

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS ★ INSTITUTE OF COMMUNICATIONS STUDIES

**Reader Comments on Online Journalism and Political Deliberation:
An Analysis of the reader comments on online political newscoverage in
Turkish Online Newspaper; hurriyet.com.tr**

Ozen Bas

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Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds

Supervisor: Dr. Katrin Voltmer

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes deliberative potential of the context constituted through reader commenting on political news coverage published in Turkish online newspaper, hurriyet.com.tr. Quantitative content analysis has been conducted on a sample of 816 reader comments which have been drawn from the controversial political issues of Turkish agenda. The focus is on the dilemma between factual justifications and emotional references and the level of politeness. The findings suggest that, commenters both use factual-explicit reasons to justify their opinions, and can still be passionate. 24.3 % of the sample has measured to be impolite, which is consistent with the prior research and contrary to the conventional thinking of the opponents of cyberspace. The concept of incivility has been measured, following Papacharissi (2004), analyzed to be a more meaningful concept to measure a political discussion's compatibility with deliberative democracy. It is a methodologically difficult task to measure politeness in online political discussions due to the peculiarities of the context, culture and language. Level of political diversity has found to be low for an inclusive public deliberation to take place. There are not many variations across the different issues selected. It has been seen that the design of the interface and the moderation process of the comments by the newspaper are other crucial factors affecting the political discussion, which need to be further studied.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The crises of representative/ parliamentary liberal democracies have been theorized by many scholars (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Even though the problems and the solutions proposed to impede this crisis vary, a somewhat common ground of criticism can be located about the modern liberal democracies.

Drawing on the basic definition of democracy, the core of the democratic political system is the will of the public. Accordingly, the public has been given a constitutive role to voice their demands and participate in the actual governing process. Even though this model of democratic governance has been now acknowledged and embraced by a big proportion of the countries throughout the world, great level of controversies exist in terms of their level of implementations. Even the Western democracies with their long tradition of enlightenment have a great deal of problems in terms of their implementations of democracy, let alone the newly democratizing countries of the non-Western contexts. However, the similar grounds of discrepancies between the implementation and the ideal theorization of democracy in both the western and non-western contexts can be mentioned. In this respect, cross-national comparative studies in terms of the democratic systems of these two groups of countries gives us valuable insights and enrich our understanding of the democratic governances.

One of the pillars of the discrepancy between the theory and the practice of democratic political systems is the decline of citizen participation. Wahl-Jorgensen gives a detailed account of the studies and scholars that have criticized the liberal democracy due to its lack of encouraging the citizen participation, if not directly discouraging them- other than voting once in four years (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). She further contends that the relative apathy of the citizens towards politics can easily be understood as an end product of the distance between the citizens and the decision- making institutions in the liberal democratic society:

"Liberal theory has created a system in which the institutions that make decisions in society are far removed from those whom these decisions affect. It is perhaps not surprising, then, if citizens feel disenfranchised and unable to participate in any substantial way" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 17).

Having said that the difficulty and apathy with participation in politics on the part of the citizens is a reaction and an end product of the dominant understanding of democracy today, i.e. the liberal democracy, it means that there is a way for the citizens to increase their participation in politics, through replacing the non-participatory institutions disabling the citizen participation with those that rests on citizen participation.

Accordingly, there have been different models of renewing the set of liberal democratic institutions in a way to strengthen citizen participation in the decision- making mechanisms.

One of these models is deliberative democratic theory.

Deliberative democracy theory has been well theorized by many theoreticians with some variations. However, democratic politics according to all deliberative theorists, I believe; “involves public deliberation focused on common good, requires some form of manifest equality among citizens, and shapes the identity and interests of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of common good” (Cohen, 1997: 69).

Habermas’ concept of “bourgeois public sphere” and his conceptualization of the ideal speech situation- even though not uncontroversial- have set very influential criteria to critically evaluate the actual conditions of the today’s liberal democracies (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007).

In a historical context such as this, where the decline of citizen participation and the political institutions that actually limit it in line with the dominant democratic discourse are problematized, the Internet forums have led to optimism and constituted a very fertile area of research, given its relatively free and inclusive opportunities provided for political participation. In line with the discussions about the deliberative democratic approach in general, the deliberative potential of the Internet forums and other online facilities have been continuing to cause academic controversies. Among many issues of such controversies, the two most influential are that of “rationality” and “manners” to embrace toward the “other side” together with the diversity of political opinion the Internet provides. The former referring to the internal aspect of deliberation, and the latter to the interpersonal; taking these two controversial concepts as objects of analysis for this dissertation will – hopefully- provide an understanding of the deliberative level of the very context of political discussion.

The first aim of this dissertation is to analyze the way political discussion takes place in the context of Turkish reader comments on political news articles published in the online version of the mainstream newspaper of *Hurriyet*; relying on some of the criteria that deliberative democracy theorists set. Two concepts of deliberative discussion- the argumentation styles and the reference to the opposing views- will be focused on through conducting a content analysis. Furthermore, I believe conducting this study in a non-Western democratic experience will be influential to give an insight about the repercussions of the civic cultures other than Western ones, on the actual practices of interpersonal political communication. Endeavouring to contribute to the relative lack of research on the area of reader comments on online newspapers, this study also underlines the emerging popularity of reader comments on the online journalism in the Turkish context and discusses its deliberative potential.

And the other aim is to find out whether the results coming from the Turkish context as to the situation of the political discussion in the cyber world is consistent with the conventional thinking of the opponents of cyberspace, i.e. "fragmented, nonsensical, and engaged discussion" (Papacharissi, 2004: 260), or in line with the empirical research such as Hill and Hughes (1998) and Papacharissi (2004). The deliberative concepts of politeness, civility operationalized as research variables will give out the answer to the above questions.

The dissertation that follows will continue with four related chapters. In the second chapter, a literature review that composes the founding theoretical discussions relating to the concepts of deliberative democracy and the cyberspace as opportunities for political discussion their participatory opportunities for impeding the ills of the contemporary liberal democracies, together with a more focused examinations pertaining the conceptualizations and the operationalizations of the concepts of rationality, passion, politeness and civility in the context of deliberative political discussion will be given. In the third chapter, a deeper look of the Turkish context in terms of the the new (online) media consumption practices will be provided through the lenses of the opportunities provided as to the political discussion and participation acts. The fourth chapter will be the methodology chapter, dwelling on the rationales behind the very research questions, aims and objectives, together with the research methods and instruments specifically chosen for these. Chapter five is devoted to the findings of the research and discussing their repercussions in the conceptual

framework and the theoretical discussions drawn in the chapter two, the literature review. Chapter six concludes the overall work, comprises the theoretical, conceptual debates coming from the literature together with the contributions that this very study is.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The critique of Liberal democracies from the angle of citizen participation

The dominant form of political rule today is democracy. If the regime of a country is called a “democracy”, it is usually assumed that it is a liberal democracy. Through time, and long periods of theorization in the academic field, trial and struggle in the practical field, liberal democracy as a form of government has triumphed in the latter field. Owing to the historicity of the failures of government forms other than the liberal democracy by the end of the Cold War, some authors were even able to commentate that the evolutionary process of the history has finished and the “end of history” came with the victory of western liberal democracies (Fukuyama, 1992).

However, the fact that liberal democracy has endured to survive the test of the history, does not necessarily mean that it is without controversies. Critiques to liberal democracy from many different perspectives have targeted both its theoretical origins, and its current implementations in contemporary western societies. Carter and Stokes (2002) give an exhaustive summary of the contemporary criticisms against the dominant theory of democracy, which ranges from participatory, republican, communitarian, feminist critiques, to more radical critiques of power and domination. As the editors conclude, by no means, western liberal democracy was not accepted as “the final form of human government”. “[...] Fukuyama overstated the case. Debate continues over the very nature of liberal democracy, its distinctive principles, its diverse institutional forms and the proper grounds for its defence” (Carter and Stokes, 2002: 17).

One of the crucial criticisms toward liberal democracy is the issue of participation of citizens in the decision making mechanisms. Benjamin Barber, in his book *Strong Democracy* (1984), criticizes the ills of the “thin democracy”, and at the core of his criticism lies the weak role assigned to the citizen.

Basing his proposal of strong democracy on this notion of strong citizenship, Barber summarizes the crucial aspect of his theory that is more relevant for the concerns of this

study; which are the participatory aspect of a democracy, civic education and the institutions that are suitable to coordinate these:

“Strong democracy is a distinctively modern form of participatory democracy. It rests on the idea of a self-governing community of citizens who are united less by homogenous interests than by civic education and who are made capable of common purpose and mutual action by virtue of their civic attitudes and participatory institutions rather than their altruism or their good nature” (Barber, 1984: 117).

The lack of contact between the governors and the governed in the liberal democratic states, sustained by a set of institutions, focuses merely on the concept of freedom of the individual from the government intervention. Citizens can only said to be engaging in decision-making act through voting once in four years. This act of voting actually can be seen as a mere expression of consent or dissent (Salmon and Glasser, 1995 as quoted in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 16). The theoretical underpinnings of this limited version of “self-governing” lies in the liberal democracy’s very expectations of citizens: “(...) the ideal citizen is a rational, well-informed, but mostly apolitical and private creature. Citizens’ primary occupation is to grease the wheels of the market by engaging in production, trade, and consumption. Liberal democratic theory sees voting as the most important role of the citizen in the political process” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 16).

However, democracy requires a much more politically active understanding of citizenship. In the following section, one of the most well- theorized types of democracy in terms of their solutions proposed to the above described participation crisis of liberal democracy, will be outlined.

2.2. Deliberative Democracy theory as an answer to citizen participation

Before examining the repercussions of the deliberative democratic theory on the citizen participation aspect, a relatively more general understanding of the core of the deliberative democracy should be gained. Thus, the first step into the systematic study of this theory, Habermas’s conceptualization of the “public sphere” should be mentioned.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Habermas traces the historical development of the “bourgeois public sphere” and places great importance to the

legitimizing power of the deliberation going on in the public sphere as a domain outside of the state power, specifying the historical European examples of “café societies” in the middle of the seventeenth century. “The coffeehouses and salons gave the middle class a participatory life in discussions of timely issues from which a general consensus or public opinion might emerge” (Hauser, 1999: 41). Breaking the traditional political dominance of the monarchy and the aristocrats, the public sphere had given an emancipator power to get involved in the political decisions, through the generating “public opinion” which results as an end product of the public deliberation going on in the “bourgeois public sphere”.

The public opinion is different from the aggregative understanding in the context of the contemporary liberal democracies. Habermas observes it to be inducing from the “the critical reflections of a public competent to form its own judgements” (Habermas, 1989: 90). These critical reflections rely on the fundamental activity of “rational- critical debate”, which he theorizes as the defining characteristic of the “bourgeois public sphere” and eventually, his proposition of overcoming the ills of the liberal democratic crisis. The normative contemporary understanding of a “the public sphere”, theorized by Habermas is the following:

“Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion- that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions- about matter of general interest” (Habermas, 1974: 49).

This can be considered as a very ambitious and hard-to-achieve kind of a social construct to realize. However, it should be taken as a normative ideal, against which the real-life experiences should be measured against. The basic building blocks of the theory of deliberative democracy, which is built on this Habermasian conceptualization of “the public sphere”, can be deduced in the following way: The trust in the human reason, the crucial pivotal role of the rational- critical debate to be taking place in an egalitarian context without any prior restrictions applied to be able to take part in the debate about the issues concerning

all, and through shaping the identities of the all participants reaching at a solution which will be considered as legitimate by all the parties due to its collective formation process.

