The Use of Netnography in Covid-19 Studies in the Context of the Political Economy of Media

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Abstract: Researchers working on the political economy of media have determined the production structures, production relations and social classes of mass communication as their subjects of study. Forms of organization seen in the media, market structure of media businesses, and working processes in the media are among the other topics examined. It can be said that information plays an important role in the construction of the new social order, with social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube being among the largest companies in the world. In this context, it would not be wrong to say that new media owners have gained power in the design and management of social structures. The political economy of media examines how communication tools play a role in the global capitalist system and what their functions are. The subjects of examination are what the actors in the new media structure are, what activities these actors engage in, and what the results of these activities are. On the other hand, topics such as the level of ownership in the commercialization of new media, power relations, surveillance and control initiatives are among the topics that researchers focus on.

With the rapid developments in new media, the reaction of individuals and communities has been to maintain balance. In other words, communities that have seen the focus of power shift to media ownership have tended to play their roles more actively in the new media. The ideas, reactions and actions put forward by virtual communities have caused the communities to increase in number and mass.

Since March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has shaped the comments and content of individuals and communities on social media tools. These studies, which are handled in the context of the political economy of the media, have been one of the application areas of the netnography research method.

EBSCOhost (705), Science Direct (311), Web of Science (647) and Dergi Park (5) (included in the study because it is a national academic database) databases were analyzed 1668 academic articles in which netnography methodology was used. The number of academic articles investigating the topics of individuals and/or virtual communities in the context of the political economy of the media was 24.

Keywords: Netnography, Political Economies of the Media, Covid-19

INTRODUCTION

The opportunities and opportunities that the internet and technology offer to individuals are developing at an unpredictable rate these days. Especially when considered in a commercial context, current productions and services make great efforts to reach this speed. On the other hand, the speed at which individuals integrate into this pace and adapt to the opportunities offered is undeniable. The spatial opportunities that individuals obtain on the internet and social media tools offer the opportunity to express themselves at the social level, unlike the commercial context. This spatial richness, called new media, has led to the emergence of the "third wave" concept with the introduction of new technologies into our lives. The impact of the third wave on the economic, social and cultural change process is that it supports individuals' efforts to express themselves, criticize and make policies, especially on social media tools. When the efforts of individuals reach the stage of a common discourse, the concept we encounter is virtual communities. The nature of belonging, sharing or commenting in virtual communities has enabled individuals to focus on the policies they have created or have created. In this way, the productions put forward on the internet and/or social media channels have attracted the attention of researchers. The structure formed in different media and tools has moved away from hierarchy, and the control mechanisms in media tools have gradually weakened. This brought about what McChesney [1] titled "active anarchy". When the productions of individuals and/or communities are examined in the focus of discourse within this "new" order, the concept of netnography has offered researchers the opportunity to analyze the production owners. Regarding the subject, Kozinets [2] developed the netnography method specifically to examine virtual communities. Focusing on the discourses of communities, netnography analyzes the qualitative content of focused individuals.

POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF THE MEDIA AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

The concept of political economy was conceptualized to examine the enrichment processes of society after capitalism and the industrial revolution. The concept, which is considered as a classical political economy approach and a critical political economy approach, examines production relations in general terms in the structures of production, exchange, distribution and consumption. Adam Smith, the founder of the Classical School of Economics and one of the pioneers of liberalism, considers individual freedom of initiative and competition as the key concepts that can eliminate social problems. Smith prioritizes reason with the idea of "laissez faire". Smith believes that the right path can be found with this idea and that the conditions for existing in a happy and equal society are through this teaching [3].

Critical political economy differs from classical political economy by four features. The first of these is that critical political economy is holistic. The second is that it deals with political economy in the historical process. Its third feature is its focus on the balance between capitalist enterprise and state intervention. The last feature is efficiency. In critical political economy, efficiency describes dealing with moral issues (justice, equality, and the public good, etc.). While classical political economy deals with the dominant relations of the capitalist system, the critical approach considers power-society relations [4].

Critical political economy reveals the facts by taking into account the processes of change and development in the world. With this approach, critical political economy is liberating; It brings perspective to issues such as globalization and monopolization [5].

