

Ekşi sözlük or how Web2.0 was invented in Turkey

Friday 9 September 2011, by [Clément Girardot](#)

Ekşi Sözlük is one of the most popular websites in Turkey, especially among young people. In English, the website's name means "sour dictionary". It's based on a concept close to Wikipedia, but any topic can be covered and all users can write whatever they want; using slang or sometimes rude language. Anonymous writers use this platform as a means to express themselves freely and without caring too much about accuracy. Ekşi Sözlük is often targeted by mainstream media for its supposedly rubbish or immoral content. But the website, launched in 1999, is above all the pioneer of Web 2.0 in Turkey.

[Mashallah News](#) met with Ekşi Sözlük, founder and CEO Sedat Kapanoğlu, in his big office in the heart of Istanbul CBD.

Can you tell us about your career and education?

I'm basically a self-taught software engineer. I started programming when I was ten years old and I liked it a lot. I forced my parents to buy me a computer just to write programs. Because of my passion towards creating software, I failed my university entry exam. So I'm just a high school graduate, I wasn't able to go to university at all.

Then I started to work as a freelance developer. I created shareware programs to make money out of my passion. This is the ideal lifestyle for someone who works with computers. That was my utopia, so I struggled to reach that goal. I grew up in Eskişehir and moved to Istanbul in 1998 to find a better job, but the first company I worked for didn't pay our salaries for six months. That allowed me to focus on web development and other pet projects during work time.

How was Ekşi Sözlük created?

I founded Ekşi Sözlük in February 1999, out of a mix of ideas. At that time, there was no blogging. There was no Wikipedia either, nor Web 2.0. This was two years after I read the book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. I really loved the idea of everyone contributing to one single source of information. The ones who consume the information provide it themselves - something very different to what we had seen in our education life in Turkey. To us, the textbook was the authority. I felt it could be really fun to create a participatory platform, but actually didn't think beyond that.

You just had the concept but no idea of how it was going to look?

No, not at all. In the beginning, it was just a single page that listed the topics. When you clicked a topic, you were moved to another page showing the content. Later on, I added frames on the left and the details on the right. I usually hear from big web developers around the world that this is the ideal approach. They say: prototype fast, adapt to users' needs quickly, and scale as needed.

What happened after the creation?

When creating Ekşi Sözlük, I didn't know a single important fact about Turkey. Freedom of speech is important of course, but I wasn't aware of such a need. I think freedom of expression is the key aspect behind Ekşi Sözlük's popularity. There was a tradition in Turkish internet culture that you create a website and anyone who objects to it gets kicked out. I didn't follow that tradition. Instead, I allowed

everyone with any view at all to stay and write on the website. That policy made it grow very fast. In the first month we got 300 contributors, which was not bad for that time. At the end of 1999, we had around 1 500 authors creating entries and interacting. In 2003 we had 5 000, and now there are more than 34 000 writers.

During that time, Ekşi Sözlük was still a hobby, I was developing just for fun. It stayed that way for a while, but I kept trying to make money out of it. In 2001, I put Amazon banners on the website. In one year, I made eleven dollars. That doesn't seem like a very feasible business plan. Finally I ended up getting advertisement on the page which brought more money.

In 2004, I got a job offer from Microsoft as a software design engineer. So I moved to Seattle and stayed there for five years. In 2008, I had come to a point where the money I made from Ekşi Sözlük exceeded what I got from Microsoft. In 2009, I returned to Turkey to start my own business.

One of the mysteries with Ekşi Sözlük is how one can become a writer?

Yeah that's the big mystery, which I think helped to create the popularity of the website. Now, it has become really hard to become a member. People must think of it as an elite club. But that was never the idea. In 2001, people started coming to Ekşi Sözlük in crowds. It was no one but me working on the website, and I couldn't handle that many people. So I stopped registrations and people immediately started to create a hype around it. Then, we started accepting new authors in batches periodically. Every year we would take thousands of applications and then register them. Applications would open for a month and then close. That again increased Ekşi Sözlük's popularity. It was like lines in front of a restaurant.

I thought joining Ekşi Sözlük was like a co-optation or reference system?

We use that method as well. If you know a moderator, you can get invited and skip the line. Right now, we still have 80 000 people waiting to become authors. On the other hand, there are 34 000 contributing authors already, and there's a black market of Ekşi Sözlük accounts as well. I think nowadays the average price for an account is around 100 liras (\$57). Back in 2008, it went all the way up to thousands of liras.

Did you make a study to know who your authors are?

Yes, and we've already published those statistics on the website. Most authors are between 18 and 25 years old and many of them university students, but we have users from all age groups. We even have minors who lie about their age.

Why are authors anonymous?

Anonymity is a huge weapon for freedom of expression, especially in Turkey where the legal system isn't that protective. People have other ways to put pressure on you; they can threaten you, they can beat you up, and still get away with just a fine.

Why did you choose to make Ekşi Sözlük a company and not a foundation, like Wikipedia for instance?

I chose to make it a for-profit company but I didn't prohibit clone websites from being developed. So people started to copy my design, the idea, and all the concepts, but creating new dictionaries. I think of Ekşi Sözlük as an entity that provides the platform for online culture to live and evolve. I'm in no way mandating or limiting that culture from jumping to other platforms. There's actually an anti-Ekşi Sözlük, without advertisement but using the same design.

Maybe one of the reasons to be a corporate is to be more sustainable financially?

Yes, that's something really hard. There are successful businesses that don't use advertisement at all. But I don't think donation is a feasible option in Turkey. We're not used to donating to something that's

perceived as free. I guess Wikipedia really confuses Turks.

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[Sedat Kapanođlu](#)'s page on Ekđi Sözlük.

First published on *Mashallah News* <http://mashallahnews.com/?p=4751>.