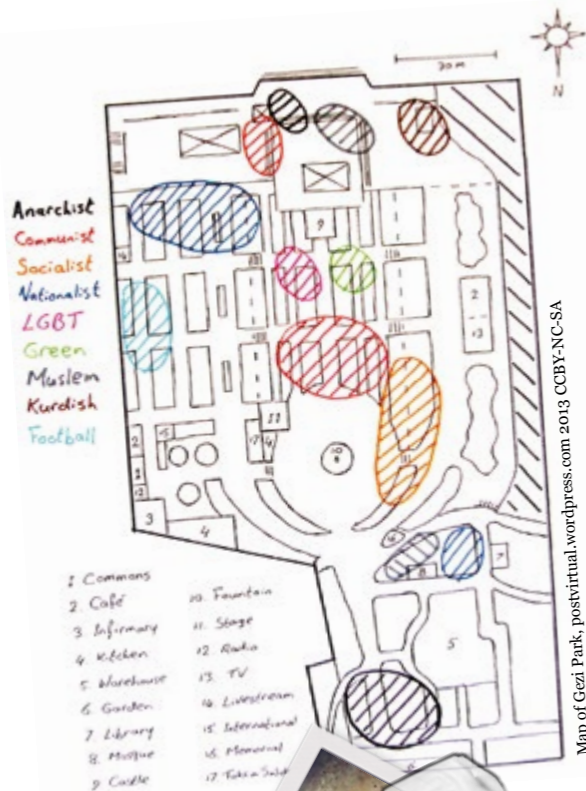


#definitiveinfo #kesinbilgi

Young people informing young people

by Gülesin Nemutlu Unal



Reliable information is a crucial precondition for those who would like to enjoy their right to association and freedom of expression. If you cannot get reliable information about what is going on in the streets from the ones in charge of reporting, what do you do? You go out and report it yourself!

What had been going on in Istanbul since 27 May 2013 had a lot to do with youth and it had a lot to do with information. Yet one has to cross his or her eyes to see what it has to do with “youth information”.

JULY 2013

The circumstances that led to what I choose to call a civic resistance were a series of events in which people were asking for their right to participate. It was neither the first “demand to participate” nor it will be the last. Yet here we are. I am trying to put this article together while jumping between screens from several social media sites and this page. Because it has been almost two months since it started and tonight – as I write in July 2013 – it is still going on.

What was going on in Istanbul?

Let me tell you the background story as briefly as I can. It started just before the general elections in 2011. The governing party started to announce their “development” projects as the elections were getting close. Out of many “crazy projects”¹ for Istanbul (for some reason that year, journalists preferred to refer to the major projects as “crazy”) one of them was about the renovation of Taksim Square. This project² would take all the vehicle traffic underground leaving the square for the pedestrians and re-build the long gone Topçu Barracks in the place of Gezi Park.

Depending on your visions of life, city planning and economic growth, you could take different sides on the value of these projects. And people did just that. A group of architects and city planners argued against the Taksim renovation project and formed an initiative called “Taksim Solidarity”. They also called the project “crazy” but with a different tone of voice. The craziest part for them was that at no time were people of the region³ consulted about this project. At the end of an unannounced non-participative process, the project was there on the table, decided.

As an opposing initiative, Taksim Solidarity not only took their case to several committees and the courts, but also started to organise gatherings and festivals in the park to spread the word. Meanwhile the square was closed for construction and their

court case was accepted and then rejected several times. (Finally, in the last days it was accepted again).

Then one night in May 2013, the construction machines start to take down some trees in Gezi Park. A fairly small group of people rushed to the park to stop this demolition, and they managed to do so. The day after, the machines approached the park again and for the guardians/protesters it became evident that they would have to stay there day and night. Even though, legally, the demolition was not allowed, the machines were there.

The response from the authorities quickly escalated from municipality forces to the state police. The police interference was brutal on the second morning when the tents were burnt and teargas and water cannons were used excessively.⁴ That was the moment when many young people said “enough is enough” and rushed to the park to help. By the end of the day, thousands of people were trying to reach Taksim Square.

Why mainly young people? It was because they could get the news and pictures from online social media. Meanwhile the older people were away from the Internet, enjoying several TV shows on how to bake and who is the most beautiful and what to do in the summer. And “the” news channel aired a three-hour documentary on penguins.⁵

1. <http://www.euronews.com/2011/04/27/turkey-s-pm-unveils-crazy-canal-project/>
 2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22753752>
 3. <http://www.taksimplatformu.com/english.php>
 4. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22780773>
 5. <http://youtu.be/kxeZILofzM>

Where are the young people? Here they are...