Since the 1980s, media has gained a very important position within the new economic policies of capitalism along with globalization. With this change, the structure and legal framework of the media was rebuilt as "media-capital-state". In this new order established on

the basis of complex relations, the owners of "new media" tools have become global giant companies. In this way, global companies have been able to generate commercial profits through their production and operations, as well as create a political population [6].

The conceptualization of new media as the “third wave” cannot be limited to the emergence and unpredictably rapid acceleration of new technologies. Alvin Toffler [7] called this process the "third wave" and argued that new media played a leading role in the process of economic, social and cultural change. He suggested that the change experienced today involves knowledge-based processes. The industrial revolution and the age of new technologies, in which economic resources are based on the agricultural society, are explained as the basic processes of the third wave outcome. The factor that gives speed and acceleration to the process is seen as the monopolization in the field of communication and technology. What strengthens the conditions is explained as multimedia, the ability to transform and disseminate information, and the diversification of sharing environments.

The ease of access to third wave developments and the gradual decrease in costs have been the subject of many academic studies. In the light of these developments and knowledge, the changes in individuals' lives are considerable. This process, which makes the lives of individuals easier, has also led to an increase in the number of those who aim to benefit.

Another issue that needs clarification is the social structures, hierarchies that occur in the change in the level of interest in old and new media tools and their legitimacy. It should be understood how the political economy of new media has become stronger and differentiated, and the path and role it will follow in the future. When it comes to the possibility of changing the axis of power of new media and technologies, it is seen that people and communities who want to change the balance take their place in the third wave. The support, information and sharing received from each other, especially by people who share ideas and opinions, has caused these groups to increase in number and mass. It has been observed that virtual communities formed in the light of these developments express the opinions they have or cannot express with the support they receive and the opportunities provided by technology.

Virtual communities consist of people who can come together and communicate and interact with other participants within the virtual technologies developed within the scope of the third wave. In virtual communities, individuals can stay connected to each other in the context of their interests, establish social relationships and create belonging around the subject.

When it comes to the possibility of changing the axis of power of new media and technologies, it is seen that people and communities who want to change the balance take their place in the third wave. The support, information and sharing received from each other, especially by people who share ideas and opinions, has caused these groups to increase in number and mass. With these developments, new media has become less controllable. The main role in this process is played by the increase and spread of communication channels in the internet field and the gradual decrease in costs. It is unthinkable that the widespread and increasing communication channels do not lead to global, interactive and mass communication. McChesney [8] defines this development in the internet field as "active anarchy". Arguing that this anarchic environment cannot be controlled by a command, the author argues that this lack of control makes room for a greater democracy. With the active anarchy and democratizing internet environment, the internet has now created new mechanisms to achieve social goals, and participation in these mechanisms is gradually increasing. McChesney [9] argues that two important questions must be answered while witnessing the developments in technology. The first of these is who will control the technology and for what purpose. The other is what the social, cultural, economic and political effects of developing technology will be on society.

Considering the social and economic dimensions of social media tools, it would not be wrong to say that efforts to own them by capital are increasing. In particular, the story of the appropriation of the X platform (formerly known as Twitter) has managed to become a global public opinion. However, the opportunities offered by these tools provide great opportunities for interpreting and criticizing social, cultural, economic and political approaches, interpretations and developments. This provides individuals with the opportunity to criticize within the advanced democratic environment offered by technology. More importantly, it provides the opportunity to manipulate the subject with different methods. The demands of individuals and/or communities to develop policies within these opportunities will increase.

Sicilia and Palazon [10] define virtual communities as personal but geographically diverse associations that are shaped around shared common interest and have a dynamic network of relationships.

Porter [11] summarizes virtual communities according to the categories of researchers' scientific fields. According to the author, while a virtual community can be examined by information systems researchers in the context of "supporting communication technologies" (chat rooms, forums, etc.), it can be examined by economics researchers "according to their purposes" (playing games, making transactions, etc.). On the other hand, sociologists have categorized virtual communities "according to the structure of interaction" (small groups, networks, etc.).

However, in addition to these classifications, Porter also mentions the existence of classifications with more than one variable.

