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Social Media's Impact on Civil-Political Protests:
Iran Case since 2009

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ÖNSÖZ

Sosyal medyanın seçimlerle ilgili protestolar için önemli bir araç olarak ilk kez 2009 İran cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimlerinde kullanılması hem ülke içindeki hem de uluslararası alandaki etkisiyle dikkat çekmiştir. Aradan yıllar geçmiş olsa da, sosyal medyanın, İran'daki siyasi ve sivil yönetim yapıları üzerindeki etkisi giderek artmaktadır. 2009 Yeşil Hareketi, Twitter, Facebook ve YouTube gibi platformların, halkı mobilize etme, siyasi otoriteye karşı gelme ve daha önce hiç görülmemiş boyutlarda protestolar düzenleme potansiyelini ortaya koymuştur. Ancak, bu olayın önemi genellikle göz ardı edilmekte ve sosyal medyanın siyasal değişim üzerindeki etkisi daha çok "Arap Baharı" gibi olaylarla ilişkilendirilmektedir.

Değerlendirmelerdeki bu eksiklik, İran'ın 2009 seçim protestoları sonrasında, sosyal medyanın siyasi direncin önemli bir aracı haline geldiği ilk ülkelerden biri olduğunun göz ardı edilmesine neden olmaktadır. İran, dijital platformların politik değişimlere olan etkisini inceleme açısından önemli bir örnek teşkil etmektedir. Sosyal medyanın küresel çapta siyasetteki etkisi arttıkça, alanyazının büyük bir kısmı, İran'ın sıkı medya denetimi altında sosyal medyanın oynadığı rolü tam olarak ele almamaktadır.

Bu çalışma, 2022 Eylül ayında başlayan protestolar üzerinden sosyal medyanın İran'da var olan siyasi yapılar üzerindeki etkisini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, sosyal medya, siyasi iktidar ve sivil toplum arasındaki ilişkileri analiz ederek, dijital platformların devletle olan etkileşimdeki değişen dinamiklerini vurgulamayı hedeflemektedir. Araştırma, ulusal ve uluslararası basının incelenmesi, vaka analizlerinin karşılaştırılması ve sosyal medya içeriklerinin analizini içeren bir metodolojiyle desteklenmektedir. Bu şekilde, sosyal medya ve siyasi aktivizmin kesişimi üzerine daha derinlemesine bir anlayış sağlanarak, İran'ın toplumsal ve siyasi yapılarındaki değişimlerin daha iyi anlaşılması hedeflenmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Sosyal Medya, İran, Arap Baharı, Sivil Protesto, Kadın Hakları

ABSTRACT

While the role of social media in electoral protests first became relevant in a lasting way with regard to political developments in Iran during the 2009 presidential elections, international attention quickly shifted towards other countries across the Arab world. Decades have passed since that critical juncture, but social media remains a game changer in the realm of power and governance in Iran. The Green Movement of 2009 revealed that things like Twitter and Facebook and YouTube could be used to help mobilize citizens, challenge political authority, and organize protests in ways never before possible. Yet much of the social media studies literature that emphasizes the role of social media networks in political change point to more readily talked about instances such as the Arab Spring and undervalue Iran's early importance.

This is an oversight that overlooks the fact that Iran (rather specifically after the governmental protests of 2009 onward) was one of the very first places where social media instigated meaningful political resistance early on in its history as a broadcasting medium, thus paving the way for subsequent uprisings. In particular, while the global literature is noting the more general consequences of social media become more and more entangled with political systems worldwide, far too much is written without an acknowledgement of the special place that it occupies in Iran one where all other traditional media channels are constantly under the watchful eye.

By illustrating the importance and growing power of social media in Iran's contemporary political scene especially related to events which began in September 2022 this research seeks to fill this void. This study attempts to examine the significant association in the context of Iranian society between [the use of] social media, political power and civil society.

The study will highlight the changing nature of the relationship between digital platforms and state by looking at the use of social media for political mobilization. The study will utilize a hybrid methodology that includes a holistic review of national and international press coverage, comparisons of relevant case studies, as well as social

media content and discourse analysis. Drawing upon the overarching current trends as well as some background knowledge about political protests aided by digital media, the research is aimed at a wider understanding of social media condition and socio-political activism together with deciding how those aspects keep impacting each other to shape Iran social and political order.

