

When Shaming Backfires: The Doublespeak of Digitally-Manipulated Misogynistic Photographs

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Abstract:

This study examines the case of an iconic digitally-manipulated news photograph, a controversial product of political propaganda featuring Majid Tavakoli, a student leader of the Iranian opposition in 2009, human rights activist, and political prisoner. The photograph depicts Mr. Tavakoli wearing a chador, traditional women's clothing in Iran, and appears to be digitally manipulated with the help of image-editing software. Published during the "Green Movement" protests of 2009, it triggered controversy and the production of a series of political memes mocking the Iranian authorities. This study analyzes how misogynistic shaming tactics utilized to discredit Mr. Tavakoli failed, transforming his digitally-manipulated image into the symbol of resistance. Accounting for the role of social media in raising awareness about the public's discontent regarding gender inequality, human rights violations, and media censorship in Iran, the study extends the typology of standard photojournalistic icons (Perlmutter, 1998) by adding the dimension of credibility to categorize ambiguous digitally-manipulated photojournalistic content in contentious times.

Keywords:

Iran, gender, journalism, photography, censorship, Internet, media studies, social media

Introduction

In December of 2009, many Iranian men went online to post photos of themselves wearing headscarves.¹ Aimed at raising awareness about human rights violations and women's rights, this social media campaign was triggered by the publication of a photograph that portrayed Majid Tavakoli, one of the outspoken critics of the Iranian authorities. Published by FARS² and IRNA,³ pro-government news agencies, the photograph depicted him wearing a chador.⁴ This case of the journalistic digitally-manipulated photo-

graph portraying Majid Tavakoli can be used as a lens to explore misogyny as a phenomenon of political technology, media tradition, and culture in the Islamic Republic of Iran during the “Green Movement” protests.⁵

Intended to discredit and shame Mr. Tavakoli by showing him cross dressed as a woman, the publication of this digitally-manipulated photograph ultimately backfired at the Iranian authorities and government-controlled media, paving the way to satirical social media campaigns that ridiculed the leaders of Iran (Tait, 2009). Following the publication of Tavakoli’s photograph, the opposition supporters utilized social networks and the Internet to disseminate political memes, i.e. user-generated and digitally-manipulated visual media that relied on satire (Shifman, 2004; Rahimi, 2015). Social media users digitally manipulated photographs of Iranian leaders, producing memes that featured Iranian state leaders in headscarves in a manner similar to that of Tavakoli. Given the role of media as an intermediary between the authorities and the public, Tavakoli’s digitally-manipulated photographs and political memes of Iranian leaders that originated from it became symbols of resistance during the biggest protests since the late 1970s in Iran.

To frame this article theoretically, it should be noted that the age of media convergence created a suitable environment for the controversial digitally-manipulated photograph of Majid Tavakoli to enter the online circulation (Perlmutter, 2003) as an iconic image, a news photograph (Hariman and Lucaites, 2002), and a political meme. The social media campaigns relying on political memes called for justice and attention of the international community to the situation of women in Iran and the ease with which misogynistic stereotypes can be used to shame any individual. The “Green Movement” protests of 2009 triggered the desire of Iranians to employ satire to raise awareness about violations of the rights of political prisoners, human rights in general and women’s rights in particular (Osborne, 2013).⁶

That the “Green Movement” demonstrations of 2009 presented many opportunities for the media to produce mega media events merits research attention, since the coverage of the protests stimulated intense public involvement, representing the “history in the making” moments for the Iranian nation regarding sensitive social, political, religious, and cultural issues (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Comprised of multiple media narratives, the me-

dia coverage of “Green Movement” rallies constructed media events that contributed to the tone of the future Iranian presidential elections. Voicing the expectations of the public and the authorities, it provided venues for the re-examination of the status quo; contributing to the creation of the media culture, it stimulated public discussion.

Due to their ambiguous nature - since only the producers of memes can be certain whether a specific event referenced in the digitally-manipulated photographs has happened - the digitally-manipulated photographs can sway the public opinion or cast doubt. This ability makes them perfect ideological conduits that funnel their messages through digital manipulation, sustained by media censorship. The tone of the media coverage during the major media events depends on the political atmosphere and mainstream religious sentiments in the countries where religion’s role in politics is crucial. Hence, the conclusions drawn from the investigation of digitally-manipulated photographs depicting major political media events can enhance an understanding of the interrelationships between the political and the religious institutions in the countries with similar media systems to those of Iran (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Moe and Sjoavaag, 2008). For instance, political memes can elaborate on the information censorship in the country, where republicanism co-exists with religion, and where the media system is considered to be an “interactive, dynamic, and convergent .. [with] .. religious communication” (Bahonar, 2009, p. 242).