Porter also questions whether this social interaction is institutional or personal. On the other hand, it questions whether individuals focus on business or social interaction. It has also been observed that the level of commitment among virtual community members is evaluated.

The elements that identify virtual communities are the intense interaction experienced in the group and the level of relationships formed within the group. While in some communities, the stability of the number of members, the intensity of interaction, and virtual and social activities are prioritized, in some communities, priority is given to information exchange and problem solving.

NETNOGRAPHY

The extent to which virtual communities formed in the "new" living spaces brought by technology parallel the behavioral patterns, discourses and emotions of tribes in human history has been the subject of research. Ethnography, which is the cultural science that examines tribes by comparing them and investigates cultural formations, sheds light on the examination of virtual communities (tribes). With these virtual environment studies, which we will refer to as netnography, elements such as communication, interaction and behavior dimensions, diversity and variability of virtual communities are discussed.

The concept was introduced in the United States at the end of the 20th century, when the internet was on the textual level. The concept of Netnography, coined by Robert V. Kozinets, has emerged as the most frequently used research method in examining virtual tribes over time. The main reason why the concept is frequently used is that it is fast, simple and cost-effective. On the other hand, it has been preferred because the natural behavior and interactions of social community members are observed in a more natural environment than survey, focus group or in-depth interview techniques. However, it is wrong to equate the netnography method with the content analysis method. Netnography includes understanding, context. Kozinets [12]defines netnography as "a more individual-centered, personal, social and emotionally relevant vector".

Gretzel [13] argues that a netnographer will have the opportunity to examine and zoom the data obtained in the primary position.
Ivan [14] summarizes the research topics of the netnography approach as follows;
1. Observing how individuals in online resources communicate and create social impact,
2. To determine who is involved in online tools on which topics,
3. To reveal the types of information communicated,
4. To show how individuals communicate with other communities in coordinating their daily lives and meeting their needs.

The first purpose of using netnography in social media research is to investigate the consumption styles of virtual communities and reveal their consumption cultures. However, sociocultural developments, events and approaches experienced in both regional and global geography have brought the use of netnography to the fore in obtaining the opinions of virtual communities in the context of the subject. In the research to be put forward, research issues in the context of other subjects will be discussed, beyond the initial purpose of the concept.

The first phase of netnography, the planning and cultural introduction phase, is the phase in which the researcher decides exactly what he will research, how he will process it, how he will introduce himself to the community, how he will handle the project ethically, and determines the communities or cultures he will research. The first thing to do at the planning stage is to determine the research focus and questions. Three types of data are collected in netnographic research. These are archival data, procured data and field note data. Data that is readily available online and copied without any involvement of the researcher is called "archival data". He notes that not all important information is conveyed in letters and numbers and that visual and graphical data should not be neglected. Attention needs to be paid to background colors and background formats, as well as explicit graphical representations such as drawings, emotions and photographs. Data obtained through instant messaging, adding comments and sending e-mails, and with the active participation of the researcher, is called "provided data" and defines the second type of data group. The third type of data group is "field note data", which is created by the researcher by writing down observations about the community, community members and member interactions [15].

When analyzing netnographic data, assisted data analysis is usually used. Computer data analysis is the careful use of software tools to support the researcher in the netnographic research process. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS), like other forms of qualitative analysis, interprets data by identifying and coding recurring themes, concepts, ideas, processes, contexts and other relevant structures [16].

Kozinets [17] argued that ethics in netnography is not a simple matter that can be expressed in a paragraph at the end of the research. In this context, he mentioned the importance of informed consent and anonymization by citation in order to conduct ethical netnographic research. The researcher should inform the members that he/she is conducting research in the relevant virtual community. In addition to informing the members, he recommended that the researcher should write an informational text on his/her profile [18]. In addition, the researcher should present the results of the research to the opinions of the members and ask for their permission [19].

Kozinets recommends netnographers to use a webpage dedicated to the research. Ideally, the webpage should belong to an official university server and link to the researcher's profile and even published work. The researcher should also clearly and accurately introduce himself/herself, avoiding all deception, clearly and accurately describe the research purpose for engaging with community members, and provide an accessible, valid and accurate description of the research focus and interest [20] .