For Habermas, there is an appropriate type of communication among the participants of the public sphere, based on the above conditions to be satisfied; “the ideal speech situation”. In the “ideal speech situation”; “two or more persons could infinitely question one another’s beliefs about the world until each perspective had been fully scrutinized, leaving only a limited set of valid statements on which to base one’s conclusions about an issue” (Gastil, 2008: 18). Gastil, underlines the parallel between the Bormann’s public discussion model (1996) and “the ideal speech situation”, which is “the rational exchange of views resulting in enlightened understanding” (Gastil, 2008: 18).

Relying on the ultimate trust in the capacity of interpersonal communication and human language to be able to conduct a rational critical debate on the issues concerning the common good, and eventually being able to reach at an optimum solution with the inputs from all of the participants, and placing his ultimate hopes in this “communicative action” as to the transformation of the social relations- Habermas, explicitly theorizes this holistic perspective in *The Theory of Communicative Action*(1984). The contemporary theory of deliberative democracy also borrows this second grand conceptualization of Habermas’- “communicative action” which places great emphasis and hopes on the interpersonal communication and the language.

As to the relation of the deliberative democracy for the purpose of this study, the fundamental role of the citizen deliberation in a well defined context called “the public sphere” attributes great significance to the citizens agency in relation to their direct involvement in the democratic decision making process through the “public opinion” as an product of the public deliberation. The gap of the contemporary liberal democracies mentioned above, between the governors and the governed is proposed to be bridged by the means of the public deliberation taking place in “the public sphere”. Thus, as many commentators argued, besides posing a crucial set of criteria to evaluate the real-life examples of democracy, deliberative democracy itself, should be evaluated as a holistic solution to the crisis of public communication and democratic participation of the citizens.

The critiques of Habermas's underlying concepts of the deliberative democracy as summarized above; focus on the two concepts ;“the rational-critical debate” and “the ideal speech situation” and egalitarian way of public deliberation. In the following section, two lines of critiques will be given, which are at the focus of this study: the critique to “the rational-critical debate” and the critique to the right manners to be embraced by the participants during the “ideal speech situation” taking place in “the public sphere”.

2.2.1. The Critiques to the “Rational- Critical Debate”

In this section, the critiques who are emphasizing the importance of the political discussion within a democratic polity are going to be outlined. In other words, the criticisms to Habermas coming from those scholars who share the common understanding that political talk, conversation or deliberation- whichever one it may be called specifically- is the “soul of democracy”- will be given in this section. It will be a “within criticism”, from the sharers of a similar understanding of “strong democracy” endeavouring to transcend the limited participatory channels given to the citizens.

There are two different lines of criticisms made to the “rational-critical debate” restriction put on the political discussions; the first one concern the rejection of the emotionality of any kind being used in a political discussion and the other one the reproduction of the inherent inequalities present in the given society when the “rationality” exclusivity is applied in a deliberation context. These two points are interrelated to each other, resulting in a common product.

To begin with the first one; some commentators criticize the limited understanding of the “political deliberation” as the only legitimate “soul” of a truly democratic society. Namely, these limits are the ideal of the rationality and the necessity to reach a common conclusion, a common good. However, as it was advocated by the critiques, setting these kind of high criteria to fit in a special discursive type of rationality, and to be able to reach at a common goal, decreases the chances for the already deprived ones to be able to involve in the public deliberations, hence does reproduce the already inequalities embedded in the society (Flyvberg, 1998; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007, Young, 2000).

At the centre of this line of critique lies the “rationality”, and “reason”. “The emphasis on reason implies that public debate should focus on reason and rationality over emotion and passion” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 21). As political psychologists and political scientists argue as well, the when the genealogy of the place of “emotions” in the political science scholarly study is traced, it has never been paid attention, and when it was, it was the about the urge to keep emotion out of the way while making political decisions. At the heart of this attempt lies a presumption coming from the ancient ages, as political psychologist George E. Marcus puts; “In the modern era the thinking is much the same as in ancient times: feeling and thought are alternative and often antagonistic foundations for decision-making” (Marcus, 2003: 184). Further, Marcus contextualizes the study of emotions within the democratic politics, quoting Jim Kuklinski and his colleagues; “In a democratic society, reasonable decisions are preferable to unreasoned ones: considered thought leads to the former, emotions to the latter; therefore deliberation is preferable to visceral reaction as a basis for democratic decision making” (Kuklinski et al. 1991, as cited in Marcus, 2003: 188). This line of argument can be attributed to the one inherent in the Habermas’s emphasis of reasoned discourse, which can be traced back to Kant’s philosophical inspiration on him, as Calhoun underlines; “Kant occupies a central place in *Structural Transformation* as the theorist who offered the fullest articulation of the ideal of the bourgeois public sphere. In his public sphere, practical reason was institutionalized through norms of reasoned discourse in which arguments ... were to be decisive” (Calhoun, 1992: 2). These arguments were exempt of any involvement of emotion, to be able to enter into the arena of public sphere, relying on the assumption that the emotions will bring, or is a proof of, self-interestedness, and it is denounced in a deliberative discussion.

Whereas on the other hand, there are the critiques who are advocating to break this dichotomous understanding of the emotions and the human reason, in the contexts of public deliberations. They argue that, the emotions are inherently part of politics, and it actually enhances the interpersonal political communication through easing the transfer of experiences with the help of the emotions. “Emotions are part of the ‘stuff’ connecting human beings to each other and the world around them, like an unseen lens that colors all our thoughts, actions, perceptions, and judgements” (Goodwin et al., 2001: 10). As

Goodwin et al. underline the interrelationship between emotions and the social movements, and eventually advocate for the crucial role of the passion in politics, without which nobody would actually bother to get involved in it (Goodwin et al., 2001). Hence, emotions are seen by these authors as “an essential ingredient in democratic deliberation and political judgement” (Marcus, 2002 as cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 113). Goodwin et al. summarizes a table of categories and examples of emotions that are relevant to political action;

Table 1: Categories and Examples of Emotions

Time Scale	Has Specific Object	General
Longer Term	Hate, Love, Compassion, Sympathy, Respect, Trust, Loyalty, Moral Outrage, Some forms of fear (dread)	Resignation, Cynicism, Shame, Paranoia, Suspicion, Optimism, Pride, Enthusiasm
Shorter Term	Other fears (fright, startle), Surprise, Shock, Anger, Grief, Sorrow	Anxiety, Joy, Euphoria, Depression

Talking about the deliberative model of democracy in particular, Young warns about some dangers that might come up as a result of this kind of norms of “articulateness and dispassionateness [that] sometimes serve to devalue or dismiss the efforts of some participants to make their claims and arguments to a political public” (Young, 2000: 38).

The inevitable consequence of this kind of exclusion of the emotions and passions and hence the discourses such as personal story-telling, in the public deliberation, arguing that they do not voice concerns about the common good, but only articulate the self- interests of private bodies; is damage to the inclusive character of the public sphere. It leads to the reproduction of the state of some ‘voiceless citizens’, due to their lack of ability and knowledge to grasp the appropriate “rational” way of involving in the public discussions (Fraser, 1992; Young, 2000).

2.2.2. The Critique of the "Right Manners"

The second line of criticism directed towards Habermas and the other deliberative democracy theoreticians can be framed as that of ‘right manners’, some normative norms regulating the interpersonal political communication taking place in within the public

deliberation context. As Young (2000) precisely proposes, none of the advocates of deliberative democracy explicitly specify these 'norms of order', "Nevertheless, in everyday political contexts the invocation of deliberative norms frequently appeals to the good of deliberation as a means discrediting or excluding modes of political communication deemed disorderly or disruptive" (Young, 2000: 47).

One of these norms about the interpersonal aspect of deliberation is the issue of 'politeness'. It concerns both as a general attitude when articulating an idea and also referring to another participant of the deliberation.

The general norms regulating the interpersonal aspect of deliberation are implicitly mentioned by the deliberative theories. The most important pillar of public deliberation is its egalitarian character where every participant has equal right to voice their opinions. In this perspective, there should be a preliminary attitudes concerned by the participants, in order not to intimidate the others, leading to withdrawal or hesitation to speak up. As many scholars had proposed, climate of the "perceived" or overt public opinion is crucial in terms of its repercussions on the psychology of the discussants, which might lead to intimidation, due to aversion of social discomfort. (Noelle-Nuemann, 1993; Mutz, 2006; Mutz and Martin, 2001; Price, Nir and Cappella, 2006)

Drawing on this kind of a social intimidation, interpersonal politeness is something that is required as a general norm in the public deliberation context. Many authors especially, those studying online political discussion, have significant findings pertaining to the politeness and civility levels within the online political deliberation contexts. This line of criticism is actually what differentiates the opponents and proponents of online political communication, which I will elaborate on, in the next section of this chapter.

In the Oxford Dictionary the meaning of the word civility, is given as "politeness and courtesy" and "polite remarks used in formal conversation". This interchangeableness exists in the political communication literature as well. Ng and Detenber (2005), operationalizes civility as politeness. However, this crude equating of these two concepts reproduces an unrefined understanding of democratic political discussions, and public deliberation.

Papacharissi (2004) conceptually differentiates civility and politeness. She defines civility “by identifying as civil behaviors that enhance democratic conversation” (Papacharissi, 2004: 259). In that respect, what should be seen as the criteria that promotes democratic discourse and participation is civility, which is not to be misunderstood through reducing it to “interpersonal politeness, because this definition ignores the democratic merit of robust and heated discussion” (p. 260). Hence, civility is understood as the “respect for the collective traditions of democracy” (ibid.) as opposed to politeness that is “etiquette-related”. In the next section, the online political discussion literature will be summarized, through the lenses of advantages and disadvantages for furthering democratic participation within the deliberative democratic perspective.

2.3. Online Political Discussions and Possibilities for Democratic Deliberation

There is a growing interest and literature on the possibilities that the Internet hold for enhancing participation and deliberative democracy (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Janssen and Kies, 2004; Karakaya, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Price and Cappella, 2002; Poor, 2005; Poster, 1997).

While the proponents propose that the Internet technology will bring about a relatively more active space for political participation through political discussion and creating the utopian public sphere, some others disagree with this optimistic view, suggesting that “technologies [are] not universally accessible and ones that frequently induce fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussion, otherwise known as ‘flaming’, far from guarantee a revived public sphere” (Papacharissi, 2002: 10). In terms of measuring “flaming” there are methodological difficulties, which lead to an inconsistency among the studies. As Witschge concludes, the methodological gaps of the empirical should be bridged, before making conclusions on the Internet’s potential (Witschge, 2002: 17). On the one hand,

Dwelling on the rational-critical normative ideals of Habermas, Dahlberg evaluates the deliberative potential of online deliberation practices; and outlines six requirements to be regarded as a ‘public sphere’; “autonomy from state and economic power”, “thematization

and critique of critizable moral-practical validity claims”, “reflexivity”, “ideal role-taking”, “sincerity”, “discursive equality and inclusion” (Dahlberg, 2001).

Another feature that makes the proponents optimistic about the Internet is the diversity and the disagreement that it can provide, unlike the offline forms of communication (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009). Optimists suggest that the tendency to face-to-face cross-cutting political encounters is surpassed through the special features of computer-mediation, and more diverse political views are encountered. For instance, Price et al. found that “the argumentative climate of group opinion indeed affects postdiscussion opinions” (Price et al., 2006: 47), meaning that the involvement in online political discussions where cross-cutting political views are encountered holds potential for opinion change, a prerequisite of deliberative democracy (Dryzek, 2000).

