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Political Accountability, Communication and Democracy: A Fictional Mediation?

Siyasal Hesap Verebilirlik, İletişim ve Demokrasi: Medyalaştırılmış bir Kurgu mu?

Ekmel GEÇER*

Abstract

This study, mostly through a critical review, aims to give the description of the accountability in political communication, how it works and how it helps the addressees of the political campaigns to understand and control the politicians. While doing this it will also examine if accountability can help to structure a democratic public participation and control. Benefitting from mostly theoretical and critical debates regarding political public relations and political communication, this article aims (a) to give insights of the ways political elites use to communicate with the voters (b) how they deal with accountability, (c) to learn their methods of propaganda, (d) and how they structure their personal images. The theoretical background at the end suggests that the politicians, particularly in the Turkish context, may sometimes apply artificial (unnatural) communication methods, exaggeration and desire sensational narrative in the media to keep the charisma of the leader and that the accountability and democratic perspective is something to be ignored if the support is increasing.

Keywords: Political Communication, Political Public Relations, Media, Democracy, Propaganda, Accountability.

Öz

Bu çalışma, daha çok eleştirel bir yaklaşımla, siyasal iletişimde hesap verebilirliğin tanımını vermeyi, nasıl işlediğini anlatmayı ve siyasal kampanyaların muhatabı olan seçmenlerin siyasilerin sorumluluğundan ne anladığını ve onu politikacıları kontrol için nasıl kullanmaları gerektiğini anlatmaya çalışmaktadır. Bunu yaparken, hesap verebilirliğin demokratik toplumsal katılımı ve kontrolü inşa edip edemeyeceğini de analiz edecektir. Siyasal halkla ilişkiler ve siyasal iletişime dair teorik tartışmalardan da faydalanarak, (a) siyasilerin seçmenle iletişim kurma yolları hakkında ipuçları, (b) izlenebilirliği ne denli dikkate aldıkları, (c) propaganda yöntemleri ve (d) kişisel imajlarını nasıl oluşturdıkları incelenmiştir. Literatür analizlerinin verdiği sonuçlar; özellikle Türkiye bağlamında, liderin karizmasını devam ettirmek için

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kurgusal (doğal olmayan) iletişim yöntemlerine ve mübalağaya başvurdukları, medyadan sansasyonel bir anlatımı istedikleri ve destek artacaksa hesap verebilirliğin ve demokratik perspektifin görmezden gelinebilir olduğunu düşündüklerini göstermiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyasal İletişim, Siyasal Halkla İlişkiler, Medya, Demokrasi, Propaganda, Hesap Verebilirlik.

Introduction: Communication, New Media and Accountability

Political communication includes political propaganda, political-public relations, and political marketing strategies. The political communication campaigns particularly relate to political advertising (McNair, 2017). Although Turkey does not have a long past in terms of using political communication methods, and the present strategies are mostly influenced by the American election campaigns, the country has been progressing in using these communication and persuasion tactics since the 1980s (Akay, 2012). Accountability, which is also related to the democratic control over power and politics, on the other hand, is a concept that is not only vital for the political communication process—it is an essential notion for the democratic values (human rights, freedoms) and institutions (NGOs, parliaments) as it provides the state organs to answer the questions coming from the people. It has been used to bring the public up-to-date and to access larger audiences. As the accountability has structured the communication between the target group and the politicians or the private sector, it has influenced the political, social and economic preferences and sometimes changed them (Mulgan, 2002, p. 555).

Furthermore, the recent new media/social media and communication developments have helped the accountability to be increasingly considered in political communication. The mass communication technologies eased the process of communication between the *target group* and the private or political personalities (Dezelan & Vobic, 2016). People using social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, can pose their questions to the politicians easily and directly. In addition, since all the followers are able to see what the politicians share on social media, they feel under pressure from the public testimony. As a result, the actors in the political arena have been more careful in their ways to get in touch with the audience groups and to avoid any possible mistakes in the communication process, so they have started to hire/apply professional communication/PR consultants (Hawthorne & Warner, 2015). Moreover, the accountability concept is mostly, in this article, discussed around the politicians and is covered as a notion regarding the official organisations and personalities. Nonetheless, it has a wider sphere of influence. Political communication and political public relations do not merely target the voters in the country. These methods of communication are also targeting international lobby groups, societies and political blocs (Beus, 2005, p. 21).

