An Alternative Media Experience: LiveLeak[*]

Fatih Çömlekçi[1] and Serhat Güney[2]

[1] Ministry of Culture, State Theater,
Mete Cad. No: 26, Beyoğlu, 34420 Istanbul Turkey
fatihcomlekci@gmail.com
[2] Galatasaray University, Faculty of Communication,
Ciragan Cad. No: 36 Ortakoy 34357 Istanbul, Turkey
hserhatguney@gmail.com

Abstract. This research examines a video sharing web site called LiveLeak to be able to analyze the possibilities of democratic and horizontal social mobilization via Internet technology. In this sense, we take into consideration the Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophical conceptualization of "rhizome" which provides a new approach for activities of online communities. In the light of this concept and its anti-hierarchical approach we tried to discuss the potentials of network communication models such as LiveLeak in terms of emancipating use of media and democratic communication. By analyzing the contextual traffic on the LiveLeak for a randomly chosen one week (first week of December 2013) we argue that this video sharing web site shows a rhizomatic characteristic.

Keywords: LiveLeak, Rhizome, Social Networking.

1   Introduction

Rapid developments in communication technologies and its social reflections, which took place especially in the 20th century, have drawn the attention of social scientists. At one extreme, Frankfurt School and its followers advanced a pessimistic approach to new media targeting specifically manipulation and standardization of the message. On the other hand, an optimistic approach formulated by Marshall McLuhan attributes an emancipating and democratic meaning to new media. Apart from these orthodox Marxist criticism and technologically deterministic liberal aspects, writers such as Bertolt Brecht [1] and Walter Benjamin [2] set forth different approaches that regard the energy and socially transforming effect of the new media, emphasizing the socialist and emancipating mission of massification in the age of mechanical reproduction.

It is clear that radio, TV and Internet technologies have accelerated the globalization process. However mainstream media, shaped by capitalist multi-national corporations', works in order to reproduce the benefits and dominance of those who

possess and run these apparatus. At this point, the dichotomy of tree and the rhizome, suggested by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari provides a new understanding to alternative media which challenges the dominance of the hierarchical mainstream media controlled by capital and/or bureaucracy.

The notion of Rhizome suggests a heterarchic, ever-growing and a dynamic unprecedented process in which the beginnings and the endpieces cannot be foreseen, contrary to the old hierarchical order of mainstream thinking. While the tree symbolizes a linear order from the roots to the body, rhizome is a heterarchic, horizontally expanding structure in which the patterns interweave in a random and unplanned logic with each other. Rhizome is equivalent to an anarchical-dynamic structure in contrast to standardization and to the removal of differences.

In the light of this conceptualization, the research examines the LiveLeak (a video sharing site established in October 31, 2006) where the content is provided, shared and consumed by independent and rootless users from all around the world. As its logo points out (redefining the media), LiveLeak is a web medium in which its anonymous members record their videos in their own environments with their own technical tools. As LiveLeak founder Hayden Hewitt puts, "There is no other faster way to reach millions of people; old ways do not work anymore." [3]

The videos shared by the users have a wide range of content from natural events to the fights, social movements and every aspect of daily life and thus each user becomes a producer/camera instead of just being a consumer. However, the site reacts more reactive especially in case of politics where nation states' traditional security policies are disrupted. For example, during the invasion of Iraq, release of torture videos through LiveLeak helped question the legitimacy of the military intervention of the allied forces. In the ongoing Syrian civil war, it was anonymous LiveLeak users who tore down the anti-Assad perception of the events by leaking the atrocities of his opponents. The estheticizing and justifying aura of war/atrocity images created by mainstream media has virtually been reversed; the uncensored, unredacted naked truth reached several million households just in seconds and disrupted the hierarchic-sterile structure of mainstream way seeing the events.

Given these features of LiveLeak, our intention is to make a research on a random one week of the contextual traffic on the site in order to make a profile of the interaction and the function of this medium. More specifically, the news videos, and the videos on politics (Syria and Afghanistan titles); debates in the chat rooms and the forums; the structure of the moderation; the attributions of videos, and the rivalry/scoring mechanisms of users (called leakers in the site) will be examined by analyzing the agenda focus, the radius/intersecting points of the content and the possibility of diffusion of non-linear production. In this way, this new medium of production, where the class distinction of receiver-transmitter is removed, will be profiled and analyzed in the light of socio-political, cultural and personal factors.