The purpose of this article is to reveal digitally-manipulated photographs and political memes as tools of propaganda charged with cultivated and long-established gendered stereotypes, given the major media events and their packaging by the media. In order to do that, this article fits digitally-manipulated photographs within the typology of standard elements of photojournalistic icons, celebrated products of photojournalism (Perlmutter and Wagner, 2004). Building upon the elements of typology for photojournalistic icons (Perlmutter, 1998), this article extends it to include digitally-modified photographs to examine them through the lens of credibility in the context of the Iranian media system and the strategic communication tools it employs for media coverage. Specifically, the digitally-manipulated iconic photograph of Majid Tavakoli and discussions regarding the tactics of political shaming associated with it offer a possibility for making conclu-

sions regarding the role of social media in the country, where the state and religion are inseparable. Investigating the case of the iconic social media photograph of Tavakoli, this study seeks to demonstrate how established and newly published symbols, mediated by social media, change their original meanings, transforming public attitudes regarding gender inequality and human rights violations.

To contextualize the situation in the Iran before and after political memes gained popularity, a review of conditions related to the gender inequality, media censorship, role of the religion in the state-making, and violations of human rights is necessary.⁷

Gender inequality and the making of media events in Iran

Some of the world's major disparities regarding gender equality are ubiquitous in the Iranian society. The Islamic Republic of Iran was ranked 137th out of 142 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2014). As of 2009, the labor force consisted of 18 percent of women versus 86 percent of men. The number of women in the labor force decreased to 16 percent in 2013 (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2013). On average, women's salaries are up to five times less than those of men's. Aimed at increasing country's population, multiple edicts issued by the Iranian authorities during the regime of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei made the situation regarding women's participation in labor force even more problematic.⁸ Habitually disqualifying female candidates during the elections since the early 1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially during its Ahmadinejad period, has become known to the world as one of the countries that achieved an anti-record regarding women's political participation.

Media censorship, access to information, and media coverage

Even though media censorship was present before the early 2000s in Iran, and women's and gender issues were a particular target, Iranians were still able to visit some international sites until 2009, the year of the mass "Green Movement" protests. After the protests, the Iranian media system adopted media censorship as a predominant method of operation. For instance, to prevent any information about human rights abuse reaching the international community, the Iranian authorities strengthened existent media censor-

ship and Internet filtering regulations (e.g., by banning the access to foreign websites associated with politics). In general, the media content was censored if it was associated with articles about (1) art and culture, (2) media and journalism (e.g., biographies of journalists, news services in Farsi offered by major western news agencies, such as BBC-Persian), (3) human rights (e.g., human rights violations, gender issues, and critiques of the regime), (4) religion (e.g., Baha'i), (5) sex and sexuality (e.g., pornographic videos), (6) civil and political rights (e.g., the protests and controversial elections), and (7) other content related to different realms of life that may be considered inappropriate by the Iranian authorities (Anderson and Nazeri, 2013).

A series of media censorship techniques helped the Iranian authorities to stop the strategic communication tools of international social and popular mobilization movements, including color revolutions that changed the political regimes in several Eastern European countries, from being transported to Iran.⁹ To prevent people from using social networks as a means of spreading news about Iran, the authorities blocked social networks such as *Facebook* immediately after the first protests of 2009.¹⁰ Hence, only the people who knew how to avoid the Internet filters through proxy servers were able to access social networks. Moreover, to prevent Iranians from coordinating their actions during protests, the authorities practiced shutting down mobile communications.

