Considering the number of focus groups needed to be conducted for a study, the numbers in existing literature range from two to more than forty per study although they have not proved any empirical evidence and many have addressed “theoretical saturation” as the main strategy to determine the sample size of a qualitative study (Guest et. al., 2016, pp. 2). The sample size of this study had to be relatively small as many participants refused to administer upon being informed about the discussion topic and session recording although they were also informed about the maintenance of data confidentiality. As the aim of this study was to reach a depth understanding rather than making generalization, we conducted a set of five 60-min focus groups each consisting of homogeneous 4 participants (n=20) in January and February 2021. We also limited the number of each group to 4 respondents to equalize the opportunity to speak and keep them engaged throughout the discussion. We selected focus group participants through maximum variation sampling which is one of the purposive sampling techniques based on study purpose. Anyone who is 18 years older and consumes political news at least one hour per day representing a range of gender, age and educational background and provide informed consent were allowed to participate in focus groups.

Procedure

We developed a semi structured question sheet containing a series of structured questions addressing the key topics and corresponding follow-up questions. However, as our aim is to explore the issues considered important by the respondents, we tried to ensure an environment where participants were allowed to express themselves freely. The two main topics in the outline were, political news consumption and engagement in opinionated news online. To provide consistency, we used the same topic guide in each group and all interviews were moderated in Turkish by the researcher. The researcher asked participants to sign in at least ten minutes earlier to be able to detect potential technical problems. Each session began with the researcher providing information about the purpose and procedure of the study, and the consent of the participants was obtained as the researcher read the agreement and asked each participant whether they agree or not and recorded their verbal responses. All focus discussions were recorded and participants were clearly explained the researcher was recording to transcribe interviews. Focus groups were generally held in the evenings due to interviewees’ availability. The researcher contacted respondents several times previously to organise the schedule and check the technical needs. However, some groups still suffered from internet connection problems. Prior to main investigation, we conducted a pilot study to check the understandability of the questions as well as refining the procedure.

Analysis

We conducted focus group sessions in Turkish which is respondents’ native language but we had also a separate translation by a professional translator to allow for consistency. We transcribed recorded interviews verbatim and looked for the themes arising across focus group sessions.

Results

Sample Characteristics

We conducted 5 focus group sessions with 4 participants in January and February, 2021. The interviewees ranged in age from 19 and 59 years and the mean age of participants was 33.3 with a standard deviation of 12.09 years. Of the sample, 45% (n = 9) were male and 55% (n = 11) female. Most of the interviewees had at least a high school education. Of the participants, 25% (n = 5) high school education, 40% (n = 8) had bachelor’s degree and 35% (n = 7) had an advanced degree

(master's and PhD). There were not any statistically significant group differences in general demographics between the groups.

Focus Group Themes

We did not restrict political news consumption with online media, as conventional media are still important although the internet has gained on television to obtain political news. Furthermore, political information seeking behaviour whether online or offline may contribute to the production of echo chambers online. The responses given for political information seeking behaviour led us to explore political sharing behaviour in detail. Therefore, we made a distinction between political news consumption and sharing as the former addresses a passive act of political involvement while the latter refers to a more active behaviour to provide continuance of echo chambers. The analysis of focus groups generated two major and four subthemes which was demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus Group Themes

Main Themes	Sub-themes
<i>Selective Exposure to Political News and Motivations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political News Sharing • Media Bias • Information Explosion • Disinformation
<i>Online Echo Chambers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political Bullying • Political Polarization

We provided some expressions to illustrate emerging sub-themes in following tables.