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research is to reveal how Covid-19 studies are investigated in the context of netnography within the research topics in the political economy of the social context, unlike marketing, consumer behavior and culture, which is the first purpose of the netnography research method.

The sub-objectives arising from the purpose of the research can be listed as determining in which social media tools virtual communities produce information and shares about the Covid-19 pandemic, the methods of examining social media tools of netnographers, whether they use auxiliary methods or whether they get support from netnography while using different research methods.

In the context of the aim of the research, the research questions can be listed as follows:

R.Q.1. What is the distribution of publications according to databases?
R.Q.2. What is the distribution of publications according to years?
R.Q.3. What is the priority of using netnography?
R.Q.4. In which academic field journals are the publications published?
R.Q.5. What are the policy areas produced?
R.Q.6. Which social media tools are used according to research priority?

LIMITATIONS

Content analysis method was chosen as the research method of the study. In order to obtain the netnography studies specified in the purpose of the study, databases that are approved in many academic circles [21] covering publications in multiple fields were selected.

EBSCOhost, Science Direct, Web of Science were selected from these databases. In addition to these databases, netnography studies in Dergi Park will also be included in the study. The reason for this is to shed light on netnography studies conducted in Turkiye.

All academic articles will be scanned by entering the keyword "Netnography" in the search engine of these databases. At this stage, the selection limitations of the articles that will be the subject of the research will be as follows:

1. Academic articles will be examined in the research, theses and non-academic articles will not be included in the scope of the review.
2. The writing language of the articles will be English and Turkish.
3. The articles will be downloadable to the computer and can be opened again afterwards.
4. Netnography research method will be used in the articles.
5. Articles published between 2020-2023 will be examined in the study.
6. There is a limitation that the articles to be examined in the study should be produced within the framework of social issues and policies that do not contain commercial concepts such as marketing, consumer behavior, brand, tourism marketing.

DATA COLLECTIONS AND FINDINGS

When EBSCOhost (705), Science Direct (311), Web of Science (647) and Dergi Park (5) databases were examined, netnography studies were seen in 1668 scientific articles.

Considering the limitations specified in the study, the number of articles subject to the research was 24.

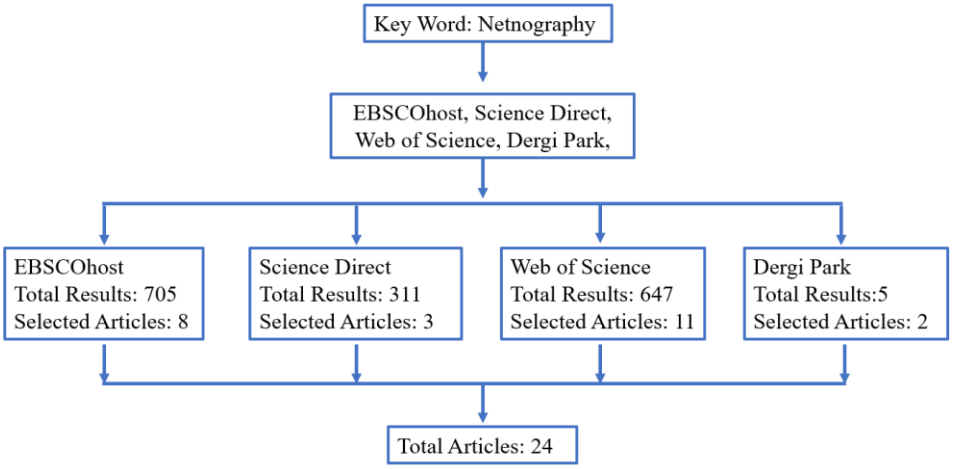


Figure 1. Selection Process of Articles

In the context of the political economy of the media, the database with the highest number of articles on the Covid-19 pandemic in netnography studies was Web of Science with 11 articles. This was followed by EbscoHost (8), Science Direct (3) and Dergi Park (2), respectively.