However there are some scholars articulating the dangers that might stem from the very nature of the Internet. For instance, Sunstein (2001) is very pessimistic about the prospects of the Internet technology will bring; namely group polarization bringing extremism to disrupt the harmony of the society. In that respect, the diversity of opinions available on the Internet, are not encountered by everybody, because the like-minded people have tendency to search for the like-minded to interact with online (Sunstein, 2001).

2.4. Online Political Discussions and Newspapers

Even though the interactive features and incorporation of user-generated content of the online newspapers have been widely studied (Schultz, 2000; Rosenberry, 2005; Matheson, 2004; Hermida and Thurman, 2007; Zamith, 2008), the opportunity provided by the online newspapers to open up a political space through the reader comments have not. One of the few studies has recently been conducted by Manosevitch and Walker (2009), examining the reader comment to online opinion journalism, as a space for public deliberation. The findings of the study suggested that “online opinion journalism has a potential to embody a space for public deliberation, thereby offering citizens new ways to participate in the public sphere within the context of journalism” (Manosevitch and Walker, 2009: 21).

3. ONLINE POLITICAL DISCUSSION AND TURKEY

To be able to study the online political discussions taking place in Turkey, the comparison between the online forums and the new facilities that are served by online newspapers should be made. Even though, in the academic literature, the studies predominantly focus on the internet forums, or bulletin board discussions in terms of their participatory repercussions on the citizens, these two types of engagements are not frequently used by many Turkish internet users, at least not in a degree where some important conclusions can be drawn from. An overview of the level of engagement in the Turkish internet forums- which have been the typical object of study of the prior researchers- is given in the following chart of. The data are retrieved from Alexa, The Web Information Company.

Table 2: Alexa ranking of Turkish internet web sites

A l e x a Ranking	Name	Site Address	Forum	Comment	Type of Site
6	Hürriye.com.trt	hurriyet.com.tr	NA	Yes	O n l i n e Newspaper
7	Milliyet.com.tr	milliyet.com.tr	NA	Yes	O n l i n e Newspaper
11	e-kolay.net	e-kolay	NA	Yes	Portal
36	forum TR	http://frmtr.com/	yes	NA	Forum Site
59	M e m u r l a r Forum	memurlar.net	Yes	NA	Portal
326	Türk Net	turk.net	Yes	Yes	Portal
10307	Türk Forum	turkforum.net	yes	NA	Forum Site
25161	Siyasi Forum	siyasiforum.net	Yes	NA	Forum Site
63169	Yazıyaz Forum	yaziyaz.com	Yes	NA	Forum Site

This table provides the Alexa ranking of the most popular internet forums, online newspapers and portals. What concerns this study most is the fact that, the internet forums are on a decline in Turkey. The old popularity of the internet forums is no longer viable. The internet forum with the highest Alexa ranking is “forum TR”, ranking 36. However, political discussions do not take place in “forum TR”, because it is strictly banned by the

forum, saying that; “Siyaset konuşmak yasaktır” (meaning “It is forbidden to discuss politics” in Turkish).

The underlying reason for the forums to feel uneasy and eventually ban the political discussions has to do with two related things; the suspected high level of flaming and insults expected from Turkish people when discussing political issues, and as a consequence of this, the potential law suits that may be opened against the forum itself, according to the Turkish legal framework. In order to prevent these kinds of legal issues and to moderate the discussions in a way that is desired by the forum, there is a need for moderators. This increases the costs, which held back the number of the political forums as well. I will open up these problems of the online political forums, in the following sections.

Continuing to review the table, another important conclusion that can be drawn is the overall Alexa rankings of the forum sites. Other than “forum TR”, where politics is forbidden to be discussed, there are no forum sites in the list of first 10000 top sites in Turkey. And, the rankings of the specialized political forum sites, which are- “siyasiforum” and “yazıyaz forum”- are even lower (25161 and 63169 respectively).

This table reflects the locales of online political discussion in Turkey, and sums up that; internet forums in Turkey can not be relied as an object of study for political discussion. The main reason is the limited number of people engaging in the internet forums in Turkey. Due to methodological concerns and the rationale of the very research question itself, a small group of people who are being actively involved in political discussions in the internet forums; do not satisfy the aims of this study: examining the new opportunities served by the internet technology to the citizens, regarding the construction of new public sphere(s), “agoras” through encouraging political discussion and public deliberation. Thus, in line with the specified aim, a context of political discussion which is more inclusive is needed in order to be able to generalize findings.

The other crucial point that can be retrieved from the chart is the popularity of online newspapers. The online versions of Hurriyet and Milliyet, the two mainstream newspapers are ranking 6th and 7th in the Alexa rating chart. These two online newspapers, like most of the other online newspapers in Turkey, does not require subscription, hence anybody with

the Internet connection is able to read the news on the hardcopy version of the newspapers, in addition to the other “breaking news” and sections of the online version that are not included in the paper version.

There are some other facilities that is enabled by the online newspapers of Milliyet and Hurriyet that resembles the facilities embodied by newspapers in the UK (Hermida and Thurman, 2007) and the US. Those facilities mostly provide opportunities for the readers to be able to generate content, which is referred as “user-generated content” (UGC), in the literature.

The initiation of adopting user-generated content by the mainstream online newspapers is a relatively new trend in Turkey (For an exploratory study conducted in the interactivity and the general level of user-generated content in the Turkish context, see Şanlıer and Tağ, 2005).

Aydogan gives the integration of user-generated content facilities by the biggest Turkish online news corporations. (See the Table 3 adopted from Aydogan) Hurriyet.com.tr is the online news corporation which had integrated almost all of the user-generated content facilities.

One of those user-generated content facilities is the comments on stories section provided to each news story of the online newspaper. It is a relatively simple idea –compared to forums– of putting any kind of comments in a box place under the news article. For some of the online newspapers, it is required to get a username in order to post comments, where as for some others, it is not a necessity, and the comments appear with the signature of “guest”.

Table 3: “Methods Used by Turkish Online News Organizations to Integrate User-Generated Content”

Website	Pools	Message Board	Have you r say s	Comments on stories	Question and answers	Blogs	Your media	Your story
Hurriyet.com.tr	NA	Yes	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	Yes
Milliyet.com.tr	NA	NA	NA	Yes	NA	Yes	NA	NA
Sabah.com.tr	NA	NA	NA	Yes	NA	NA	NA	NA
Radikal.com.tr	NA	NA	NA	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	NA
Haberturk.com.tr	NA	NA	NA	Yes	NA	Yes	NA	NA

Another advantage of the comments section is the less necessity for the moderation. Even though a basic type of moderation is still needed, it is easier to control for reader comments that should be taken into consideration separately.

On the part of the readers, it requires less effort to write down the comments right after one reads an article.

Given these advantages resulting in the popularity of reader comments on the online newspaper articles, the highest ranking newspaper- as shown in the chart- is www.hurriyet.com.tr. Irrespective of its ranking, the number of reader comments in average overwhelmingly exceeds other newspapers’ reader comments. Reaching 400 comments, hurriyet.com.tr attracts scientific attention, in terms of examining the new phenomenon of reader comments and its repercussion on the potentiality of online political discussion.

As it has been mentioned in the literature review, there is a bulk of findings about the flaming levels of the online forums.

What needs to be clarified for the theoretical framework underlying this study is that, the detailed theorization of deliberative democracy is not embraced fully. What is being borrowed from the deliberative democratic theory is the ultimate trust in the public deliberation as an engagement to transcend the inadequacies of the liberal democracy in

giving enough voice to the citizens. Hence, the context constituted through posting reader comments to news articles is being analyzed as a brand new opportunity for political discussion to thrive among the citizens, even though the facility is not designed for the commenter to address other fellow commenter.

In Need of an Inclusive Deliberative Discussion in Turkey- the Controversial Political Issues

Nowadays, Turkey is facing a deep move of deliberation- trying to be initiated from the political centre, the government. An inclusive “public sphere” needs to be constructed, in order to bring together all the thoughts and opinions of the people who have a say about and suggestions for solving the Kurdish issue through democratic means; and hence initializing a large scale public deliberation that is planning to take place, this 25 year-old problem is placed in the agenda of the government to be solved (For the socio-political background of the Kurdish Issue, see the Appendix 1 and Gunter, 1988; 2000 ; Barkey and Fuller, 1997).

In addition to the Kurdish issue, there are some other rooted issues of controversy, stemming from socio-economic and political reasons. Two other issues of such controversy are those known as the “headscarf issue” and the overly politicized character of the Turkish Army and the positioning of the people toward the army. The underlying polarization behind these two issues is that of “secularization”. (See Appendix 1 for a deeper background on the issue and Toprak, 2009; Berkes and Ahmad, 1998)

The other cause of controversy is the situation of the Turkish Army. The Turkish Army had intervened in the political process, by conducting coups, three times in the history of the Turkish Republic. The situation of the Turkish Army, being one of the pillars of the political bureaucrats historically, takes us to the tension between the centre and the periphery, and the concerns for democracy. This constitutes another hotly debated topic, by the large sectors of the population. In the beginning of the July 2009, the government, AKP, had passed a law which hands the prosecution of the members of the army to the civil courts, who were being prosecuted by the military courts before. This had lead to curiosity by some groups of the public, arguing that the government is trying to change the secular regime, and thus attacking

the guardian of the regime- the Army. While the other groups had regarded it as a very necessary move for democratization.

The controversial and the sensitive character of the issue, which requires the involvement of all of the sectors of the society, in the process leading the solution of this crucial issue, can justly and healthily be analyzed in a deliberation context where it can be seen that large amounts of citizens are getting engaged in. Given the popularity and the overwhelming numbers of the posts of the reader comments in the online news articles of the hurriyet.com.tr, these three issues are chosen for the sample.

4. METODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

While Wahl-Jorgensen (2007) approaches to solve the problem of limited citizen participation in the democratic governing process through proposing the letters to the editor section of the traditional news media institutions, this research is going to approach the same question through a new media facility- reader comments on the Online Newspaper articles. To put it openly, the emancipating potential of the online newspaper reader commenting facility will be examined from the angle of citizen participation and public discourse. Staying in the theoretical boundaries of deliberative democracy from which two crucial concepts are borrowed, a partial test for the practicality of it will be provided for a non-Western context, Turkey. Furthermore, this will enable a more in depth look into this new opportunity involving in the public discussion through the new medium of online newspapers.

4.1.1. The Aims

The aims of the study are;

- 1) To examine the deliberative potential of the context constituted through reader comments on the political hard news articles of the online version of the Turkish mainstream newspaper Hurriyet.
- 2) To examine whether the findings coming from the context of online reader comments in Turkey will be consistent with the prior scholarly literature and studies on the online political discussion concluding that they contained a lot of impolite and uncivil messages.
- 3) To reach some exploratory findings concerning the context of reader comments on the political online newspaper stories.

4.1.2. The Objectives

In order to realise these aims, the following objectives are formulated;

- 1) To analyze the content of the reader comments made on the political news articles in www.hurriyet.com.tr, the most visited online newspaper of Turkey (whose Alexa

rating: 6th) through examining one concept from each dimensions of deliberation; internal and interpersonal aspects.

