



Information and communication technology and women empowerment in Iran

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ABSTRACT

Since the introduction of the Internet in Iran, Iranian women have used this medium not only as a means of accessing and disseminating information but also as the means of voicing their concerns about discriminatory laws and to participate in public discourse. In Iran, the Internet provided a voice to repressed and marginalized groups, particularly young people and educated women. In 2003 the number of female Internet users in Iran reached a remarkably high proportion of nearly half (49%) of the total Internet users in the country, according to the International Telecommunication Union report (ITU, 2008). This constitutes a total of 11.5 million female Internet users in Iran which is the highest level of Internet penetration rate among Islamic countries in the Middle East. Since the first Farsi blog appeared online in 2001, thousands of weblogs have been created including blogs related to women's issues in Iran. Blogging in Iran has helped repressed and marginalized groups reach out, including women's and human rights activists, ethnic and religious minorities and Iranian youth to get their voices heard and to challenge the long standing univocal government and Islamic religious authorities. Women bloggers have been among the leading bloggers within the Iranian blogosphere. By applying the theory of social action and mobilization, this study finds that women's digital activities prove to be an effective means of participating in communication discourse and mobilizing the female population of Iran in their struggle for a just and fair society.

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1. Introduction

In a recent report published in a mainstream Iranian newspaper (Abrar, 2010), an official claimed that, on a daily basis, Iranians exchange 60 million SMS messages—among which young male and female students comprise the largest group of SMS users. Many Iranian families, particularly middle class households, provide cell phones to their school-age daughters to ensure their safety and security. However, the popularity of SMS among young men and women in a conservative society such as Iran, has sent an alarming signal to hardliners about the “immoral” use of cell phones.

The multi-functional capabilities of cell phones and their ability to serve as a means of voice, text, email, video and picture transmission make this device a very popular and an effective tool for socio-political participation and mobilization. The number of cell phone users has increased drastically during the last decade in Iran. For example, while the number of cell phone users in 1998 was estimated to be 239,000, this number increased 180-fold a decade later (ITU, 2010).

In many different social contexts Iranians have used SMS messaging as a means of communication and political mobilization. For example, SMS played an important role during the last two presidential elections in Iran. Throughout the 2005 Iranian presidential election, millions of young Iranians sent SMS messages to boycott the election or to support oppositional candidates. Prior to the June 12, 2009 presidential election, young Iranian voters had used SMS as means of sending out

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political messages and converting SMS into a fast and effective political communication channel. During the campaign, a heavy flow of subversive SMS messages were exchanged between users. In these messages, subversive content was generally critical of the hardliner incumbent candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or supportive of popular liberal opponents. Since the government was unable to filter text messages sent during the campaign, the Ministry of Telecommunications shut down the entire mobile network including the text messaging system a day before the election. In addition, opponents of Ahmadinejad setup their own campaign watch groups to monitor the election across the country by the means of mobile networks. The number of text messages exchanged during the election campaign reached a record high of 110 million messages per day (Tehran Times, 2009). Many of the SMS messages were clearly political and encouraged people to participate in the election—particularly those who were skeptical of the integrity of election or those who might boycott it to rethink their stance. As Hafezi (2009) points out, many SMS messages warned boycotters, “If you plan not to vote, just think about June 13 when you hear that Ahmadinejad has been re-elected.” Other ICT tools such as e-mails, blogs and social networking sites were widely used during the presidential campaigns by liberal candidate supporters, the so called “greens”. According to one ITU report (2010), more than 23 million Iranians had access to the Internet in 2008 while the number of cell phone users reached as high as 43 million in the same year, the actual number of Internet and mobile cell phone users was higher during the presidential election. Given these substantial figures, it is not surprising to read in Hafezi’s (2009) report from Iran that SMS, emails, blogs and social networking sites played an undeniable role in mobilizing the masses during the 2009 presidential election campaign.

Young Iranian men and women became ‘grassroots’ journalists as they captured and disseminated hundreds of thousands of images and video clips of the socio-political events in June, 2009. These independent citizens uploaded their text messages and images on globally popular social networking and video sharing sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as well as on weblogs. Haider (2009) points out that within the context of democratic societies, individuals can freely use the Internet for their own purposes, such as promoting their own cultures and views where these views can be explored in a safe, non-threatening manner. However, in non-democratic countries, governments may perceive the Internet as a threat and therefore use all possible mechanisms to filter and censor its content. In this context individuals cannot discuss differing viewpoints thus an underground and subversive counter-culture germinates (Haider, 2009).

The Internet has provided a voice for the silenced and marginalized groups of Iran, especially women, to express their concerns about socio-cultural, political and economic matters. Such freedom of expression would not be possible through the official media channels (TV, radio and print press), which are controlled by the government.

Many scholars have emphasized the empowering role of ICTs (Sutton and Pollock, 2000) in communication discourse; however, few researchers have investigated ICTs’ impact on promoting women’s rights in the context of Islamic Middle Eastern countries. This paper seeks to shed light on this timely and pertinent subject.

By applying the theory of communication discourse and mobilization and using Internet narratives, this research investigates the role of ICTs and in particular the Internet in emancipating women in Iran in their struggle for social justice.

The rest of paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a review of the recent literature on communication discourse, social action and mobilization. Section 3 provides an overview of Iranian women in social and political participation and their roles in the two most prominent cultural and political revolutions. Section 4 discusses the role of Iranian women in digital discourse, and Section 5 provides a critical discussion and conclusion.

2. ICTs and communication discourse

Kaplan and Duchon (1988) argue that ICTs should be viewed from its social and organizational aspects and from the perspectives of its role in communication discourse. Van Dijk (1989) defines discourse as a specific form of language that expands beyond the boundaries of semantic presentation. In this context, discourse is used for the purpose of social interaction and therefore should be interpreted as a means of completing communication between and among different social actors. In this context discourse distinguishes itself from as being passive format of grammar sentences.

Many scholars have also argued that there is a strong relationship between the flow of information provided by ICTs and political behavior. In particular, information is considered to be an important factor in political participation (Bimber, 2001; Quintelier and Vissers, 2008; Tolbert and MacNeal, 2003), political cognition (Eveland et al., 2004; Bimber, 2001; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Sniderman et al., 1986), public opinion (Norris, 1999, 2001; Neuman and Pool, 1986), political meaning (Davenport, 2007; Neuman et al., 1992), political discussion (Eveland et al., 2004; Norris, 2001; Gamson, 1992) and socio-political mobilization (Bimber, 1998; Ayres, 1999; Norris, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Suarez, 2005). Brown et al. (2007) argue that Internet diffusion has been a valuable resource to business (both large and small), government, NGOs and civil society.

Dahlgren (2005) argues that the Internet extends and pluralizes the public sphere which rests upon a “lifeworld” of shared meaning (Danowski, 1991; Benkler, 2006) developed through discussion (Hurrell, 2005). Not only does the digital revolution bring features of freedom of expression to the forefront of our concern and make widespread cultural participation and interaction possible (Balkin, 2004), it also affords national and local governmental bodies the opportunity to enhance democracy (Dertouzos, 1997; Sussman, 1997; Cigler and Burdett, 1998; Bennett and Fielding, 1997; Bimber, 2001).

Verba et al. (1997) argue that citizens’ participation in democratic discourse is at the heart of democracy and access to information is the cornerstone of any shifts that may have taken place in the world (Carnaby and Rao, 2002). Mobilization

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