

## From Arab Spring to Chinese Winter: Political Communication

Sertaç Serdar<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*It was perceived as a spring to Arabian World, political protests that relevant to democratization which has started in North Africa in early days of 2011. As well as some commentators called it victory of democracy, some others thought success of capitalizm. Facebook as well Twitter, occurred as communicator for Arab Spring, moreover as reason why this social movement came out. Some says the internet proved itself in North Africa as a new way of political communication. This is not the only one thing to disappoint hopeful ones in early months of 2011 that The Spring could not reach goals till today also the objection to being new era and primary role of the internet. China is the main reason for this objection to assumption that the net is new democratization instrument. 34 percent of one and half billion people, it means 458 thousand, are internet user in China. It might be expectable to see some cues for democratizing China if the internet has had features related with democracy and capitalizm. In this article, the internet as a new media, will query the importance for political communication basis on Arab Spring and the situation in China.*

**Keywords: Arab Spring, Political Communication, Political Participation, New Media, Chinese Winter.**

---

<sup>1</sup> Assist.Prof., Uludag University, Department of Public Administration, serdar@uludag.edu.tr

## INTRODUCTION

It was perceived as a spring to Arabian World, political protests that relevant to democratization which has started in North Africa in last months of 2011. As well as some commentators called it victory of democracy, some others thought success of capitalism. As all these have some censurably characteristics because of the consideration as both the point of congestion reached today and its way of happening, this is not acceptable to deny the function and the power that the new media had.

Facebook as well Twitter, occurred as communicator for Arab Spring, moreover as reason why this social movement came out. Some says the internet proved itself in North Africa as a new way of political communication.

This is not the only thing to disappoint hopeful ones in early months of 2011 that The Spring could not reach goals till today also the objection to being new era and primary role of the internet.

China is the main reason for this objection to assumption that the net is new democratization instrument. 36 percent of one and half billion people, it means 485 thousand, are internet users in China. It might be acceptable to see some cues for democratizing China if the internet has had features related with democracy and capitalism.

In this article the internet's importance of political communication based on Arab Spring and the situation in China as a new media will be queried.

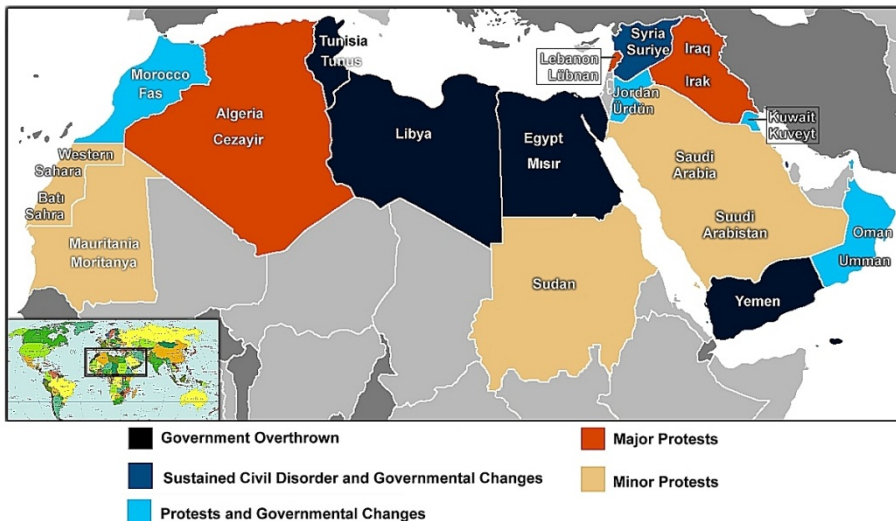
## ARAB SPRING

The demonstrations that organized to keep front liberty and democracy demands had called as Arab Spring and lead to some discussions till today was started in December of 2010 with a symbolization that Muhammad Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia and sparked to many countries firstly including North African ones.

The series of protests and demonstrations have been observed in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Jordan, Oman, Yemen, Syria, Morocco, Sudan and Bahrain. Protesters who filled city squares expressed not only the politically rights such as liberty and democracy they also mentioned some economic and social problems listed as bribery and favoritism eradication, finding solution to unemployment. As in January 1968, former Czechoslovakia,

Prague Spring metaphor used in describing emerging based on liberalization requests; this movement was called The Arab Spring.

