

## **Resisting Censorship: How Citizens Navigate Closed Media Environments**

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Why do citizens seek alternative online information sources in censored mass media environments? How do they react to perceived media censorship? Drawing on psychological reactance and work in comparative democratization, we propose a new communication construct called *motivated resistance to censorship*, which assesses cognitive and affective reactions to perceived censorship and, in turn, predicts online information seeking as a mitigation strategy. We evaluate our proposed construct based on two survey studies in Turkey including a national face-to-face household survey of Turkish respondents ( $N = 1,161$ ) and a second survey of Turkish Internet users ( $N = 2,002$ ). Our results validate the central propositions of our model. We discuss the contributions of adopting reactance theory to better understand citizen responses to media censorship and future directions for research.

*Keywords: Turkey, censorship, Internet, social media, reactance, information seeking*

According to Freedom House (2015), about 86% of the world's population resides in partially or fully censored mass media environments, making citizen political communication in censored media systems the global norm. Moreover, most political communication scholarship examines the communication processes of citizens who reside only in countries with open and free media systems. An exception to this bias is the recent growth of scholarship examining how citizens in nondemocratic and censored media environments employ the Internet as a means of political learning and mobilizing toward democratic governance, as well as exploring the consequences or effects of this learning (e.g., Bailard,

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2014; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Lei, 2011; Nisbet, Stoycheff, & Pearce, 2012; Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014; Stoycheff, Nisbet, & Epstein, 2016).

Nevertheless, it remains unclear what underlying communication and psychological processes initially influence citizens to go online for political information in censored media environments. Why do some citizens engage in these communication behaviors and others do not? How do perceptions of and attitudes about their media news environment influence these information-seeking behaviors? Is there a theoretical framework we can apply to enhance our understanding of such perceptions and processes?

We use Turkey as a case study because citizens are embedded in a media news environment that has been the focus of increasing political and legal censorship by the government (Freedom House, 2015). Although still an intermittent target of government censorship, the Internet remains a relatively open and pluralistic information environment for the Turkish population. In this context, we extend the boundaries of audience reactance theory (Brehm, 1972; Dillard & Shen, 2005) and apply it in an innovative manner to provide an overarching theoretical framework for explaining how citizen perceptions of mass media censorship may influence the likelihood of citizens turning to online sources as alternatives for news and political information.

### **Citizen Perceptions of Censorship**

Research conducted by a number of organizations that monitor media freedom shows that a majority of countries around the world are battling some form of information censorship (Freedom House, 2015; International Research and Exchange Board, 2015; Reporters Sans Frontieres, 2015). According to Freedom House (2015), approximately 14% of the global population lives in countries where media are "completely free," with the remaining living in media systems that are "partially free" or "not free" at all. In countries that lack sufficient press freedom, media outlets and journalists are frequently subject to legal sanctions by the state, intimidation by political or state actors, and harsh financial impediments (Freedom House, 2015; International Research and Exchange Board, 2015).

However, as described by Nisbet and Stoycheff (2013), what partially drives citizen demands for free media (how much media freedom they want) is audience perceptions of how much censorship, or freedom, exists in their media system, not the institutional assessments by organizations or expert observers. In other words, it is the perceived supply of media freedom that is important for citizens, not the actual or institutional supply (Nisbet & Stoycheff, 2013). A corollary to this proposition is that audience evaluations of how much media freedom they enjoy may vary widely in accuracy and depend on a range of personal and social factors such as education, forms of media use, values, conflict situations, and regime support, to name a few (e.g., Hayes & Reineke, 2007; Nisbet & Stoycheff, 2013; Norris & Inglehart, 2008).

In this context, we may further examine censorship from an audience perspective and conceptualize it as a perceived threat to media freedom based on evaluations of perceived supply and citizen demand. In approaching censorship from a citizen perspective rather than an institutional one, we are able to introduce theories regarding individual communication processes and motivations as a means

of better understanding why citizens use online resources as alternatives for political information seeking in nondemocratic states. This approach allows for a deeper analysis of censorship and provides an opportunity to explore broader dimensions (e.g., institutional, cultural, political) that may contribute to media effects in nondemocratic media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2011).

### **Motivated Resistance to Censorship**

If we conceptualize censorship as a threat to media freedom based on citizens' assessments of their media supply and demand, then reactance theory provides a basis for understanding how such assessments may increase the likelihood of using online information sources as an alternative to mass media. Reactance theory was first introduced by Brehm (1972) as a motivational state, and posits that individuals behave in a manner that attempts to maximize the satisfaction of threatened needs. Efforts to re-establish a lost freedom can include denying the existence of the threat, finding means to mitigate the threat, derogating the source of the threat, or engaging in the threatened behavior.

Dillard and Shen (2005) expanded on Brehm's work by explicating reactance as composed of both affective and cognitive attributes that motivate the restoration of one's "freedom." These affective attributes may manifest as anger and frustration, and are expected to fuel the motivation required to achieve a particular satisfaction (Brandon, 1994).

Similarly, the cognitive attributes are described as negative responses toward the source of the threat. Scholars have long researched cognitive responses to persuasive messages, with outcomes suggesting that when messages do not adhere to an individual's established cognitive stance, then negative cognitions, such as counterarguing, will take place (Greenwald, 1968; Petty, Cacioppo, & Heesacker, 1981; Sherif & Hovland, 1961).

We assert that this conceptual framework, most often applied to persuasive messaging, may also be used to understand audiences' psychological reactance to perceived censorship that threatens their media freedom. When individuals recognize that their ability to access otherwise readily available and/or accurate information is threatened, the affective (e.g., anger and frustration) and cognitive (e.g., counterarguing) mechanisms of reactance may arise and motivate them to re-establish their informational freedom by, for example, the use of alternative information sources. In some cases, even when a direct threat does not exist, individuals may resist persuasive messages by a potential threatening source by proactively seeking alternative sources of information.