Acknowledging that “politics of the protest animates demonstrations not only through public squares, but also, and it happens more often than not, through the media” (Cottle, 2008, p. 853), the authorities and the Iranian opposition craved for media attention. In pursuit of the media spotlight, the Iranian authorities shut down the oppositional newspapers or media that expressed reluctance to favor the authorities in the media coverage (CNN report, 2009). As a result, the Iranian media were limited to publishing only “what was permitted,” refraining from publishing “what was possible” (Debord, 1994, p. 20). Furthermore, in a situation when international journalists were banned from Iran, “the ruling order” was able to win the battle for the domestic media attention, overwhelming the public with the monologues of self-praise and political shaming of those who opposed it. Implementing strict policies regarding domestic media coverage, the Islamic government aimed to limit the coverage of any media events related to

the “Green Movement.” Instead, the pro-government media often cited the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who referred to the opposition supporters and participants of the anti-government protests as “dust and dirt” (New York Post, 2009).¹¹ The demonization of the opposition supporters, while relying on religious references, was one of the most important tasks of media censorship in making the protesters invisible and authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran invincible.

Representations of women's rights and gender inequality in media and society

Given the restrictions on public appearance and behavior in Iran, a comparison of the differences in the treatment of men and women regarding basic human rights in Iran and the Western world may not suffice, because it can lead to misleading conclusions (Osanloo, 2000). The dichotomous structure of the political life in the Islamic Republic of Iran that relies both on republicanism and Islam has resulted in “the Islamization of ...[women’s]... social and legal rights” (Moghissi, 2009). Hence, the question of how to approach women’s rights remains controversial (Afshari, 2012), even though Baderin (2007) claims that Islam can contribute to solving complex issues regarding human rights in Iran. Nevertheless, mapping the structure of gender inequalities can contribute to an understanding of why and how some Iranians defy the regime, despite the restrictions established by the state and religion. As the Iranian society was de-secularized after the Shah was deposed during the revolution of 1979 (Matin-Asgari, 2006), both men and women were required to obey multiple restrictions, enforced by the police (Afshari, 2001; Afary, 2004). For example, unmarried men and women cannot date, kiss or hold hands in public (Sciolino, 2000). But in comparison to men, unmarried women cannot travel without the consent of their male relative. In contrast to men, women can only file for divorce under certain circumstances. Moreover, the punishment for marital infidelity is more severe for women than for men, and can include fining, stoning, and flogging. Even though the Shi‘ite Iranian tradition of temporary marriage allows men to have intimate relationships with women, including sex, for a limited period of time, men can have many temporary wives at the same time, whereas women can only marry one temporary husband (Boe, 2015). Woman’s virginity is also not considered a personal matter. If a woman is detained by the police for being on a date with a man, she can be a subject to a virginity exam. If the results of a virginity exam performed on an unmarried woman show that she is not a virgin, she faces punishment.

The institutionalized control over women and their bodies and the restrictions on public behavior and appearance contributed to the plethora of media shaming tactics aimed at causing a political or community death of ordinary citizens in Iran. Iranian media heavily relied on exploiting restrictions, religious traditions, and gender stereotypes. Shaming tactics contributed to building a stigma, which branded a person as the “untouchable,” an outcast (Goffman, 1963). Stigmatization made it easier for the society to spot the enemy, who is believed to be responsible for the past or future plight of the community. In Iran, the misogynistic shaming tactics associated with gender stereotypes became typical for the country where “...[b]eing a woman is considered so shameful that if you are an outspoken male opposition supporter in Iran, the press will release a picture of you wearing a headscarf and chador to humiliate you” (Muslim Media Watch, 2010). This quote, applied to the digitally-manipulated photograph of Majid Tavakoli, can explain why the authorities relied on his depiction in women’s clothing as a shaming tactic.

Despite multiple restrictions on public behavior, Iranian people invented multiple ways of defying them. For instance, since Iranian culture has strict rules regarding women wearing makeup; many defy these restrictions by wearing layers of makeup (so that the outer layer could be removed on the demand of the moral police, whereas the inner layer could stay).¹² This is only one example of how Iranian women are expressing their protest and defy the established restrictions (Mahdavi, 2008). The ritual of expressing the protest was covered by *The New York Post* in June of 2009. Contributing to the international iconology of the “Green Movement,” it highlighted “[t]he red nail polish, black eyeliner and side-swept bangs of young Iranian women,” labeling them as “the symbols of dissent,” which were:

So conservative by American standards, yet revolutionary by Iranian ones: these women, who by law can do and say and expose and adorn almost nothing, are agitating for the most basic human rights in the smallest of ways (New York Post, 2009).