### COUNTRIES AFFECTED BY ARAB SPRING DIRECTLY



Even though the features of social structures are equipping political, sociological and economic phenomena of daily life with its own characteristics, sometimes universal, mostly regional similarities are common. Each country's culture is one of the distinguishing features from others. But as that indicated by North African countries what happened repeatedly, there may be similar historical processes in between societies with similar infrastructural qualities. Arab Spring appeared as a result of such an interaction in individual countries with the processes that at first glance were similar to each other. Besides there are many factors shown to give rise to this situation, British newspaper The Guardian has compiled with 3 items the common ground of rebellion fire between different continents that surrounds the world<sup>2</sup>:

1. There were teens and young people in the middle of the rebellions because the neoliberal economic system hit youngsters mostly. They wound up to the existing order in all countries, struggle to develop an alternative power structure and to change the order was made.

<sup>2</sup> "İşyanların Dili Ortak", *Milliyet Gazetesi*, 14 Ağustos 2011, <http://dunya.milliyet.com.tr/isyanlarin-dili-ortak/dunya/dunyadetay/14.08.2011/1426507/default.htm>

2. The overthrow of the Egyptian leader, Hosni Mubarak, questioning of media emperor Rupert Murdoch's wiretapping scandal gave encouragement to young people to believe the idea that traditional institutional authorities may be collapsed. People filled the city squares to change the order.
3. The most common in revolts is forms of being organized: Both uprisings in the Arab world as well as the last British people (*occupy* movement) were organized through social media tools. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter helped people to organize easier and faster.

In this sense, it does not seem possible to say the most important factor behind the repeatedly uprisings is freedom request.

In other words, just like what happened in social movement began in late 60's in Prague couldn't cover neither the freedom expectation nor hopes for spreading to other countries, these riots in the Arab countries weren't also directly correlated with freedom; moreover weren't follow enlargement course that resulted freeing. In the end both Springs couldn't reach their summer.

## POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Although the communication scientists have named the twentieth century as communication era, we notice that the main issue which masses are rather than concerning is political communication.

Both the process that began with the invention of television and the period that televisions and radio receivers have become smaller thanks to invention of transistor caused results in favor of countries that create technology.

Liberalization and democratization dependent upon it, on one hand, spread simultaneously to many parts of the world due to capitalist obligations imposed by the international market, on the other hand, with the impact of the rapid change processes called globalization, has led to the emergence of structures where societies resemble each other. While the factor behind the capitalization being possible is international economic relations, the factor behind the fact that societies resemble each other is the effect of rapid means of communication. Advances in technology and reflections of these advances on communication, entertainment sector have drawn people directly into a technological world, while the new goods becoming fastest-changing products of the market economy, this speed has led social structures change, that is, become similar to one another. In this sense, interacting systems in the political structure like every social institution is in the process of resembling each other have emerged.

Even social structures without any element of democracy in the political cultural foundations have had to revise the ruler-ruled relationships due to impact of processes of obligation of social resemblance. Thus, lifestyles of the countries which have invented technology, had mass production and dreamt of a life integrated with other technological products have shaped the processes of social change in the countries forced to use the technology.

As a result of economic structure, production format, relations with the international economic networks, daily goals and concerns, ultimately social life has changed in accordance with the imaginations of those who produce the technology. All this differentiation chain, in the final analysis, changed the structure of the state of differences, so the political process. The public is not a mass following orders given by the state now, but it has become the most important element of the political system. In this stage an obligation to communicate between the ruler-ruled emerged and formed the basic structure of the modern world democracy. As the rulers began to receive the power from the people, a requirement for more and more people to participate in decision-making process appeared and at this stage new technologies were benefited from.

Television and the transistor portable radios that were begun to be used in the first quarter of the twentieth century have become agents of the state-society interaction. Computer networks began to cover the world at the end of the century have become the new area of this type of communication. In this sense, concerning this coverage, we can say the last century was not only a communication era but also the era of political communication.