Keywords: Social Media, Iran, Arab Spring, Civil Protest, Women Rights

PREFACE

First and foremost, I owe my deepest appreciation to my advisor, Prof. Dr. Nilüfer Pembecioğlu for being by my side all along the way during this journey as a supporter and mentor. Her immense wisdom and reflective thoughts helped me with academic research and also broadened my thinking on complicated subjects. She took me through one challenge after another, frequently reframing my perspective when it felt as though I were trapped the way a fly in a spider web. I am deeply indebted to her for the dedication and encouragement which have inspired me to put my utmost effort into this study.

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Şahin Demir
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List of Abbreviations

AI   **:** Artificial Intelligence

ICT   **:** Information and Communications Technology

IR   **:** International Relations

MENA   **:** Middle East and North Africa

NCC   **:** National Center for Cyberspace

NIN   **:** The National Information Network

SCC   **:** Supreme Council of Cyberspace

UGC   **:** User-Generated Content

USA   : United States of America

VPN   **:** Virtual Private Network

Introduction

Just as institutions have different periods, transitions and agendas, states and cultures also have different periods, transitions and agendas with their own communication tendencies. Especially with the rise of digital media, digital platforms have been integrated into the communication environments of the last twenty years, creating a more effective, competent and comprehensive form of communication. In this multi-dimensional communication landscape, actors include governments, citizens, international organizations, civil society organizations, multinational corporations and communication platforms. At this point, it is necessary to use communication-based scientific research methods such as monitoring, mapping and developing algorithms to analyze who communicates with whom, at what level, how and how often.

As highlighted by Manuel Castells (2010), the concepts of citizenship, society, community, and belonging are deeply intertwined with communication dynamics, particularly in the digital age. Citizenship involves legal and cultural inclusion, shaping societal boundaries and enabling participation. Community emphasizes shared identity, values, and social relationships, while belonging reflects an individual's sense of connection to a specific cultural or social group. Digital platforms are crucial in reframing these ideas since they sustain multifaceted communications between organizations, youth, and governments. To encourage and spread inclusive, peaceful societies in a globalized world, these messages need scientific investigation, such as tracking and charting communication trends.

According to Villalobos et.al., even if in different countries and regions, definitions of good citizenship vary regarding the expectations of how citizens should contribute to society, research on good citizenship is published in multiple disciplines. Of the articles included in the review, 82.29% are concentrated in three disciplines: education, political science, and sociology. However, the communication science is underestimated in this respect, aiming to find the clues of good citizenship through the media coverage or shared themes and topics.

Citizens now have new forms of mobilizing, communicating and engagement at their disposal in the blink of an eye with the rise of social media as civil and political activism (Castells, 2015; Tufekci,2017). These platforms have proven to be indispensable for mobilizing voices, organizing protests and confronting oppressive regimes from the Arab Spring uprisings all the way up until today with a new round of protests in Iran (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Shirky, 2011).

This study questions the complex interplay between social media and civil-political dissent, particularly in Iran where many dynamics have shifted over the years subsequent to the 2009 presidential election crisis.

Elections in general gain more importance when it comes to the application of good citizenship. In most countries and cultures, elections are the only way to show the degree of support for good governance and they undertake the function of supporting or withdrawing support for the government. Sometimes, countries are in a kind of a turmoil during the elections (Layne, 2021). When the digital surroundings play a role in the elections, chaos occurs. (Zelenkauskaite, 2022)

According to Zelenkauskaite (2022), some unknown forces may try to influence pre-election votes and post-election results using new applications of the digital world. Common methods include the use of bots designed to manipulate public opinion and disrupt democratic processes, disinformation campaigns, and the spread of false narratives.

From this perspective, these digital exchanges have the potential to cause social unrest and spread beyond the virtual realm. Gatherings organized using digital media can lead to actions such as marches, protests, and civil disobedience that disrupt social order, highlighting the real-world effects of digital manipulation on behavior.

