

New Media and Social-political Change in Iran

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Abstract:

The increasing penetration of new communication technologies into everyday life has attracted a growing interest in the social, economic and political implications of these technologies. Most studies have looked at Western democratic societies and the literature on the developing countries is unfortunately small in comparison. In 2009 Iran witnessed a political upheaval in the aftermath of the presidential election in which the Internet was utilized effectively by the political opposition. News and videos of police brutality and repression were uploaded online, including onto social networking sites, in what was called the 'Twitter Revolution'. Expectations rose on the capacity of new media to bring about democratic change in Iran. Later developments, however, showed that 'mouse clicks' alone do not produce profound political changes. In this article we look at the role of the new media and the social and political functions it took on in the post election period. We suggest that, firstly, new media has helped ordinary citizens and the political opposition challenge the government's monopoly of information. Secondly, we suggest that new media have paved the way for the emergence of a global public sphere for Iranians across the globe. This article also looks at the social and cultural impacts of the satellite channels which have been an ongoing source of concern for the Iranian conservative regime. Finally we take a critical stance and analyze the effects of new communication technologies in light of the 'digital divide' and 'the radicalization of the Green Movement'.

Keywords:

information and communication technology, activism, Iran, social aspects, censorship, digital divide, democracy

Communication technologies and social change

The media and information technologies play an indispensable role in the conception of modern societies (see for example Bell 1973; Baudrillard 1983; Castells 2000). The Internet like other technologies is socially shaped (McKenzie and Wajcman 1999). With the advent of the Internet in the

1990s a number of utopian discourses emerged extolling the Internet as a miraculous solution for major social problems (Fisher and Wright 2001). More recent research has shown that the Internet is incorporated into people's everyday life and blends with the preexisting social context (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002; Wellman 2004). While the Internet is arguably a source of free flowing information in Western countries, it can become a tool in the hands of authoritarian regimes for economic and not democratic purposes, like what can be seen in China (Goldsmith and Wu 2006). This reveals the decisiveness of the existing political and social contexts the Internet enters into.

This article aims to investigate the role of new communication technologies in generating socio-political changes in Iranian society. For the most part the existing research has focused on Western societies' experience of the Internet (see for example Keck and Sikkink 1998; Pickerill 2006; Terranova 2001). We believe that the study of new media within the context of a Middle Eastern country like Iran, with its social and political particularities, can shed light on some uncovered aspects of these technologies.

The 2009 presidential election attracted global attention and gave rise to hopes for progressive change in Iran. However, the events that followed cast doubt on the realization of these hopes (Esfandiari 2010). In this article we focus on the social and political functions of the Internet and satellite channels in the post election period. We begin our discussion by looking at the history of the Internet and satellite channels in Iran.

New media and its politics in Iran

The Internet was introduced in Iran in 1993 and has experienced exponential growth since then. From 2001 to 2009 Internet usage increased annually by 48 percent (*OpenNet Initiative* 2009). Recent statistics indicate there are more than 33 million Internet users in Iran amounting to 43.2 percent of the population (*Internet world stats* 2010). Domestic sources report the figure at around one third of the population (CINA 2009). The government has implemented national plans to develop the infrastructure and has also

carried out educational programs in schools and governmental organizations to improve Internet literacy. The increased number of university students and graduates has drastically facilitated the integration of the Internet into everyday life.

The use of the Internet for social purposes is commonplace; social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, blogs, YouTube, Flickr, and Wikipedia are widely used (CIMA 2009). Blogs are particularly popular indicated by the fact that Iran has one of the highest rates of blogging in the world. Reports indicate that there are about 700,000 Iranian bloggers (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010) and that 60,000 blogs are updated routinely in Iran (Kelly and Etling 2008). The website Alexa.com tracks websites by number of hits and shows that after Google and Yahoo, the blog provider sites Blogfa and MihanBlog are the most visited websites in Iran (Alexa 2010). Social networking sites like Facebook and Balatarin (a popular web 2.0 website in Persian which helps users to find the most popular web pages through a credit system) and news websites like Gooya News and Rooz are blocked but are still widely visited in Iran (Shirazi 2010).