- 2) To critically examine whether the concept of civility- instead of politeness- can be proposed as a more convenient/appropriate concept to judge the political discussions in terms of their deliberative and democratic potentials.
- 3) To examine the role of emotions in the online political discussions, to see whether they are frequently revealed and implied in the act of commenting.
- 4) To examine the opportunity of online political news commenting for a public deliberation to take place in a time where the controversial issues are being discussed in the political agenda of the government, and where they want to let large segments of the society to get involved in it.

4.2. Research Method

4.2.1. Content Analysis

Content analysis will be conducted in this study, in order to make a systematic analysis of this relatively new phenomenon of reader comments on online political news articles. The sample consists of reader comments posted on the hot topics which cause lively and controversial discussions that are rooted in the socio-political mapping of the Turkish context, also take place in the mainstream media and public opinion in Turkey.

The definition of the method of content analysis can be given in the following way: “Quantitative content analysis is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption (Riffe et al., 2005: 25).

4.2.1.1. Population and Sample

The sample is not a representative sample in the terms that is normally understood. The reason behind this is the requirements of the very research question of this study. The attempt to analyze the participatory potential of the reader comments in the framework of the

ideals of the deliberative democracy some requirements about the topic, and the number of participants relating to it: issue at hand should concerns all parties involved, i.e. citizens in this case, and thus requires the participation of all of the citizens. A topic which concerns all of the citizens with huge number of participants, inevitably, brings high levels of controversy, and they mostly occur about hot topics. Further more, since the content analysis, as a methodology, endeavours to generalize the findings, through the representative sample chosen and eventually to be able to understand the structure of the real world, the articles containing large amounts of reader comments had chosen to have a more reliable understanding of the potential that this new online facility provides to consolidate an inclusive “public sphere”.

The sample of the unit of analysis -reader comments- made on the online version of the mainstream newspaper Hurriyet (www.hurriyet.com.tr) had been chosen, because it is the online newspaper with the highest traffic, according to the source of Alexa- the Web Information Company (Alexa.com). It has the ranking of being the 6th in the list for the “Top Sites in Turkey” (<http://alexa.com/topsites/countries/TR>). Hurriyet.com.tr is the one with the highest ranking online newspaper website in Turkey, as well.

In addition, the quantity of reader comments written on its news articles, is the other reason for choosing to analyze its reader comments. Especially for the news articles about the controversial topics that lead to heated discussions mentioned above, hurriyet.com.tr by far, has the most number of reader comments compared to other online newspapers in Turkey. Ranging between 50 and 400 reader comments, their content definitely deserve to be analyzed in a systematic way, in terms of their potential for political participation through involving in public discussion. The context of reader comments of hurriyet.com.tr is the most probable one that bear potential to be the “inclusive” public discussion, due to its huge number of comments.

The contemporary Kurdish issue and the latest legal regulation concerning the prosecution of the members of the Turkish Army, and the long-rooted, headscarf issue that polarizes the whole population, are chosen to be the topics to be covered in the sample.

The samples are chosen from the time periods when the discussions and related news stories of these three topics have dominated the mainstream political agenda, in order to understand the dynamics of the controversial political discussions, since every topic is not at its highest tension in any given time.

The proportion of the Kurdish issue to headscarf issue and the prosecution of the members of the army issue are 2:1:1, respectively. Because, as it has been explained in the previous context chapter, the contemporary Kurdish issue is meant to be solved via a productive democratic mechanism of inclusive public deliberation, as aimed by the Prime Minister, and thus it constitutes a legitimate context of study to pay more attention on- if not a case study. However, this study is not merely endeavouring to understand the online political communication of the Kurdish issue, but attempts to increase the level of analysis to be able generalize some commonalities concerning the nature of online political discussions of the controversial issues, in a non-Western, “democratizing” country. Hence, a weighted number of content had been chosen from the contemporary Kurdish Plan of the government, and the other controversial issues are supplementing the sample as well, in a way to generalize the findings and to be able to compare the attitude of the online reader commenters.

The week beginning with the 23th of July till 31st of July, 2009 had witnessed the highest level of discussions of the Kurdish issue in the mainstream print media. A random selection by the help of computer had been conducted on the new stories published on hurriyet.com.tr, and when the reader comments add up to 417, the selection was finished. The public discussion of the other topic of prosecution of the members of the Turkish Army, had occupied the agenda in the first half of July, 2009, and the random selection of the computer had chosen the news article which had over 400 reader comments. In line with the weight appointed to this topic, the first 200 reader comments have been added to the sample. Lastly, the headscarf issue had dominated the whole sectors of the civil society, mainstream mass media in the beginning of the year 2008. The random selection had appointed another news article on hurriyet.com.tr, about the reactions against the abolition of the ban of the headscarf in the universities, on the 31st of January, 2008. The first 200 reader comments made on this

news article had been added to the sample. Hence, three pieces of time frames have chosen, in the following manner.

Table 4: Sample Overview

Issue	Date of the Article	Number of Articles	Number of Comments
Headscarf	31st of January, 2008	1	200
Prosecution of Army Members	8th of July, 2009	1	200
Kurdish	23rd - 30th of July, 2009	3	416

4.2.1.2. The framework:

In order to analyze the participatory potential of the reader comments of the online newspaper articles in Turkey, two different sets of concepts have been selected: the internal aspect of deliberation and the interpersonal aspect of deliberation (Kim, 2007). The internal aspect of deliberation consists of the variables concerning the type of justification. The interpersonal aspect of deliberation brings together the two main variables of the general level of politeness and the occurrence of incivility (Papacharissi, 2004). These concepts of factual-explicit justifications, references to emotions, politeness and incivility have been drawn from the literature of deliberative democracy and online political communication and have been problematized. The main pillars of the study are composed of these concepts.

The operationalization of the internal aspect of deliberation covers the factual/explicit justifications, reasons and the references/disclosures of emotions. This differentiation stems from the theoretical dichotomy between the reason and emotion in politics, also seen in the public deliberation model of Bormann (1996) and “the ideal speech situation” and rational-critical debate of Habermas(1989). However, in this study, the two concepts are not operationalized to be juxtaposing to each other. The intention here is to explore, how often each way of self-declaration, either directly or indirectly, have been implemented by the citizens in a new environment of political communication.

The operationalizations of the concepts of incivility have been borrowed from the exploratory study of Papacharissi (2004). The criteria for incivility, as outlined in the literature review section, have been applied in this study, to see whether this kind of a

differentiation can be proposed in the online reader comments section, in the Turkish context, and whether the level of incivility and impoliteness will be similar to the popular belief or in line with the previous findings such as Hill and Hughes (1998). The operationalizations had been quite hard to apply for the online reader comments section (Janssen and Kies, 2004), where the design and the intention of the section were different from a deliberative purpose, where the users are talking to each other.

In addition to these problematized concepts, some other variables evaluating the general level of deliberative promise of the online reader comments section was operationalized, such as the type of the reader comments (whether it is a question, demand/policy suggestion, negative criticism); the referred persons, groups (the government, the opposition party, ethnic or social groups, journalists and media, the fellow commenter). Furthermore, the type of discourse, which are frequently voiced in the mass media, and by the public opinion readers, such as the nationalistic/ patriotic discourse, the religious discourse, the discourse of human rights and democracy, the official secularist discourse, and the personal narrative discourse have been operationalized to measure how much they have been reproduced in the comments.

In order to measure the level of disagreement which emphasized in the literature (Mutz, 2006; Mutz and Martin, 2001; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 2004; Gastil, 2008; Sunstein, 2001) among the commenters and the distribution of the different camps pertaining to the controversial issue chosen, the “Pro and Con” variable have been operationalized. The variable measures the explicit utterances particularly about the specific content of the news story, not the issue as a whole. In other words, this variable is a more nuanced version of a referendum model of voting for or against a policy proposal. However, if the comment was not explicitly declaring a Yes or No vote, it was coded for “No pro/con utterance”, but further coded for the other variables in the code book.

4.2.1.3. Units of analysis: the Codebook

The unit of analysis for this study is the reader comments written under the political news stories published in hurriyet.com.tr. Using the operationalizations of Papacharissi (2004) for

the incivility, and others for impoliteness and the internal aspect of deliberation by myself, 26 variables have been written in the codebook. (See Appendix 2)

4.2.1.4. The Pilot Study

The pilot study had been conducted on the 200 reader comments on the Kurdish issue, in order to be able to understand the time that each comment takes to analyze and code and to decide on the variables that do not work, or to add or decrease some options to be given to some variables. For instance, the categorization and exemplification of Goodwin et al. had been used for the type of emotions, variable. In the pilot study, it got evident that, not all of the examples of emotions were relevant for the online political communication, at least for our sample of reader comments. Hence, only the mostly referred emotions are chosen as the values for the variable of “type of emotions”.

4.2.2. Conducting the Research

The 26 variables decided after the pilot study, had been used to analyze each 816 reader comments. The data gathered through the coding have been recorded on the spreadsheets, and then transferred into the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), for further statistical analysis and interpretation. Only one researcher had coded the data, hence inter-coder reliability does not apply in this study.

Due to the difficulty of conducting an objective evaluation which is a requirement of a reliable qualitative content analysis method, some examples of the “crucial” variables and general explanations of how the comments were coded will be given below to sustain more reliability for the further researches.

For the methodological reasons of the content analysis, the overt manifestation of what is written in the comment should be taken as it is, since anybody who reads the same content should agree that and code it in the same way. However, due to the peculiarity of the Turkish language, as a general rule for coding in this study, some of the words have been taken into consideration and analysis, beyond their literal meanings. Turkish language is a very “elastic” and “flexible” one, where many people, concepts and meanings can be implied without explicitly mentioning them. Hence, in a content analysis where the level of

politeness, incivility and emotions are being studied, the implications “beyond the words” had been involved in the analysis.

Variable 11: PRO-CON

This variable is operationalized to measure the how strong the readers are supporting their opinions. Another concept that this variable measures, is the distribution of the opinions, whether there is an even distribution meaning that there is a heterogeneous context of political space, or an uneven distribution; a relatively more homogenous context. The comments that are criticizing side issues other than the specific focus of the news article covers, or the attitude of the government in general, are coded as “no opinion/ pro-con utterance”, due to the fact that they are not stating any specific opinion either in favour or against the given issue and hence; not contributing to the discussion on the very topic of the article. Similarly, general evaluations of the situation without explicitly declaring any personal opinions were coded as “no pro-con utterance”.

Deciding among the strongly supportive and supportive; and very strongly opposed and opposed was decided according to the explicit emphasis given through the wordings of the commenter. Comments discussing the advantages and the disadvantages of the issue being discussed are coded as “Both pro and con”.

Variable 12: FACTUAL/EXPLICIT JUSTIFICATION NUMBER

This variable measures the number of comments which contains any kind of explicit justification, reasoning; even though the justification does not rely on any scientific or ‘rational’ base. In that sense, it is not as ambitious as Habermas theorized as requirements of the public sphere, due to the acknowledgment that it would be an unrealistic criterion. However, this milder conceptualization enables to examine a much more relevant and crucial finding for the context of online reader comments; whether the commenters are giving any explicit explanations, to support their opinions. Even though the argumentation can not be truly “rational” and objective, if an explicit justification would be given for others to follow, then this would be –up to an extend- enough to regard this kind of online political

communication promising, for furthering a space of public deliberation. If there were more than 1 factual justification, the first justification given was coded for the type of justification.

Variable 14: NUMBERS of EMOTIONAL REFERENCES

This variable is not conceptualized as juxtaposition to the number of factual-explicit justification. It measures whether there are any references -explicit or covert- to the emotions of the commenter. If there were references to more than 1 emotion, the most dominant feeling was coded for the type of emotion.