Accountability is a concept interconnected with public administration and one that is recently considered in the Turkish political arena. Today, it is being used in communication strategies of the political and commercial brands and in civil society organisation policies. The

academic studies today are focusing on four different accountability forms: administrative, political, professional and legal (Lee & Odugbemi, 2011). Political accountability is related to political individuals and institutions such as governments, parliaments, political parties and politicians. It has been mostly utilised in the context of political public relations as a subtitle of political communication. Public relations have been effectively used in the twentieth century. After its practice in politics and public administration, a new kind of public relations campaign as a part of political communication emerged. The political public relations since then have been used in the global international arena through specific communication techniques (Stromback & Kioussis, 2011).

Here, it is beneficial to note that public relation methodologies used in various areas such as, environmental politics, social services, and public communication necessitate the authorities to answer public desires and questions which may be considered in the context of accountability. Therefore, it is not accurate to limit accountability only within the political issues or to see it as a responsibility only relevant for the politicians (Coombs, 2011, p. 229). For instance, if the organisations dealing with the environment do not inform the supporters well enough through their public relations advisers, trust towards these organisations may be lost in the long run. In this regard, accountability is what should be considered also in public administration and non-governmental performances. Yet, because this study mostly focuses on political communication, accountability is debated within the political context which will give insights on the politics and public relations.

Whilst talking about political accountability, the first group of people who can be mentioned in this context are those whose professions are associated with politics such as the political parties, parliaments and their members, political leaders and the political movements. All these personalities, institutions, and the social organisations/movements have promised the people so they need to consider being accountable at all levels of their structure. Therefore, political public relations have been one of the important parts of political organisations which have emerged as a sub-type of political communication and public relations. This is increasingly taken into account especially after the invention of social media and other new media technologies, which force the politicians to connect with the voters and answer their questions when needed. The reason that makes *political public relations* as an important part of the entire political communication process is its capability in making political organisations; and personalities gain dignity at the end of its professional performance (Button, 2016, p. 142).

As political communication can ultimately produce life-long influences on the audiences, those who undertake political campaigns have moral responsibilities. Therefore, the activities undertaken during the process of political public relations should be compatible with the accountability in principle (Ceron, 2017, p. 135). In this context, this study will take the reader towards the practice or misuse of communication campaigns and political public relations in Turkey with regards to accountability. In addition, it will demonstrate how political public relations work in Turkey, and if the tradition of the political communication in the country could

have significant accountability principles, as one of the ways for the people to control the election pledges of the politicians.

Political Public Relations: Convergence of the New and the Tradition

The appearance of political public relations is associated with political communication, which emerged after the 1929 economic recession in the United States of America (USA) (Stanyer, 2007, p. 5). The financial problems in USA faced at that time led the commercial companies and governmental organisations to reconsider their communication strategies, in order to restructure the relationship with their clients and society. As a result, governments and political organisations have been significant customers of the public opinion research institutions. Subsequently, it has been understood that communication is crucial not only to determine public demands but also to direct them (Semetko & Scammell, 2012).

It is possible to describe political communication as all the communication activities or strategies conducted by various tools and ways used by politicians, political ideologies and movements, and political parties to influence the local or international voters, public, organisations or even the states in the directing their aims. Although political communication has its own principles and techniques, it has been used as a sub-branch of communication studies. This is because it is at a point where advertisement, propaganda and public relations merge, so it is a discipline whose boundaries are not clear (McNair, 2017, p. 41). In addition, it is necessary to note that the high rate of votes does not only come after a successful political communication campaign. The economic, social and cyclical situations are also the reasons, which help the political party to increase its votes. Nevertheless, the political campaigns that ask and act with the help of the public mind for being “accountable” will have a powerful and systematic strategy (Kentel, 1991).

