

Constructing an Alternative Public Sphere: The Cultural Significance of Social Media in Iran

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Happiness brings people together.

Happiness is our right.

Nobody can stop our laughter.

I am a happy Iranian.

#freehappyiranians.

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In March 2014, a YouTube video called “Happy We are From Tehran” made in Iran became known throughout the world. This clip was a music video that showed Iranian youths dancing to Pharrell Williams’ song “Happy”. In it, young men and women are dancing in the streets and rooftops of Tehran, and the women are not wearing veils. The video had almost 300,000 views within five days, and 2.32 million views were recorded by November 2015. However, the seven men and women who uploaded the video were arrested for undermining ‘public chastity’. They were sentenced last September to three years of imprisonment and lashing.

Efforts to free these youths mobilized under the hashtag *#freehappy-iranian* on Twitter and through the “Free Happy Iranians” Facebook page. Similarly, the current Iranian president Rouhani also took a critical stance towards the arrest, by retweeting one of his own past tweets, “Happiness is our people’s right. We should not be too hard on behavior caused by joy.” In Iran, where such expression of happiness and joy on social network services (SNS) can become a crime (Koo 2016a), critical voices continue to emerge against this reality. Iranians, both within the country and abroad, are uniting in solidarity and collective opposition towards governmental policies through their posts on Twitter or Facebook.

Reform-oriented urban upper-middle-class youths have a strong dissatisfaction towards the Islamic government and dream of social change; in reality, however, they face too many obstacles in which reform is a slow and laborious process (Yaghmaian 2002). In contemporary Iran, we see a muddle of features that include aspects of the pre-modern ruling system and the modern state system, mixed in with recent attributes of globalization. Within this social context of colliding values, it is only natural that the Iranian urban upper middle-class youths feel confused. As a result of globalization, the influences of new media and the introduction of a new culture of consumption have rapidly transformed the cultural configuration of the Iranian city dwellers. New media, satellite media and social media have seen an explosive growth despite governmental censorship and restrictions. In the present, the “mediated experience” conveyed through mass media has deeply influenced the basic tissues of self-identity and social relations, and, as a result, it has developed the self-identity of the Iranians in a more reflective manner. In contemporary Iranian society, electronic devices and social media have changed the

“situational geography” of social life (Giddens 1991), which has allowed continuous and direct communication with the globalized world.

Iranian media, which has its roots in the small media from the times of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the foundation of the Islamic Republic (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994), has always maintained an important position in public and private discourses. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi emphasize the importance role played by small media in the success of the 1979 Revolution. In this context the term small media refers to the alternative media vehicle that counters the state authority or companies’ big media (national broadcasts or public television). During the Islamic Revolution, various forms of small media, including flyers, audio cassettes, Polaroid photographs, etc., led those of opposing opinions into social mobilization. Small media functioned as a successful media vehicle that targeted the audience in spite of the pressures and controls of the then-authoritarian administration (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994). Just as small media led the Islamic Revolution to success in the past, personal and new media in contemporary Iranian society are becoming consolidated into a political public space of their own.

The Ahmadinejad administration has had a great influence upon Iranian modern history and its current media environment. By attempting to enforce a new policy of Islamization on all aspects of Iranian society, it has strongly confronted the infiltration and penetration of individualistic, secular values of Western culture through media. It has issued fines on the installation and use of illegal satellite media, while trying to strengthen the capacity of the national television stations. The Iranian administration has increased the budget for the production of state broadcasts to effectively convey the voice and vision of the Islamic Republic, and has tried to produce and distribute an increased number of programs (Piri and Halim 2011). Nonetheless, although the government tries to prohibit access to information through worldwide channels and satellite television, in reality, it is difficult to maintain such control or censorship. For example, global human rights discourses regarding democratization and the rights of women—among others—has already filtered deeply into Iranian society (Koo 2013).