Variable 22: GENERAL LEVEL OF POLITENESS

This variable does not only measure the level of politeness towards the other readers commenting on the same news article, but the general tone and the attitude of the comment as a whole. The 5-point scale has been used to measure the level of politeness. The specific criteria applied are as follows:

Due to moderation that the comments go through before being published, by the comment editors of hurriyet.com.tr, there have not been explicit words of vulgarity. The covert forms of impoliteness were the mostly used ones, such as sarcasm. Thus a more-nuanced criterion was constructed to measure politeness in a scale. The sarcasm which are directed at specific persons are coded as “impolite” and other sarcasm directed at situations, non-person are coded as “neutral”, but comments containing any kind of sarcasm were not coded as either “polite” or “impolite”.

The differentiation between “polite” and “impolite” was done through the explicit forms of expression, such as types of addressing to the others, inappropriate usage of capital letters and exclamation marks. The difference between these is a matter of technicality, other than content.

The substantial difference lies between the group composed of “polite” and “very polite” opposing “impolite” and “very impolite”.

Variable 23: NUMBER OF INCIVILITY and Variable 24: TYPE OF INCIVILITY

The index used to measure incivility operationalized by Papacharissi (2004). A three-item index consists of:

- 1) Verbalization of a threat to democracy
- 2) Assigning stereotypes to persons
- 3) Threatening other individuals' rights

Background Questions to hurriyet.com.tr

In addition to the content analysis, some background questions about the evaluation of reader comments have been directed to the comment editors in hurriyet.com.tr, in terms of how they perceive and eliminate them. Their answers will also be used to supplement and enrich the analysis of the study.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings presented in this chapter explore the deliberative potential of the space of online reader comments on political news stories that are related to controversial political issues dominating the agenda through the chosen concepts. The findings will be discussed drawing on the academic literature on the theory and practice of deliberative democracy, public sphere and online political communication.

5.1. Internal Aspect

5.1.1 Type of the Comments

Drawing on the underlying reasons of deliberation, the type of the comments made was a necessary finding as the first step to evaluate the space of reader comments, whether it can be regarded as a public sphere or not. According to the deliberative theory, in the public deliberation the members of the “public sphere” should be involved through voicing policy suggestions, articulating their demands; asking questions to be informed and listen them carefully to be persuaded; and to be able to criticize the other opinions to further the deliberation, and probably find the optimum solution with the active participation of everyone concerned in the issue (Bohman, 1996; Elster, 1998). The depth and the level of argumentation is important together with the length of the comment are important finding to take into analysis.

The overall means of the length of the comments are 202.95 characters and 27.69 words. It comes up to 2 sentences of average, which might said to be short, inefficient for a full-fledged deliberation to take place. The design of the web page might be influential in the relative shortness of the comments. It is observed that there is a word limit for reader comments. Some relatively longer comments have been cut into pieces, and then published separately; which in a way disrupts the integrity of the comment, and causes difficulty to follow it.

The findings reveal that, the online reader comments are dominantly composed negative criticisms with 61.3% of all 816 comments contain negative criticism in their content. It is an optimistic finding, which might be showing that the citizens are able to post online

comments and be able to criticise the issues and the policies that they are not content with. In that aspect, the facility of online news commenting gives them a space to voice their criticism, and they actually instrumentalize it. However, the lower rate for the other “type” variables complicates the situation. 28.8 % of the total number of comments was coded as containing policy or opinion suggestion as proposal, whereas only 24% were directing questions.

The results coming from different issues –the Kurdish, Head scarf and Army Members- are all similar to each other (Table 5).

Table 5: Types of Comments Across Issues

	Valid Percentage of Questions	Valid Percentage of Policy/Idea Suggestion	Valid Percentage of Negative Criticism
Head Scarf Issue	21,1	28,1	43,7
Army Members Prosecution	25,6	28,1	62,8
Kurdish Plan	24,5	28,8	68,8
Total	24	28,4	61,3

As far as the core theory of public deliberation is concerned, these preliminary results about the type of the comments are not satisfying the requirements of the “ideal speech situation” (Habermas, 1989; Schudson, 1997). However, the results from other variables should be analyzed and interpreted as well, in order not to commit reductionist interpretations.

5.1.2 Level of Disagreement

it is extremely important to see the distributions of the opinions in terms of pro and con in the context of online political communication, where controversial, hot debates are being discussed.

Table 6: Distribution of PRO or CON

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly opposed	253	31,0	31,0	31,0
Opposed	189	23,2	23,2	54,2
Both pro and con	66	8,1	8,1	62,3
supportive	55	6,7	6,7	69,0
Strongly supportive	51	6,2	6,2	75,2
No opinion/ pro-con utterance	202	24,8	24,8	100,0
Total	816	100,0	100,0	

The variable of “pro and con” is operationalized to measure the distribution and the strength of the opinions of the readers, about the exact issue that is covered in the very news article that they are commenting. For instance, very general opinions about the government or the opposition party were coded as “no opinion/pro-con utterance”, because those kinds of general remarks have been coded as “negative criticism” in the other variable. Only the explicit declarations of the opinions were being able to code in this variable.

This is behind the reason for the relatively high percentage of “no pro-con utterance” variable (24.8). Hence, the 24,8 % of the total comments did not declare explicitly in favour or against the Kurdish plan; the abolition of the ban of the headscarf within the universities; the new legal regulation of prosecution of the army members in the civil courts, which are all regarded as the initiatives of the government in the general understanding.

When the sum of the valid percentages of the strongly opposed and the opposed comments are compared to the strongly supportive and the supportive, the proportion is 54.2 to 12.9. This is a clear sign of a lack of even distribution and disagreement. Similar to the weight of the negative criticism, those who are more opposed to the issue at hand were more inclined to comment on the news article, and it led to a relatively more homogenous context, rather than a heterogeneous one. This composition is relevant in the cross-issue analysis (Table 7).

Table 7: Diversity of Political Opinions in the Sample

Issue	Sum of "Strongly Opposed" and "Opposed" in Percentages	Sum of "Strongly Supportive" and "Supportive" in Percentages
Head scarf	44,2	23,7
Army Members	43,7	16,0
Kurdish Plan	63,7	6,5
Total	54,2	12,9

But still, around 13 % of the people have not hesitated and were able to speak up in a climate that is predominantly against their opinion.

Only 8.1% of the total number of comments were containing both in favour and against the policy, or the suggestion of the main article they are being commented on. This may be interpreted as a lack of awareness of alternative viewpoints, and hence inability to reflect on an issue from different perspectives, to reach the best conclusion through evaluating multiple possible views. Most of the comments were containing single opinion, and there were not many references or signs of awareness of the alternative view points about the problem being discussed, that would be considered.

5.1.3. Factual/Explicit Justification and Reference to Emotions

Table 8: Distribution of Factual Justification Numbers

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	399	48,9	48,9	48,9
1	377	46,2	46,2	95,1
2	40	4,9	4,9	100,0
Total	816	100,0	100,0	

According to these criteria, about half of the total number of comments contains an explicit factual reasoning. However, there are not many of them that have more than one single factual justification, there are only 40 out of 816 comments that contain 2 separate

justifications, which may mean that 95% of the whole sample actually can not be regarded as deliberating, or reflecting upon the issues.

Table 9: Distribution of Factual Justification Types

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Reference to prior events	85	10,4	20,2	20,2
	Reference to politicians records, credibility	43	5,3	10,2	30,4
	Socio-political analysis	175	21,4	41,6	72,0
	Other	118	14,5	28,0	100,0
	Total	421	51,6	100,0	
Missing	Missing	395	48,4		
Total		816	100,0		

The majority of the comments are coded for “socio-economic analysis” as the type of factual justification. It is a surprising finding that, “reference to prior events” and “politicians’ records” is lagging behind “socio-economic analysis”, which is composed of evaluations like dynamics of the society, human rights, the rule of law, the functioning of the state apparatus etc. This variable shows that even though there are not so many elaborated factual, explicit justifications given, 41.6 %, of the sample had attempted to give objective reasons dwelling in socio-political analysis, even though it is another matter of research whether they were “objective” or not. Often times, the comments were consisting of 2 sentences, authoritatively stating the outcome of the situation from social lenses. Yet, these comments were also revealing the emotions of their authors as well (63.8 %). A point should be made clear; within the operationalizations of the variables in this study, referring emotions and justifying through factual reasons are not constructed as mutually exclusive variables. Furthermore, the results show that 230 comments have carried the passions of the authors and factual reasoning at the same time (see Appendix 3).

Table 10: Emotions vs. Means of Politeness in General

Type of emotions	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
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Hate	3,73	26	1,041
Suspicion	2,52	23	1,082
Fear	2,67	39	1,221
Anger	3,19	144	1,077
Cynicism	2,88	99	,895
Paranoia	3,05	59	1,007
Optimism	1,76	25	,926
Sorrow	2,62	16	1,147
Other	2,48	83	1,063
Joy/Relief	2,25	8	1,282
Total	2,86	522	1,112

Hence this means that they are not likely to be juxtaposed to each other, in the context of online political discussions. The readers have both given factual-explicit justifications, and also referred to their emotions at the same time, throughout all of the three issues analyzed (Table 11).

Table 11: Factual Justification vs. Reference to Emotions

Issue	Percentage of Comments with at least 1 factual justification	Percentage of Comments with at least 1 reference to emotion
Head Scarf	45,7	63,3
Army Members	42,7	67,1
Kurdish	51,1	63,8
Total	51,1	63,8

Table 12: Distribution of Emotion Numbers

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	295	36,2	36,2	36,2
1	442	54,2	54,2	90,3
2	76	9,3	9,3	99,6
3	3	0,4	0,4	100,0
Total	816	100,0	100,0	

Even though the relationship between the two variables of “number of emotions referred” and “number of factual justifications” is not mutually exclusive, there is a correlation that can be underlined. As can be seen in the Figure 1, as the number of the referred number of emotions increase, the overall mean of the number of factual justification decreases.