Advertisement, propaganda, and marketing in the political communication process have been criticised. They are single-sided communication methods and could manipulate the target groups for the source, and may not allow the target group to intervene in the communication. Therefore, politicians have been looking for other ways to communicate with the voters, which would be impartial, respective to the target groups’ opinions and coherent. The political public relations in this context have been considered by the politicians to abolish these communication concerns. Besides, the new media channels seem to alter the negative approach to political marketing as they are enabling people to give feedback on political discourses and performances (Mazzoleni, 2016). Politicians, who are aware of new perspectives and media technologies, are widening their getaways and synthesising the new communication strategies with traditional ways. Therefore, public relations, political communication, and the media with all their platforms, by time are becoming increasingly important for politicians/ governments to market their political personality to the public and to gain more support. Yet, better to note that the two dimensions of political public relations are most applicable here. The first one is, governments or political parties use political public relations (PR) to get in touch with the public. Secondly, the lobbyists

use the political PR to create pressure on the political process which seems to be interwoven and succeeding processes (Theaker, 2011, p. 57).

The accountability in politics refers to the politicians' responsibility of answering the questions of the people and their consent for being under the control of the electors, directly or indirectly through political institutions such as parliament, elections, local governments and other elected organisations (Scott, 2000, p. 42). The politicians are expected to provide accurate and consistent information to the voters about their educational, economic and political background, and to talk about their feasible pledges from the beginning of the election campaign to the end. Thus, people still look for traditional ways of communication such as face-to-face discussions, as they can easily question the accountability of the politician. The traditional methods also persuade people and explain that the voters see the politicians more trustworthy, when they see them in reality, explaining their promises and political programmes (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2012).

The politicians who do not consider the result of their pledges and discourses do not only harm their political careers but also cause the misperception of communication strategies and public relations by the target groups. For example, the public relations campaign of Alastair Campbell (former British PM Tony Blair's media consultant) was accused of corrupting British politics and the communication strategies because of unrealistic political promises. These methods have been recorded as "non-accountable communication strategies" in PR history (Theaker, 2011, p. 56). Political public relations professionals, therefore, ought to avoid declaring messages which manipulate the intended population. Today, societies are trying to be directed and persuaded through opinion surveys. However, as it is the case in Turkey, politicians are being influenced by public opinion researchers, and political communication experts sometimes prefer these surveys over the long experiences and communication strategies.

Images of the Politicians in the Post-Truth Times

The recent debates about the image and communication success of international and Turkish politicians have increasingly forced them to get professional support, for having better coverage in the media and for receiving more attention. However, this professional support has also raised concerns about the "manufactured consent" (Chomsky and Herman, 1995) regarding their imaginary appearance on the media or in front of the public. The press officers or image-makers predominantly create the political image through specific psycho-political methods and communication strategies (Goldberg, 2008). Although it starts at a point to change the appearance and perceptions, the image making is associated with wider areas that include daily agenda, everyday life, cultural ideology, political campaigns, political advertisements, media coverage format and contents (Archetti, 2014, p. 11).

Especially after the second half of the twentieth century, due to the fast developments in the communication technologies, the politicians have used professional press officers. This is to have a better representation in the media and cope with the problems they face in their communication activities and interactions with the voters. On the other hand, politicians have also portrayed

an image as being a product to be marketed. Their “perfect” image has been accused of being manufactured as it is far from and contradicts the human imperfections of their real personality (Kalpokas, 2018). In the long run, this has caused people to question the place of such constructed “reality” in political communication and public relations (Kunczik, 2012, p. 120). Therefore, this part of the study, within the context of accountability, will be handling the creation of a political image, to question the re-produced and stereotyped politicians’ identities both in the media and the public eye. The usage of political personality illustrations and codes will be tackled.

After recent technological changes, especially fast-produced and edited video and photography, the meaning of the image in politics has developed. Subsequently, *image management* in the press offices of the politicians has been at the centre of their political communication campaigns. The communication management at the beginning was directly being done by the politicians themselves, but today the media/image/communication professionals are mostly undertaking communication part of an entirely political process (Powell & Cowart, 2017). Eleri Sampson (1996) states that people are recognised through their individual features such as talking genre, dressing, media appearance, attitudes, and charisma. These private differences shape the personal image in the public mind (p. 12). Although the image starts at face value, it is structured by the thoughts and the way of speaking (Rigel, 2000, p. 240).

In a world where television and other audio-visual productions are dominating our culture, political knowledge is not only formed by vocabulary but mostly by video and photographs (Postman, 2005, p. 133). Therefore, any politician, who wants to have a good career and progress in politics, feels obliged to apply/hire a professional officer or an image-maker who designs the visual images in the peoples’ minds. In the political campaigns, the politicians who wish to gain social support mostly do not portray themselves as they are, but are represented through images which are usually exaggerated in order to be idolised, in a way that the press officer/image creator believes how they should be (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). The image creation process through this way tries to reflect the fictionalised depiction of a person or an event as the reality (Barthless & Howard, 1993). Though the politicians, who merely predicate political success upon visual images, may get mistaken so it will be more difficult to correct the fictionalised perception.