This chapter is a qualitative study based on research around the adoption of new and social media by the urban upper middle class of Tehran, based on fieldwork carried out over a year in 2009, during the Mahmud

Ahmadinejad administration, followed by two shorter terms of fieldwork carried out in January 2015, 2016, 2017. It will explore the Iranian media environment that have been changing with the distribution and expansion of new and social media, and analyze—from an anthropological perspective—how Internet and social networks have been introduced into Iranian society and function as sociocultural devices in the lives of the urban population. The visible and invisible wars between the state and citizen that began in urban areas have now moved onto the arena of new and social media. Social media is currently one of the most responsive and interactive mediums of communication. There are numerous case studies of how social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been used as instruments of political activity around the world (Loader and Mercea 2011; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010), and it is within this perspective that we will explore the political significance of social media in Iran.

Furthermore, I seek to emphasize the role of online media and social networks as an “imagined community” (Anderson 2006) and a space of solidarity and resistance. Shirky (2011) argues that social media creates a “shared awareness”, “the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand but also understand that everyone else does, too” (Shirky 2011). In other words, social media, as an instrument of communication between friends and colleagues, allows for the “second step” in the formation of political opinion. As Shirky (2011) points out, the “more promising way to think about social media is as long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere”, we can expect social media to be the cornerstone for the development of, not just an alternative public sphere, but of civil society in Iran. In other words, I will consider how the domain of media has transformed into a platform for heated political debate between the state and its citizens. By actively revealing the voices of the interviewees through their experiences, I plan to follow the processes by which private discourses about social media construct the vast public discourse.

CURRENT USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN IRAN¹

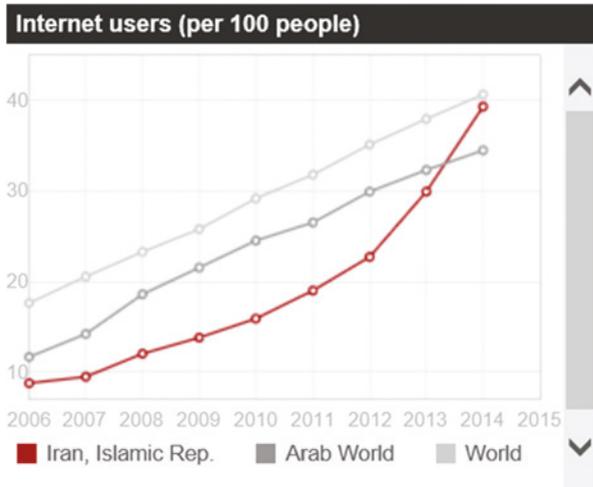
“Internet? Internet is my life itself!” said a 16-year-old girl from the upper-middle class of Tehran, her eyes locked on her mobile all day long. She was constantly communicating to her friends and family through mobile applications, and they all shared their daily lives as

well as “anti-Islamic” content that was being transmitted through illegal satellite channels. This phenomenon is not limited to teenagers, however. Family entertainment had been, until a few years ago, shows and soap operas shown through cable television, but now every family member in the upper urban classes has smartphones and tablets through which they have access to media from all around the world, particularly media that are censored by the Iranian government.

For Iranian youths nowadays, the actors of the American TV series “Bones”, The Oprah Winfrey Show and The Doctor Oz Show, pop stars such as Beyoncé or Rihanna, football players such as Lionel Messi or Wayne Rooney, and even the Korean pop singer Psy are familiar figures. New technology such as satellite broadcasts, smartphones, bluetooth, personal computers, digital cameras and the Internet, have functioned as important devices that set new standards and norms for cultural life in Iranian society. The media industry is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the Iranian economy, and it is this unprecedented growth rate that demands our attention. Furthermore, new communication technologies have had a greater influence upon the youth’s culture and mass culture in a relatively short period of time, and they are changing the cultural landscape of the urban upper-middle classes, particularly for the younger Iranian generations.