The ultimate goal is to discuss how these network communication models can help in the context of making communication more democratic, by using the possibilities of Internet and expanding the circle of communication in a horizontal way.

2   Theoretical Background: Rhizome

Rhizome is a philosophical metaphor used by Deleuze and Guattari which has its roots in biological terminology and refers a constantly growing dynamic organism, both above and below the surface by offshoots. Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature. [4] These new connections/offshoots can fade at some point, or they can form new kinds of meanings/structures. A rhizomatic entity can be defined as the swarm of ants moving along in an endless plateau by lines. These lines can be destroyed by an external intervention at one point but they will continue marching in an alternative and newly formed way/route.

Deleuze and Guattari's text about rhizome is partly a manifest. According to them, arborescent culture is historically dominant on linguistics, biology, politics etc. In fact, thinking can not be pictured as a planned, arborescent and linear process. Arborescent culture reproduces the existing nation-state and capital domination. Though rhizomatic interactions are horizontal, spreading, unpredictable, and open to new ways of change.

Similar to the 'metaphor of ants', in a "virtual" medium which has shaped by growing internet technologies, new communities can come together even for a short-term project and a common purpose can be formed all of a sudden. The "LiveLeak" has also a similar mission. The open door strategies of the site welcoming a wide range of users such as free membership, anonymity, heterogeneity and anti-hierarchical structure are distinguishing characteristics for LiveLeak. It's a platform in which local/personal experience becomes apparent globally and free from capital's interests.

Manuel Castells points out that the relations based on "Internet" are not actual physical ones, yet can form dynamic/variable networks by creating a different reality and dimension. [5] Even if it has an arguable nature in terms of the reality virtuality contrast, we can't limit the Internet communities by these terms. As stated by Benedict Anderson, apart from villages, in which face to face relations are valid, all communities are imagined, sometimes even villages themselves. [6] We can classify communities not with the terms of reality/virtuality, but with the way they are imagined.

Social networks don't remove social relations. On the contrary online and offline relations feed each other and interact with one another. As we observed in LiveLeak, partial communities which gather around specified goals/topics are open to all kinds of Internet users and they have the potential of pushing social mobilization. These "virtual" networks perform with a horizontal logic and non-hierarchical/rhizomatic way; so they create a new practice which could has had an impact on social transformations.

3   The Past of the LiveLeak

LiveLeak was established on 31th November 2006 by the founders of the web site "Ogrish.com", in which users share violent/bloody/gore footage related to war or/and daily life. When the "ogrish.com", which is seen as unbearable/nauseous by many people has faded out; LiveLeak showed up as an offshoot and a site which also

includes violent content. The LiveLeak started broadcasting with the motto of "redefining the media"(Fig. 1.), and with a citizen journalism perspective. It became a medium, where anonymous users from all around the world share videos about war, crime, entertainment, politics and so on in a short time.
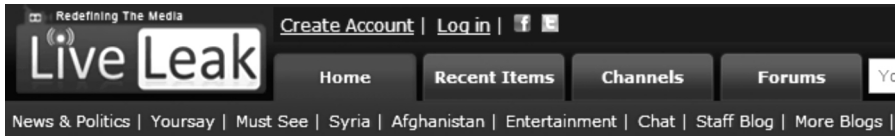

Fig. 1. The amateur camera, human shaped "i" letter and "redefining the media" motto takes part on the logo. These symbols indicate that, LiveLeak is an alternative media project in which individuals share videos from their local residences with their own technical equipment.

In reality, Saddam Hussein's execution footage which was broadcasted via LiveLeak in 2007 brought a worldwide reputation to the web site. In the same period, after anonymous users shared videos about war crimes in Iraq, British Prime Minister Tony Blair called LiveLeak as a "pro-terrorist manipulating web site." Similarly, in 2007, former White House Press Secretary mentioned LiveLeak in his speech and underlined its "mass manipulating" characteristic. In this process governments have started to understand the significance of videos spread from the internet and they planned to use web videos in the sake of their own interests as a counter-propaganda strategy.