## **INTERNET, FACEBOOK, TWITTER**

Widespread use of Internet has influenced the lives of individuals as well as the social structures. From e-trade to e-government, applications offer conveniences in many areas of daily life that may cause difficulty. The increase in coverage of Internet services provided by both wireless networks and mobile operators have revealed a rapid process of social change, states aiming to adapt to this change first made their legal structures adapt to a system in which the Internet existed at all times, and then placed the Internet in political decision-making processes. Not surprisingly, internet usage rates have increased in all over the world and at the end of 2011 reached 35% of the total world population<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global\\_Internet\\_usage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Internet_usage)

Facebook that began publication in 2004, soon attracted the attention of Internet users has reached 1 billion to the user<sup>4</sup>. When we consider a group of two and a half billion people of Internet users, we can say that 40% have Facebook accounts. So for every 10 people in the world 2 are Facebook users<sup>5</sup>.

A similar situation also applies to Twitter. The figure has reached 250 million users of Twitter, started broadcasting in 2006<sup>6</sup>. The fact that a social networking site where mostly 140-character messages can be sent is shown a lot of interest is not thought to be a very common situation.

Facebook and Twitter have features that are not ordinary web page characteristics. Users are often in activity in the site. 2.7 billion *Like* are sent every day or *comments* on Facebook. Every day an average of 250 million images are uploaded. The total number of friends of all the users has surpassed 100 billion<sup>7</sup>. 340 million tweet is sent and 1 billion 600 million Twitter queries are done daily<sup>8</sup>.

Internet in a structure where there is Facebook and Twitter has more effect on the individual, community, and therefore the political structure. Arab Spring is the most exemplified for this issue. As noted above, popular movements in North Africa in early 2011 where an intense effect was observed are perceived as the success of Facebook and Twitter; the articles are frequently observed where it is called *Facebook revolution*. At this stage, the necessity of subjecting the Arab Spring an analysis of political communication context stands.

Individuals taking part in the political system is explained by the concept of political participation. The individual has the opportunity to participate by declaring demands, suggestions or complaints to the political system. Political participation appears at various levels. In the first category which can be handled as viewer activity, we see those who wonder the functioning of the political system, watch, read the news about politics. Those who only vote in elections without any political activity can also be handled in this group.

---

<sup>4</sup> The estimated figure for August 2012: [http://allfacebook.com/facebook-billion\\_b73632](http://allfacebook.com/facebook-billion_b73632)

<sup>5</sup> The estimated figure for the end of 2012.

<sup>6</sup> The estimated figure for the end of 2012: [http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/twitter-active-total-users\\_b17655](http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/twitter-active-total-users_b17655)

<sup>7</sup> <http://techcrunch.com/2012/02/01/facebooks-s-1-845-million-users-every-month-more-than-half-daily-and-nearly-half-mobile/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>

Those who adopt a political idea, say that they have an ideology, join political party meetings are in an upper stage, i.e., referred to in the transition activities. Those involved in an election campaign, members of a political party, participants of the political strategy-setting meetings, candidates for political office and those serving in a manager position in a political party can be included in the top-level form of political participation. This group is referred as gladiator activities<sup>9</sup>. The factor causing the individual's political participation is a sense of political efficacy. The more intense and high the sense of individual political activity is, the higher the individual's political participation.

Political culture heavily influences the individual political participation. Individual who has existed as a part of the political socialization process is in the influence of a whole comprising of traditions, and those taught and his own experiences. As a result, due to the elements of existence of high-level political participation in his political culture, individuals who have a sense of political efficacy have more intense demands of being integrated into the political system.

The form of use of social networks, at this point, brings some differences. Not to use Facebook or Twitter as a political ground is completely an individual choice. It is not possible for a social structure where lack of individuals' expectations in the political life is traditionalized, that is, there are no democratic elements in its political culture suddenly to have potential to do revolution through the possibilities provided by the Internet. In political cultural codes of the countries experiencing Arab Spring, especially Tunisia, Egypt, Libyan, it is not possible to come across traces of democracy. All of these countries were ruled by totalitarian, dictatorial leaders for many years but there was not such a large rebellion by the people. Although there was no common tool within easy reach such as the Internet in the past, the communication possibilities were not completely eliminated. However, the ruled, they had refrained from going out in public squares.