We term the reactance arising from a perceived threat to media freedom as *motivated resistance to censorship* (MRC) given that our conceptualization moves beyond the psychological motivation to respond to an explicit threat, and accounts for the preemptive response individuals may have toward a threat that may or may not overtly take place (Whitehead & Russell, 2004). This is an important distinction from existing reactance research because it integrates both the motivational attributes of reactance and the anticipatory nature of resistance.

Although one alternative framework that can be considered in this approach is uses and gratifications, our decision to focus on reactance is predicated on several important distinctions. Although the affordances of online sources may provide some justification for online information seeking (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004), reactance theory accounts for the psychological processes and outcome behaviors that occur when there is a perception that certain needs are not being gratified. There is also an imbedded assumption that through reactance arousal and subsequent use of online information seeking, a level of gratification is established.

### **Mitigating Censorship Through Online Information Seeking**

Individuals motivated to resist censorship may alleviate the perceived threat through a variety of means, just as they do in persuasive contexts. This may include source derogation, motivated attempts to engage in the threatened behavior (i.e., information access), or bypassing the threat. In our study, we were concerned with one particular form of behavioral response to censorship of information: online information-seeking behavior.

In conditions where mainstream media are highly regulated and manipulated by the state, citizens may lose confidence in the information source and turn to outlets that are not as tightly controlled. The advent of the Internet plays a crucial role in reshaping the face of media censorship. A number of studies have reported the significant role that the Internet plays in the promotion of deliberative democracy (Dahlberg, 2001); the diffusion of diverse information, which may rebut mainstream discourse (Farrell, 2012); and the spread of a more interactive means of conveying information (Taylor & Perry, 2005). Finally, the Internet has been established as an integral tool in social, cultural, and political movements (Meikle, 2002). The convenient, unaltered, and multifaceted nature of the Internet provides greater potential for informing the masses at a higher standard (Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Kenski & Stroud, 2006). For example, according to Freedom House (2015), in countries with censored media systems such as Russia, Malaysia, Ukraine, Egypt, Jordan, South Africa, and Turkey, the Internet offers a more open information environment than traditional mass media. Such open environments may offer appealing characteristics for those facing limited information flow from mainstream media.

Previous scholarship indicates that using online information sources in response to perceived threats to media freedom is common (Coombs & Cutbirth, 1998). Citizens who perceive these threats are likely to experience negative affective reactance (i.e., fear and anxiety), which encourages alternative information-seeking behavior (Valentino, Hutchings, Banks, & Davis, 2008). Consequently, it would appear conceivable for citizens who experience a valid threat to freedom and develop unfavorable emotions toward the message (as is predicted by MRC) to seek information via a source that restores that freedom or helps them resist the persuasive nature of the threatening message (i.e., the Internet).

The more open, pluralistic, and credible attributes of the online information environment as compared with the mass media in nondemocratic states are the basis on which "window opening" and "mirror holding" in the democratization literature are grounded (Bailard, 2014; Nisbet et al., 2012; Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014; Stoycheff et al., 2016). Window opening occurs when citizens use the Internet

to learn information about democratic practices and norms in other countries not readily available in their mainstream press. In contrast, mirror holding occurs when citizens use online resources to gain more accurate information and news about their own country and government that may not be available or are actively censored in their mass media, leading them to be more critically informed.

However, a limitation to both of these conceptual frameworks is a focus on the effect of Internet use rather than the communication processes that lead to such online political information seeking among citizens in nondemocratic contexts. Such processes, unfortunately, remain largely unexplained. Our proposed conceptualization of MRC makes an important contribution toward understanding how citizens move from consuming mass media news in a censored information environment to consuming alternative sources of information online, which may provide more pluralistic views.

### **Integrated Model**

From the above explication, an integrated model emerges that contributes important insights to the underlying communication mechanisms that may lead citizens to use online political information sources in nondemocratic, censored societies. The central pathway in this model originates with perceptions of threat to media freedom based on individuals' evaluations about the supply of media freedom or the amount of media freedom they desire, or possibly a combination of both. In turn, perceiving a threat to media freedom or exposure to unsavory persuasive messages triggers both cognitive and affective responses (i.e., MRC), which are aimed at mitigating the threat. As such, perceived supply of media freedom will be associated with lower MRC (H1a) and demand for media freedom will be associated with higher MRC (H1b).

As discussed, a common strategy used to mitigate threat in many censored societies is online information-seeking behavior. Therefore, MRC will be associated with higher online political information-seeking behavior (H2). In this sense, the relationships between perceived supply of and demand for media freedom and online political information seeking will be mediated by MRC (H3), creating a mediation model (Hayes, 2013).

### **Study Context: Turkey**

The context we used to assess our model is the Republic of Turkey. Turkey is a prime example of how media censorship can be used by alleged democratic states to oppress voices criticizing the government. Examples of abuse include the imprisonment of journalists, mass expulsion of media staff, criminalization of dissent, intimidation of antigovernment media through legal measures (e.g., tax fines, defamation laws, arrests), and growing concentration of media ownership in the hands of government-friendly corporations (Corke, Finkel, Kramer, Robbins, & Schenkan, 2014).

In comparison to the mass media, Turkey's Internet and social media space has remained relatively open and pluralistic despite both formal and informal censorship attempts made by the government (Freedom House, 2015). Compared with other countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, Internet technologies are more widely used in Turkey, with slightly more than 50% of the population regularly accessing the Internet (International Telecommunication Union, 2014). Within the

subset of citizens who are online, 88% are on Facebook, making Turkey one of the largest populations of Facebook users in the world, with an estimated 46.3 million users (Internet World Stats, 2016).

Turkish citizen journalism on social media has thrived despite the atmosphere of oppression and restrictions imposed on traditional media. Reliance on citizen journalism has substantially increased with the failure of traditional media to cover Gezi Park protests (Tunc, 2014). Beginning as a sit-in opposition to the urban development plan in Gezi Park, these protests soon turned into a countrywide wave of antigovernment demonstrations primarily targeting the increasingly authoritarian practices of the ruling party. In contrast to widely implemented self-censorship in the mainstream media, both pro- and antigovernment social media users shared logistic information about demonstrations, statements of grievances, live streams of images pertaining to the protests, and the reactions against the government since the beginning of the unrest.

