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Protest and Resistance in Authoritarian Contexts

Abstract

Information communication technology (ICT) has long been used as a form of expression, rebellion, or resistance. Social media has changed the way individuals and groups express and discuss political opinions. In an era of digital diplomacy, it is important to consider the impact of new forms of communication on domestic and international politics. New media has impacted the way social movements are established and arguably plays an even larger role in how these phenomena evolve. Through a case study digital ethnography of the women's movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), this project examines how ICT is used by social movements as a form of circumventing censorship and repression in authoritarian contexts.

Keywords: social movements; social media; internet studies; information communication technology; computational social science

Information communication technologies (ICTs) facilitate transnational connection, coordination and collaboration, which are essential for new social movements. At the same time, issues of access and censorship hinder social movement use of social media for mobilization. This project examines how internet technologies are used by women's movements to discuss issues of identity, dignity and justice and to contest gender-based discriminatory laws.

The Middle East has recently witnessed new relations between women and space where women have been empowered with new forms of social and physical mobility. Despite increased mobility, Iranian women continue to fight against the regime's gender discriminatory laws and protest the government in public squares and in virtual spaces with online social movements such as My Stealthy Freedom where they share photos and videos of themselves removing their headscarves or sneaking into soccer stadiums disguised as men. Using hashtags and symbolic communication, the movement against the gender apartheid highlights women's voices and presence. Protesting morality laws that exclude women from public space, hashtags such as #mystealthyfreedom #whitewednesdays #mycameraismyweapon and #bluegirl organize digital content and facilitate public discourse regarding issues of gender. By documenting their unapologetic visibility in public spaces, Iranian women express their strength and resilience and continue a long tradition of media representation through the production and dissemination of information and iconic imagery on social media platforms.

Through subtle, everyday acts of protests, women contest state narratives by documenting their presence in both physical and virtual public spaces. Singing, dancing and resisting compulsory hijab in streets and public parks, Iranian women practice the art of presence and challenge the restrictions they experience living in the IRI and abroad. My Stealthy Freedom and related campaigns demonstrate social media activism's ability to circumvent censorship and discuss controversial issues under repressive contexts. This research collects and analyzes data from Twitter and other social media platforms to investigate the evolution of these hashtags and relates these campaigns to the long-standing tradition of Iranian women's voices with a focus on the role of the camera and user generated content in art and daily life.

Research question

How are social movements using new technology to communicate, gain attention and support, recruit members and achieve their objectives? How is information communication technology (ICT) impacting the way individuals form identities and mobilize for collective action?

This research examines women's movements in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the online networks involved in propagating digital campaigns. While many scholars of new social movements focus on the establishment and evolution of movements in the Western world, this research contributes to new social movement literature by analyzing a non-Western, Middle East case of new social movement. This study seeks to explain how individuals and groups form identities and collectives online.

Data and Methodology

The sources of data for this project consist of real-time Twitter data, databases on conflict, protest and media, and semi-structured interviews. Real-time data is collected through the Twitter API in both English and Persian language and is used to conduct a cyber ethnography through computer assisted content and network analysis. The project also draws from databases documenting the occurrence of both peaceful and violent demonstrations such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) 2016-2019 and the Digital Society Project (DSP) which tracks misinformation campaigns, social media surveillance and the repression of political content.

Dissertation Progress

The researcher successfully defended her PhD proposal on April 22, 2019. She is currently collecting all Persian tweets and conducting analysis with an expected graduation in 2020.