Gendered stereotypes in media frames

Providing a comprehensive media coverage of the Iranian authorities’ actions, the Iranian media tended to omit information about the opposition or

mock the opposition supporters, while relying on gender stereotypes and including them in the media coverage templates. The instances when domestic Iranian media distorted the information about protests to favor the Iranian authorities were omnipresent. For instance, after the arrest of the daughter of one of the opposition leaders, the media covered this event in an article entitled: “The daughter of the opposition leader was arrested during the demonstrations to be protected from the rioters” (Anon, 2009a). Relative silence of the media on the account of women’s rights and human rights violations can be explained not only by the union of the state and religion in the Islamic Republic of Iran, but also by the media censorship practices. Since many political prisoners were detained when expressing their protest against the regime, many of them faced accusations of criticizing senior religious clerics, values of the Islamic revolution of 1979, and core values of Islam. As a result, when covering media events related to human rights violations, the media would habitually reference religious myths, while blaming the political prisoners for causing sedition and turmoil among conscientious public of the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹³

In addition to the established practices of not talking about human rights violations and “Green Movement” protests, the government stimulated the information blockade of the Islamic Republic. The main premise of this decision was to maintain the status quo and to avoid reporting human rights violations that peaked during the “Green Movement” protests. Tightened censorship of all media and absence of foreign journalists, who were sent out of the country as the protests of 2009 became more populous, ensured the existence of the information vacuum, which was filled with the media statements approved by the government. Numerous instances of abuse and torture of political prisoners were left unreported and only occasionally reached domestic or global media.

Even though the information about political prisoner abuse was sparse, tortures had become an established ritual in prisons throughout the Islamic Republic of Iran that were mostly omitted by the official media coverage, but known to the masses through word-of-mouth (Abrahamian, 1999; Afshari, 2001). Iranians also knew that the practices of torture were genderless. Despite the fact that Henderson (2004, p. 1034) categorizes virginity tests along with threats of rape and actual rape as forms of an “essentially women’s repression,” Iranian political prisoners arrested during the protests

of 2009 were often subject to rape regardless of their gender while in prison or under investigation (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2011). These practices of demasculinization intensified an existing gender divide in Iran, spotlighting the privilege to be a man as opposed to a misfortune to be a woman - or treated as if one were a woman - in the Iranian society. As one of the most infamous and well-publicized practices of demasculinization that aimed to destroy a person's reputation, banishing him from participating in the political life of the country, a digitally-manipulated photograph of Tavakoli disseminated by the media, portrayed him not only a protester/rioter, but also as a person who practices cross dressing. Relying on the media as a propaganda device and gendered stereotypes as tools of communication that are capable of being perceived as credible by the public, the Iranian authorities attempted to create a photojournalistic icon that would feature the anti-hero, who can be blamed for the disruption of peace in the society governed by the state and religion.

Credibility and legitimization of media coverage

Almost every media story about the protests of 2009 contained multiple comparisons of the events that happened in 2009 to the events that happened during the time of Mohammad and his disciples. The pro-government media metaphorically compared the "Green Movement" protesters or the United States and Israel to the enemies of the prophet who were always defeated by him and his disciples. Iranian media referred to the people of Iran who support the authorities as victorious disciples of the prophet (party of Hossein), who were able to defeat those serving the enemy (party of Yazid). Furthermore, citing multiple references to the meanings of religious holidays and not necessarily the interactions that happened on those holidays between the protesters and the police, the Iranian media broadcast only the information strengthening the general public's belief in the state and state leaders as the paramount authorities in interpreting religious traditions and books for Iranians. For instance, to emphasize the condemnation of the opposition supporters and to praise those who support the Iranian authorities (metaphorically represented by Hossein and his supporters), *Iran* wrote an article entitled: "[w]eeks after insulting the founder of the Islamic Revolution,¹⁴ the rioters insulted reverence of Ashura,¹⁵ the people mourning for Hossein clashed with rioters in central streets of Tehran following which the

rioters had to flee” (Anon, 2009b). Hence, not only Iranian media sustained the Iranian authorities’ right to be the only interpreters of religious texts, it also made it clear to the public that the Iranian authorities’ interpretations of the events, if framed in religious terms, cannot be questioned.