Alternative online media outlets, some of which were initiated by former media staff, allowed citizen and professional journalists to provide publicity to otherwise silenced voices in the public sphere (Corke et al., 2014). However, considering the continuing reliance on traditional media for political news by the majority of the Turkish public, the influence of alternative outlets remains largely limited to those who are actively using the Internet and social media. Based on this precarious political and media climate in Turkey, we deemed the country an appropriate case study for this project given that the stringent restrictions placed on mainstream media may prompt individuals to employ the Internet as an alternative source of information.

## **Method**

### ***Study Design***

We evaluated our hypotheses and research questions as they apply to Turkey through two different sets of analyses. Our justification to include both studies was that the replication provides additional validation for our results. Because our interest was online information seeking, we deemed it appropriate to test our model using both a general population sample as well as larger sample of Internet users to ensure that our original outcomes were a product of our model and not due to differences in type of data collection, sample characteristics, and/or study period. With confidence in the validity social science research under scrutiny due to a lack of replicability, we believe replicating and expanding the results of our initial study with a larger sample of Internet users is important to establishing the validity of our findings (Open Science Collaboration, 2015). In the first analysis, we evaluated the mediated relationships outlined in H1a–H3 between perceived supply and demand for media freedom, MRC, and online political information-seeking behavior. The data for this analysis were collected through a national, face-to-face, general population household survey of Turkey conducted over a six-week period (December 20, 2014–February 2, 2015). The sample was a random stratified, clustered sample with stratification applied in two levels based on the total population and urban/rural proportion within each Turkish census region, with clusters containing 20 households. The Turkish census agency randomly selected clusters and households for the survey. The survey was conducted by both male and female survey interviewers to allow same-sex interviewing when appropriate. Survey interviewers contacted 2,111 households, with one

survey respondent randomly selected within each household without replacement. The response rate was 55%, for a total of 1,161 completed survey interviews. However, for the analysis, we focused only on those individuals from the sample who had access to and used the Internet (568 survey respondents, or 48.9% of the sample, which is consistent with the estimated Internet penetration in Turkey according to the International Telecommunication Union's ICT Indicators 2014 Database).

### **Study 1 Data Coding**

In the first analysis, eight demographic control variables were coded for inclusion in the mediation model. These variables included age ( $M = 33.8$  years,  $SD = 10.8$ ) and educational attainment measured on a 7-point scale ranging from *no formal education* to *graduate education* ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ). Dummy codes were entered for respondents who were employed (56.6%), female (42.7%), and who self-identified as Kurdish ethnicity (14.5%) or as Sunni Muslim (90.7%). A measure of Muslim religiosity was constructed by combining two survey items, one item asking respondents on a 7-point scale ranging from *never* to *more than once a week* how often they pray ( $M = 5.1$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ), and the other asking respondents, independent of how much they pray, how religious they are on a 11-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *very religious* ( $M = 6.9$ ,  $SD = 2.2$ ). Non-Muslims were scored as *never* and *not at all* on each item, respectively. The two items were standardized (z-scored) and averaged into one overall measure of Muslim religiosity ( $M = -0.19$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ,  $r = .47$ ). The population density of the area in which the respondent resided, measured with rural coded high on a 5-point scale ranging from *metropolis* to *hamlet, settlement with single dwelling*, was included in the model ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ).

We also included control variables accounting for respondents' political orientations and mass media use. Our measure for a respondent's affective support of the governing regime ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 3.6$ ,  $r = .85$ ) was constructed by averaging the affective ratings (each on an 11-point scale ranging from *very unfavorable* to *very favorable*) of the recently elected President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, former prime minister and leader of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP;  $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 4.0$ ), and the current Prime Minister and leader of the AKP Ahmet Davutoglu ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 3.5$ ). In addition, whether the respondent self-identified as supporting the governing party, AKP, or not was entered into the equation (33%).

The use of television and newspapers as sources of news was evaluated by measures of exposure and attention to news (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986). Frequency of exposure to TV news broadcasts, including online, was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from *never* to *daily* ( $M = 6.4$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ). Frequency of newspaper reading was also measured on a similar scale ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 2.5$ ). News attention was entered into the model separately, assessed by averaging three survey items asking how closely respondents followed news about Turkish politics in general ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ), international issues and events ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ), and the recent presidential election ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ), each measured on a 5-point scale ranging from *not closely at all* to *extremely closely* ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ).

Perceived supply of media freedom and demand for media freedom were each constructed by averaging responses to two different sets of parallel survey items that assessed the political and legal

dimensions of media freedom (Freedom House, 2015) on 5-point Likert scales. To assess supply of media freedom, interviewers asked respondents how much they agreed that "the government does not prevent Turkish news media from criticizing the government" ( $M = 2.2, SD = 1.2$ ), "journalists are free from coercion and violence when reporting controversial issues" ( $M = 2.4, SD = 1.2$ ), and "Turkish news media have free and open access to government information" ( $M = 2.6, SD = 1.2$ ). These three measures were averaged into one overall index of perceived supply of media freedom ( $M = 2.4, SD = 1.0, \alpha = .84$ ).

Demand for media freedom was assessed by asking three questions directly paralleling the three perceived supply measures that asked how much respondents agreed that "the Turkish news media should be very free to criticize the government" ( $M = 4.1, SD = 0.87$ ), "journalists and bloggers should be free from coercion and violence when reporting controversial issues" ( $M = 4.1, SD = 0.91$ ), and "Turkish laws should ensure news media have free and open access to government information" ( $M = 3.9, SD = 0.96$ ). The measures were also averaged into an overall index of demand for media freedom ( $M = 4.0, SD = 0.79, \alpha = .82$ ).