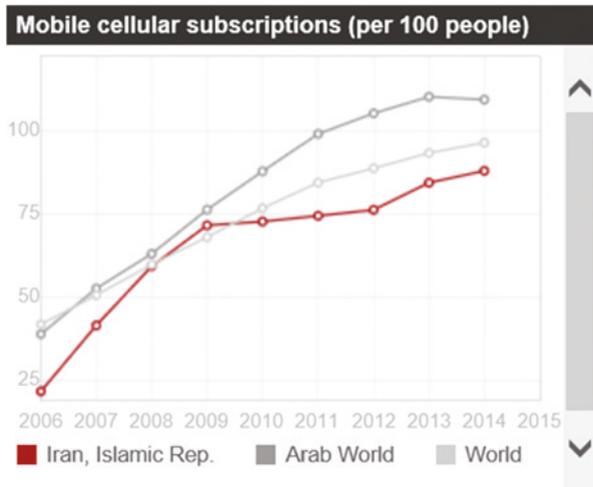
The following are some data charts from the World Bank database that give us an idea of the extraordinary growth of new media in Iran over the past few years. Figs. 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 show the number of Internet users, of mobile cellular subscriptions, and of broadband subscriptions, per 100 people. In order to provide a comparison, world and Arab world figures have also been included.

Let us first consider the use of broadband Internet in Iran. Iranian Internet users amount to 56% of the total number of Internet users in the wider Middle East (Amir-Ebrahimi 2009). As can be seen in Fig. 2.1, the number of Internet users has increased in the past 10 years by almost 25 times, from 610,421 in 2000 to 15,707,706 in 2014. Furthermore, the number of mobile phone users has grown from only 5 in every 100 people in 2003 to 87.8 of every 100 people in 2014. This is one of the clearest examples of the astonishing growth in the distribution of new technologies in Iran over the past decade. Similarly, the number of smart phone users has also been increasing exponentially since 2011. Recent fieldwork in Iran (carried out in January 2015, January 2016, and January 2017), showed that the demand for smartphones is increasing



Data from World Bank

Fig. 2.1 Internet Users (Per 100 People)



Data from World Bank

Fig. 2.2 Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people)

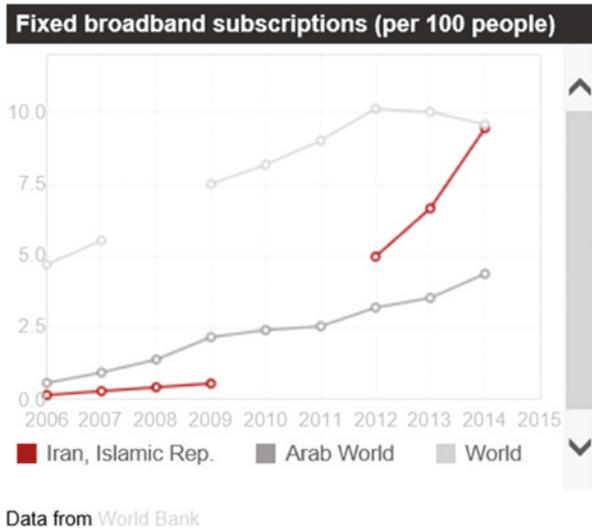


Fig. 2.3 Fixed Broadband Subscriptions (per 100 people)

rapidly, in particular among the upper-middle-class youths, despite the high prices.² According to a study published in 2015 by Iran’s Academic Center of Education, Culture and Research, “over 20 million of Iran’s 78 million people are smartphone users.”³

Similarly, the use of social networks such as Facebook⁴ to send messages, share music and photos has become a popular trend amongst the younger generations. In major cities, almost all of the young people in their 20s and 30s, even high school students, possess mobile phones, which they use to send text messages and share videos and photos through Bluetooth. Broadband networks have expanded from schools and public offices to home and personal computers, which has resulted in the increase of Internet bloggers and greater access to information that had been previously restricted by official Iranian media.

In 2011–2012, Wojcieszak et al. (2012) carried out research regarding Iranian media consumption and found that only 4% of those over 59 years of age accessed the Internet, whereas almost 61% of the youths between 18 and 28 years of age used the Internet at home. According to this study, for Iranian youths (those aged 18–28 years),

the Internet and SMS (text messaging) were the most important means of information transmission, compared to other generations' access to information.⁵

The Internet in Iran cannot be considered an entirely uncensored environment. According to the 2013 Freedom of Press report by Freedom House, a global advocate of human rights, Iran was ranked at 192nd along with Cuba, out of a total of 197 countries, putting it in the bottom seven of the freedom of press ranking. As can be seen in the case of Omid Mir Sayafi, a blogger who had been sentenced to thirty months in the notorious Evin prison for insulting Ayatollah Khomeini and other religious clerics, where he committed suicide (March 18, 2009),⁶ openly expressing political and/or religious views in Iranian society can still be a life-threatening act. Hossein Derakhshan, the first Iranian blogger (also known as the Father of Persian blogging), was also sentenced to 19 years in prison in 2010,⁷ charged with "cooperating with hostile states, propagating against the regime, propagation in favor of anti-revolutionary groups, insulting sanctities, and implementation and management of obscene websites"⁸