Satellite channels are another part of the new media in Iran. Tens of Farsi satellite channels are accessed from inside Iran and most of them are stationed outside the country particularly in the US. Their programs include music, movies, commercials and political commentary. *Voice of America (VOA)* and *BBC Persian* are popular for their political programs and *Farsi1* for its entertaining movies and serials. Apart from a small number of channels run by the Iranian government like *Press TV* and *Jame Jam*, nearly all satellite channels are anti-regime. The precise number of people watching satellite television is not known. Some sources estimate it to be half the population (Wordpress 2008) while others estimate the number at around 40 percent (Iran Focus 2010).

The government fluctuates between pragmatic and ideological policy with regards to the media (Khiabany 2007). While the government invested vast sums in web communications technology, it has simultaneously attempted to minimize its socio-political effects. One recent survey indicates that

Iran is one of the leading Internet filterers in the world (*OpenNet Initiative* 2009). Opposition websites are systematically blocked and internet cafes are under constant scrutiny (*Radio Liberty* 2007; *Wired* 2001). Cyber activists producing anti-regime content have been targeted and even sentenced to death (*Reporters without Borders* 2010; Tehrani 2010).

The government views the satellite channels as a corrupting amoral force against Iranian Islamic society. To neutralize the perceived threat, the government continues to sending jamming signals to the satellites and this has received strong international condemnation (*Deutsche Welle* 2010). The government sporadically collects satellite dishes off roof tops but these campaigns have been unsuccessful in halting the rate of residential satellite installations (Perry 2008; Sanati 2006).

The 2009 Presidential election: a turning point

The regime had viewed the new media as a threat and taken direct action to curb its influence for a period before the upheavals of the 2009 presidential election. However, the election gave new meaning to communication technologies and is now perceived as a threat to the very foundations of the regime. Ironically, the development of telecommunication infrastructure opened new doors for dissidents. The unprecedented political resurgence in the wake of the election and the dramatic role of new media boosted hopes for a democratic change.

The shocking announcement of a landslide victory for the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was followed by mass rallies in the big cities, particularly in Tehran. Protesters believed that large-scale fraud had occurred and that the election should be declared null and void (Simpson 2009). The regime responded with a repressive crackdown. Foreign media reporters were forced to leave the country and opposition newspapers and websites were shut down. Many opposition leaders were arrested overnight and tortured and street protesters were violently attacked. Many people were killed and thousands were arrested and jailed. Yet the regime was unable to maintain a façade of control.

Protesters used their mobile phones to take photos and videos of police brutality and published them online. Large numbers of YouTube videos came out day by day showing events unfolding on the streets (Nasr 2009). The links were shared on Facebook and the Internet soon became the first source for up-to-the minute news. Satellite channels like *BBC Persian* and *VOA* played a large part in collating the photos and videos into a news story. These images successfully caught the attention of the global media. Human rights groups around the world condemned the violence and many states made statements requesting Ahmadinejad respect the Iranian people's right to peaceful protest (Burns and Eltham 2009; Hermida 2010; Shirky 2010; Nasr 2009).

The Internet in the election aftermath well revealed its potential as a powerful political force (Sohrabi-Haghighat and Mansouri 2010). Hopes were high to the extent that commentators were calling the uprising a *Twitter Revolution* (*The Washington Times* 2009) and *Facebook Revolution* (Foster 2009). The protests continued on for several months but the regime eventually regained control of the political sphere. This cast doubts on the utopian views aired during the early days of the protests (Schechtman 2009; Abadi 2010; Weaver 2010). While the protests did not come to a 'revolution', the political scene fundamentally changed. The anger at the election outcome is still palpable and the government has extended its reach over the Internet more than ever before. Harsher legislation has been enacted against cyber activists and more invasive internet surveillance tools are used to curb the flow of information.

The next section further examines the capacity of the Internet and satellite television to generate social and political change within the more repressive climate that is the post-election period.