MRC ( $M = 3.5, SD = 0.80, \alpha = .78$ ) was measured using eight items on a 5-point scale (see the Appendix), which assessed both the cognitive and affective dimensions of individual resistance to perceived threat. Survey items were adapted from previous studies measuring reactance and resistance to persuasion (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007; Nisbet, Cooper, & Garrett, 2015). Online information-seeking behavior ( $M = 3.0, SD = 1.5, \alpha = .85$ ) was constructed by averaging six items that measured the use of the Internet and social media as sources of political information aside from the Turkish mass media (see the Appendix) on a 7-point scale ranging from *never* to *everyday*.

### **Study 1 Results**

We produced two different hierarchical ordinary least squares models, one predicting MRC (see Table 1) and the other predicting online political information seeking (see Table 2). We also used Hayes's (2013) SPSS PROCESS macro (hereafter PROCESS) to explore the indirect effects of perceived supply of and demand for media freedom on online political information-seeking behavior.

The results of the first analysis predicting MRC among Turkish Internet users are shown in Table 1, with unstandardized coefficients and standard errors reported. The overall model explained 29.0% of the observed variance. Each block of variables was entered into the model in their assumed, theoretically driven causal order, and the change in explained variance was recorded. The first block of sociodemographic variables explained 9.1% of the variance in MRC, with religious Muslims ( $b = -.11, p \leq .001$ ) expressing lower levels of resistance to censorship in the overall model. Affective support for the current regime and self-identification as an AKP supporter accounted for 3.1% of explained variance above sociodemographics, with AKP identification ( $b = -.28, p \leq .01$ ) associated with lower MRC in the final model.

Media exposure and news attention accounted for 4.4% of the explained variance in MRC after accounting for prior variables. Although not significant in the final model, prior to the entry of demand for



media freedom, attention to news ( $b = .15, p \leq .001$ ) and television news exposure ( $b = .07, p \leq .01$ ) were significantly associated with MRC.

The final block of variables representing perceived threats accounted for the largest single contribution to the explained variance (11.8%). Whereas perceived supply of media freedom was not significantly associated with motivated resistance as expected ( $b = -.03, ns$ ), greater demand for media freedom was associated with greater MRC as expected ( $b = .39, p \leq .001$ ). In other words, holding perceived supply of freedom constant, the more media freedom they desire, the greater they are likely to react to media censorship negatively.

**Table 1. Study 1: Hierarchical Ordinary Least Square Regression Predicting Motivated Resistance to Censorship.**

	Model 1
Variable	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )
Constant	1.37 (.32)***
Block 1: Sociodemographics	
Age	.01 (.00)
Sex (female coded high)	-.01 (.07)
Educational attainment	.03 (.03)
Population density (rural coded high)	-.05 (.03)
Employed	-.01 (.07)
Sunni Muslim	-.04 (.11)
Muslim religiosity	-.11 (.04)***
Kurdish	-.15 (.11)
% incremental variance explained ( $R^2$ )	9.1***
Block 2: Political orientation	
Regime affect	.02 (.01)
AKP support	-.28 (.10)**
% incremental variance explained ( $R^2$ )	3.7***
Block 3: Mass media use	
Newspaper news exposure	.02 (.02)
TV news exposure	.03 (.03)
Attention to political news	.08 (.04)#
% incremental variance explained ( $R^2$ )	4.4***
Block 4: Threat to media freedom	
Perceived supply of media freedom	-.03 (.04)
Demand for media freedom	.39 (.05)***
% incremental variance explained ( $R^2$ )	11.8***
% total variance explained ( $R^2$ )	29.0

Note. AKP = Justice and Development Party.  
# $p \leq .10$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

Table 2 presents the second half of our analysis in Study 1 that predicts online political information seeking for which the overall model explained 27.7% of the variance. Sociodemographic variables explained one of the largest blocks of variance at 11.3%. Identifying as Sunni Muslim ( $b = .58, p \leq .001$ ) and lower population density ( $b = -.18, p \leq .001$ ) were most prominently associated with online political information seeking in the final model among sociodemographic variables. Political orientations also influenced online political information seeking, with greater favorable affect toward the regime associated with less online political information seeking ( $b = -.05, p \leq .001$ ) and explaining 3.9% of the total variance. Not surprisingly, other media behaviors were strongly associated with online political information, with newspaper reading ( $b = .09, p \leq .001$ ) and attention to news ( $b = .48, p \leq .001$ ) both increasing online information-seeking behaviors and explaining 11.3% of the variance.

**Table 2. Study 1: Hierarchal Ordinary Least Square Regression Predicting Online Political Information Seeking.**

Variable	Model 1 <i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )
Constant	
Block 1: Sociodemographics	
Age	-.01 (.00)*
Sex (female coded high)	-.04 (.13)
Educational attainment	.07 (.05)
Population density (rural coded high)	-.18 (.06)***
Employed	.16 (.13)
Sunni Muslim	.58 (.20)***
Muslim religiosity	-.14 (.08)
Kurdish	.05 (.19)
% incremental variance explained ( $R^2$ )	11.3***
Block 2: Political orientation	
Regime affect	-.05 (.03)**
AKP support	-.05 (.06)
% incremental variance explained ( $R^2$ )	3.9***
Block 3: Mass media use	
Newspaper news exposure	.09 (.03)***
TV news exposure	-.07 (.05)
Attention to political news	.48 (.08)***
% incremental variance explained ( $R^2$ )	11.3***

Block 4: Threat to media freedom	
Perceived supply of media freedom	.07 (.07)
Demand for media freedom	-.01 (.08)
% incremental variance explained ( $R^2$ )	0.03
Block 5: Reactance	
Motivated resistance to censorship	.21 (.09)**
% incremental variance explained ( $R^2$ )	0.09***
% total variance explained ( $R^2$ )	27.7

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*Note.* AKP = Justice and Development Party.