Selective Exposure to Political News and Motivations

Of specific interest to this research was to explore motivations in selective exposure to political information. Political information seeking online and offline is the focus of first research question. Nearly all participants in each group reported that the digital media was the sole source of political information. For all participants, trust in the conventional media was particularly low. Twitter was reported to be the prominent platform to obtain political news and was followed by Instagram and Facebook. However, they were not active on Facebook as much as they were on Twitter and Instagram. Many participants reported to use online news sites as well. The reported reasons to use Twitter for political information included: overall confidence in Twitter users, exposure to different political opinions and access alternative news. Another reason which was widely reported by participants was that Twitter provided news summaries from different sources faster than conventional media. They could keep themselves up to date through surfing online no matter where they were thanks to smart phone. As news consumption has moved online, people have started to turn away from political news sources offered by mass media and rely on internet media. Although a few respondents used television and radio, none of them followed print media. Only one of the participants reported that she sometimes bought newspaper to support alternative media.

The second research question addresses the reasons why they purposefully select political information reinforcing their views. Although all respondents felt conventional media manipulation of public opinion was a threat, they stressed the importance of getting political news from different perspectives. Considering the amount of political information, most of the respondents felt that they were politically better informed compared with pre-internet era. The reasons suggested included provision of vast quantity of information from diversity of sources as well as dissemination of independent and unbiased information. However, according to most respondents, expansion of political content did not lead to an increase in opinion diversity. Rather online media made political polarization visible. All respondents stressed the importance of being politically informed in Turkey as political issues have economic and social consequences that have direct impacts on their everyday

life. While they actively seek out political information for guidance, they select political information sources reinforcing their own opinions as they reported to find them more objective and trustworthy. Although not explicitly stated by many, they were observed to define objectivity within their own political view. They are interested in obtaining information about political issues as well as users' opinions to guide their everyday life. It is therefore political information was justified by many as necessary for the protection of oneself.

Furthermore, some respondents reported that they select information supporting opposing views to verify their own. On the other hand, all respondents further expressed their concern on widespread mis/disinformation online due to the increase in the quantity of information. For some participants, online media did not make people more informed as it was supposed to, on the contrary the internet brought ignorance. As it provided vast of information, it became impossible to find the facts amid growing disinformation, which caused people blindly, believe in anything they came across without questioning it. The participants were also asked their attitudes and behaviours when they felt suspicious of news credibility, some reported to use fact-checking sites to verify information and some searched other news sites or social media contents they followed. Table 2 demonstrates some illustrative expressions.

Table 2: Selective Exposure to Political News and Gratifications

"As conventional media are dominated by big corporations, they broadcast within their economic and political interests."

"I generally get informed through online media as i feel can't reach credible news on television."

"I have been using Twitter for about 5 years and before using it, i hadn't known anything about politics."

"Before the internet, we had to get political news through television and we always had to learn what the others wanted us to learn."

"The situation we are currently in is so sad that we don't know what to believe in."

"As I understood we no longer trust the conventional media. Of course I don't trust citizen journalism but I find it more naïve. My father was also a journalist but he was working for his boss, he did whatever his boss wanted him to do."

"There are just two or three television channels trying to broadcast different from mainstream media but they have been so polarized that even if they try, they can no longer report the news fairly."

"I think strong partisanship shapes Turkish media and political parties produce their own disinformation in their own media outlets. Maybe we don't use conventional media as the dominance of partisanship distorted the characteristics of news reporting."

"I use Facebook for entertainment not as a news source but I have to be exposed to political information there as well."

"As Turkey's media is biased, I verify each news from international sources to access objective news."

"All news is disinformation. I don't think any news is factually correct because nobody is unbiased."

When compared with news consumption habits, a lesser amount participants spent on political information sharing. Two participants reported that they couldn't share political contents because of their jobs but they also reported that they shared their political views face-to-face in order to raise awareness of others who support opposing political party. While some participants shared

political contents on social media, a few of participants reported to like or comment on contents. Especially student participants said that they refrained from sharing political contents as they thought those posts could affect their future career. They did not want to be rejected for a position due to a political post on their profiles. The main reason reported by participants for why they refrained from sharing or commenting on political posts was the avoidance of getting into argument. This indicated fear of sharing ideas which may lead to fear of isolation to set the spiral of silence into motion. However, there were still a few participants trying to break the spiral.