The emergence of a global public sphere

New media has helped bridge the deep gap that existed between activists inside and outside Iran. Social networking sites like Facebook, Balatarin

and Twitter are bringing Iranians together across the globe. Websites established and managed from outside Iran are visited mostly by Iranians inside Iran implying that Iranians use proxies successfully to bypass filters (Shirazi 2010). Satellite channels which are mainly based in the US and Europe have millions of viewers in Iran. Despite all the measures taken by the government, Iranians around the world can come together online for the latest news coverage as well as to exchange ideas. To better understand this trend we next examine the social placement and political identity of the Iranian diaspora.

The Iranian diaspora

Before the 1979 revolution the number of Iranians abroad was only in the tens of thousands (Ghorashi and Boersma 2009). The 1979 revolution and its repercussions (Iran-Iraq war, repression and persecution of dissidents) resulted in large-scale emigration and refugee seeking (McAuliffe 2007). The number of Iranians living abroad is estimated to be between half a million to 2 million people by some academic sources and 4 million by Christina Monitor (*Radio Farda* 2010). The nostalgic memories of Iran as a 'lost home' have been prevalent amongst at least the first generation of emigrants (Ghorashi and Boersma 2009) and this has been a common theme in pop music and literature produced in the diaspora since 1979. Throughout this period the Iranian regime's aggressive foreign policies resulted in Iran's increasing isolation from the rest of the world. Added to this was an atmosphere of mistrust between political reformists in Iran and activists living abroad.

With the victory of Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election the political sphere became even more repressive and the opposition found it harder to survive. The disputed 2009 presidential election was a turning point and the ensuing mass protests changed the scene fundamentally. The regime clearly signaled that the opposition will no longer be tolerated. Even small gatherings of dissidents ran the risk of arrest. Traditionally the most outspoken group in Iran, university student activists were silenced and detained in large numbers. In brief, no political activity against the

regime was to be permitted. Even mention of the opposition leaders' names in newspapers was banned (Kamali Dehghan 2010). With the clamp down on traditional media channels, the Internet played a vital role in keeping dissidents and activists in contact and in circulating news and information.

The Iranian diaspora played a large part in spreading news to the world stage. Iranians across the globe successfully organized rallies and demonstrations in support for the political opposition, the so called Green Movement. After decades of isolation, the Iranian diaspora found themselves able to have a say in Iran's domestic politics and exert pressure on the Islamic regime. The politically diverse fabric of the Green Movement allowed Iranians abroad to share in the movement's collective identity. The overarching theme of this collectivity was opposition to the authoritarian policies of the regime. UK based *BBC Persian* and US based *VOA* aired roundtable discussions on current issues which were hugely successful with the viewer audience at home. It was their success that inspired *Euro News* to launch its Persian service (Briel 2010). These channels of communication and information have undermined the regime's ability to keep the public sphere under the influence of its propaganda machinery.

Challenging the monopoly of information

Despite all efforts made to stifle the opposition, the Green Movement has survived due in large part to new media. Street protests have moved to mediated spaces and the regime has been unable to colonize the online public sphere (*VOA News* 2010). After the election, the Revolutionary Guard (the major section of the army) bought a 51 percent stake in the national Telecommunication Company to extend its control over cyberspace (Tait 2009). The police also launched a new unit called the 'internet police' to monitor the online activities (Aljazeera 2009; CNN Tech 2010). The reach of opposition websites is unclear, however their significance can be gauged by the government's response and sensitivity (Nouri 2010).

Regime's sensitivity to the new media manifests a profound fear among the ruling group. Regardless of the capacity of these technologies, the

government's *perception* of the capacity would have actual effects because situations when defined real they become real in their consequences (Thomas 1923). Responding to the opposition on the Internet, denying their claims and warning online activists of severe consequences has become part of the routine of official news. Indeed, people have realized that two narratives of political events exist; one of the state-owned television and government news agencies and the other online and on satellite television. One portrays Iran as a world-power, the other warns of the coming economic hardships and growing isolation of Iran in the world.