The place of Facebook and Twitter in the Arab spring is their use of only as a means of communication and organization. In essence, it is not the the things shared in Facebook, nor the tweets that performed the riots; it is the individuals going out to the streets to revolt. Revolution is not the use of Facebook, but a society which has *obedience to the state* in its political culture gathering in the squares against political power.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *Çağdaş Siyasal Bilim - Teori, Olgu ve Süreçler*, İstanbul: Beta Yay., 1984, s: 121.

In fact, an establishment of a direct link between the high-level political participation and Facebook and Twitter-specific entertainment, or gaming action, *sharing, likes, poking, tweeting* or *re-tweeting* is not very possible. *Sharing* a dissident statement, sending a *Like* to a criticizing picture are not activities that go beyond the entry-level of political participation actions. Moreover, expecting a management approach that does not have a tradition of inference from protest and criticism to be affected by Facebook groups, Twitter posts is not a situation that can go beyond fantasy.

Were social network-specific actions to have the power to make a revolution, with the continuous control mechanisms which are part of the tradition of strictly managing the state of the countries going through the Arab Spring becoming active to make a reverse effect, they could reach the conclusion they wanted. Various units of the state made an effort to use the social networks to lead the society according to their wishes, used disinformation, but they could not gain what they aimed. The fact that Gaddafi tried to achieve but failed by using not only social networks, but television programs as well is an example of this situation.

One of the most important questions on this subject is why uprisings have not started in other countries with a non-democratic governance structure, but have internet connection, while *Facebook Revolution* is the name given to the events in North Africa and it is claimed that the Internet can make revolutions now. The most important example of this is the People's Republic of China because China has a number of different interesting features from other countries that do not have a democratic governance structure, or even all the countries in the world.

## CHINA

According to 2010 estimates, the population is 1 billion 340 million. Considering that the total population of the world is an estimated 7 billion, we can say that approximately one fifth of people (19.142%) live in China. There are also issues that should be emphasized in terms of political history: Thousands of years of dynastic ruling ended with the takeover of nationalists in 1912. Communist Chinese nationalists, led by Mao, who managed to defeat the nationalists in 1949 seized the administration of the country. Mao began working to establish a socialist state. A period of a more liberal atmosphere dominated the country with the Stalin's death. However, Mao whose regulations that were closed to criticism and predicted uniting failed big time got in a difficult situation politically. This failure led to the fact that the party was divided into Maoists and the pragmatists in the 1960s.



Although Mao took a back seat for some time, he continued to be a cult among the people. However, the country's founder wanted to complete the revolution, and was still supported by the army in particular. For this reason, he returned to active political life with a series of new activities called *the Cultural Revolution*. Over time, eventhough he grew away from almost everyone around him, from the year 1976 until his death he continued his cultural revolution<sup>10</sup>.

For many years, showing the structure of a closed economy, in the early 1980s, China ceased implementation of collective farming and re-allowed private enterprises. Currently, China is the world's largest exporter and attracts foreign investment in record levels. It gained the right to join the World Trade Organization. In this way, China will win the right to easier access to foreign markets, but will be open to foreign competition. This situation is expected to increase private sector investments, but the state still maintains a monopoly on power and the strict control on individuals.

In December of 2001, the People's Republic of China completed negotiations continued for 15 years with the World Trade Organization and the government promised that it would have various structural changes in the economy particularly the trade regime and it would act by international trade rules. Immediately afterwards came the high growth rate that had been signalled for years, trading volume records were broken and China became the most attractive center of foreign direct investment. China, the world's second largest economy calculated via purchasing power parity, is expected to rise to first place in this ranking in 20 years under normal circumstances<sup>11</sup>. With the consistent rate of development in the last 10 years reaching 10%, it has become known as the new global power of our century.