Neil Postman (2005) states that the image creation process is a kind of psychological therapy, (p. 139) which points the post-truth times when people believe in their feelings, which might be influenced by propaganda rather than the truths. Since it is an emotional process, it is possible to expect that this image representation may skip the political realities. The difference between reality and stereotyped picture almost vanishes. Should the target public also be unable to distinguish between the political person and the image, which has been advertised, he/she becomes a consumable item in the passage of time (Kelly, 2018).

On the other hand, political communication today as mostly seen by the political personality of former Italian Prime Minister Silvia Berlusconi has been transformed into a show. A new term, in this context, *politainment* has appeared to describe this celebrity politics (Street, 2004, p. 439). The popularized election campaigns have decreased the importance of political ideologies,

and have let the images to gain more weight in the election campaigns (Schultz, 2012, p. 47). Not only have ideological weakness emerged, but also the historical contents of politics are not considered. In modern society, the ideologies have been changed into market images and have started to direct the constituency members (Heywood, 2012, p. 339). Consequently, the audiences have considered not the political ideologies, but the ideas which have been created by the manufactured political image. People since then have not approached politics as a way to public good but preferred to follow the images as a way to satisfy their own beliefs and feelings (McNair, 2017).

The overplayed visual or inscriptive depiction in the media sometimes caused the politicians not to care about the context of the modelling. The “image” in the media, which is formed of various effects, is the main point of the political campaign. However, this fabricated image in the time process takes place of the “actual self”. Therefore, the politician feels obliged to follow this image until the last day of his/her life. This commitment at the end may result in disappointment when s/he leaves politics, as s/he had thought that this would have no end. Nevertheless, the representation of a politician in the media is important and has a longer life if it is close to the reality. If there is a problem in the representation, it does not mean the “image – making” is itself a problematic concept but its usage is mistaken.

As seen in the 2007 elections in Turkey, a famous businessman whose alleged “dirty relations” were revealed through investigative journalism, told people that he left all unclear background in the past by wearing a “white” shirt at all of his political rallies, and in fact got more than expected votes in that election (Kejanlioglu, 2008, p. 804). That means the critiques for the “overestimated representation” are not always right, and they may sometimes take the politician to a successful finish line. This example will take us to another point. Modern societies live in a simulated world and simulation is the meaningless form of reality. The new power of this simulated world is the manufactured imaginaries. Nevertheless, the images in political science are not used to cover the reality, but to reproduce the reality through benefitting the political order and models.

The politicians determine their images in the context of the cultural, historical, traditional and economic structure of their country. However, the recent efforts in “reproducing the images” have been misperceived by the election target groups. They now view the image as part of a “production” which is about the hairstyle, dressing up, media appearance, literary style, and body language. But, the appearance is not merely about these elements but the political image is also about the individual, intellectual, cultural and professional specialities of the politician. Particularly at the time of elections, the political representation of all parties looks like each other, as the image making literature almost tells the same thing to everyone. The politicians who appear in the media do not really care about how their political background is represented, but they care about how their image is produced by the media. Politicians in the media are presented like well-decorated and packed items and these kinds of image competition have been the “sine qua non” of the election campaigns (Street, 2007, p. 87).

Conclusion

The term *accountability* has a wide range of interaction, from public management to politics, local governments to any civil or official organisations, and academic institutions. Yet it has mostly been discussed within the context of public administration as a democratic part of governance, which allows people to check the authorities which pushed the administrative organs to answer public questions. Therefore, most of the political, civil or official organisations have set up communication departments, which will plan and perform communication strategies to convey their messages to the people, enhance their reputation, manage the crisis if needed and gain support. Especially in these post-truth and social media times, politicians, NGOs and governmental bodies are trying to find ways to address people's feelings, when and where the people start to believe in what they see on media rather than the actual facts (Harsin, 2017; IED, 2017). Therefore, they hire communication professionals who will create an agenda in favour of them and manufacture the consent even sometimes in a non-legitimate way. With no doubt, the growing new media technologies and their usage increases the influence of *political public relations campaigns* and makes organisations think more professionally as these mass communication items ease the way for the people to question the authorities and hold them accountable (Stromback & Kioussis, 2011).