Despite these difficulties and obstacles imposed by the regime, there are approximately 65,000 active bloggers in Iran and the total number of Internet users in 2015 amounted to over 46,800,000.⁹ The penetration of digital devices such as personal computers and laptops has opened a new stage for the fomentation of public opinion and transfer of information, and young people are the main pillar of this rapidly expanding digital society. However, with the increase of information and the development of an eye for the outside world, those urban youths who have greater access to new media and social media have come to be considered dangerous by the Islamic government. The expansion of the Internet and various digital devices has become reflected as one of the most threatening forces of resistance against the government pushing for a strong Islamic state. As can be seen in the following interview, the number of new media users in Iran is multiplying rapidly and, in the process, they are gaining access to information from which they had hitherto been cut off. The incapacity to discuss issues freely in the public sphere has caused a movement to the online space, and now, despite governmental restrictions, they are constantly attempting to stay online and connected.

MALE, 26 YEARS, GRADUATE STUDENT,
TEHRAN, NOVEMBER 20, 2009

Unlike other generations, the younger generations in Iran are encountering a reality ridden with social problems, and in this context, we are experiencing foreign cultures ‘with our own eyes’ through new media such as the Internet and satellite television. With the increase in the number of Internet users in the population over the past 10 years, the government has implemented censorship institutions, but these do not pose severe obstacles for the young people. Everybody downloads programs that deactivate firewalls and access the Internet, unrestricted.

Although people maintain a public image of themselves vis-à-vis the government and in public spaces, they show their true selves to their closest friends and family in private, and also on their blogs (Koo 2008). The rapid changes of the communications industry, greater economic wealth, the increased demand for communication channels, the upsurge of use of personal technologies has led to an extraordinary growth of blogging and SNS activity in Iran. Whilst the early uses of the Internet were limited to chatting on certain websites, in recent years, the trend has moved from chatting rooms to blogs, to social media sites and smart phones.

One historic incident that best shows political importance of new media is the 2009 Green Movement. Green cloth wristbands and small media mixed with social media to create a “Green Wave”. Just as the Arab Spring was coined a Twitter Revolution, so also was the impact of the Internet War around the 2009 presidential elections, where political slogans were shared through Twitter and Facebook, while posters and flyers that had filled the streets in the past came to fill the screens of mobile devices through the use of social networks. In fact, Candidate Mousavi targeted the youth and reform-oriented population by opening a Twitter¹⁰ and Facebook¹¹ account, and carrying out an online electoral campaign. In response, those young people in their 20s and 30s who supported Mousavi began sharing posts and home-made videos showing their support on their SNS accounts such as those of Twitter, Facebook and their personal blogs. Furthermore, these young supporters shared with each other emails with photos or other materials satirizing the shortcomings of the Ahmadinejad administration. To further support

this, Iranian diaspora from all around the world participated actively alongside the Iranian electorate, thanks to the capacities of new media, for which the forces of the reform-oriented Iranians, including expatriates and those in exile, began to gather in this virtual space (Koo 2012).

People refer to the Iranian Green Movement of 2009 as the SNS Revolution, but we need to take into account that, until 2009, there was a very low level of smartphone penetration in Iran. In fact, a closer look at the period shows that it was mainly through the SNS activity of the Iranian diasporas that the world was informed about the Iranian Green Movement. Nevertheless, this does not undermine the fact that the internet had become one of the most important channels of Iranian social and democratization movements, and that the 2009 Green Movement would be a starting point in the history of new media and social media as transmission tools for political propaganda and public protests. (Fig. 2.4).