There are also noteworthy features in terms of Internet usage. Population of Internet users in China is around 485 million people<sup>12</sup>. With this figure the country has the most internet users. Worldwide, one of every four Internet user lives in China<sup>13</sup>. 36.1% of the population can use the internet. The number of users in the country is about the total of the 4 countries that come after it in ranking<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> [http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%87in\\_Halk\\_Cumhuriyeti](http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%87in_Halk_Cumhuriyeti)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> <http://nextbigfuture.com/2012/01/internet-usage-at-end-of-2011-for-world.html>

<sup>13</sup> given approximately: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm>

<sup>14</sup> the 4 countries that come after China in ranking: USA, Japan, India, Brazil. For more.: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_number\\_of\\_Internet\\_users](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_number_of_Internet_users)

The world's second largest social network after Facebook, Qzone, is in China and has over 480 thousand users. Qzone has surpassed the number of members of Twitter all over the world with this figure. Even Facebook which is banned in China has approximately 700 thousand users<sup>15</sup>. Tencent Weibo and Sina Weibo blog sites in China, totaling nearly 650 million members, come after Qzone<sup>16</sup>.

The total number of Internet users in the countries with the Arab spring is around 20 million<sup>17</sup>. Among these countries, the country with the highest rate of Internet usage is Tunisia with 27%<sup>18</sup>. The sum of all the Internet users of not only the countries that are experiencing public riots, but the entire continent of Africa and all the Middle East countries are 217 million people<sup>19</sup>. So the total number of users in the two geographical regions cannot reach that of the half of China.

Figures show us that the things happened in North Africa cannot be called as Facebook or internet revolution. If the use of Facebook or the Internet were elements that could create consequences which could lead to a revolution on their own, uprisings should have started in China where the most intense Internet use is before all the countries in the world. Indeed, the Chinese government, learning some lessons from what happened in Tiananmen Square in 1986<sup>20</sup> continues to control Internet use by taking serial measures. On the days experiencing Arab Spring, the government seeing the possibility of starting unrest in the country's north concerning the independence of Tibet not only took military measures quickly but cut the region's Internet connection as well. In addition, with a safety net that covers the entire country, it constantly watches and controls the Internet. This network security is known as *Virtual Great Wall of China*<sup>21</sup>.

---

15 <http://www.zdnet.com/blog/facebook/number-of-facebook-users-in-china-septuples/237>

16 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online\\_communities\\_with\\_more\\_than\\_100\\_million\\_users](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_communities_with_more_than_100_million_users)

17 <http://www.checkfacebook.com/>

18 <http://www-958.ibm.com/software/data/cognos/manyeyes/datasets/number-of-facebook-users-in-arab-c-2/versions/1>

19 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>

20 For detailed information about the student demonstrations in Tiananmen: Barış Adıbelli, *Arap Baharı'ndan Amerikan Gazabına: Çin-Suriye İlişkileri, Arap Baharı ve Suriye*, Barış Adıbelli (Ed.), IQ Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, İstanbul 2012, s: 102-105

21 The Great Firewall of China. <http://www.greatfirewallofchina.org/>

People's Republic of China that implements a state-controlled change model in the process of adaptation to the capitalist economic model, in the phase the liberal elements begin to take place within the country, in all the processes to adapt to international economic model where market economy and free market conditions are valid in recent years employs similar mechanisms of control in the use of the internet and social networks. Although it has the impression that it is a country with socialist, a strict mentality of management that is closed to innovations, the state's not relinquishing control and succeeding in adapting to all the innovations in the phase of internet becoming widespread is a herald of the fact that Spring will not come to China easily and winter months will last long. Maybe if North Africa's deposed dictators had managed to adapt to changing technological structures and even to lead as in China, they would have protected their power.

## CONCLUSION

Then the only question is left to be answered: What happened in North Africa? The demonstrations shown as Arab Spring, and began with hopes could not reach the objectives. In some *Spring countries* the Muslim Brotherhood increased its power, the soldiers assumed more important duties<sup>22</sup>. Some countries became worse than ever before in terms of democratic values. Dreams of creating a freer country ended with disappointment after the bloody civil wars. The leaders, dictators were gone, but successors were not adequate to respond to the hopes. Arab Spring emerged as the result of a serious error as though there was an ideology that brings together the masses. The principle of ideology that Habermas emphasizes is a false form of communication held true in North Africa too<sup>23</sup>. The leaders protested by the people were gone, but the old ideas still continued to remain in power. Increase of the impact of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is at least one of the results of this type.