In 2009, the Iranian elections became a major moment in social media usage for protest, where citizens turned to Twitter and Facebook to express geo-located

frustration with a domestic electoral process they viewed as manipulated (Aday et al., 2010; Lotan et al., 2011). The uprising, referred to as the Green Movement, demonstrated the ability of social media to bring together diverse voices and shape political agendas on an unprecedented scale (Ghonim 2012; Tufekci & Wilson 2012). But the Iranian social media which is as dynamic as its political landscape are far from being dormant.

According to Ervand Abrahamian (2008), Iran saw significant political changes in the 1970s, culminating in the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This significant event marked the end of the Pahlavi monarchy and the beginning of the Islamic Republic, and fundamentally changed the political climate in Iran. The country's internal governance and regional and international ties were affected by these developments.

Since then, Iranian activists and protesters have been adapting to a more flexible media landscape their approach had already moved much further than Twitter (X since 2023) as it had during the Green Movement, to newer platforms such as Instagram (a main channel in protests after Mahsa Amini's death) and some governmental censorship within Iran has become increasingly effective. This flexibility highlights the willingness of activists to adjust social media activism in accordance with shifting political and technological contexts (Chen et al., 2020; Golestaneh, 2021).

On the other hand, social media attracted interest as a possible site for democratic engagement, one with no shortage of its own challenges and obstacles. Within the context of this information war, it has created social media surveillance and stigma techniques to be utilized in order to surveil and censor at home in conjunction with online, state-sponsored narratives that inherently attempt to regulate knowledge and pathologies (Entman & Waisbord 2019; Ghazizadeh 2020). Furthermore, the rapid rate in which misinformation and disinformation spreads on these platforms might support protests of their efficacy by destabilizing trust, inducing ambiguity, or even dividing activists (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Drawing from this combination of both theoretically and empirically informed inquiries, it is possible to conclude with a detailed discussion of the various roles social media plays in Iranian protests. From time to time focusing on the nexus of social media, state repression and political dissent, this study aims to disentangle the intricacies behind modern protest movements whilst assessing their capability of impacting existing regimes in Iran or elsewhere. The focus of this research is to understand when and where society is adapted to civil and political resistance in today's digital world, hence mixed method approach has been adopted combining qualitative as well as quantitative methodology.

1. Social Media and Civil Political Protests

In current affairs, social media is one of the most influential instruments which has directly impacted an essential nature of civil disobedience by eradicating activism and bringing a universal tonality. The following outlines some of the effects of social media on civil protest before discussing the implications noted in seminal papers.

In their 2007 article, Boyd and Ellison provide a foundational overview of social media by outlining its boundaries, expanding upon its developmental history, and drawing attention to its scholarly importance. They highlight that social network sites have changed the ways we connect and express ourselves, incorporating different spheres of life but within separate digital environments. Within civil protests, these avenues have become essential tools for staging movements, disseminating facts, and mobilizing support. Social media has transformed community mobilization based on its capacity to amplify activists' voices and facilitate collective action (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Zhang, Ghojogh, Luber, and Lan (2023) question the importance of social media platform reliability in nonviolent protest, both through participation and collective action. The trust created by people's understanding of an information source's competency, reliability, and credibility is crucial for how individuals interpret protest messages and translate that interpretation into action. High trust expands the responsive audience of protest content, driving engagement from a large and heterogeneous population. This foundation of trust becomes crucial for gathering continued support across different demographics, allowing protest movements to gain traction and unity in digital spaces (Zhang et al., 2023).

Similarly, Akın et al. (2021) and Markov et al. (2021) discuss the cognitive factors playing a role in trust and consumption of transnational elite-led movements on social media, exploring some psychological motivations behind individuals' actions or lack thereof, not exclusively during protests but also before and after consuming protest-

mediated content. They emphasize that certain cognitive processes, such as credibility and the affective impact of received information, influence the inclination to engage in efforts. Activists and organizers can harness these cognitive mechanisms to enhance trust, expanding the reach of their work and providing groundwork for an increasingly invested and engaged base that uplifts the movement (Akın et al., 2021; Markov et al., 2021).

These studies, when put together, indicate the importance of social media in aiding civil protest, shedding light on its democratizing capability to amplify underrepresented voices and facilitate broad social transformation. Using social media platforms to mobilize collective action and advocate for a more just and equal society will always depend on the dynamics of trust and credibility that emerge from these spaces, which is why civil society groups should navigate this landscape carefully.