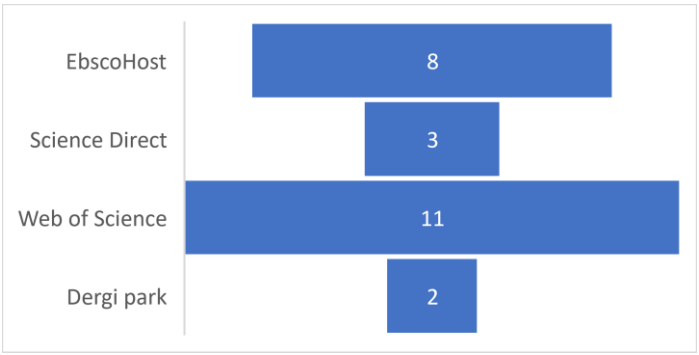


Figure 2. Distribution of Articles According to Databases

Looking at the distribution of studies by year, it was observed that the majority of academic articles were published in 2021 (8) and 2022 (9). This is followed by 2023 (4) and 2020 (3), respectively.



Figure 3. Distribution of Articles According to Years

In the academic articles published on the Covid-19 pandemic in netnography studies in the context of the political economy of the media, netnography methodology was the research method used in 20 articles. In 3 articles, it ranks first in research methods used more than once. Netnography was used as an auxiliary research method in only 1 article.

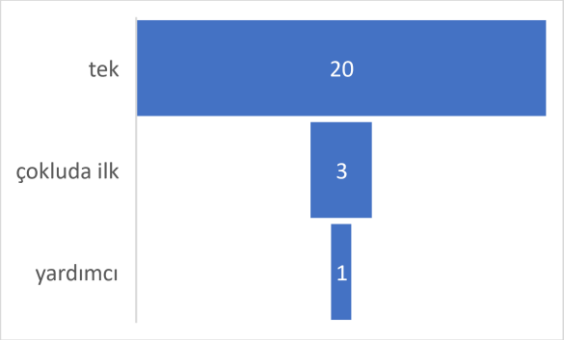


Figure 4. Prioritization of the Use of Netnography

When the scientific fields of academic journals were analyzed, it was seen that the Covid-19 pandemic was examined in 18 different scientific fields with the netnography research method. Among these, marketing, religion, society, service and business science fields come to the fore.

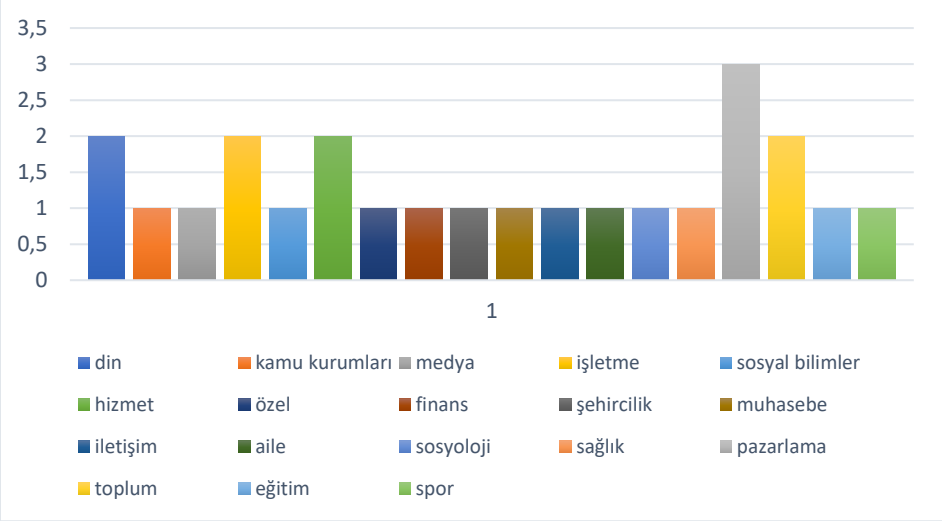


Figure 5. Distribution of Articles According to Fields of Science

In the policies produced in virtual communities regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, the title of society comes to the forefront with 11 articles. This is followed by health (6) and communication (4).