Table 3: Political News Sharing

<p><i>"I always share political contents on social media because some people have to speak up, if they don't, we have to live as slaves."</i></p> <p><i>"I posted a small content on Facebook saying what might lie in our future and one of my friends living in the U.S.A. commented on my post saying i am not living there so it shouldn't have interested me. How is that? It interests me a lot; world politics influences all of us in fact."</i></p> <p><i>"Even if my posts get me in trouble now, they will in the future. I'll have difficulty while seeking a job."</i></p> <p><i>"Sharing on social media may turn into fights. People have different political views and even one word we say can ruin our friendship."</i></p> <p><i>"To be honest, i don't share posts supporting opposing view. But I write a comment. A positive one. I mean give to Caesar what is Caesar's."</i></p> <p><i>"I don't share anything. I deleted all my posts two or three years after i started to use Facebook. I don't want to share because i don't want to leave digital footprints behind. We don't know what is going to happen tomorrow due to rapidly changing political agenda."</i></p> <p><i>"I don't share anything political and i don't like the stuff shared on Facebook. Moreover, I unfriended some who were sharing much about issues around politics. If those had opposing political views, i would certainly unfriend but i don't like those posts even if they were shared by people having political leanings i sympathize with."</i></p> <p><i>"Facebook is a socialisation platform not a platform for clash of political opinions. It is not reasonable. I don't think those who share politics are sincere. Thanks God, i don't have many friends sharing too much politics but i unfollow some to reduce their visibility at least."</i></p> <p><i>"Thanks God there is social media, i can learn more about people. I try to understand their quality, educational level and how smart they are. I don't like contents militantly political either...I think people should share everything, i do share too. It is sincere or not, i can't detect it. "</i></p>
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Although most participants preferred not to share political opinions on social media, they reported to read comments attached to political posts and news articles. While some reported that they read users' comments out of curiosity and entertainment, most respondents stressed the urge to discover what others think about political issues. As respondents were not asked whether they felt in the minority or not, it would not provide any support for spiral of silence online. However, there are still hints of two main indicators, which are reluctance to speak out in public and monitoring the climate of opinion.

Online Echo Chambers

The third research question addresses the existence of online echo chambers and respondents expressed different views on the issue. Most of the respondents reported to be exposed political information from news sources holding different political views and nearly all participants stressed

the negative effects of extreme political polarization both in conventional media and online. Even all participants reported to rely on internet media as it offers multi-optional and less biased information, they tended to choose political information both in conventional media and online which is in accord with their existing political beliefs as some of their expressions carried hints of echo chambers as reflected in Table IV.

Table 4: Online Echo Chambers

"I use Twitter because there are people from every political leanings and the opinions of target population are in accord with ours."

"I don't use news websites because I think they are all partisan."

"Dissident or partisan, however we define, mainstream media have adapted high level of offensive speech in political discourse. This is far from objectivity and pursuit of truth, which are hallmark of journalism and it's completely subjective. So instead of getting news through mass media, we try to create our own alternative news sources which we can verify. At this point we have started to act like journalists."

"I know mainstream media are biased and give high wide coverage to one political party. As i don't trust in that party, i don't want to get informed through mass media."

"I think relatives even siblings do not communicate with each other if they have different political leanings. Everybody is in his or her own balloon and nobody deals with different opinions. Everybody fervently supports their views.... Nobody tolerates other people's opinions. For example, I don't have an uncle from a different political leaning in WhatsApp family group. Because one day, one of my uncles got angry and left the group and nobody has added him in, yet."

"I consume political news only when I feel good and when things happen in my favour."

"I share the acts of good deed even if they are carried out by actors of opposite view. However, that never happens."

"I think sharing on social media has turned into something unnecessary recently. Because our followers or people we follow are so sterile that whatever we share, it is like stating the obvious...So I gave up sharing. It is not because of fear or being silenced... Maybe it is because of social silencing. I can't understand it properly. But I don't need to read others' contents or share them. This is what I perceive."