1.1. Democracy, Civic Society, and Digital Citizenship

It has completely altered the dynamics of democracy, civic society and digital citizenship in the social media era. Digital platforms have enabled citizens to participate more freely in civic discourse, assert democratic rights and engage in political processes than ever before.

Making Access to Information Infinite

With the broader access that social media opened, many citizens became free of traditional gatekeepers, having a chance to reach various news outlets and opinions (Castells 2015). By breaking the information monopoly of mainstream media, this decentralization has also allowed more news consumers to better craft their views and engage in political action (Habermas 2006). Accessibility is an important factor for democracy, however, reaching to such kind of collective used media the candidates seem to be able to structure their decision depending upon the quality and quantity o the available media. However, sometimes the echo-chambers of their own point of view might be deceptive.

Strengthening Civic Engagement

Digital platforms also play a role in fueling civic engagement, since they create channels for expressing grievances, mobilizing people at the grassroots level and pushing for social change (Bennett 2012). The interactive characteristic of social media encourages dialogues among citizens and policymakers through ideas exchange that cultivates a culture of participatory governance (Chadwick, 2013).

Shaping Digital Citizenship

Developing digital citizenship has both advantages and disadvantages depending on variables such as accessibility, equity, and literacy rates. People with greater digital literacy can engage responsibly online by fostering inclusive online communities. On the other hand, inequalities in digital literacy can exacerbate the digital divide by contributing to exclusion and unethical online behavior. For example, a 2021 study by Dunaway and Macharia found that fostering digital citizenship practices in classrooms can improve student learning outcomes by reducing harmful online behaviors such as cyberbullying.

Additionally, one of the biggest barriers to equitable digital participation is the digital divide. According to research by Ali et al. (2021), approximately 16 million children in the United States lack adequate internet access or devices, with rural, Black, Latino, and Native American homes being disproportionately affected. This restricts the growth of key digital literacy skills required for active participation in digital citizenship.

Such solution must include the promotion and support of digital literacy, equitable access to technology and the usage of technology in responsible manner. This enables communities to balance the beneficial aspects of digital citizenship with the impact the power of influence can have on social behaviors.

When social media platforms grew, the concept of digital citizenship flourished as well and it includes a body of work that describes the digital or virtual—and more so unethical social rights, duties and behaviors (Ribble, 2015). Citizenship in the 21st century is impacted by online privacy, digital literacy and ethical issues as citizens partake in these digital locales (Livingstone, 2008).

The intersection of democracy, civic engagement and digital citizenship in the social media age has usher red a new era of empowered citizenry and participation after centuries of political transformation. Digital technology is also enabling people to realize their rights and engage more fully in civic life, reshaping the future of democracy and society as a whole.

1.2. Participatory Social Media

Participatory social media refers to platforms that enable users to actively engage in creating, sharing, and interacting with content, transforming them from passive consumers to active participants. This transition has blurred the lines between content creators and audiences, fostering a more inclusive and democratic media environment (Bruns, 2007). Unlike traditional one-way media, participatory platforms encourage two-way interactions, empowering individuals to contribute to public discourse and engage in civic actions.

Core Characteristics

Participatory social media thrives on three key features:

- User-Generated Content (UGC): Platforms empower users to create and distribute content, shaping narratives collectively.
- Interactivity: Tools like commenting, sharing, and voting enhance two-way communication.

- Community Building: Digital communities foster shared goals, providing a foundation for collective action.

Examples in Context

In politically restrictive environments, participatory media plays a vital role. For example:

- Twitter (X): During Iran's Green Movement in 2009, activists used Twitter to bypass state-controlled media and mobilize international attention.
- Instagram: Amidst increasing censorship, Instagram became a crucial tool for disseminating information and organizing protests during the Mahsa Amini demonstrations.

Significance and Impact

Participatory social media has redefined civic engagement by democratizing access to information and amplifying marginalized voices. However, it also brings challenges, such as misinformation and digital divides, which hinder equitable participation. In the Iranian context, participatory platforms empower activists while facing state censorship and surveillance, illustrating their dual role as tools for empowerment and contested spaces.