The pro-government media always presented media coverage of the opposition supporters in a disparaging manner. For instance, when covering violent confrontations between the protesters and the police, the pro-government newspapers tended to shift the blame from the police to opposition, assuring the public that the opposition supporters as rioters who disturb the peace would be punished. Iranian media glorified those citizens who supported the Iranian authorities, framing the media spectacle of disparaging the opposition supporters with their help. To back the government claims about the public suffering from the protesters, *Iran* quoted Tehran Chief of police: “People filed 10 thousand complaints to the rioters” (Anon, 2009c).

Mainstreaming the public opinion that the majority of the public supports the Islamic government, Iranian media emphasized: “The people mourning for Hossein in Tehran didn’t spare the rioters” (Anon, 2009d). In general, Iranian media broadcast the official government rhetoric of denying opposition any chance of being seen by the public in a good light: “The presence of people neutralized the sedition” (Anon, 2009e). To back the government claims about the public suffering from the protesters, Iranian media constructed a myth about threats to the united society that emanate from the opposition, by quoting the police chief of Tehran: “[p]resence of insurgents and members of terrorist groups along with their use of weapons are the main cause of fatalities” (Anon, 2009f).

The Iranian media coverage of the protests demonstrated that while using references to religion as signifiers for righteousness, the pro-government media strategically utilized religion to legitimize the practices of vilification through creating a series of symbolic social dramas in society (Venger, 2016). In order to enhance the trustworthiness of media events, Iranian media frequently used religious metaphors that made references to the good and the bad when comparing the authorities and the opposition. Religious references in media legitimized media coverage, adding much needed authority and credibility to the statements. Respected and followed by the majority of the public in everyday life, they contributed to persuading the public

that media coverage is trustworthy. Additionally, media also relied on gendered stereotypes to convey their messages and make them more effective, since some gendered representations and stereotypes are well-established and mainstreamed in the Iranian society. The next section elaborates on the attributes of Tavakoli's photograph as a photojournalistic icon and how it became a political meme, which surpassed in its effectiveness the Iranian media's practices of using religious references as tools of strategic communication.

Theorizing photojournalistic icons

The digitally-manipulated photograph of Majid Tavakoli fits into the typology of the standard elements of a photojournalistic icon, comprised of the following: (1) importance of the event depicted, (2) metonymy, (3) celebrity, (4) prominence of display, (5) frequency of use, and (6) primordality (Perlmutter, 1998).

The first element of a photojournalistic icon is the importance of the event. Tavakoli was previously detained for criticizing the regime. He was also a well-known leader of the opposition. The publication of his photograph in a chador made the political persona of Majid Tavakoli even more important in Iran, because the photograph triggered debates about his ability to lead the opposition, as it portrayed Tavakoli in a disparaging for an Iranian man manner.

The second element of a photojournalistic icon is metonymy, represented by the ability of images to embody the greater events. The publication of Majid Tavakoli's photo was intended to disgrace him. However, as the discussion around the credibility of the photos intensified, the misogynistic meaning of the photograph got reversed by the Iranian public who defied the regime and expressed protest.

The third element of a photojournalistic icon is the celebrity status of the image. The photo of Tavakoli achieved a celebrity status not only because he was one of the leaders of the student opposition, but also as a result of the online discussions centered on whether it was digitally manipulated. After the image-editing of the photograph was evident, the opposition supporters digitally modified the photographs of the most powerful men in Iran. Por-

traying them in chadors, they used the same image-editing techniques that were utilized by the media who digitally manipulated the image of Tavakoli. That is how the misogynistic portrayal of Majid Tavakoli backfired at those who wanted to discredit him.

The fourth attribute of the iconic news photograph, *id est*, prominence of display, is closely related to the fifth element of the photojournalistic image, *id est*, frequency of use. In the case of Majid Tavakoli's photograph, the authorities and opposition used it frequently for different purposes. Digital manipulation of the photographs, if noticed, stimulated public debate, resulting in the prominence of display and frequency of use.

The final element of the photojournalistic image is the primordiality - "a theme embedded in a specific visual and literary culture" (Perlmutter, 1998, p. 101). The primordial theme represented in Tavakoli's photograph is that of the conflict between the opposition and the authorities. Even though the authorities were successful in persuading some of the public that the elections were legitimate, they failed to unite the country. As a result of the alleged fraud committed during the presidential elections of 2009, the society was divided.