Smartphone penetration in Iran increased abruptly in 2012. Unofficial statistics suggest that at the time of writing there are at least 5 million Iranians using mobile SNS applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Viber.¹² During the short-term fieldwork carried out in January 2016, I was able to gather that mobile phone users were switching from Viber to Telegram for instant messaging while Instagram was more popular, relative to Facebook, among the younger generations. Whilst this seems to be in line with global demographics of social network users, which indicate that Instagram is, indeed, more popular amongst teens than Facebook or Twitter, in the case of Iran, the major reason behind the popularity of Instagram is simply the fact that it has not yet been censored by the government, meaning that currently anybody can access it.

It should be noted that several of world's most popular networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, are banned in Iran while users are still able to access them via proxies.¹³ (Figs. 2.5 and 2.6).

Among these are Facebook and Twitter—for which nowadays, there is an increasing tendency for people to hide in the more private spaces of mobile messaging applications such as Telegram.

While it is possible to “access” Facebook and Twitter through aforementioned proxies or programs, expressing one's opinions or political stance through Facebook or a blog is considered a cultural crime in Iran and can lead to either imprisonment or execution. In other words, despite the fact that so many people utilize SNS through their smartphones, the users are prevented from voicing their opinions freely.



Fig. 2.4 Some pictures used as Facebook profiles during the Green Movement

They are forced to be very cautious about their online activities and are required to wear a political mask in their personal online spaces, such as their Facebook profiles. However, in mobile messaging applications such as Telegram, Iranian users can share their latest news and voice anti-governmental opinions freely with their personal contacts.

THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO TRANSITION TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In this section, I will explore—through various examples—the potential of social media to transition into social movements in Iranian society. The Facebook page “My Stealthy Freedom” was created in 2014 by an UK-based journalist from the Iranian diaspora, and has subsequently



**Access
to this site is Denied**

برابر قوانین جمهوری اسلامی ایران و دستور مقامات قضایی
دسترسی به این سایت مجاز نمی باشد.

در صورتیکه این سایت به اشتباه فیلتر شده است ، جهت بررسی مجدد دکمه Submit را بزنید.
If you think this site is incorrectly blocked please press the Submit button.

Fig. 2.5 Screenshot of forbidden website, taken by researcher in 2009

received over 945,000 “likes”. By addressing the lack of freedom of choice regarding the Iranian government’s hijab policy, it has gained the attention of many Iranian studies researchers (including, among others, Hamzehei 2014; Karimi 2014; Koo 2016b; Lewis 2015; Novak and Khazraee 2014; Sreberny 2015). (Fig. 2.7).

On the cover picture of this Facebook page, we find the following greeting in Persian, “I want to say to all of you: Come and shake my hand, I am not your enemy, I just do not want to breathe any more of my freedom stealthily, simple freedom that does no harm to others... We do not want to be sentenced forever to this stealthy freedom. That’s it! We want to walk, shoulder to shoulder with those who believe or do not believe in Hijab, with dignity and freedom. That’s it.”

What is surprising is the high level of participation this social media campaign involved, despite the possible dangers entailed. Numerous Iranian women are uploading their stories and photos without their hijabs. One woman posted, “I do happily request you to publish my



Fig. 2.6 Screenshot of forbidden websites, taken by researcher in 2014



Fig. 2.7 “My Stealthy Freedom” Facebook page (“My Stealthy Freedom,” Facebook, accessed February 20, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom>.)

photo in your page so that you can deliver to the entire world not only our desire for freedom and our quest to be respected, but also our pursuit of dignity to those dictatorial authorities of Iran who have been turning a deaf ear to our aspirations. I hope they will be able to see vividly our request of freedom for our most basic rights.”

As can be seen in the following post, the most common themes recurrently discussed on “My Stealthy Freedom” are freedom of choice and women’s rights:

*Equality is my right. Freedom is my right.
And I want to enjoy this right while I’m alive.
Until we unite our voices, we won’t be able to decide for our simplest of rights.
That is the right to choose how to dress, let alone our great right.*

Furthermore, in the next post, reform-oriented women maintain that it is not their true “self” that submits to the government’s compulsory hijab policy:

The international sanctions against Iran are lifted, let’s stand shoulder to shoulder and raise our voices so that the domestic sanctions would be lifted as well. Each one of us lives once and only once. But we don’t live, even this one time the way we like, the way we are entitled to and the way we deserve. It seems we are kept in captivity. The freedom to choose what to wear is only one simple example. We cannot even take the risk of being happy. Look at those men behind me, I am as much a human being as they are and I don’t wish to die before I have lived my true self.