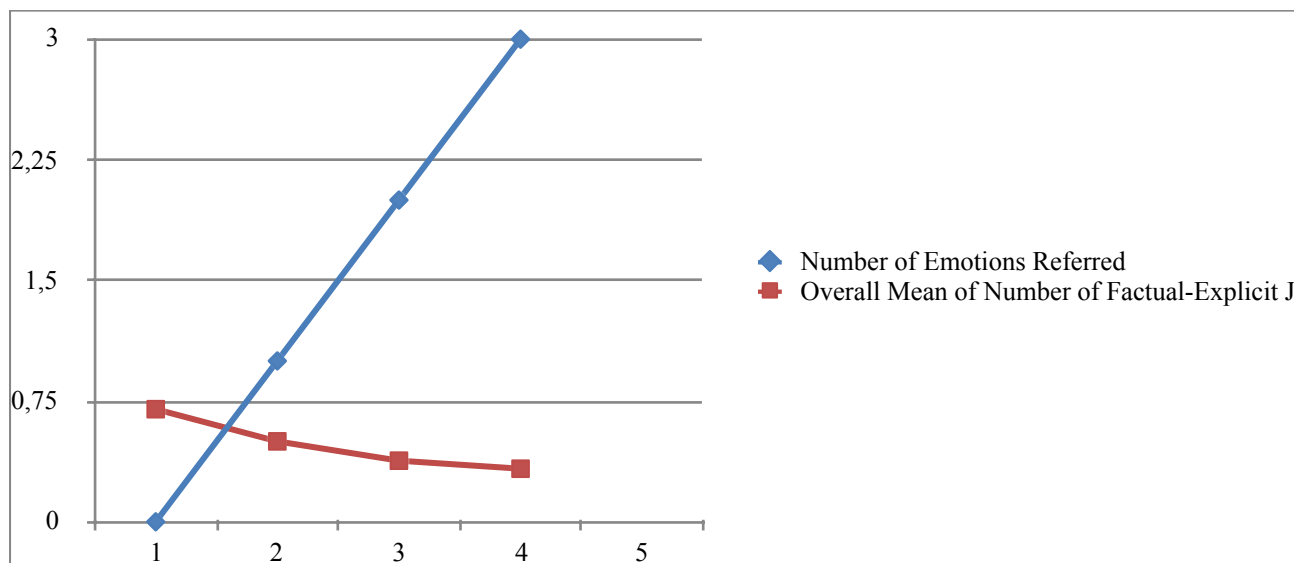


Figure 1: Means of Referred Emotion Numbers vs. Factual Justification Numbers

Among the type of the emotions, there are some outstanding ones, commonly referred in the comments. The mostly referred emotions are Anger (27.8 % of the total), Cynicism (18.8%), and Paranoia (11.4). These emotions are followed by Fear, Hate and Suspicion. The “positive” emotions of Optimism and Joy/Relief were only referred in the 4.8 % and 1.5 % of all the references to the emotions made, respectively. The distribution of the types of the emotions deserves deep analysis in terms of reflecting the psychology of the public which

affect the climate of opinion, and the interpersonal attitudes among individuals. By just a quick glance at it, it can be said that, there is a lack of trust towards the politics, or the political institutions. When we consider that the majority of the comments are referring to the government (68.3 % of the overall sample), it may be suggested that the feelings of distrust and fear are directed towards the government. The precision at this point need deeper research and analysis about the social psychological of a society and the political institutions, which might be done by political psychologists. As far the considerations of this study, those emotions of Anger, Cynicism and Paranoia have the ones with the most impolite means (respectively, 3.19, 2.88 and 3.05). (Table 10.)

Table 13: Number of Emotions Referred vs. Means of Politeness in General

Number of emotions referred	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
0	1,99	295	,896
1	2,74	442	1,087
2	3,53	76	1,000
3	4,00	3	,000
Total	2,55	816	1,119

5.1.4. Type of Discourse

Even though, the type of discourses reproduced by the readers through the comments were not inherently related to the main research questions of this study, drawing on the general literature of public sphere, the types of discourses had been coded. The most referred discourse is what is called “nationalistic/patriotic discourse” (56.7% of the total).

As another discourse, narrative/references to personal stories had been included. The related studies have found out that, other discursive modes such as personalized story-telling and rhetoric are being used by the people in face-to-face small groups, mediated political discussions, and online political forums (Ryfe, 2006; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Hauser, 1999). These alternative types of discourses are suggested to be helping to overcome the various difficulties of deliberation. Surprisingly, the narrative/personal experience has only been referred 18 times out of 816 comments (5.0%). It may be related to the fact that, the

commenters are trying to give factual justifications instead, which are relatively more objective, such as “socio-political analysis” (41.6%). Hence, the tendency of the reader comments lies with giving more objective explanations, references, instead of their subjective, personal experiences; even though their emotions are revealed through their attempts of objective/factual analyses.

Table 14: Distribution of Type of Discourse

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Reference to nationalistic/patriotic discourse	206	25,2	56,7	56,7
	Reference to religious discourse	20	2,5	5,5	62,3
	Reference to personal experience/narrative	18	2,2	5,0	67,2
	Reference to official secularist discourse	56	6,9	15,4	82,6
	Reference to discourse of human rights and democracy	63	7,7	17,4	100,0
	Total	363	44,5	100,0	
Missing	Missing	452	55,4		
	System	1	,1		
	Total	453	55,5		
Total		816	100,0		

5.2. Interpersonal Aspect

5.2.1. Referring to the “Other side(s)”

The results show that, in the online comments, the readers are referring to the government (31.7%) in the total. This locus of reference is followed by, “ethnic/social groups” (19.6%), and the “opposition parties” (9.1%). (Table 15)

Table 15: Types of Reference to “other(s)” across Issues

Issues	Percentage of Reference to other Commenters	Percentage of Reference to the Government	Percentage of Reference to Opposition Parties	Percentage of Reference to Ethnic/Social Groups	Percentage of Reference to Journalist/Media
Head Scarf	14,1	12,1	9	0,5	4
Army Members	7,5	25,1	11,6	0	0,5
Kurdish	2,9	44,5	7,9	38,2	0,2
Total	6,7	31,7	9,1	19,6	1,2

Most of the comments are referring to the government, for understandable reasons. Since the policy issues are suggested and are being planned to be implement by the government, it is the addressee of the comments made about those issues and plans. However, when the difference between the percentages of the “reference to the government” variable is compared, the difference attracts attention requires further analysis. The high reference percentages to “ethnic/social groups” results from the topic of the news articles that around half of the data of the sample has been drawn. 416 of the total number of 816 reader comments are on the articles about the Kurdish Plan by the government to give more rights. Since the Kurdishness is an ethnic identity, the comments have frequently referred to the “ethnic/social group”.

The most surprising finding out of the whole five “reference” variables is, I think the low levels of reference to “fellow commenter” and “media/journalist”. Only 55, out of 816 comments had referred to other commenter, and even less, 10 of them had referred to the media or any journalist. The reader commenting facility is part of the online media institution, and the news articles, the content that the readers are commenting on are all products of the journalists working in the online version of one of the biggest mainstream newspapers of Turkey. However, the readers do not voice any criticisms or suggestions to the reporter of the very news article; whereas they use this opportunity to articulate their criticisms and opinions toward the government.

5.2.2. Politeness and Civility

Around half of the comments are coded as very polite and polite (52%) and 24.3% of the whole number of comments are coded as impolite and very impolite (Figure 2).

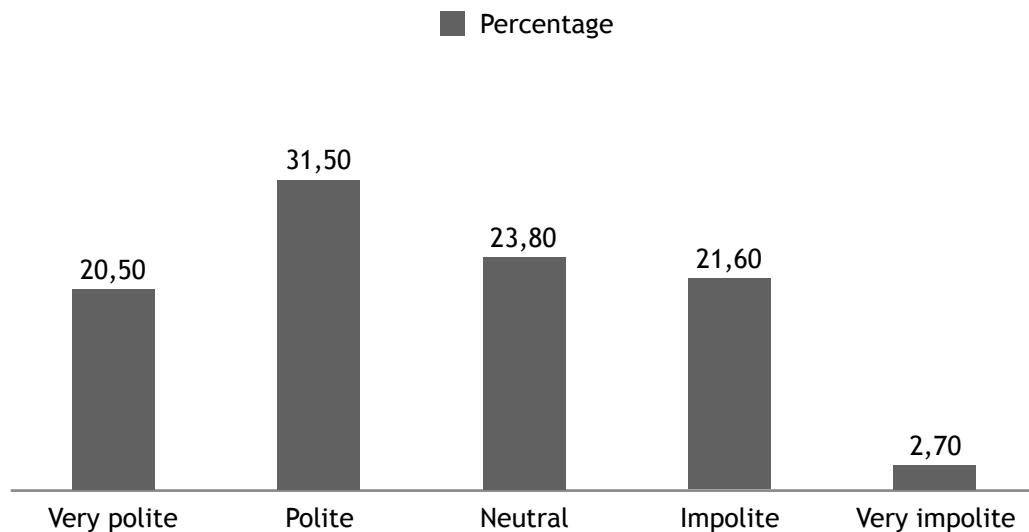


Figure 2: Level of Politeness

This finding is central to the study. Contrary to the common assumptions, it shows that online political communication- even though this is a relatively new and not much studied area of online political discussion, if we can call it- is not overwhelmingly prone to impoliteness. More than half of the comments do not contain any kind of attitude, or behaviour that can irritate others, or make them hesitate to withdraw from joining the discussion, in line with the findings of Hill and Hughes (1998) and Papacharissi (2004).

It is important to make the warning at this point that the criterion to evaluate impoliteness can be problematized. This study has been conducted in a non-Western context, Turkey. As Gambetta (1998) had pointed, there can be talked about some other “cultures” which have some specific characteristic that differentiates them from others. He analyzes what he calls the “Claro culture”, and outlines some definite characteristics. If this kind of an analysis is to be embraced, than it might be concluded that, the analysis of “politeness” can be context-specific. In other words, the criteria to evaluate politeness should be contextualized according to the very culture the data is being taken from, because then, a word which may “sound” obviously impolite when articulated in a Western society, may only be “normal” in a non-Western one.

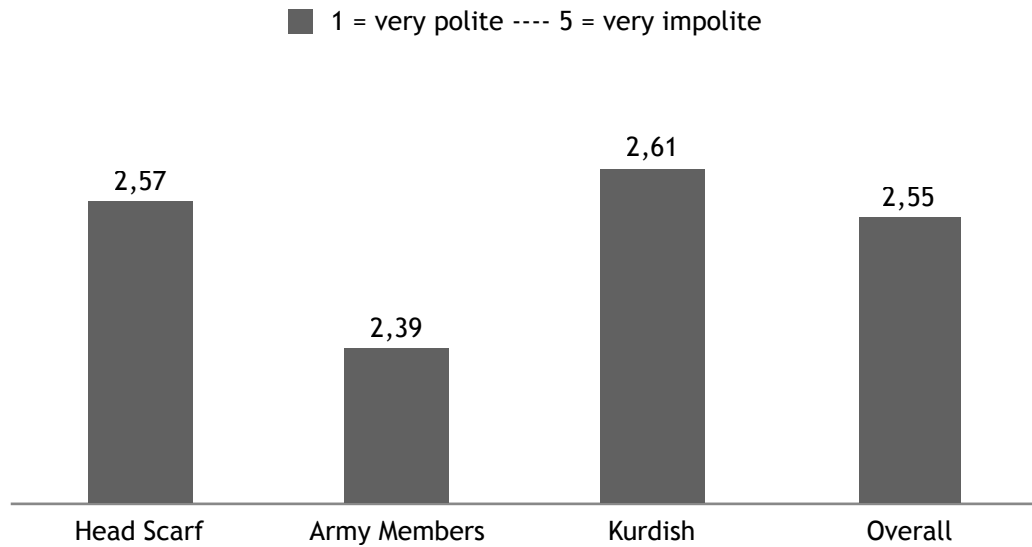


Figure 3: Means of Politeness Across Issues

The content analysis which had been conducted through taking these particularities, contextualities into consideration, gives out these finding of impoliteness and politeness. Hence 24.3% of impoliteness with 2.55 mean of politeness (with the 5-point scale, 1 being very polite, 5 being very impolite), I think, do not constitute any major source of hesitation, anxiety, and discomfort for the other readers to take them back from adding their comments (Witschge, 2002).

Civility, as framed in the literature review, is taken as a concept other than politeness, unlike the common usage of the word (in the Oxford dictionary), and other researchers specifically studied incivility in the online political communication settings (Ng and Detenber, 2005). Unlike impoliteness, incivility is not context-specific. Incivility, being the negative collective attitude toward the democracy (Papacharissi, 2004), is more critical in terms of its effects on democracy and promises for deliberative democracy and the criteria to evaluate incivility is universal. Fortunately, the level of incivility is much lower (4.9% of the whole sample) than impoliteness.