However, the debates in the literature review indicate that political communication supervisors or public relations experts have specific responsibilities in terms of accountability (Ceron, 2017, p. 134). The reason being is that the political leaders, their faces and the ideologies which are presented to people, are somehow the tailored productions made by the communication consultants, in which the accountability might have been ignored. In this regard, the concept of *image representation* in the press or the media is gradually being discussed in the political communication arena in Turkey. The political image is based on the two political theories. The first one, where the politicians are advertised in the media or in the election campaigns by their individual features, and at the second stage, these features are reconstructed according to the electorate views. The main aspect of this discussion is that the press officer or communication professional produces the image to attract more audience interest and that it is a manufactured personality and public impression (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008).

The photographic imagery has cleared all the problems of advertising and made it "the reality" for us. The illustration today, which has been created by the motifs of our daily culture, is a make-up of our feelings and expectations. It has covered the reality and made us believe in our feelings rather than the truths, realities (post-truth). Today, especially, as we see through their social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) usage, the politicians believe they are as actively appealing in real life as much as they are in the print or online media. However, an image, which looks like a celebrity personality, does not give them longevity in the dynamic political arena. In addition, on some occasions, the media representation is completely different from the reality of the person. Media representations also highlight the features of the politician and concealing the negativities. The image that is sometimes completely dissimilar to the political personality may harm the representation and may produce a negative impact on the target group (Brent & Dent 2010). For

that reason, the media representation should not be based on the “perfectly designed political personality” but should be built considering the target audiences’ interests; and an image, which the voter feels close to, should be created.

The voters, passing through this way, may seek refuge in the “created image” of the politician and may feel free of her/his own problems, hoping that the candidate will help her/him to get rid of long-lasting troubles. Postman, (2005) in regard to this point, indicates that the politician who is being characterized on TV does not present an image of him/herself, but tries to persuade the voters that she/he has an image as they want (p. 137). Nevertheless, the professional communication consultants, who manage the PR strategies, should take accountability into consideration. The social media interactions encourage them to falsify the images, the easy and fast produced media contents can also spread the news that the PR supervisors are trying to fabricate their approvals through re-produced images and framed news stories. Therefore, they should share the correct and accurate information with the public, provide people to access the necessary knowledge at the communication period, and should show regard to occupational communication ethics (Newman, 2016).

On the other hand, because public relations and political communication are where politics, people and media get together for political accountability to work or be functional. At this point, the mostly referred democratic necessities such as freedom of expression and criticism, tolerance, preserving human rights and particularly opportunities for media outlets to cover all issues in a freer way should be provided in a country (Skillen, 2017). As for Turkey, because of the political and social traditions and also the ongoing democratic conflicts, it seems quite difficult to look for accountability in communication strategies. Politicians sometimes consider it unnecessary to communicate with their followers although they have an active social media performance, as they tend to negatively judge and blame the follower who criticizes them and take it personally.

Furthermore, the accountability in political public relations is also possible through providing the accuracy of the applied documents during the entire time of the communication progression. This long period of communication will let the target group know all the details about the politician, apart from the private life details which should be omitted from the campaign as respect for the private life. As the feedback is the main way of staying accountable, the communication experts should be tolerating the negative feedbacks and updating the politician about them. This will help them to have more positive interaction with the voter or follower and will create a powerful belief in the marketed image or ideology. Lastly, the media and communication managers should be able to evaluate the effort and outcomes of the political communication process objectively and undertake the responsibility of failures. After analysing the results of the communication process, they should have clear plans regarding the failed or victorious attempts and be able to manage crisis again in a professional way, deeming the even the severe criticism as the crucial necessity of getting better.

Political communication and particularly political public relations, sometimes in the long run, but usually in due course of the communication (under favour of new media technologies),

provides transparency and control in politics and allows those who work demand the power and governance to convince the voters through democratic ways. Therefore, all these points mentioned in this study eventually refers to democracy and how it is performed in a society. Furthermore, political communication strategies and public relations create a dialogue both between the rival groups, the politicians and the people through permitting all parts. This allows them to discuss themselves and help them to understand the other, which also will create a consensus on disputed issues via democratic participation and deliberation.

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