Nonetheless, in reality, even such secretive instances of freedom of expression on social media can be dangerous. Although most women agree with these opinions, they are afraid of the negative consequences that may arise from revealing themselves and posting photos without the hijab.¹⁴

We don’t have freedom even in social media. We are being judged just because of what we wear. Some people think that if we don’t dress as they wish, then they can insult us. That all means we have a long way to go. So we need to be strong and stand together.

This Facebook page also addresses women's rights issues beyond the enforced wearing of the hijab, expanding to issues such as women singing in public spaces, watching public sports matches, and travelling. For example, women singing in public or on stage were considered a sin, and the conservative religious leaders considered these women a target of hatred and blame. As a result, and, in resistance, Iranian women uploaded videos of themselves singing. This page serves as a platform to criticize not only the mandatory use of the hijab, but recently, it has also uploaded posts with the hashtag "*#Myforbiddensong*", referring to the official verdict to forbid a female singer's song.

"My Stealthy Freedom" further expanded its political significance as it began to incorporate endorsements of men for women's rights, as seen in the hashtag "*#ItsMensTurn*". Men's social movement on SNS is closely related to a recent incident that caused much controversy in Iranian society. The captain of the Iranian women's futsal team, Niloufar Ardalan, was unable to participate in the 2015 AFC Futsal Championship held in Malaysia because her husband did not allow her to renew her passport.¹⁵ However, once the Iranian team won the championship, they brought this issue to the center of attention of both national and international media. Ardalan made a call for change in Iranian laws on her Instagram, so that married women may travel abroad without their husbands' consent. After this incident, the Facebook page that had featured mostly women without their hijabs, began to be covered with posts by men, wherein they showed themselves holding up a statement saying, "Iranian law states women need their male guardians' permission to travel abroad. I support my wife's rights to travel freely without anyone's consent".

In addition, freedom of expression and the subject of individual human rights are important issues that are yet to be resolved in Iran. Individuals are still under surveillance and censored for the way they present themselves and how they act in public as well as in private. As Rahimi (2015) analyzed, censorship is continuously and systematically taking place in Iran, both officially and unofficially. New media, with its immense power of influence, has become the greatest battlefield between the government and the civilians. Nonetheless, as pointed out by Rahimi (2015), the Iranian government's cultural policies on media censorship has an omnidirectional impact on "division of labor, with

regards to visual art, crafts, cinema, print publication, music, research, press relations, and tourism". Recently, two poets, Mehdi Mousavi and Fateme Ekhtesari, were sentenced to long prison terms for crimes including "insulting the holy sanctities", one of the charges being shaking hands and kissing on the cheeks with strangers. The judge sentenced both of them to 99 lashes. In response, on "My Stealthy Freedom", couples posted themselves holding up statements like "Shaking hands is not crime! A poet's place is not the prison! Break the cruel sentence!"

Furthermore, this page shows the potential of social media to move from an online social movement to an offline civil movement. As Sreberny (2015) said, "The My Stealthy Freedom page is an online activity that is putting new issues into public contention", giving the issue a sense of political significance. In other words, this page brings Iran's internal problems to the outside world, and allows the different debates of the private sphere to be discussed in the virtual space of social network. Thus, the online community is becoming an alternative public sphere, a platform for political debate. The issues that are raised on social networks have been contended in the Iranian private sphere for a long time. After the Islamic Revolution, the secretive discourses of the private sphere have moved to the platform of social media such as Facebook and, in this process, are becoming part of a new public discourse. It is true that the resistance towards the hijab policy that is active online has yet to become an offline social movement. For this, the authority of Islamic law in Iranian society is too strong. Nonetheless, just as women have now been allowed to enter sports stadiums,¹⁶ we can expect this movement against the compulsory use of hijab to soon flare up in the Iranian social scene.