Throughout the course of history in Turkey, young people were called by several names associated with different roles. At times they were the “light of the future” and at other times “the soldiers of democracy”. In the political history of Turkey, young people were always present and reserved for a duty of saving or protecting. This was the case until the 1980s.

For the youth of the 1980s and afterwards young people started to be referred to as “apolitical”. The common discourse was that these young people only wanted to have better, newer and more commercial goods and that they had absolutely nothing to do with politics. Knowing this is not true, I would like to suggest a very good study by Demet Lüküslü, summarising the history of youth in Turkey and making a detailed case that the youth after the 1980s are not apolitical at all.⁶

As a self-proclaimed youth worker, I personally have been asked several times in the last decade why young people in Turkey were not interested in politics anymore. In a nutshell, how I responded was based on what I hear from young people and also believed: “It is not true that young people are not interested in politics. They have unlimited ideas and proposals about how things should be dealt with and how a country should be governed. Their lack of interest is towards the system as such, which they refer to as slow, corrupt and dirty.”⁷

And there they are. From the first day until now, young people are on the streets, in the parks, in the forums, online, offline. They are the ones gathering information, sharing, spreading the word and shaping their lives. Several responsible adults apologised explicitly to young people for their “apolitical” labelling. Especially people from my generation. We were the ones oppressed and cut off from being political. The least we could do is to provide support now.

Are you chapulling too?

During the first week of resistance, in one of his speeches, the prime minister declared that he was supported by the 50% of the votes at the elections so he did not need permission to change Taksim Square from anyone, not from the opposing party or from a few *çapulcu*.

A very rough translation of the word *çapulcu* to English would be “looter”. Young people didn’t assume this name as an insult but rather took it with humour and joy.

In a short time, this new name formed a common identity to call out the messages of the resistance, a common “brand” under which communication would flow easily and in a united manner. Thousands added this “brand” to their profile names on various social media sites. The meaning of the word became “resister” in public use.



Symbols of Gezi Park, Anonymus, 2013



Taksim square volunteer medical help, Mstyslav Chernov, 2013

Forming and informing

Already the first day it became evident that traditional media would ignore whatever was going on in the streets. The resistance spread to more than 20 cities and the speed of information flowing on the screens was way too fast to follow.

Following the changes in profile names, the hash tags came. (Pause for some language training: *diren* means “to resist” in Turkish). #direngezi was the one related to Gezi Park. All the neighbourhoods in Istanbul and cities in Turkey started to form their own hash tags. #direnbesiktas, #direnankara, #direneskisehir, #direnadana. Profiles that shared news from the streets were quickly formed and followed. The information flows started to form hubs.

The speed of online information and the uneasy feeling of turbulence began to form a risk of spreading misinformation. Online trolls were a known concept after all. Everyone became a volunteer journalist and the responsible attitudes we expected from journalists were our responsibility now. Confirming any information you came across before sharing it again became a constant struggle. When you see pictures of people in need of a doctor and also the phone number of a volunteer infirmary, you want to share it immediately. But no, you should call the number and quickly check it before doing anything.

In time, standards started to form. If you are the witness of what you are writing, then you also write *kesin bilgi*, which means it is definitive information. And then it is up to the receivers of course to re-distribute it. Another norm: you should not say “happening now!”, instead you

should type the time. You should be as clear as possible about the place, and hash tag it if possible. Pictures and videos are considered crucial, both in spreading the news and collecting evidence for judicial cases afterwards. And most importantly, you should keep yourself safe while reporting.

Is this a Spring or an Occupy?

The ignorance of the mass media was so extensive that young people needed to call their parents and relatives in different towns to inform them. Not only uncles and aunts but the whole world should know about what was going on. I think it was done for two reasons: firstly, to put foreign pressure on the government to stop the police brutality⁸ and secondly, because we could!

The collective memory we shared in the last years of the “Occupy” movement and the Arab Spring were not through television but through other channels of information. So it was in Istanbul. The Erasmus students in Istanbul shot a video and posted it on YouTube.⁹ Facebook groups were informed.¹⁰ Tweets were sent with occupy hash tags and in different languages. The word of resistance was out there for the world to see.