The pervasive censorship in the official media has turned people into news producers, a phenomenon referred to as 'citizen journalism' (Goode 2009). Ordinary citizens take photos and videos of events not covered by the official media and publish them on YouTube. In a recent case, a video was published on the Internet showing a man who had stabbed another man (who he thought had had an affair with his wife) and who was not allowing anyone to approach and help the victim. Two police officers were present at the scene but did not take action for 45 minutes, leading to the victim's death. This video sparked an outcry on social networking sites where the police and bystanders of the scene were harshly criticized. Parliament held a meeting to investigate the event (Mehrnews 2010) and the police, who do not usually respond to the public, were forced to accept the dereliction of duty by the police officers. This incident (*Iranian* 2010; *Rajanews* 2010) illustrates how new media functions as a surveillance tool for grass roots allowing them to bypass the traditional gatekeepers and project their voices.

Satellite channels and their socio-cultural impact

Conservative views supported by the government view satellite channel as a corrupting force undermining religious beliefs, promoting promiscuity and breaking families apart (Saber 2010). Besides channels like *BBC Persian* and *VOA*, which are a concern for the political ideas they promote, there are also the entertainment channels. Channels like *MBC Farsi* and

more recently *Farsi1*, broadcast movies and serials dubbed in Farsi or with Farsi subtitles. *Farsi1* has attracted millions of viewers in just one year and the number is rapidly growing.

Farsi1 was established by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and an Afghani family. It broadcasts comedies and dramas from Korea, Colombia and the US, but are 'toned down for a more conservative Iranian audience' (Filkins 2010). The channel's soap operas with their low quality dubbing have drawn viewers from the state television which has concerned government leaders (Erdbrink 2010; Sinaiee 2010; Aslan 2010). A website affiliated to the Revolutionary Guards, analyses *Farsi1* in a report and concludes:

After unsuccessful military attacks, economic sanctions, and creating political tensions, now a more complex and softer attack to the Islamic revolution targets the Islamic family. It views the disintegration of the Iranian family as a prerequisite of the disintegration of a united Iranian society (Fars News 2010).

These views demonstrate the profound unhappiness of the state with the socio-cultural impacts of entertainment satellite channels like *Farsi1*.

Discussion

Thus far we have looked at new media and its capacity to produce social and political change in Iran. It should be noted that we do not believe in technological determinism, but choose to analyze technology within social, economic and political contexts. In this section we provide a critique through the lenses of the digital divide and its role in the radicalization of the Green Movement.

Digital divide

As previously stated, it is estimated that more than half the population do not have access to the Internet or satellite television. This might be

due to issues of financial affordability, moral panic or lack of knowledge or skill. Installing a satellite dish costs about 100 to 120 dollars. The average price for ADSL with a speed of 128 kilobytes per second is about 20 dollars per month (*Iran Iran* 2010) while at an Internet cafe it costs about \$0.5 per hour in Tehran. Out of the group that does have internet access, only 250,000 users have access to high speed Internet (*OpenNet Initiative* 2009).

It seems that there is a correlation between having access to new media and support for the regime. When moving from cities to the villages and from the upper classes to the lower classes, the amount of support for the regime increases. The relationship between the social position on the one hand and support for the Green Movement and the regime on the other is a source of debate (Behdad 2010; WSWs 2010; Maljoo 2010). However, it is safe to suggest that the Green Movement is supported mostly by the middle and upper classes. An Iranian sociologist, Ghazian, in his analysis of the Green Movement argues that the movement has been unable to produce slogans and programs to attract the interest of low-income groups in urban areas. Apart from the vertical expansion through social classes, Ghazian maintains that the movement could not extend its horizontal and geographic reach beyond big cities (Ghazian 2010). Opposition leaders accept this argument with the Green Movement's leader, Mir Houssein Mousavi, stressing the necessity of extending the movement to 'school teachers and workers' (*Aftab News* 2010). In his letter to students on Student International Day he asked them to extend the 'knowledge to those who don't have access to the virtual world' (Mousavi 2010).