As we can see, the Facebook page "My Stealthy Freedom" is gaining more and more symbolic and political power within Iranian society. Although it is a social movement that began abroad to criticize the enforcement of the hijab, we can expect much more from this movement, in that it is dealing with the rights of Iranian women in general and is gaining support from both men and women. Overall, we can say that social media has become the new platform where public opinion is created, fomented and transmitted (Koo 2016). As the public interested in women's issues such as the hijab policy meet the opinions of discontent of the private sphere on this Facebook platform, this page has become a form of alternative public sphere. Whilst it is still difficult

for this online movement to evolve directly into an active offline civil moment, it is a development we can hope to see in the close future.

CONCLUSION

Iran is no exception to the worldwide trends of neoliberalism and globalization. Iranian people are watching Psy's "Gangnam Style" through YouTube, and different parodies of the same by Iranian diasporas around the world. Furthermore, through new media and diverse forms of personal media, they are encountering the flow of information that had hitherto been controlled and restricted. The new media audience is continuously met by modernity, and in this process, the urban Iranians are establishing a world of their own, an alternative public space online. New media in Iran is engaging with political situations to produce various discourses and the competition between the state-centered media and social media that arises in this process can be ultimately explained as an extension of the conflicting ideologies and classes in Iranian society.

The use of SNS, such as Facebook and Twitter, has seen explosive growth since 2011, and we can expect Iranian media around social media and smartphones to expand even more rapidly and more multidimensionally in the future. After a large-scale anti-governmental uprising in 2009, the government has realized the threat of SNS and the Internet, declaring a "Soft War" and devoting itself to blocking the influx of Western culture via social media networks. In particular, the government is taking a strong stance against the Internet and illegal copies of Western cultural products. However, Iranian Facebook users have found their way around the restrictions through programs that disable Internet firewalls, or other proxy servers.

Abadpour and Anderson (2013) stated that the media space in Iran is functioning as an important medium for expression and is one of the few spaces left where debates can still take place. Furthermore, Wojcieszak (2013) said that the act of connecting onto the Internet, which is under censorship, is a political act in itself, and a form of day-to-day treason. Although the act itself is not a direct act of resistance against the administration, it is essentially a political act that mocks the restrictions on access to information. Thus, the viewing and embracement of new media means more than simple media intake. For this reason, research on Iranian new media should extend beyond the field of communications,

and consider the fact that it is possible to extract political and cultural significance from this phenomenon.

Just as the role of new media in Iran is currently one of the most heated issues in contemporary Iranian political society, the observation of social media becomes thus an important resource for predicting the future state of Iranian politics and society. During the Green Movement that process took place around the 2009 presidential elections. New media had a greater significance above all other types of media (Koo 2012). Furthermore, the rapid growth in supply of smartphones since 2011 is expected to instigate yet another Media Revolution. The election of the moderate president Hassan Rouhani in 2013 has led to careful speculations for progressive reforms in Iran, and his statement on “the expansion of liberty through new media”, right after his inauguration, leads us to pay greater attention to the outlook of new media in Iran. In this context, we can say that media is the most important factor determining the Iranian political scene, meaning that new media and social media are research topics that need to be expanded and studied in greater depth.

So far, we have seen the development of new media in Iran, centered around SNS and its impact on society. SNS is consolidating an alternative public sphere for Iranian people where they are expressing and sharing their thoughts and voices, safe from persecution. This is achieved by the collective enjoyment of illegal popular culture and communication with the outside world using new media and technology in the private space. Social media functions as an imagined community and a space of solidarity and resistance. In other words, recent trends of globalization and transnationalism are communicating and conflicting with the specific sociopolitical context of Iran as an Islamic state. What remains in question is whether the social movements that develop over online social networks can extend into the physical world.

NOTES

1. This chapter expands upon a part of Koo, Gi Yeon. “The Study on the Acceptance of New media in Iran: Focusing on Ahmadinejad Regime” *Collection of In-Depth Studies about the Strategic Region* (2013).
2. There are certain limitations to presenting accurate statistics on smartphone penetration in Iran. However, according to a report by an Iranian 3G carrier, Tamin Telecom, smartphones are predicted to take up around

40% of the Iranian mobile market. Referencing a study carried out by Freedom House (2012) about Iranian mobile communication, Fars News Agency estimates that 9% of the total Iranian population use mobile Internet, while almost 100,000 text messages are sent daily. However, this study is from 2012, but, considering the smartphone dissemination has rapidly increased since the end of 2011 and 2012, we can expect the current mobile Internet access rate through smartphones to be much higher than predicted in this report.