# $p \leq .10$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

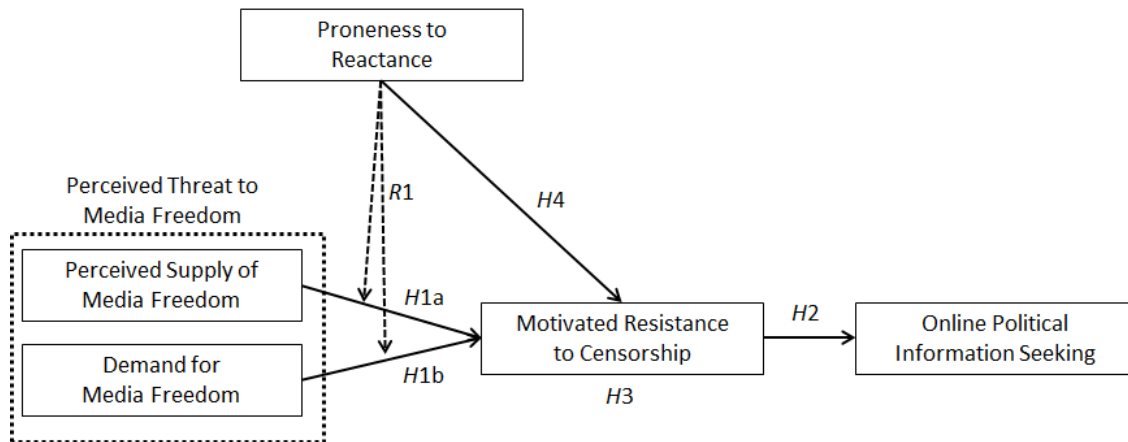
The two threat variables (perceived supply of and demand for media freedom) did not have a significant direct association with online political information seeking. However, independent variables do not need to have direct associations with a dependent variable to have indirect effects through possible mediators (Hayes, 2013). In this case, we theorized that perceived supply and demand for media freedom would have an indirect effect on online political information seeking through MRC. The first step was testing whether MRC significantly predicts online political information seeking, which it did ( $b = .25$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ), explaining 0.09% of the variance. The second was to use the PROCESS macro to estimate the indirect effects of demand for media freedom on online political information seeking with bootstrapped 99% and 99.9% confidence intervals using 5,000 samples calculated to test the significance of the pathway. The indirect effect of demand for media freedom on online political information seeking via increased MRC was significant ( $b = .08$ , CI [.01, .18]), partially supporting H3.

### **Study 2: Replication and Expansion**

Our second study not only attempted to replicate the first study on a larger sample of Turkish Internet users, but it also added a new variable to our model, proneness to reactance (PtR). In contrast to state reactance that occurs based on perceived threat, PtR is a discrete trait that is described as the propensity of an individual to engage in reactance generally across contexts (Hong, 1992; Hong & Faedda, 1996). The added measure of PtR provides a degree of validity to the traditional measure of state reactance, because it accounts for individual differences with regard to threat response. Thus, we posited that PtR would be associated with higher MRC, as these individuals are more sensitive to having their freedoms inhibited (H4).

In addition, in the context of perceived threat to media freedom, PtR may influence the relationships between perceived supply of and demand for media freedom and MRC. As demand for media freedom increases (holding perceived supply constant), MRC may increase as the gap widens between how much media freedom people want and how much they think they possess. In other words, PtR may amplify this relationship given that individuals high in PtR will be more likely to experience affective and cognitive reactance in the face of this perceived threat compared with individuals low in PtR. In contrast,

individuals high in PtR may be less sensitive to changes in perceived supply of media freedom, thus dampening the relationship between perceived supply of media freedom and MRC. We added, therefore, a research question (RQ1) to our model that asked whether PtR moderates the relationships between perceived supply of and demand for media freedom and MRC. With this addition, our hypotheses and research question form what is termed a full, moderated mediation model (Hayes, 2013), depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Moderated mediation model of perceived threat to media freedom, motivated resistance to censorship, and online political information seeking.**

The data for this analysis were collected via a survey administered to respondents recruited through a Turkish online commercial opt-in panel contracted by Qualtrics. A quota sampling technique, which attempted to mimic the demographics of Turkish Internet users based on age, sex, and education, was employed to increase external validity. A total of 2,002 Turkish Internet users who reside in Turkey completed the online survey between April 29 and May 6, 2015, providing a larger sample of Internet users on which to replicate and extend our first analysis.

### **Study 2 Data Coding**

As mentioned, the data for Study 2 were collected via a survey administered to an online opt-in commercial survey panel maintained in Turkey. Although the survey mode and sampling differed significantly from those in Study 1, the same question wording was used on the survey instrument. In terms of sociodemographics, age ( $M = 33.1$  years,  $SD = 10.3$ ), gender (39% female), and employment (54.9% employed) were very close to the face-to-face sample of Internet users in Study 1. Sociodemographics varied substantially in terms of greater educational attainment ( $M = 5.0$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ), fewer Kurdish respondents (7%), fewer self-identified Sunni Muslims (77%), a lower level of Muslim religiosity ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ), and more urban dwellers ( $M = 1.3$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). However, despite these demographic differences, using such a heterogeneous sample is a valid means to explore basic

communication and psychological processes and explicate relationships when not attempting to estimate population parameters (Hayes, 2005).

Political orientations were again measured with two items. Somewhat similar to Study 1, an index of support for the governing regime was constructed by averaging affective 11-point ratings of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, and the AKP itself ( $M = 3.3$ ,  $SD = 3.6$ ,  $\alpha = .97$ ). The other political orientation indicator was whether the respondents self-identified with the AKP (22%).

Television exposure ( $M = 6.0$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ) and newspaper exposure ( $M = 6.0$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ) were measured the same as in Study 1. News attention was again assessed by averaging three questions asking how closely respondents followed news about Turkish politics in general, international issues and events, and the upcoming parliamentary elections (rather than the past presidential election) on the same 5-point scale as in Study 1 ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ).

Perceived supply of media freedom ( $M = 2.4$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ) and demand for media freedom ( $M = 4.3$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ) were each measured exactly as in Study 1. Similarly, MRC ( $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ) was assessed using the same scale index of eight statements. Online information-seeking behavior ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ) was constructed by averaging six items that measured the use of the Internet and social media as sources of political information as was done in Study 1.