---

<sup>22</sup> *The Muslim Brotherhood*, a religious political organization founded by Hasan al-Benna in 1928, in the city of Ismailia, Egypt. Movement advocating a return to the guidance of the Quran and Sunnah in order to establish a modern Islamic society has found wide base in the Middle East and North Africa. It has a strong place in public. It became the most important movement in the Islamic world, especially during the Arab Spring and became stronger. It organized in almost every country where Muslims live. The Muslim Brotherhood, aspects of political stance, is a very popular movement advocating peaceful, moderate and democratic Islamic, liberal, and religion brotherhood. It has much broader support than organizations all over the world, such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban (Wikipedia).

<sup>23</sup> See discussion for this issue: **Kadife Karanlık**, Nurdoğan RİGEL, vd, (Ed), Su Yayınevi, İstanbul

In this context, the state in North Africa is a state of *hyperreality*<sup>24</sup>. A society that do not have democratic traditions, political participant cultural codes organized by taking advantage of Facebook and Twitter and like the always emulated West shouted slogans in the squares freely(as though such thing existed). The *hyperreality* is the social structure itself which looks like doing high-level participation. The public is the very notion of *simulation*. In fact, many different versions of this *hyperreality* can occur at every stage of the world created by internet. The bitter thing in terms of what happened in North Africa is the lost lives, the life and property losses, and deteriorating order. A hyperreality situation that can be created by sending a *Like* to a Facebook message cost the lives of some people on the days when Spring tried to come.

The increase in the use of the internet which allows us to expand the coverage of democratic space, i.e., one who is political in a modernist sense narrows the range of movement of those who are in control. A compensation for this loss is possible following a process whose every stage is controlled by the government to ensure the continuation of the spread of the use of internet as in China. As an another process, a *hyperreality* created as in North Africa, can affect the broad masses with the help of social networks.

## REFERENCES

Adibelli, Barış, “Arap Baharı’ndan Amerikan Gazabına: Çin-Suriye İlişkileri”, *Arap Baharı ve Suriye*, Barış Adibelli (Ed.), IQ Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, İstanbul 2012.  
<http://www.greatfirewallofchina.org/>

Baudrillard Jean, *Simülakrlar ve Simülasyon*, Çev: Oğuz ADANIR, Dokuz Eylül Yayınları, İzmir 1998.

given approximately: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm>

[http://allfacebook.com/facebook-billion\\_b73632](http://allfacebook.com/facebook-billion_b73632)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global\\_Internet\\_usage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Internet_usage)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_number\\_of\\_Internet\\_users](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_number_of_Internet_users)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online\\_communities\\_with\\_more\\_than\\_100\\_million\\_users](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_communities_with_more_than_100_million_users)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>

<http://nextbigfuture.com/2012/01/internet-usage-at-end-of-2011-for-world.html>

---

<sup>24</sup> For hyperreality concept: **Simülakrlar ve Simülasyon**, Jean BAUDRILLARD, Çev: Oğuz ADANIR, Dokuz Eylül Yayınları, İzmir 1998

<http://techcrunch.com/2012/02/01/facebooks-s-1-845-million-users-every-month-more-than-half-daily-and-nearly-half-mobile/>

[http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%87in\\_Halk\\_Cumhuriyeti](http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%87in_Halk_Cumhuriyeti)

<http://www.checkfacebook.com/>

<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>

[http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/twitter-active-total-users\\_b17655](http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/twitter-active-total-users_b17655)

<http://www.zdnet.com/blog/facebook/number-of-facebook-users-in-china-septuples/237>

<http://www-958.ibm.com/software/data/cognos/manyeyes/datasets/number-of-facebook-users-in-arab-c-2/versions/1>

İsyanların Dili Ortak, *Milliyet Gazetesi*, 14 Ağustos 2011,

<http://dunya.milliyet.com.tr/isyanlarin-dili-ortak/dunya/dunyadetay/14.08.2011/1426507/default.htm>

Kalaycıoğlu, Ersin. (1984). *Çağdaş Siyasal Bilim – Teori, Olgu ve Süreçler*, İstanbul: Beta, s: 121.

Rigel Nurdoğan, vd, (Ed), *Kadife Karanlık*, Su Yayınevi, İstanbul.