In 2008, an anti-Quran short-movie shot by Dutch politician Geert Wilders angered the Muslim World and raised criticism about the LiveLeak again. LiveLeak moderation stressing usually that they favor freedom of speech and neutrality, had to remove the short-movie "Fitna" from the site after serious threats by Muslim audiences. But shortly after, this controversial video is uploaded again to the web site by another anonymous user.

In May 2007, United States Department of Defense restricted the access to LiveLeak, YouTube and MySpace from military computers, suggesting some soldiers' video sharing threaten the security of military operations in Iraq. This is because, the videos shot by some army members containing "human rights violation" images spread quickly through the web and open the war's legitimacy up for discussion.

In 2007, videos containing violent children fighting scenes were brought forward by the BBC programme "Panaroma" with a critical perspective. In response, LiveLeak's co-founder Hayden Hewitt stressed that: "Of course it's horrible. It's not about me morally defending anything here. We have to take a stance of saying look all this is happening, this is real life, this is going on, we're going to show it. We will only remove racist comments about the videos" [7] He even said that "police and prosecutors can use these videos as evidence and catch the criminals more easily". On the contrary, popular video sharing site YouTube has removed this kind of footage immediately.

Lastly, LiveLeak has become an important actor during the social movements of the "Arap Spring" and the "Syrian Civil War" in 2011, and was frequently quoted by

international media. LiveLeak had an influence on the change of the common understanding that "Bashar al-Essad was the only one to blame" in this fight. For instance in June 2013, Catholic priest François Murad was executed by terrorists who label themselves as "jihadists". [8] The video of this tragic event was broadcasted by LiveLeak with no censore unlike the main-stream media, and because of its shocking and dramatic content, the video has clarified that all the people who fight against Bashar al-Essad can not simply defined as "freedom fighters", but involve terrorist organizations like Al-Nusra. In this period, the arguments disguised as being "democratic and humanitarian" and used by dominant nation-states/powers as an excuse for military intervention to Syria took a major blow by the unsung information provided by anonym actors.

4   Traffic on the LiveLeak

In this part we analyze the LiveLeak's general view and the traffic on it in the period of 1st-8th December 2013 which was chosen randomly. With a general glance, we can say that averagely 340-380 videos are uploaded to LiveLeak by day. Weekly average number of uploaded videos is around 2500. The uploaded videos in 2nd December and 4th December are shown in (Table. 1.), and classified according to their subjects.

Table 1. Subjects of the videos uploaded between December 2nd and December 4th 2013

SUBJECT	December 2nd 2013	December 4th 2013
Politics	64 videos	82 videos
Social Movements, Blasts	19 videos	10 videos
Syria	61 videos	38 videos
History, Science, Natural Life	50 videos	48 videos
Entertainment	116 videos	132 videos
Reality	37 videos	68 videos
IN SUM	344	378

This tableau shows the intensity of videos about politics and specifically about Syria. We can say that user choices are important but not the major factor in this situation. The fact that "politics" and "Syria-Afghanistan" channels established and promoted by the LiveLeak moderation can be described as dominant in this tendency. Similarly, all the "featured items" are chosen by moderation and so users can be canalized through specified issues. So it's not only the user's tendency which serves for LiveLeak's political reputation, it's also the image shaped by LiveLeak's moderation.

LiveLeak moderation is also the decision maker over the acceptance/decline process of the uploaded videos. The 'moderations touch' bring along ideological preferences. However, elimination of the videos is also a must for protecting the web site from acontextual and "garbage" content. Also there are some strict rules about uploading process: Racism, pornography, advertising, criminal activities and videos

which reveal another anonymous user's identity are not tolerated. Plus we have to underline this statement which shows that the site is limited with a certain degree of legal conditions: "Media which is deemed to be illegal in the United States of America is not welcomed."

Another remarkable point is that one third of the videos which were uploaded to LiveLeak can be defined as an "entertaining video". This is also related with the LiveLeak's horizontal interactions with the other web platforms. LiveLeak has 14.212 followers in Twitter (by 01.12.2013) and the official LiveLeak Twitter account shares an average of 13-15 video links daily. If we look at the numbers for all Twitter activity, we can point out that Twitter users share averagely 90-100 LiveLeak video links per hour.