A new measure tapping PtR was also coded. PtR ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ,  $\alpha = .53$ ) was measured by asking respondents their agreement with four statements on a 5-point scale with selected statements taken from the Hong's (1992) PtR scale. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that (a) "rules trigger a sense of resistance in me," (b) "I often resist the attempts of others to influence me," (c) "I become angry when my freedom of choice is restricted," and (d) "I enjoy contradicting other people's opinions."

### **Study 2 Results**

Our analysis for Study 2 also employed Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro to evaluate our hypothesized moderated mediation model fully outlined in Figure 1. Table 3 presents two sets of equations testing our hypotheses and research questions, the first equation predicting MRC and the second equation predicting online information seeking. Each equation was bootstrapped 5,000 times, with the model predicting MRC explaining 36.0% of the variance and the model predicting online political information seeking explaining 43.8% of the variance.

As in Study 1, demand for media freedom ( $b = .19$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) was a significant predictor of MRC (supporting H1b). However, differing from Study 1, perceived supply of media freedom ( $b = -.13$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) was also a significant predictor, with greater perceived supply associated with lower levels of motivated resistance (supporting H1a). This difference in the relationship between perceived supply and MRC between Study 1 and Study 2 could be due to the substantially increased sample size of Internet users (four times) in Study 2 and thus greater available power for analysis. Also similar to Study 1, regime affect ( $b = -.05$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) and attention to political news ( $b = .12$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) were also significant

predictors of MRC. The new variable entered into the model, PtR, was associated ( $b = .19, p \leq .001$ ) with greater MRC (supporting H4).

**Table 3. Study 2: Moderated Mediation Analysis of Perceived Threat, Motivated Resistance to Censorship, and Online Political Information Seeking.**

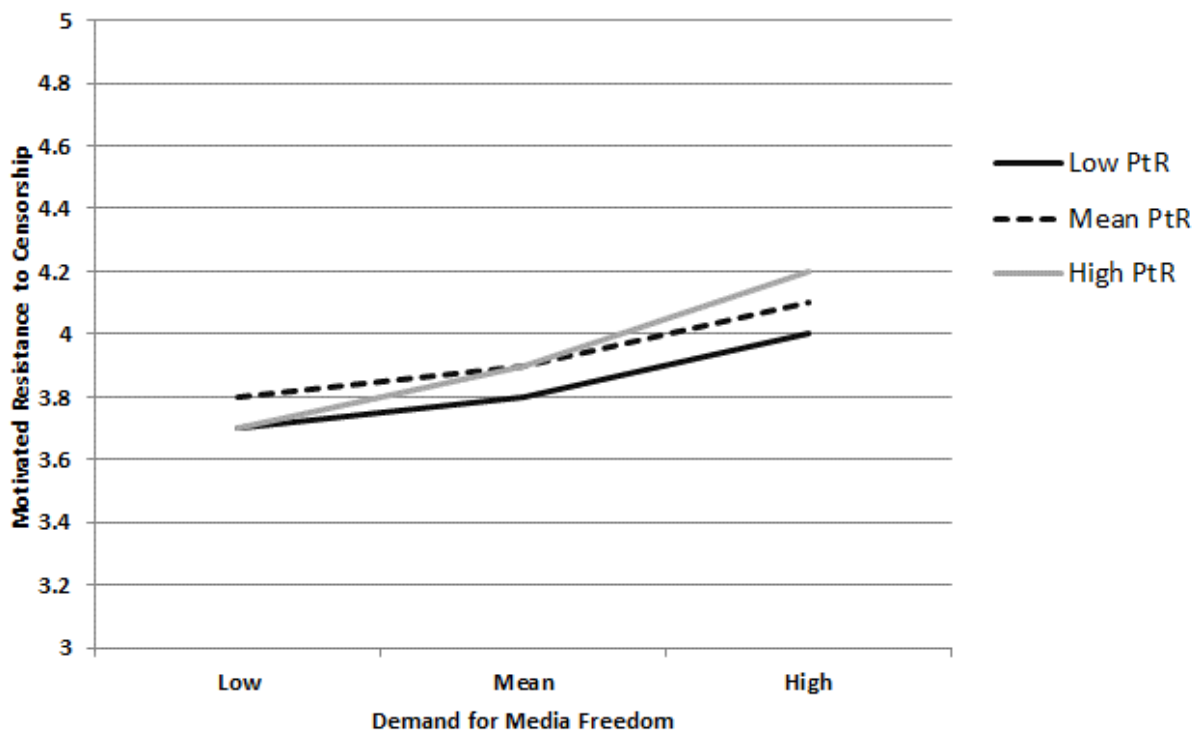
Variable	Model 1 <i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )
Equation predicting motivated resistance to censorship	
Constant	3.69 (.44)***
Proneness to reactance (PtR)	-.22 (.12)#
Regime affect	-.05 (.01)***
AKP support	.13 (.06)*
Attention to political news	.12 (.02)***
Perceived supply of media freedom	-.29 (.06)***
Demand for media freedom	-.05 (.09)
PtR × Perceived Supply	.04 (.02)*
PtR × Demand	.07 (.02)**
% variance explained (Total $R^2$ )	36.0
Equation predicting online political information seeking	
Constant	-1.21 (.31)***
Proneness to reactance (PtR)	.22 (.04)***
Regime affect	-.05 (.01)***
AKP support	.33 (.10)***
Attention to political news	.76 (.04)***
Perceived supply of media freedom	.07 (.03)*
Demand for media freedom	-.01 (.04)
Motivated resistance to censorship	.16 (.04)***
% variance explained (Total $R^2$ )	43.8

*Note.* AKP = Justice and Development Party. Controlling for age, education, gender, employed, population density, Kurdish, Sunni Muslim, Muslim religiosity, and television and newspaper use.