The standards of photojournalistic icons can be applied to Tavakoli's photograph not only because he was a leader of the opposition, but also because the photograph gained the iconic status by multiple people reposting it online. Since people who raised awareness about the photograph were concerned if the image was edited, the typology of the standards of photojournalistic icons should be extended to analyze digitally-manipulated content, accounting for its credibility. The credibility of the photograph stands for any retouching/airbrushing of the original photograph performed with the help of image-editing technologies, which is discussed in the next section.

Credibility of photojournalistic icons on social media

The photo of Majid Tavakoli (Figure 1a) stimulated the debates centered on whether it was airbrushed with image-editing software from the first moments of its publication. The discussions of digital manipulation ignited the debate about the credibility of information regarding his arrest. Bloggers posted detailed descriptions of the digital manipulations performed on Tavakoli's photographs (Figure 1b).

Introducing the attribute of credibility to the typology of standard elements of photojournalistic icons, this study posits that the investigation of the role performed by the digitally-manipulated content is possible by accounting for credibility of the image. The proposed extended typology of photojournalistic icons accounts for (1) the event that took place, (2) the intended effect of the digital manipulation, (3) the credibility of the photograph based on the features of digital manipulation, and (4) techniques of digital manipulation (Table 1). The addition of the dimension of credibility to the typology of photojournalistic icons accounts for the demand of the digital era, where the digitization of information is almost unavoidable. As an attribute of an extended typology, credibility encompasses the ability of the photograph to depict the situation as it happened without adding or removing anything to or from it.

The extended typology for photojournalistic icons can be applied when analyzing a content of digitally-modified photojournalistic icons (Figure 1a) and political memes (Figure 1c). For example, the relatively easy procedure of making political memes by image-editing the original photographs of Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was an Iranian President from 2005 to 2013 (Figure 1c and 1d), provided additional context to how the photo of Majid Tavakoli could have been digitally manipulated.

When considering the credibility of the image and the role of social media, the analysis of a photojournalistic icon reveals media events in a new light. According to Hudson (2013): "...at its best, social media has given a voice to the disenfranchised. At its worst, it's a weapon of mass reputation destruction..." The case of Majid Tavakoli's photograph demonstrates how the authorities attempted to use media, including social media, to destroy the reputation of the opposition and its leader. It also shows how social media gave voice to the opposition, transforming not only the meaning of the photograph, but also reversing the meaning of gendered stereotypes.

The event that took place	The intended effect of the digital manipulation	Credibility of the photograph: Features of digital manipulation noted in the coverage of the media event	Techniques of digital modification
Majid Tavakoli, a leader of student opposition is shown wearing women's clothing	Create and contribute to the atmosphere of shaming of the opposition leader	The photograph portrays Tavakoli with one hand and the other hand is missing, as if it was chopped off	Image-editing software (e.g., Microsoft Paint or Adobe Photoshop) is used to portray Tavakoli wearing chador and headscarf

Table 1. Credibility as an attribute of the iconic digitally-manipulated photographs and political memes.

Iranian social media users ruined the attempt of the authorities to destroy the reputation of Tavakoli in 2009. They did so by discussing the evidence of the photograph's digital manipulation and raising awareness about it online. Acting upon their discovery that the photograph was digitally manipulated and to express their protest with the actions of the authorities and human rights situation in the country, the opposition supporters bestowed a new meaning of resistance to the regime upon the photograph and upon the stereotype of cross dressing as a woman. In contrast to the pro-government media that rarely provided a balanced coverage of the protests, social media gave a voice to the opposition and provided opportunities for glorifying the underdog in the case of Tavakoli and for women's rights in general.

Discussion

This article set out to explore the role of misogyny, digitally-manipulated content, and social media in the case of a digitally-modified journalistic news photograph that became an icon. The news photograph of Tavakoli, a controversial product of political propaganda, was published in a society infamous for political prisoner abuse, human rights violations, and gender inequality. Examining the selection of news pieces about the “Green Movement” protests published in the Iranian newspapers in 2009, this article accounted for the role of religious media references and gendered stereotypes in the legitimization of media events. Contextualizing the research on the digital manipulation of the photojournalistic icons within the two pillars of the Islamic Republic of Iran, i.e. the state and religion, this study demonstrated the complexity and impossibility of solving the issues related to gender inequality, political prisoners’ rights, and human rights without accounting for the role of the state and religion in Iran.