To be able to understand the way LiveLeak promotes itself, one factor is the content of LiveLeak's Twitter account sharing. We figure that one of the two sharing has an entertainment purpose. In the one week period of the study political videos shared by LiveLeak's account are limited to 2 videos. We can argue that LiveLeak moderation is putting forward entertainment and reality content to appeal advertisers and more followers/visitors. Yet, main-stream media mostly use LiveLeak originated reality/entertainment videos which is usually more gripping and acceptable than political videos for them.

LiveLeak has also a Facebook page which is "liked" by 252.475 Facebook users. (by 01.12.2013) LiveLeak shares averagely 2 videos from this account per day, and as similar as its Twitter account, videos can be classified mostly in the reality/entertainment category. Political video uploads are limited in LiveLeak's Facebook page according as in the Twitter account. In sum, it's evident that Facebook and Twitter accounts of LiveLeak proliferate the horizontal spreading of LiveLeak videos, but these accounts usually promote a content which is compatible with a fast and massive consumption attitude.

Another interesting point is the remarkable difference is the number of followers between LiveLeak's Twitter and Facebook accounts. Considering Twitter is especially appreciated in the context of writing, and Facebook became prominent with visual content, the difference seems more comprehensible. Also "following" an account in Twitter means to see all of the sharing of mentioned account. But for Facebook, "liking an account" is not equal to this kind of "intimate" following.

An important point which LiveLeak differs from other video sharing sites is its potential of reversing the flow of the information and news which is usually from West to Third World countries. This phenomenon is significant especially for politics and Syrian Civil War videos. Users of LiveLeak usually share footages which they shoot in their local place of residence with their own technical equipment; but also, they share Arabic news channels' footages which are not visible in the mainstream media and not available for the average news consumer. By this, the "reality" of the user himself which Western based main-stream media tend to ignore, becomes visible. Plus, main-stream media organizations usually put LiveLeak's entertainment videos into use, but ignore opposing political content.

We can say that LiveLeak users, who label themselves as "leakers", adopt a critical and horizontally expanding approach, which deals with vertical global order. For

instance, in a LiveLeak poll asking if Jack Snowden is a traitor or a hero, majority of the voters mark the 'hero' option. While Jack Snowden who leaked top-secret CIA information is seen as a traitor in the context of vertical nation-state rationale; LiveLeak's anonymous members/leakers saw Jack Snowden as their "hero".

At this point, we must stress that LiveLeak isn't usually the point of origin for the video like rhizomatic network's features. The Internet has multiple entryways to the system and not shaped by a vertical order. LiveLeak can be origin of a video, or sometimes it can work as a medium which brings popularity to any video located in a personal blog. This makes LiveLeak a station where a video can stay for a while and then carry on the way of unknown places in the network. LiveLeak users, who come together for a common purpose, have the ability to organize for short-term goals with thematic broadcasting. Similarly to rhizomatic thinking, these networks/channels which are constituted by LiveLeak's "channels" feature can fade out at some point; but sometimes they can be effective on world agenda. This means LiveLeak is a site in which new agendas and goals trigger continuous video circulation and motion.

"LiveLeak forum" is another feature of the site which creates a space for the discussion between members and also gives chance to users to communicate with LiveLeak moderation. In this section, primary discussions gather generally questions of: "what are the limits of freedom of speech" and what happens "if LiveLeak moderation violates these limits". According to LiveLeak's procedure, uploaded videos can only be released after the moderation approval and user comments in forum section can be deleted by moderation as well. At this point, some members criticize LiveLeak harshly. However, moderators defend themselves with the argument that "some issues like racism can not be tolerated". This discussion brings an interesting paradox. We argued that LiveLeak's structure is anti-hierarchical and shows rhizomatic features but according to some users there is censorship and certain degree of limitations on the content which is provided by the users themselves. This can be evaluated as a serious factor which can undermine the rhizomatic entity of the LiveLeak traffic.

Yet, forum discussions provide a free space for members to speak. For instance, after the tragic death of actor Paul Walker in a car accident in December 1st 2013, a video shot by a driver around the vicinity was uploaded to LiveLeak and watched by over 1 million people. This footage spread through the web via Twitter, Facebook and blogs, and was quoted by major news agencies. In the same period, another video which is claimed to be Paul Walker's morgue image was uploaded to LiveLeak too. This video brought forward a serious discussion in LiveLeak forums. After the discussion, it came out that morgue video was fake. Thereon, number of the views of this video has reduced dramatically to 40.000 without any need to remove it. This means, the communication and information sharing between users has created a natural control mechanism on the video, since then there has been no need to a moderation intervention. We can say that this mechanism protects the web site from being "video garbage" and brings an approach against the censorship with the goal of spreading accurate information.