3. Umid Niayesh, "Over 20 Million Iranians Use Smartphones", *Trend News Agency*, June 10, 2015, accessed January 5, 2016, <http://en.trend.az/iran/society/2404528.html>
4. It is not easy to verify the number of Facebook users in Iran. Access to Facebook has been restricted as it is considered a forbidden site. For this reason, Facebook users resort to programs that deactivate government firewalls, or access Facebook indirectly through proxy servers or virtual private networks (VPN), which makes the collection of data extremely difficult. Nonetheless, "Iran Web 2.0" published in 2012 indicated that 58% of Iranians use Facebook regularly, while Iranian Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance estimated there to be 4–4.5 million Facebook users in Iran by 2015. However, according to an article from Yonhap News on "The sudden rise in Facebook and Twitter from September", the number of Facebook users in Iran reached 17 million at that time. (*Yonhap News*, August 17, 2013, accessed September 28, 2013, <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2013/09/17/0200000000AKR20130917112451009.HTML?from=search>).
5. It means that the other generations' main source of information is not the Internet, but rather, the newspapers or even religious leaders. For example, people of 40–50 years generally access information through newspapers, radios and close relatives and family. According to Magdalena, Wojcieszak, Briar Smith and Mahmood Enayat, *Finding a Way: How Iranians reach for News and Information* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 30% of youths between 18 and 28 years of age acquired information through the Internet, as opposed to reform the 59 and above age group. A greater proportion of the older generations received their information from the mosque or other religious leaders.
6. "Iran Blogger Dies in Evin Prison," *BBC News*, March 19, 2009, accessed January 6 2016, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle-east/7953738.stm>
7. Although precise circumstances remain unknown, he was pardoned in 2014 by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini.
8. "Iranian Blogger Hossein Derakhshan Sentenced to Over 19 Years in Prison," International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran,

- September 28, 2010, accessed January 6 2016, <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/09/iranian-blogger-hossein-derakhshan-receives-19-5-years-in-prison/>
9. Different sources present different figures for the number of internet users in Iran. However, according to “Iran,” Internet World Stats, accessed February 7, 2016, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/ir.htm>, there were approximately 46,800,000 internet users, that is, 57.2% of the entire population, in 2015. A recent report by the Ministry of Youth and Sports stated that 67.4% of the youth use the Internet but we can expect actual figures to be much higher than officially announced.
 10. “Mir Hossein Mousavi,” Twitter, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://twitter.com/#!/mousavi1388>.
 11. “Mir Hossein Mousavi,” Facebook, accessed February 20, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/mousavi>.
 12. Iran’s Minister for Culture Ali Jannati said that 9.5 million Iranians use the social app Viber and 4–4.5 million use Facebook: Michael Pizzi, “Iranian leaders sign on to social media, call for end to Twitter ban,” *Al Jazeera America*, November 5, 2013, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/11/5/iranian-govt-signing-ontosocialmedia.html>.
 13. A proxy allows users to bypass firewalls that block certain censored sites.
 14. It is particularly dangerous when the woman in question is a public figure. For example, recently, two famous Iranian actresses were suspended from acting for posting photos of themselves without hijab on their social network pages, and raising their voices against its compulsory use. Governmental officials announced that they would be allowed to return to acting if they were to apologize for such political treason.
 15. Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Husband Bars Iranian Footballer from Asian Championships,” *The Guardian*, September 16, 2015, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/16/husband-bars-iranian-footballer-from-asian-championships>.
 16. These activists had started a campaign called “Rusari Sefid-ha”, which means “those wearing white scarves.” The campaign aimed at “defending women’s right to attend stadiums freely.” Its motto was, “My share, half of Azadi.” (“Azadi” also means freedom.) Read more: Mani Fardad, “Iranian Women Still Banned from Stadiums,” *Al-Monitor*, July 3, 2014, accessed February 20, 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/iran-womens-volleyball-barred-entry.html#ixzz3zOmuUTV3>.

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