The ability of any country’s media to produce and disseminate photojournalistic icons can solidify stereotypes, which contributes to stigma, but it can also dispel them. After the Iranian authorities arrested Tavakoli and institutionalized the process of political meme-making through supporting the Iranian media’s efforts in the dissemination of Tavakoli’s digitally-manipulated photograph, Tavakoli’s supporters started the social media campaign in his support. These efforts paved the way for other campaigns, with Iranian men and men of other nations sharing on the World Wide Web their cross-dressing selfies they took to protest sexism and misogyny (e.g., Kurd Men for Equality). Donning chadors, they protested against the practice of punishing criminals, who routinely were ordered by court to be paraded on the streets in women’s clothing (The Daily Beast, 2013). Given the importance of public etiquette in the Iranian society, the government propaganda relied on the political repression and misogyny to vilify those who defy the authorities. At the same time, the supporters of opposition and those who wanted to express their protest chose to do so by reversing the meaning of the media events covered in the pro-government media and spreading awareness about how to defy the authorities on social media.

The misogynist shaming tactics used for the purpose of shaming Majid Tavakoli by the Iranian media were supposed to be successful because of the

deplorable condition of women's rights in Iran; however, the participatory nature of social media helped to transform the meaning of Majid Tavakoli's photograph from one that tarnishes his reputation to one that glorifies it. Thousands of Iranian men defied the regime by logging into their social media accounts through proxy servers in order to reach out to domestic and international audiences, telling the story of Tavakoli. Questioning the ambiguity of digitally-manipulated photographs in general and Tavakoli's photograph specifically – which has been sustained by the Iranian media, in part, through media censorship – social media users resorted to examining the photograph's credibility. Conducting the analysis of the photograph and investigating the possibility of digital modifications, the opposition supporters also raised awareness about the practice of media censorship regarding the major media events in the country. The social media users reinvigorated an image of Tavakoli, glorifying him for his resistance to the regime. An underdog detained by the authorities for his protesting against human rights violations in Iran, Majid Tavakoli was commemorated online by his supporters not only in Iran but worldwide.

Organizing social media campaigns, online forums, and discussions, the opposition employed political satire to highlight inhumane conditions, tortures, and abuses of political prisoners. Symbolically supporting Tavakoli by wearing chadors, his supporters protested against fraudulent elections and human rights violations at the same time. The use of digitally-manipulated photographs and memes demonstrated the lack of fear of cyber activists after 2009 protests. Moreover, they made digitally-manipulated counter-memes to stylistically resemble a photograph of Tavakoli but featuring the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran (e.g., Ahmadinejad) wearing headscarves. Quickly disseminated through social media, these counter-memes ensured that as the involvement of social media users grew, the shaming tactics of the Iranian authorities aimed at the opposition backfired at the authorities.

To sum up, the mega media spectacles covering the major events can attain new meanings when mediated by social media. For instance, the mediated context of discussions on social media facilitated the transformation of the meaning of a chador not only as a part of women's clothing or a symbol of resilience and resistance to the regime, but also as a symbolic way of moc-

king the government through political memes. The case of a digitally-manipulated photograph of an opposition leader, ridiculed by the authorities, presented an opportunity for young Iranians to defy the regime, confirming the notion that many young Iranians “see style as a form of warfare” that will help them to defy the authorities (Mahdavi, 2008).

The techniques of digital modification of iconic photojournalistic images represent an underexplored frontier for the development of political satire, photojournalism, and image-editing technologies. Successful in attracting the attention of the public, they ignite debates regarding the implications of these technologies for journalistic professionalism and ethics, as well as political spin doctoring¹⁶ (Stuart, 2005). These debates shape journalism as a field in the digital era of information control and provide opportunities for political participation for the public in the countries known for their repression of human rights.

Conclusion

The success of the social media activities of the public aimed at protesting against the Iranian authorities and the media as their mouthpieces demonstrated that the use of photographs and their digital manipulation for political means and ends can no longer be considered the most effective tool of strategic communication, even when supported by religious or stereotypical sentiments, traditional for society. Exploring the content of the photograph featuring Majid Tavakoli, a prominent leader of the Iranian opposition, this study demonstrated how the intended misogynistic meaning of this photograph as a digitally-manipulated media formation was mediated by social media and people’s desire for social change, eventually becoming an iconic political meme that (1) changed the course of strategic communication online from blaming the opposition to glorifying it and blaming the regime, (2) changed the meaning of being a woman in Iran from someone who is ostracized to someone who is respected, and (3) changed the understanding of religious rhetoric from something previously unquestionable to something that needs additional context and open mind regarding interpretations. These results contradicted the original aim of the Iranian media’s decision to disseminate a digitally-manipulated photograph of Majid Tavakoli.