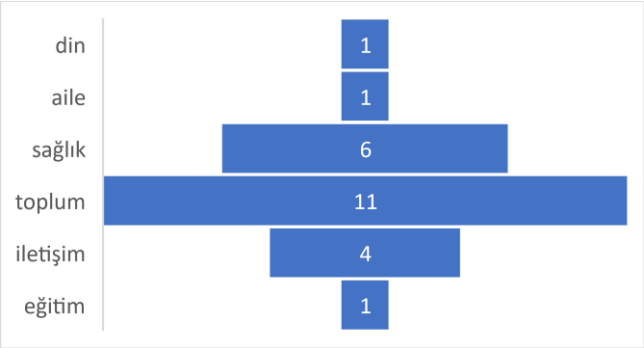


Figure 6. Distribution of Articles According to Policy Areas

It was observed that the policies produced by virtual communities regarding the Covid-19 pandemic were mostly on Facebook (7) and Twitter (5). However, the number of articles (3) in which Facebook, Instagram and Twitter channels were examined together is striking.

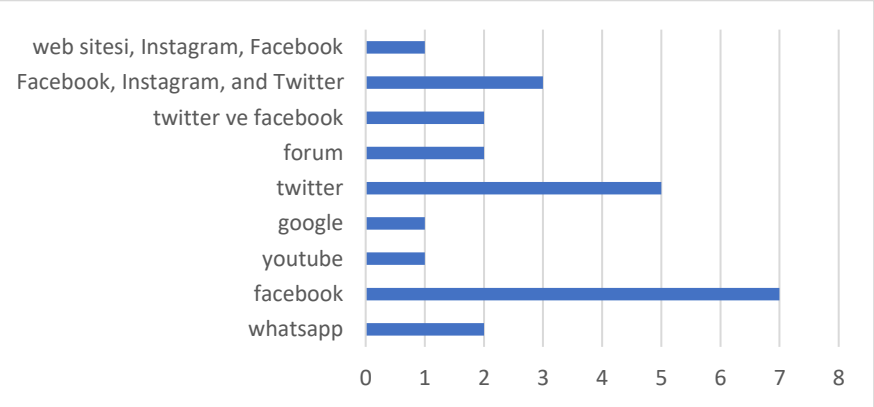


Figure 7. Distribution of Articles According to Social Media Channels

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering that the Covid-19 pandemic became widespread in March 2020, it is natural that it will be the subject of academic studies in 2021 and 2022. The dramatic decline in netnography studies conducted in virtual communities in 2023 gives a surprising result considering that studies are gaining momentum. Especially considering the political economy of the media, individuals and communities are expected to produce more policies. However, the number of studies produced did not meet this expectation. As a result of these findings, the political economy of the Covid-19 pandemic can be considered as a topic that is currently open to be examined within the framework of different topics.

In the study examining the applications of netnography methodology in the context of the political economy of the media and Covid-19 in particular, the adequacy and validity of the research method in question is seen in 20 articles as the only research method used, which is an important data in revealing the adequacy of the method. With the use of netnography, the policies and contents produced by virtual communities regarding the Covid-19 pandemic can be identified. On the other hand, the method ranks first in terms of importance in its use with different research methodologies. There are very few studies in which it is not at the forefront of the priority ranking.

It has been observed that the Covid-19 pandemic has been addressed in many fields of science in the context of the political economy of the media. It has been observed that marketing, religion, society, service and business sciences have dealt with the subject more. Although it is assumed that the subject and method can be addressed in more different fields of science, it can be said that the number of studies in the fields of science included in the research may increase in the coming years.

The topic of society ranked first in the policies produced in virtual communities regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it is a surprising result that virtual communities give second place to policies produced on health. The fact that individuals and communities address social issues more than health in their content and policy production can be seen as a clue that these individuals and communities are more concerned about the future of society.

The research data shows that Facebook and Twitter (X) are the main channels through which individuals and communities address the Covid-19 pandemic in the context of the political economy of the media. This is because the content production forms of these social media tools are open to interpretation. In other words, it is understandable that these social media tools were not analyzed because Instagram is photo-based and YouTube is video-based. However, it is surprising that the health crisis, which concerns many individuals and communities during the pandemic period, is not examined on the websites of institutions and organizations and forum pages related to the pandemic. This provides an opportunity for researchers to conduct research on the subject.

Another issue encountered during the research process is that netnography is used in different fields of science such as corporate communication and tourism. The level of use of netnography in studies conducted in these fields can also be investigated.

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