"I usually follow popular users supporting opposing view to learn about their opinions but that proves my case...Maybe i verify my opinions."

"As I work with adults, we frequently talk about politics but they are political fanatics. They don't respect opposing views...Maybe it is because of the previous acts of other party. It is as if they take revenge."

"I usually read news disseminated by the same accounts on Twitter or Instagram."

"You can avoid being brainwashed and search for various information sources including the ones which do not reinforce your own idea on the internet."

"I think online media are not objective either. Even the platforms I rely on look trustworthy maybe because they are consistent with my political view."

"I have social media friends holding opposing views. I don't approve of uniformity. I may have a wrong opinion, i may have a different perspective. I have to learn what they are thinking about. I don't comment on their posts much but i got angry. I reduce the amount of communication with him or her."

Through the eyes of participants, every aspect of people's everyday life is influenced by politics in Turkey. Not only national but global political events affect daily life. Therefore, they had to though they were not much interested in. Some respondents also reported that although they were not interested in political issues, they had to somehow. Even if they did not follow political agenda regularly, they had to be exposed on WhatsApp groups or face-to-face communication. The

responses given for political news consumption behaviour demonstrated that offline political involvement existed online as this may lead to echo chambers considering the dominant use of online media to seek political information. Therefore, this may cause polarization rather than political diversity. Furthermore, some respondents stressed the threats posed by offline echo chambers, which would likely exist online.

Discussion and Conclusions

People make greater choice over content and information sources, which has become more individualized, and it has been often claimed that digital media may lead to polarization rather than allowing political diversity. This qualitative study sought to explore users' motivations to obtain political information under selective exposure and understand whether echo chambers exist online or not. The results based on focus group discussions indicated that current situation of political polarization in Turkey (Turkuazlab, 2020) existed on digital media and this resulted in existence of echo chambers to some degree and some observations deserve mention. Digital media was the main source of political information while trust in the traditional news media was low. Being exposed to vast quantity of information from diversity of sources made respondents feel that news coverage is less biased online. However, they are well aware of disinformation threat online. Therefore, they believed expansion of political content made polarization more visible rather than increase in opinion diversity and imprison people in echo chambers. Disinformation allows people to create their own realities in order to believe in political issues reinforcing their own opinion. We are facing information explosion that lacks filters. Thus, every user has to build his/her filtration system. They take on the gatekeeping role of selecting and then filtering information. Digital media overcoming geographical distances are now establishing social distances through making political leanings more visible. Behaviours of unfriending/unfollowing people holding opposing political views may demonstrate the forms of political bullying.

Access to unbiased political information was identified as the main motivator of selective exposure. Additionally, guidance emerged as the key motivator to get political information. Some respondents also reported to use information sources supporting opposing views to verify their own political opinions. Although respondents avoid reporting to be exposed one sided news coverage, the motivators reported very much reflected online forms of the political polarization in the country. The reported statements given for sharing political opinions online may also support this perspective. While participants consumed political information to some degree, they reported to avoid discussing issues around politics. Participant-reported reasons mainly included avoidance of getting into argument and leaving a digital footprint that reminded us of spiral of silence set into motion through fear of sharing opinions. Considering respondents' expressions on selective exposure behaviour and motivations, echo chambers may be assumed to exist online to some degree. Although digital media and exposure to vast array of information sources may not lead to extreme polarization as supported by previous research, the existence of echo chambers is not a myth either.

However, the study has several limitations. First, politics is a sensitive topic so respondents might have felt hesitant to answer questions and share their honest opinion. Second, due to the number of participants, reported attitudes and behaviours of the internet users may not present the full picture of echo chambers occurring in digital media. However, as an explorative study, it aims to reach a depth understanding rather than generalization. Still, the research offers an important glimpse of understanding motivations for political news consumption under selective exposure.

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