

# Chapter 7

## 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;

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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, 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

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