Table 16: Incivility Occurrences Across Issues

Issue	Frequency of Incivility	Valid Percentage of Incivility Number
Head Scarf	10	5
Army Members	6	3
Kurdish	24	5,7
Total	40	4,9

Table 17: Incivility vs. Politeness

Number of incivility			
Level of politeness in general	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Very polite	,01	167	,109
Polite	,05	257	,274
Neutral	,06	194	,242
Impolite	,06	176	,256
Very impolite	,23	22	,429
Total	,05	816	,245

Table 17 shows the relationship between the level of impoliteness and the means of incivility. As the level of politeness decreases, the mean of incivility slightly increases. Hence, this correlation is not very clear, due the total number of “very polite” comment is 22, and the standard deviation is 0.429. Still, it might be suggested that there is a weak correlation between the two concepts, but it is not without controversy. Thus, the relationship between these two concepts suggests that, impoliteness and incivility are different concepts, and as impoliteness increases, it does not directly mean that incivility will increase as well, which is in line with the findings of Papacharissi(2004).

Table 18: Types of Incivility Across Issues

Issues	Threat to Democracy	Threat to other individuals' rights	Assigning Stereotypes
Head Scarf	0,5%	2,%	2,%
Army Members	1,5%	1,%	2,%
Kurdish	0	4,8%	1,2%
Total	0,4%	3,1%	1,5%

When the incivility types are compared, the results indicate that “threat to other individuals’ rights” is the most frequent one, and it had been seen mostly in the comments written on the news articles of the Kurdish issue. This might have to do with the substance of the issue, being the plan to give more democratic rights to an ethnic minority, hence the readers were discussing whether they should acquire extra rights or not. There are not many “threats to democracy” (0.4%), like throwing the democratic government by force, which is a promising finding for the Turkish context, where the Turkish Army had made military coups 3 times in the history of Turkish Republic. Assigning stereotypes had resulted from the polarization of the Turkish society, along the lines of secularism, which was the issue being discussed in the Head scarf, and the Army members’ prosecution in the civil courts.

5.3. How hurriyet.com.tr manage the reader commenting system and Discussions

Even though there have not been an interview conducted with the journalists working in the internet and comment section of hurriyet.com.tr, a number of background questions have been sent via e-mail to the internet department who are receiving, reading and publishing the comments, in order to interpret and elaborate on the findings retrieved from the content analysis. Some of their answers are crucial to make sense of the important findings of the study.

The most important clarification was about the moderation that the reader comments go through before being published. As Wahl-Jorgensen (2007) had ethnographically studied the moderation of the traditional “letters to the editors” sections of the print newspapers, and

suggested that the moderation that the editors are applying is one of the main parts of the process. Even though that kind of a detailed qualitative study is beyond the scope of this study, a general insight has been obtained through the written answers sent.

As to the question directed about the moderation of the comments before being published, it was answered that, any member of hurriyet.com.tr can send their comments. The comments sent, are evaluated by the “comment editors” according to the “general ethical rules of the institution” (Hurriyet, the newspaper); and are being published if they are not violating them. The criteria of moderation are listed in the following way: respect to “personality rights”, not inclusion of any insults and abuses, adherence to “national values” and morality, etc. It is said that, the comments are being read and evaluated by a group of five comment editors who are experienced in the field and still taking trainings within the institutions, from time to time. The 80- 90% of the sent comments are being published, daily. When eliminating the comments, the first priority of the editors, is said to be, the concern of the “public”; however in order to strengthen the issue they are sometimes including the personal “emotions” such as anger, hate, admiration. They underlined that the objectivity of the commenter is also important. Believing that the comment contributes to the “article” and the sharing through is a reason for publishing it.

In terms of the evaluation of politeness, and whether the moderators are feeling any tensions or dilemma between the freedom of speech and the impoliteness, they have given the criteria of moderation (personality rights, not including insults and abuses), and said that “your rights end where the others’ begin. As long as we pay attention to this criterion, we do not violate the freedom of speech”.

In the internet version of the hurriyet.com.tr, the editorial articles, opeds, columns are not open for reader comments. When the reason for this is asked, they said that this was frequently being criticized. They claimed that, the columns are the personal opinions of the columnists, and if the commenting facility was to be included the columns as well, then the readers would start to “revile”, rather than criticising the content of the article. They believe that, a group of people, who are opposing the author due to reason such as the being fan of a

different sports team, embracing another political world view- would constantly “revile” the author for personal reasons.

Another very important question was the evaluation of the editorial board about the general activity of reader comments. The perspective of the newspaper as an institution - whether the reader comments section is contributing to the flourishing of the culture of democracy, and if the climate of the reader comments is reflecting the general public opinion was asked. The answer was not explicitly mentioning their point of views concerning the culture of democracy; however it was implied that the evaluation of the reader comments would be implemented in order to “increase the productivity/efficiency”. What I discern from this phrase is that, the editors are not embracing a perspective of contributing to the democratic culture. They also added that, they have not witnessed an act of detailed analysis relying on the reader comments.

Lastly, they said that, the reader comments can be regarded as the demographic indicator of the “political sensitivity”.

Relating the answers to these background questions to the findings of the content analysis conducted on the reader comments, the relatively “low” percentage of impoliteness (24,3%) may be associated to the moderation that the comments are going through before being published. One of the important criteria they have said to implement is non-inclusion of abuse or insults. Hence, those comments that would definitely be coded as “impolite” are eliminated in the moderation process. Furthermore, some other examples of internet forums and online political discussion contain a lot more content of impoliteness. For example, in the Youtube, the comments that posted under the songs of Kurdish folk singer Ahmet Kaya, contains a lively political discussion, where serious amounts of impoliteness can be seen (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2rjYV6OcJY&feature=related>). Obviously, the YouTube comments are not moderated. Hence, the concept of “free, unlimited space of discussion” is legitimately being questioned in the context of reader comment section of hurriyet.com.tr.

As another moderation criterion, it has been declared that the comments should adhere to “national values” and morality to be published. The fact the findings that the majority of the

comments-especially in the Kurdish Issue- make references to the nationalistic/patriotic discourse (86.9%) and there is not an even distribution of the supporters and the opposers of the policies concerning extending the democratic rights of the ethnic minority of Kurdish people, may be related to the “bias” of the comment editors toward the “national values”. It may be the case that, those comments supporting the “Kurdish issue” in a way that is “deemphasizing” the Turkish national values, were stuck at the moderation process, and were not published. In that respect, the moderation may be evaluated as a “conservative” factor affecting the distribution of the supporters and the opposers.

The general evaluation of the purpose of the reader comments is not in line with what the editors in the local newspapers have declared in the study of Wahl-Jorgensen. It seems that the commenter editors, do not see the context of reader comments as a public sphere, where the freedom of expression and any kind of opinions should equally be voiced, in order to produce a public opinion to affect the decision making mechanisms. This model does not seem to exist in the comment editors mind, deduced from the following explanations given: the inability to comment on the opinion articles, the lack of any feeling of tension between freedom of speech and the elimination of some comments which are thought to contain “violations to ‘personality rights’”. From these general answers given by one of the comment editors, the institution does not seem to have a consciousness of enhancing public sphere, even though they might have a vague intention to contribute in the richness of their news article with the help of the reader comments.

6. CONCLUSION

This study have attempted to evaluate the deliberative potential of the online reader commenting facility within the mainstream online newspaper contexts, through focusing on the internal deliberation aspect of types of justification and references; and the interpersonal aspect of politeness and civility. The deliberative promise of the facility of online reader commenting section in hurriyet.com.tr, Turkey, have been considered through conducting quantitative content analysis, and using the answers from the comment editors of hurriyet.com.tr, to supplement the analysis. Since this phenomenon is a new one, the picture is much more complicated and the conclusions are far from definite. However, drawing on the results of this study, some insights deduced together with some suggestions for further research can be mentioned to contribute to the study of this newly rising form of political communication.

It has been found that, the context constituted through readers' commenting on the political news articles covering controversial issues that had dominated the agenda and published in the online version of the Turkish mainstream newspaper hurriyet.com.tr do not constitute a truly homogenous context, where an even distribution of different political opinions is being voiced. 54.2% of the total number of comments has found to be in favour of the specific issue that the news article is covering, whereas only 12.9% are opposing the issue. Even though the distribution can not be regarded as a homogenous one, it is evident that in all of the three controversial issues of Turkey (the Head scarf issue, the Turkish Army and the prosecution of their members in the civil courts; and the Kurdish Plan of the Government, to give more democratic rights to the Kurdish ethnic minorities), the majority of the opinion dominates the "climate of opinion" by more than half of the sample. According to the normative criteria of deliberative democracy theory, diversity and disagreement are the prerequisites for deliberation to flourish. In this respect, the studied context of online reader comments does not fulfill the criteria of diversity and disagreement fully; however the causes and prospects of this deserve further research. Two probable lines of research may be followed; one being the ownership issues and the general political stand of the newspaper as an institution might be a factor alienating some group of people from commenting in some

newspapers content. Because, when some other examples from online versions of Turkish newspapers, such as radikal.com.tr is examined, it can be seen that the reader comments section is clearly more heterogeneous, and its reputation is more “pro-freedom and extremes” and the readership profile is known to be composed of relatively more educated and intellectual people. However the Alexa Rating of the radikal.com.tr is 97 among Turkish web sites, much less popular than hurriyet.com.tr, which means that the level of deliberation is not as representative as hurriyet.com.tr. It should be kept in mind that, the digital divide is a crucial factor, when the demographic distributions of the online newspaper readers are concerned. In both online newspapers, the demographics are not representative of Turkey at large. (<http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/hurriyet.com.tr> and <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/radikal.com.tr>)

In this study, other criteria of deliberation had been analyzed; the involvement of large segments of public in inclusive discussion, and the deliberators’ suggesting their own proposals, changing their opinions through attentively listening and questioning others’ view points, hence reaching a legitimate solution (Bohman, 1996) by means of persuasion, not coercion or deception (Dryzek, 2000; Gutman and Thompson, 2000). It had been found that, the majority of the readers are not asking questions (76%), and making any concrete suggestions (71.6%). These findings suggest that the basic requirements of deliberation are not met in the Turkish online news commenting context. However, the majority of the comments contain negative criticisms with a percentage of 61.3. This means that, the reader comments section of hurriyet.com.tr is predominantly implemented as an opportunity, to voice citizens’ criticisms, in a space, other than the election booth. Even though it is not yet well organized, and writing down comments under the online news articles are not taken into consideration neither by the editors of the comments in hurriyet.com.tr, nor any government officials, it is beneficial for the internal aspect of deliberation (Kim, 2007) good in itself to be able to have voice them, at least for a start.

Another pillar of deliberation theory, as theorized by Habermas, is “rational-critical debate”, and excluding the emotional forms of expression and justification. This study had analyzed the ways reader comments had incorporated “factual-explicit” and “emotional” types of

discourses, and found that half of the comments contain at least one factual-explicit form of justification, and 63.8% of the comments are referring to the commenter's emotions. This finding suggests that, these two forms can and actually do co-exist in a single comment, and there is no need to devalue self-interestedness in the form of emotional expression, since factual justifications can still be given, in addition to emotional references. Furthermore, the high level of references to emotions promote the political conversation that Barber (1984) underlines, however does not fulfill the requirements of Schudson's public discussion, because it is inconsequential and there are not enough divergent views to call it inclusive public activity (Schudson, 1997).