Another interesting point about the forum pages is a section in which anonymous members upload their own photos. Even if anonymity brings a power in the context of

freedom of speech, some LiveLeak members prefer to reveal their identities. When forum discussions raise the interaction between users, some "real" meetings can be arranged among the members. This shows that forming a virtual community is not enough for some people and face-to-face relations still maintain its vitality.

Another feature of the LiveLeak created by the moderation is the "rating system". Accordingly, all the members have the opportunity to earn "LiveLeak points" considering the number of their uploaded videos and popularity of these images. This strategy brings forward a competition between the members in terms of being the best "leaker". In this way, LiveLeak moderation tries to keep up the uploaded video numbers and their quality.

"Channels" section is an important feature of the LiveLeak. These channels can be created by the users or the moderation. These are usually built for a political, economic or an actual purpose which is generally a short-term project about an ongoing incident. For example, LiveLeak moderation has created a channel about Syrian civil war, while an anonymous member created another channel for gathering activists to support the "Gezi protests" in Istanbul. When a common goal and solidarity show up in the context of online-offline relations, "project groups" can transform their potential into the activism by sharing information and experience.

However, a serious concern about the LiveLeak community has to be mentioned. It's obvious that majority of LiveLeak users are against rigid security policies and the interests of the international power relations. For example, USA and its allies have prepared for a military intervention directed to Syria and they used mainstream media for creating a common consciousness about the fall of "dictator-evil Bashar al-Essad". At this point, LiveLeak leakers started to work against this scenario and uploaded execution videos of "Free Syrian Army" which was previously proclaimed as "freedom fighters". These footages had an impact on military intervention plans against Syria and damaged the legitimacy of "war for democracy" discourse. At the same time, this protest attitude can be seen as an engagement with official discourse of Syrian government. In this sense, time to time LiveLeak has unintentionally worked as propaganda apparatus of Syria. In sum, it came out that LiveLeak, which claims to be a free and democratic alternative media experience, sometimes shows arborescent characteristics, and its opposing style can result in taking sides.

5   Conclusion

It can be put forward that, by transforming the phenomenon of "anonymity" to a kind of power and using the impact of images, LiveLeak differs from mainstream media, goes beyond the "politically correct" patterns and shows up as an alternative media network. LiveLeak moderation has a remarkable impact on eliminating and foregrounding the videos, and these preferences manifest itself as a political leaning. On the contrary, LiveLeak's official Facebook and Twitter accounts promote entertaining/reality videos to increase web sites' popularity and its level of recognition.

One of the remarkable offshoots of LiveLeak is "Channels" feature, which can be created either by members or moderators. These channels reunite many LiveLeak users around a specific goal, which is generally about a short term project. Channels,

the inside networks of the LiveLeak prove that Internet communities have the potential for realizing anti-hierarchical, horizontal and democratic communication.

As Vatikiodis points out, "People are using video and television as tools with which to assert themselves and fight back." [9] This fight is usually against the hierarchic systems which have arborescent /vertical characteristics. Also this struggle benefits from the Internet which provides anonymity, speed, interaction and diversity for every form of communication between people.

We argue that the methapor of rhizome suggested by Deleuze and Guattari can work as a guideline to be able to understand the nature of the short-term, dynamic and variable virtual communities on the Internet. Rhizomatic thinking fits to the LiveLeak's horizontal structure and its potential for supporting social movements.

Rhizomatic entities can tolerate even the paradoxes about its own suggestions; it can even run away from itself. This is because we can get the instructions of Deleuze and Guattari on rootlessness and acontextuality as a manifest which we don't have to obey: "Make rhizomes not roots, never plant! Don't sow, grow offshoots! Don't be one or multiple, be multiplicities! Run lines, never plot a point! Speed turns the point into a line! Don't have just ideas, just have an idea. Have short-term ideas. Make maps, not photos or drawings." [10]

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