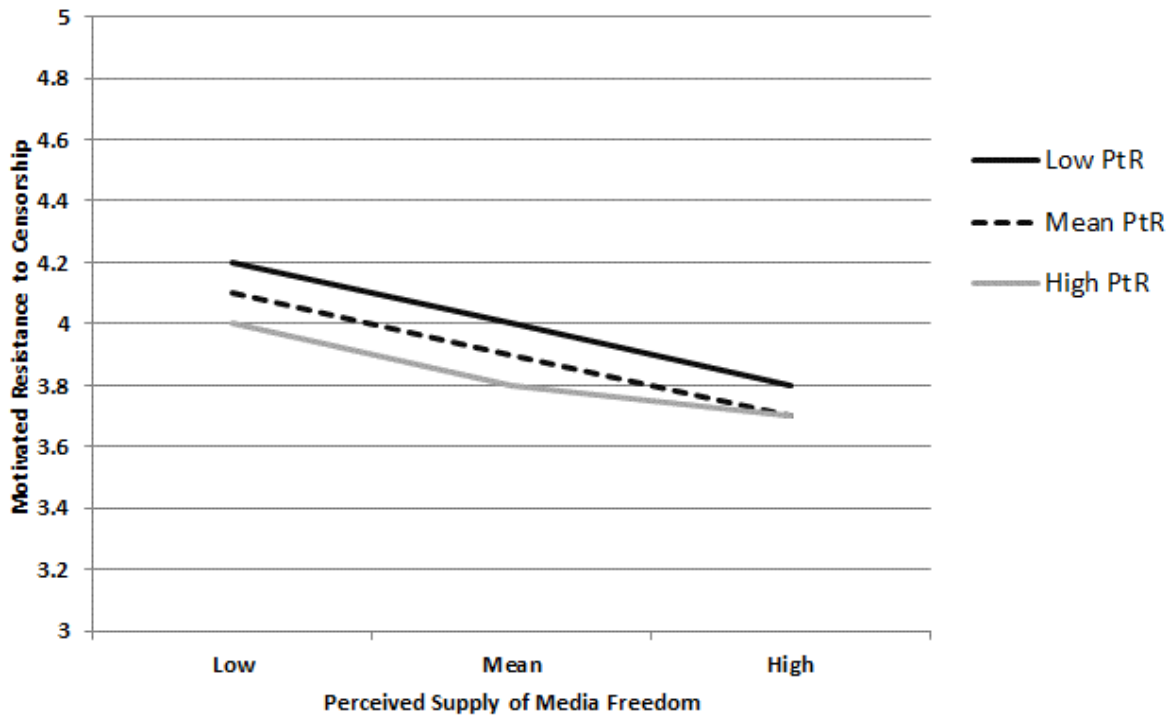
# $p \leq .10$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

We tested two sets of interaction terms in the first equation to answer whether PtR moderated the relationships between perceived supply of and demand for media freedom and MRC. In both cases, PtR was found to significantly moderate perceived supply of media freedom ( $b = .04, p \leq .001$ ) and demand for media freedom ( $b = .07, p \leq .001$ ), answering RQ1 in the affirmative. Using PROCESS, we bootstrapped the model 5,000 times to estimate moderated effects of perceived supply of and demand for media freedom at 1 *SD* below the mean of PtR, the mean level of PtR, and 1 *SD* above the mean of PtR and graphed the slopes of each interaction. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the results.

In Figure 2, PtR amplifies the effect of demand for media freedom on MRC. In other words, individuals with a high level of PtR were more likely to experience MRC at the same levels of demand. At a low level of PtR (1 *SD* below the mean), the effect size of demand for media freedom on MRC ( $b = .14, CI [.10, .19]$ ) was about 60% of the effect size of demand ( $b = .24, CI [.19, .29]$ ) at a high level of PtR (1 *SD* above the mean). In contrast, PtR dampened the relationship between perceived supply of media freedom and MRC. As perceived supply increased, MRC decreased to a lesser degree for individuals with a high level of PtR as compared with those with a low level of PtR. For instance, the effect of perceived supply of media freedom ( $b = -.10, CI [-.14, -.07]$ ) at a high level of PtR was about 40% less than the effect of perceived supply ( $b = -.17, CI [-.21, -.13]$ ) at a low level of PtR.



**Figure 2. Moderated effects of proneness to reactance (PtR) on demand for media freedom in equation predicting motivated resistance to censorship.**



**Figure 3. Moderated effects of proneness to reactance on perceived supply of media freedom in equation predicting motivated resistance to censorship.**

Turning to the equation examining online political information seeking, regime affect ( $b = -.05, p \leq .001$ ), attention to political news ( $b = .76, p \leq .001$ ), and MRC ( $b = .16, p \leq .001$ ) were all significant predictors of online political information seeking just as they were in Study 1, thus supporting H2. Similar to the equation predicting MRC, greater PtR ( $b = .22, p \leq .001$ ) was associated with increase online political information-seeking behavior.

In answer to H3, both perceived supply of and demand for media freedom had significant indirect effects on online political information seeking. Again, using the PROCESS macro to estimate indirect effects with 5,000 bootstrapped samples, perceived supply had a negative indirect effect through MRC on online political information seeking ( $b = -.02, CI [-.04, -.01]$  at mean PtR). However, it was only partially mediated, with perceived supply also having a direct positive effect on online political information seeking ( $b = .07, p \leq .05$  at mean PtR). Demand for media freedom was completely mediated by MRC and had significant positive indirect effects ( $b = .03, CI [.01, .05]$  at mean PtR) on online political information seeking.



## **Discussion**

We set out to address a number of questions we think may enhance both our understanding of the effects of media censorship and the media consumption habits of those living in censored media environments. Although research pertaining to censorship has demonstrated that online information seeking is on the rise in highly regulated societies, there have been few inquiries that address the communication processes underlying why such a behavior is taking place. Our two studies conducted in a relatively censored media environment (i.e., Turkey) are important first steps to unpacking these political communication processes in censored media environments.

The results indicate that there is more to understanding media censorship than the normative evaluations to which we have become accustomed. The integration of motivated resistance to censorship helps establish an important boundary condition that explains how perception of threat may encourage those who live or perceive they live in censored media environments to turn to alternative sources of information.