Wide-ranging responses were received. Videos from all over the world from support demonstrations started to arrive. Opinion leaders and artists started to post about the resistance. The uprising in Brazil added a whole different level to the feeling of international solidarity. My personal favourite video was from Egypt, recorded in the dark room of a young protester who shared his experience and comments on what the young resisters in Turkey should be careful of.

6. Lüküslü G.D., “La jeunesse turque actuelle: La fin du ‘mythe de la jeunesse?’”, EHESS, Paris, 2005.
7. <http://www.taraf.com.tr/nese-duzel/makale-gulesin-nemutlu-yoruk-kurtaran-gencler.htm>. (In Turkish)

8. <http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/full-page-ad-for-turkish-democracy-in-action>
9. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moYcEUHXTuY>
10. <https://www.facebook.com/chapullinginternational>

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Life and information in Gezi Park

The number of people staying in Gezi Park was in the thousands in a short time. And the first thing built was an information board, together with an infirmary. In time, as the police attacks started to subside, workshops, concerts and discussion forums took place.

Apart from the young people staying in Gezi Park, there were also others, volunteering to visit and then move to a place with Internet coverage and report, as coverage in the park was down for several days.

During the sit-in at the park, exam time arrived for high school students. As there were many high school students and university students or graduates living side by side, they quickly formed a “classroom” where older ones could tutor the younger ones for their exams.

At the 1st European Youth Work Convention in Ghent, a researcher said: “For young people nowadays, owning is not as cool as it used to be for previous generations. Now what is cool for them is to share.” Life at Gezi Park was proof of this statement with its library, stage, day care corner, classroom, food corner and tents. It was cool.

Clark Kents are on the move

As the weeks passed by, apart from the heroes, heroines and others living in the park, many young people start to live a kind of “Clark Kent” life. All through the day, workers went to work and students went to school. And at the end of the day, all these people from different neighbourhoods start to walk to Taksim, together in groups of hundreds. And to different parks and squares in different cities too.

How were these walks organised? What was the information structure? For this part, I would dare to say, none. People were getting on with their daily stuff and then started to walk.

Night time was filled with encounters with police trying to block the way to the park, which became a given condition. But what was happening during the daytime?

Humour and language

During the day, the pictures and videos from the previous night were being edited; websites and blogs were being updated; animations and illustrations were drawn.

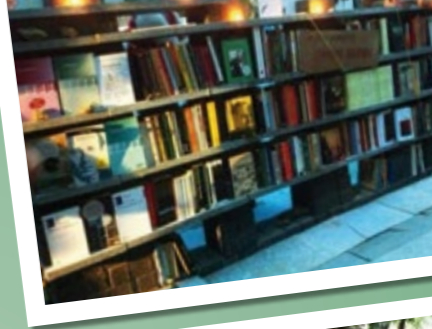
Humour and laughter are powerful tools against a stubborn solid authority. Henri Bergson says in his book on laughter¹¹ that what is funny is the stiffness (where flexibility is needed), and laughter is the punishment to it.

At a time when people needed each other, the echo of laughter played a uniting role.

So what about youth information?

If Gezi had not happened, I would probably have liked to write a *Coyote* article on “Who sets the agenda when informing youth?” What do young people need to know about? And what do we want young people to know about? Where is the pointer? Who holds it?

And in that imaginary article, I would probably argue that the expressed needs of young people should be setting the agenda so the pointer should be in their hands. If the need is jobs, let the information be on the topic of employment. If the need is expression, let the information be on the topic of art.



After the experience with Gezi Park resistance, my position about agenda setting was not changed but more deeply seated. In the youth work field, we work a lot on skills and attitudes. Demanding, receiving and critically analysing information also require a certain set of skills, so does producing the information.

I believe it is time to provide means and support for young people to consolidate and share their own set of information. With the Gezi Park experience, I believe now more than ever that any structure which is not fast in giving a response, not participative or not clear will be resisted.

The spirit

So here you are, at the last lines of this article. You know what? I would like to ask you to do something, if you will allow me? Think of something that bothers you. The best would be if you could think of a situation in which your participation was not allowed although the consequences would also affect you. It is probably a situation about which you were misinformed.

And now stand up.

Just stand up.

And think of what you will do next.



11. Bergson H., *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, The Macmillan Company, 1911