We do not suggest that merely providing people with the technology will simply alter their attitudes. Our point is that the lower socio-economic groups do not have access to alternative sources of information and are bombarded with one-sided and biased information from the official media, mainly state-owned television. Within this context access to other news sources *could* influence the political views of these groups.

The radicalization of the Green Movement

After three decades, the Iranian diaspora can influence domestic politics with the help of new media. With this newfound voice, the tensions between the expectations of activists inside Iran and abroad have emerged. Iranian activists abroad push for radical and fundamental changes however unrealistic they may be. Some reformist leaders are concerned that Iranian activists abroad are creating false hopes in light of the actual political opportunities available. Taking into account the loose leadership structure of the Green Movement, this is a real concern. Politics is about choosing suitable means to reach *attainable* ends. A veteran political reformist and an opposition leader, Ezatollah Sahabi (2009), sent an open letter to 'Iranians abroad' asking them not to encourage farfetched goals. He wrote:

Compatriots who live outside Iran are more susceptible, due to the nature of living abroad, to leading people to become 'subjective' about domestic circumstances. Moreover, many compatriots who love their land and would like to come back might become impatient and 'hasty'... leading to expediting processes, emotional and irrational encounters, and rising levels of expectations...

A well known political analyst, Abbas Abdi (2010), who was Mehdi Karroubi's advisor in the 2009 presidential election (Karroubi together with Mousavi were reformist candidates in the election), highlights the transcendence of geographic borders and its negative implications for the movement:

A more critical problem which happened to the movement but was not noticed well was the communication revolution which has transcended the borders of Iran. The problem is that people who live in Iran think and speak within the restrictions of their real [social and political] conditions but people outside do not have these limitations. Thus we witness a big gap between the actual conditions in Iran and the slogans and

ideas aired. This gap did not exist 30-40 years ago, even ten years ago ... this gap goes a bit forward then [the movement] encounters impasse.

These views exemplify the divergence of aims and strategies taken by people inside and outside the country. Thus, Iranians living across the globe bring their differing political and social circumstances to the online public sphere which can lead to political deadlock within the opposition.

Conclusion

In this article we investigated the functions of new media within the context of Iranian society. We discussed the ways the internet and satellite channels challenge the regime's monopoly on information. The Internet became an effective way for dissidents to mobilize, coordinate, and organize street protests in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election. In this way, new *political opportunities* for activists were realized through new media (Sohrabi-Haghigah and Mansouri 2010). New media assisted the Green Movement to transcend geographical boundaries and has prepared the way for the emergence of an independent global public sphere for Iranians. New media is undermining the regime's propaganda machine and its capacity to suppress dissenting voices thereby shaking the foundations of a highly ideological political system. Government attempts to control internet content, while it has had some impact, has been unsuccessful in dismantling this emerging public sphere.

We also looked into the limitations of the new media in bringing about profound political changes. We suggested that Iranians living abroad after three decades have found leverage in domestic politics through new media. There is the potential that the movement will be radicalized by the high political expectations of the Iranian diaspora which do not take into account the realities of deeply rooted social and political institutional obstacles. Divergence amongst activists inside and outside Iran is likely to create new hurdles for the movement's future direction. This is an important point considering the loose leadership structure and grassroots

internet powerbase of the movement. Moreover, caution should be taken in piecing together an image of Iran's political circumstances only through the online sphere and satellite channels. The digital divide limits who takes part in the dialogue in this emerging public sphere. This manifests its importance in that the digital divides correlates with support for and against the regime, exposing the limitations of new media in generating socio-political change. While the voices of the urban middle class are loud and clear, there is underrepresentation of the politics of the lower socio-economic groups and people who live in small towns and villages.

This article aimed to contribute to the debate on the capabilities and limitations of new media in generating socio-political change. Having passed the stage of utopian discourses on new communication technologies, we now witness the surfacing of more critical approaches to the study of new media. These approaches stress the significance of preexisting social and political conditions in shaping the way technology is developed and used.

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