The data demonstrate that perception of threat to media freedom is indirectly associated with increased online information-seeking behavior by way of the mediating influence of MRC (H3). Our first study suggests that higher demand for media freedom is a significant predictor of MRC (perceived supply did not garner significance), and the increased power from our second study shows that both lower perceptions of media supply of and higher demands for media freedom are related to MRC (H1a and H1b). We also found support for the positive effect of MRC on online information-seeking behavior (H2) in both studies, providing additional convergent validity for our theoretical framework.

Accounting for individual differences in PtR in Study 2 further strengthens the validity of our results by demonstrating that observed relationships are a function of a "state" of MRC in response to perceived threats to media freedom rather than a result of individual differences. In addition, we showed how PtR amplifies or dampens the relationships between citizens' perceptions about media freedom and their MRC. These results demonstrate that further explication of the role that PtR may play in evaluations of and reactions to censorship are needed.

## ***Limitations/Future Directions***

Our study and methodology have some important limitations. Although our analysis exhibits an appropriate level of external validity, by virtue of the nationally representative face-to-face survey of citizens residing in a censored media environment, as well as a second online sampling of Internet users, we have sacrificed some internal validity. We acknowledge that our study comprised cross-sectional data; as such, drawing definitive conclusions about the causal order of the moderation and mediation processes tested in our MRC model should be cautioned. This underscores the need for additional experimental or longitudinal survey panel designs that strengthen the internal validity of the model through experimental controls and/or over-time observations. In addition, we recognize that samples limited to Turkish Internet users are conservative and not inevitably generalizable to all contexts or populations. However, we think that our findings do shed light on an important boundary condition in censorship research. Although

previous research does provide some evidence of gravitation toward online information seeking in closed media systems, we believe that our approach creates a bridge between this behavior and the psychological motivations that initiate it.

Beyond these methodological concerns, there are some considerations in our model that have yet to be fully evaluated. One such acknowledgment is that the current study did not explicitly tie political learning to online political information seeking, although the connection between online political information seeking and political learning has been previously well developed in nondemocratic and democratic contexts alike (e.g., Bailard 2014; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Nevertheless, explicating the entire set of linkages between perceived threats, MRC, online information seeking, and citizens' political learning is still necessary to fully evaluate our proposed theoretical framework.

For instance, it remains unclear as to whether MRC will actually lead individuals to pursue the specific information they perceive is being threatened or whether the information seeking is aimed more toward entertainment or nonrelevant information. Research in other nondemocratic contexts has shown that individuals' reliance on alternative forms of online, "capital-enhancing" sources of information, rather than censored or propagandized traditional mass media, increases citizens' ability to critically appraise the amount of democracy they enjoy, dampens citizens' support for nondemocratic regimes, and increases citizens' demand for democratic governance (Stoycheff et al., 2016).

By looking at political learning as a whole, we will also be able to measure whether those who do not engage in reactance will have varying levels of political information compared with those who do engage in reactance. Understanding the extent to which people circumvent or know how to circumvent censorship may shed light on the type of information they are likely to receive from online sources. Thus, we may also be able to extend MRC beyond only explaining online information-seeking behaviors aimed at bypassing mass media censorship, and apply it to citizens who actively employ circumvention technologies to bypass Internet censorship as well.

The inclusion of MRC fulfills a gap in the relationship between media censorship and online information-seeking behavior. By accounting for perception of threat to media freedom and the subsequent motivational response to restore that freedom, we have the ability to develop a more comprehensive understanding regarding the communication habits of individuals living in both democratic and nondemocratic media systems. Moreover, whether citizens have a high MRC is dependent on the degree to which they perceive that their media freedom is threatened.

Thus, two questions arise. (1) What determines the accuracy of these perceptions given that they may vary widely depending on individual traits, attitudes, knowledge, context, and other social influences? This question has been partially answered by some (e.g., Andsager, Wyatt, & Martin, 2004; Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014), but more research in this area is required. (2) How does MRC operate in democratic versus nondemocratic countries? Even in a largely uncensored society such as the United States, if citizens perceive their media freedom is being censored or threatened in some fashion, MRC may also occur. In turn, this may lead citizens to increase their dependence on information sources outside the mainstream press. Both questions are areas in which additional research is needed.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to develop a potential model that will help explain how individuals living in censored media societies navigate their information environment. The preliminary step in this process was to establish the association between variables that could potentially explain how and why individuals access information that may increase political learning. The central theoretical contribution in this operation was the incorporation of MRC as a potential boundary condition. The data suggest that when individuals feel their freedom to access news media information is threatened by way of censorship, they will strive to restore that freedom by accessing information via the Internet. Based on these results, future studies can confidently build on this model by developing a more concrete association between information seeking and political learning. From a policy perspective, there is great potential for promoting media freedom in the long term if we can better understand how heightened MRC may prompt citizens to turn to online information or other sources that mitigate media censorship in closed systems.

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## Appendix

### A. Motivated Resistance to Censorship Scale

Strongly disagree/Disagree/Neither agree nor disagree/Agree/Strongly agree

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. I feel frustrated by the lack of accurate information available in Turkish media.
2. I often find myself looking for the flaws in the way information is presented in the Turkish media.
3. The Turkish media try to pressure me to think a certain way.
4. When consuming Turkish media, I often find myself thinking about the many ways in which I disagree with it.
5. I often think the information in Turkish media is inaccurate or misleading.
6. The Turkish news media try to manipulate me.
7. I feel limited by what information the Turkish government allows to be in the media.
8. When accurate information is not freely available in the Turkish media, I get angry.

### B. Online Political Information-Seeking Scale

Never/Less than once in a month/Once a month/2–3 times a month/Once a week/2–3 times a week/Everyday

How often do you . . .

1. Use foreign Internet sources (websites, blogs, social networking sites) for political news?
2. Search for information on political leaders or issues?
3. Read news headlines or short news summaries on social networking sites?
4. Discuss political issues with others on social networking sites?
5. Read messages from, or profiles of, the political leaders or parties on social networking sites?
6. Read political opinions about political leaders or issues on social networking sites?