Moderation in the online political discussions comes out to be a crucial factor to be further studied. Given the moderation criteria of adherence to personality rights (elimination of comments with abuses and insults) and the "national values" and morality –reported by hurriyet.com.tr to myself-, may also lead to the elimination of some of the comments and further damaging the diversity of the distribution of the comments. Specifically, for the Kurdish Issue, the percentage of the opposers of the government's Kurdish Plan is 63.7; whereas the supporters' is 6.5%. However, these results of hurriyet.com.tr does not mean necessarily mean that online news commenting is inherently unsuitable for hosting diverse political opinions. The online reader comments in radikal.com.tr, sets out a different example, where diversity seems to be sustained, however with very limited total number of comments.

Another important finding is the limitation that the design of the web site imposes. Due to the difficulty read the other comments written on the articles on hurriyet.com.tr, the comments have found to be not referring to each other. Only 6.7% of the total number of comments refers to fellow commenters, which is a severe impediment on the deliberation potential. Whereas on another Turkish online newspaper, haberturk.com.tr, all of the reader comments are being able to read on the same page, by scrolling down, and there found out to be more reference to each other among the commenters. This is in line with the Desquinabo (2008)'s finding that the character of online political discussion can be influenced and

encouraged to be “controversial and sustained debates” through “institutional systems and technical devices” (Desquinabo, 2008: 8).

As for the common prejudice about the politeness level of online political discussions is concerned, the overall percentage of impolite and very impolite comments is 24.3. However, this study suggests that the crucial variable to measure the empowering potential of a political discussion is not politeness, but civility; defined as the collective respect of the citizens to the democracy at large (Papacharissi, 2004). Following Papacharissi, incivility is examined in this study as “operationalized as the set of behaviors that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups (p. 267). Thus the findings showed that, the incivility percentage is 4.9, meaning only 40 occasions of incivility out of 816 comments. Yet, it is being argued that, even though there is a much higher level of impoliteness, when the comments are read and analyzed, their content does not pose any threat to democracy per se, and yet politeness does not constitute an impediment for deliberative democracy, unlike incivility; fortunately whose level in the sample is much lower.

This study, being one of the first researches conducted on the reader comments posted on the political hard news coverage of online newspapers in a non-Western context, is not totally in line with the similar studies conducted. For instance, since the study of Manosevitch and Walker (2009) was conducted on reader comments posted on online opinion journalism content and in a Western context, it is only normal that the findings differ from each other. When more researches will be conducted on reader comments posted on online hard news coverage from other contexts, then comparative analysis will be available.

Given the contemporary crisis of citizen participation of the liberal democracies, it had been seen that, the online reader comments in Turkish online newspaper, hurriyet.com.tr, provides an opportunity to the citizens to be able to voice their criticism against the controversial political issues, which they can not directly get involved. Even though this context can not yet be considered as a place of public deliberation, due to low level of political disagreement, diversity, lack of inter-commenter talk, tough criteria of moderation, it bears potential with the motivation of the citizens to give factual justifications (Habermas, 1989),

while their revealed emotions facilitates the political conversation (Barber, 1984). Incivility conceptualized as a collective trust and respect to democracy, differentiated from politeness (Papacharissi, 2004), and found to be at low levels, that it would not inhibit the deliberation.

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APPENDIX 1

In order to comprehend the importance and the seriousness of the Kurdish issue, it needs to be placed in a historical and the social framework. From the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the Turkish State has been constructed on unitary and centralist foundations. The Turkish nation has been carefully built, after the nation-state founded, whose underlying mechanism can be understood from the nation-building theories of political scientist, such as Benedict Anderson (1983). In line with the other contemporary states of the time, Turkish nation was only composed of the “Turkish” people, and all the other ethnicities were not officially acknowledged politically and socially. People belonging to other ethnicities were exposed to varying levels of legal and political discriminations, which led to some uprisings through out the years. Kurdish people were the ones with the highly populated ethnicity after Turkish people. Even though, the official records can not be relied upon to give an exact figure of the Kurdish population, independent researchers claim that there are about 15 million Kurdish people living in Turkey, whose total population is around 71.5 million.

Even though they are the biggest non-Turkish ethnic group, some commentators and the Kurdish people themselves regard this group as the most discriminated and most unacknowledged, which actually can be traced through the official records of the Turkish Republic. After long years of systematic ignoring of the political demands which could easily be regarded as violation of democratic rights, in 1984, the secessionist Kurdish terrorist organization called, PKK had been founded. They were after an independent Kurdish nation to be built on the south-eastern part of Turkey, where Kurdish people is densely populated. For 25 years now, the terrorist attacks had been continuing. According to some commentators, this can be called a “civil war” fought between the Turkish Army, and PKK, deployed in the mountains, pursuing a guerrilla war. Around 30-40 thousands of people had died as a result. However, the attitude of the Turkish officials- neither the highly politicized strategically important Turkish Army, nor the governments- had changed through out these years.

The beginning of June 2009 had witnessed a dramatic break in the attitude of the Turkish government. The declaration of the President Gül, saying that Turkey was going under a crucial opportunity in terms of solving the Kurdish issue, have started the course of events, that the Prime Minister Erdoğan, and the related ministers together with the Kurdish political party which has 20 MP's in the parliament and other civil society organizations got involved in. The Prime Minister Erdoğan, had carefully underlined his will to open up an inclusive discussion to solve the issue where all the organizations within the civil society, the opinion leaders, the journalists, the academicians and the public as well needs to be involved in.

Public deliberation is indeed, needs to be taken place about solving issues that concerns all the members of the public, due to various reasons- as theorized by the deliberative democracy theoreticians (. But the fore coming reason is the legitimacy that it sustains (Bohman, 1996; Cohen, 1997). In large-scale societies, the execution of the liberal democracy necessitates the majority rule, where the demands and the choices of the majority are implemented, whereas the interests of the minority are not always represented by the decision-makers. If the minority directly or indirectly, does not get involve in the actual discussion process where a decision is being made, especially about the issues that are crucial to the public at large, then the minority do not feel themselves to be bounded by those decisions. In other words, those decisions made without their opinions, thoughts, justifications being voiced in the decision-making processes, are not legitimate for them. The way to sustain legitimacy for all sides to an issue, is to make them part of the decision-making, through an inclusive public deliberation. This line of solution to the participation and legitimatization crisis of the liberal democracy is the proposition of the deliberative democracy theory, which was mentioned above.

The above mentioned declaration of the Prime Minister Erdoğan, can be evaluated in the framework of this inclusive understanding of constructing a "public sphere", where large groups of people needs to be involved in the decision-making of this kind of a complicated and sensitive political problem of the country.

In line with this understanding of reaching at a common good through a process of public deliberation, the appointed minister- the minister of internal affairs, had organized separate

meetings with a group of journalists specifically researching and writing about the Kurdish issue, occupational organizations, DTP (Democratic Society Party) the political party which is making Kurdish nationalistic politics within the parliament with 20 elective MP's, and planning to make some other meetings in the near future. In this context, the government officials are keen on making everybody feel that they are not being forgotten, or ignored in this process. Hence, the online political discussions taking place about this new phase of the solving of the Kurdish issue, deserves special attention to analyze in terms of its deliberative potential due to the "public" character of the roots and the scope and the prospects of the issue.

For historicizing and contextualizing the secularism in Turkey, it should be remembered that there was a rupture with the foundation of the Republic, in 1923. The bureaucratic elite in the centre had tried to establish a secular regime, however the majority of the public- living in the rural "periphery", were loyal to their religions, and its regulations of the public life as well- descending from the Ottoman shariah rule. The tension between the centre and periphery had been prominent, after the social transformation which brought the "ordinary", "non-bureaucratic" people from the periphery, to the political power. The old political elites, depending on their secularization, had constituted a harsh rivalry, and lead to a social polarization, which can be observed in every facet, and layer.

In particular, the ban of the wearing of the headscarf in the public sphere, meaning by the public officials, in order not to lead to any kind of discrimination, in the constitution had furthered with a ban in the universities. This had created enormous reactions against the state, due to their being anti-democratic. In the beginning of the year 2008, the pro-Western, mild Islamic government AKP (Justice and Development Party), had initiated a process to abolish this ban, and this resulted in a great turmoil, and hot debates. There was tremendous polarization, and the tone had been so harsh.

APPENDIX 2

The Codebook:

ID variables:

V1: Article ID: 12032221, 12129354, 8137494, 12148846, And 12175973

V2: Comment ID: 1, 2, 3...

V3: Commenter ID: <http://benimsayfam.hurriyet.com.tr/yorum.aspx?uid=25834821>,
<http://benimsayfam.hurriyet.com.tr/yorum.aspx?uid=25392027>....

V4: Commenter User Name

V5: Date: 8-June-2009 19:28:38, 8-June-2009 19:30:08....

V6: Content: Content of the comment

V7: Length: 1, 2, 3... (Word count)

V7a: Length: 1,2,3... (Character count)

V8: Type of Comment- Question: 0- No
1-Yes

V9: Type of Comment- Policy/Idea Suggestion: 0-No
1-Yes

V10: Type of Comment-Negative Criticism: 0- No
1-Yes

V11: Pro or Con 1-Strongly Opposed
2-Opposed
3-Both pro and con
4- Supportive
5- Strongly Supportive
6- No opinion/ pro-con utterance

V12: Number of factual justifications/explicit reasons: 0, 1, 2...

V13: Type of factual justification/explicit reason: 1-References to prior events
2- References to politicians'
records, credibility
3- Socio-political analysis
4- Other
999- Missing

V14: Number of emotions referred: 0, 1, 2...

V15: Types of emotions referred:	1- Hate 2- Suspicion 3- Fear 4- Anger 5- Cynicism 6- Paranoia 7- Optimism 8- Sorrow 9- Other 10- Joy/ Relief 999- Missing
V16: Type of Discourse:	1- Reference to nationalistic/ patriotic discourse 2- Reference to religious discourse 3- Reference to personal experience/ narrative 4- Reference to official secularist discourse 5- Reference to discourse of human rights and democracy 999-Missing
V17: Referring to a fellow commenter:	0-No 1-Yes
V18: Reference to government:	0-No 1-Yes
V19: Reference to a opposition party:	0-No 1-Yes
V20: Reference to an ethic/social group:	0-No 1-Yes
V21: Reference to media/journalists:	0-No 1-Yes
V22: Level of politeness in general:	1- Very polite 2- Polite 3- Neutral 4- Impolite 5- Very Impolite
V23: Number of Incivility:	0, 1, 2...
V24: Type of Incivility- Threat to democracy:	0-No 1-Yes
V25: Type of Incivility-Threat to other individuals' rights:	0-No 1-Yes
V26: Type of Incivility- Assigning Stereotypes:	0-No 1-Yes

APPENDIX 3

**Number of Emotions Referred * Number of Factual Justifications-explicit reasons
Crosstabulation Tables**

			Number of factual justifications – explicit reasons			Total
			0	1	2	
Number of emotions referred	0	Count	108	168	19	295
		% within Number of factual justifications-explicit reasons	27,1%	44,6%	47,5%	36,2%
	1	Count	239	185	18	442
		% within Number of factual justifications-explicit reasons	59,9%	49,1%	45,0%	54,2%
	2	Count	50	23	3	76
		% within Number of factual justifications-explicit reasons	12,5%	6,1%	7,5%	9,3%
	3	Count	2	1	0	3
		% within Number of factual justifications-explicit reasons	,5%	,3%	,0%	,4%
Total	Count		399	377	40	816
	% within Number of factual justifications-explicit reasons		100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%