

Chapter 62

The Formation of Consensus in Iranian Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

For several years now, the role that digitally mediated social movements and online communities play in challenging authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa has been extensively debated. The focus of attention on the political use of the Internet shapes conventional wisdom that political issues are widespread in online communities in these contexts and that the users are predominantly oppositional users with political democratic motivations. Using fresh methods and techniques to gather a variety of online data, this chapter argues and reveals that, at least in the case of Iran, this view selectively overlooks the diversity of users and the broad range of issues frequently and intensively discussed among users in online communities. The failure to examine a broader range of issues means that scholars have neglected how consensus forms and develops among online users in other issues. This study broadens our understanding of the current social issues and possible areas of change in Iran through investigating a more comprehensive frame of the Iranian web.

INTRODUCTION

Shocking political and social developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, from the emergence of Iranian Green Movement to Arab Uprisings, have heightened the need for understanding agents of change in those societies. Much of the political upheavals were credited to the Internet, in particular newly more personalized digitally mediated social movements which “have frequently been larger; have scaled up more quickly; and have been flexible in tracking moving political targets and bridging different issues” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 742). One global quantitative study using country-year data demonstrates that unlike in democracies, internet use has paved the way for the occurrence of protests in authoritarian regimes (Ruijgrok, 2016). It is commonly argued that the Internet, by reducing costs and risks, facilitates participation of people as well as coordination and mobilization of protests (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Shirky, 2008) resulting in the intensification of protests in repressive societies (Farrell,

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2012). On the other hand, critics contend that ‘real’ change in repressive societies requires hierarchical networks with strong ties formed on trust, which are absolutely absent on the Internet (Gladwell, 2010).

Whether from internet enthusiasts (Shirky, 2008; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013) or from a more critical view (Morozov, 2010; Gladwell, 2010; Harlow & Guo, 2014), explaining the role of the Internet in social change in repressive contexts entails understanding of online activism (Zuckerman, 2014), in other words, the process of participation in digitally mediated social movements. Klandermans and Oegema (1987, p. 519) distinguished four steps in this process: “becoming part of the mobilization potential, becoming target of mobilization attempts, becoming motivated to participate, and overcoming barriers to participation.” The first step, becoming a potential participant, involves the formation of consensus on goals and means of participation (Klandermans, 1988). The process of consensus formation concerns unplanned construction and convergence of meaning in social networks and subcultures. People validate information by discussing their issues of interest and comparing their interpretations from an event or issue with others. In fact, the process of consensus formation fertilizes the ground for participation in social movements. Thus, consensus formation, as the initial process, must be understood fully as the main condition of realizing the larger framework in the debate on the role played by the Internet in social movements.

In societies where expressing critical views is likely to be punished by the government, and mass media are suppressed and censored, online communities have increasingly become important venues where autonomous, or even anonymous discussions take place (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Al-Rawi, 2014). In this chapter, online communities refers to a collectivity of people who communicate with each other (Malinen, 2015) and actively engage in discussions in a defined web-based online service (online platform). The Internet offers a space, at least for some, to engage in conversations and spread information that can be hard to trace by government officials (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Lim, 2012). When people perceive lower levels of repression, the likelihood of sincere expressions of political beliefs and emotions increases, which makes preference falsification (Kuran, 1997) less likely (Farrell, 2012). In fact, in those societies, consensus forms and develops through generating and sharing content and discussing a variety of issues within online communities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Yet, a more comprehensive understanding of the web that captures the broad range of issues around which consensus forms suffers. So far, little attention has been paid to the political issues that are discussed among and expressed by ordinary citizens in online communities of repressive societies. For several years now, the role that digitally mediated social movements and online communities play in challenging authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa has been extensively debated (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Farrell, 2012; Lynch, 2011). Particularly the use of the Internet during the 2009 Iranian Green Movement protest and Arab uprisings in 2011 focus attention to political use of the Internet (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011; Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, Kelly, & Zuckerman, 2010). Thus, the term ‘Twitter revolution’ in Iran and ‘Facebook revolutions’ in Egypt shaped conventional wisdom and expectations about the concerns and interests of Internet users in repressive societies. There is a widely accepted belief about the Internet in those societies that political issues are widespread in online communities, and that users are predominantly oppositional users with political democratic concerns. Studies relying on these assumptions are prone to neglect how consensus forms among online users in other issue areas. Therefore, the existing literature neglects or ignores various areas of interest to Iranian users and overlooks indirectly political issues and possible areas of change resulting from activities among the Iranian online communities (Honari, 2015). This poses a challenge for understanding the agency of social change in repressive societies. If one is to obtain the fullest possible understanding of the role of

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