Analyzing the photograph of Tavakoli as a precursor to a series of political memes defying and mocking the Iranian authorities in the context of human rights violations and gender inequality, this study investigated how and why the meaning of the photograph got transformed, given gendered stereotypes and misogynistic attitudes supported by the authorities in Iran. First, as mnemonic and metonymic functions of photojournalistic icons are crucial to the shorthand of journalism (Perlmutter, 1998), the credibility function of the image enhances their operationalization in the era of information control and online media. Second, the theme of a primordial conflict between those who support the state of affairs as is and those who fight for changes stimulates all participants to act, using media coverage to their advantage. In the country where the media mostly voices the rhetoric of the authorities, political satire and the digitally-manipulated photographs or political memes posted online represented the only tools available for the opposition supporters to spread the word about their protests domestically and internationally. The extended typology of photojournalistic icons, specifically, digitally-manipulated photojournalistic icons, proposed in this study, categorizes the content of digitally-manipulated photographs, outlining a route for the exploration of digitally-manipulated photojournalistic content, including iconic content, in the future through the attribute of credibility. Future studies can examine the effects of digitally-manipulated photographs of the opposition rallies in Iran that were manipulated with a goal of swaying the public opinion.

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Appendix



Figure 1a. The digitally-manipulated photojournalistic icon of Majid Tavakoli, a critic of the regime.



Figure 1b. The digitally-manipulated photojournalistic icon of Majid Tavakoli, a critic of the regime.



Figure 1c. The political meme of the Supreme Leader in 2009.



Figure 1d. The political meme of the Iranian President in 2009.

Notes

¹ Chador is a large cloak wrapped around the head that reveals only the face. It is considered a traditional attire for women in Iran.

² FNA or FARS news agency is referred to as a “semi-official” media outlet (Time, 2010), because even though it claims to be an independent media, the media coverage provided by it aligns with the official rhetoric of the Iranian government.

³ IRNA or the Islamic Republic News Agency is the official news agency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is funded by the government.

⁴ The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country, where the cross dressing is punished by law. Moreover, it is not unusual for the judges to order dressing the convict in women’s clothes and parading him around town in order to humiliate a criminal (Hoffman, 2013).

⁵ The supporters of the protesters and opposition chose the green color to represent their struggle for fair elections and human rights. For the protesters, the choice of green color was also symbolic, since they wanted to convey their oppositional stance, and that is why they adopted the colors associated with Kalemeh Sabz (Green World), the main publication of the opposition.

⁶ One of the social media campaigns organized by the feminists in 2013 was the mass posting of selfies by cross-dressed Iranian men, who wanted to express their indignation with the state of women’s rights in Iran. An Iranian court punished a criminal by making a decision to dress him in women’s clothing and parade him through the streets in April of 2013.

⁷ The religion needs to be accounted for since it is essential part of traditions, politics, culture, and life in general in the Iranian society.

⁸ The Supreme Leader of Iran is the head of the state and the highest ranking political and religious authority in the country.

⁹ Ukrainian democratization movement of 2004 and Lebanon’s democratization movement of 2005.

¹⁰ The first protests of the “Green Movement” started after the presidential elections in June of 2009.

¹¹ An Iranian president from 2005 to 2013.

¹² Having the authority to detain those who do not follow the established etiquette of public behavior, the moral police detains women whose chador is too loose or couples on a date. The purpose of the moral police is to guide the public how “to be better citizens” (Economist, 2013).

¹³ The notion of the “conscientious public” became popular during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It stands for those people who support the authorities. Consequently, the task of the authorities is to protect the nation and its people or conscientious public who obeys the authorities.

¹⁴ During the Islamic Revolution of 1979 the regime of the Shah, the ruler of Iran up to 1979, was overthrown and a regime of religion and republicanism was established.

¹⁵ A religious holiday in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Violence is forbidden in the month of Ashura. According to the tradition, the government must never execute people during this month.

¹⁶ A practice of controlling the media coverage of the event in order to impact the public opinion.