1.2.1. Political Interaction in Social Media

Social media platforms are now core arenas of political engagement, where citizens can encounter diverse political content, express views and mobilize support for issues (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley 2016). Such online platforms allow users to do more than just engage in dialogue, they help to shape the political reality by bolstering messages through methods like retweeting, sharing and hashtags. By equipping users with the ability to amplify their voices, sway others, and join the mass propagation of political communication, social media has become an important tool for contemporary political communication (and politics itself) (Bode & Dalrymple, 2017).

Social media allows people to create narratives, highlight issues and take action together beyond sharing and liking posts Realizing how effective social media has become, political campaigns and movements have begun to use these platforms on a regular basis to target different demographics, dramatically multinational events quickly while empowering citizens themselves. The speed at which it harnesses support and activates bodies makes social media platforms a powerful environment for grassroots movements to gain momentum. Whereas in the past, news outlets and editors would control what information was disseminated through media channels, today political entities, activists, and sometimes even governments use social media networks to sway public opinion and shape narratives.

Additionally, social media enables one to challenge mainstream representation of self and/or the lived experience by providing a space in which criticism can be enacted through often raw and uncensored post or comment threads. This is especially important in areas with limited or controlled mainstream media. Thus, social media turned into an important source of immediate information and citizen journalism giving users a platform to share the ground reality which might not be covered or highlighted otherwise. These are two-way platforms that enable conversation between people and public figures, ultimately improving political transparency by giving citizens a direct line of communication with their representatives and policy-makers.

1.2.2. Polarization and The Echo Chamber Effect

According to Pariser (2011), polarization is the process by which people or groups are divided into distinct, often conflicting social or ideological groups. This process creates a lack of common ground, as well as increasing hostility and reducing opportunities for productive discourse. Social media algorithms in digital environments reinforce ideological divisions by prioritizing material that supports users' preconceived ideas, thus intensifying polarization.

Echo chambers and polarization are closely related. By isolating people into ideological bubbles where preexisting views are continually reinforced without

exposure to opposing ideas, echo chambers serve as a catalyst for polarization. This dynamic deepens rifts, making communication and compromise more difficult. For example, social media platforms have increased bias during political events or demonstrations by promoting biased narratives, such as the 2020 United States of America elections or Iran's Green Movement (Barbera et al., 2015).

These phenomena have profound implications for societal cohesion and democratic processes. Polarization reduces mutual understanding and fosters conflict, while echo chambers contribute to the spread of misinformation and decrease critical thinking. Addressing these challenges requires proactive measures, including promoting media literacy, diversifying content exposure, and rethinking social media algorithms.

The participatory nature of social media, while fostering political engagement and interaction, has also contributed to increased polarization and the echo chamber effect (Pariser, 2011). Social media platforms are designed to connect individuals with content and networks that resonate with their interests, which often leads to users tailoring their online communities to reflect their existing beliefs and preferences. This personalization of content, enhanced by platform algorithms, creates environments where users are predominantly exposed to views that align with their own, reinforcing pre-existing biases and ideological standpoints (Garrett, 2009).

Over time, this narrowing of perspective fosters echo chambers, digital spaces where diversity of thought is limited and opposing viewpoints are rarely encountered. Such environments contribute to polarization by magnifying ideological divides and creating a sense of "us versus them" among users. Instead of broadening perspectives, these echo chambers amplify singular narratives, intensifying feelings of in-group solidarity while fueling suspicion or even hostility toward out-groups. The implications of this trend are significant; political debates may become more extreme, reducing the likelihood of consensus or compromise and heightening social and political divisions.

Algorithmic curation by social media platforms further exacerbates this echo chamber effect by promoting content based on past user interactions, perpetuating a cycle of reinforcement. These algorithms prioritize content that generates engagement, often highlighting sensational or emotionally charged posts that may further entrench users within their ideological bubbles. As such, social media can become a self-reinforcing space where polarization is not only sustained but intensified. This effect poses challenges to democratic discourse, as it limits opportunities for users to be exposed to balanced information or to engage with diverse perspectives in meaningful ways.

To navigate this complex landscape, users and platform designers alike must confront the implications of content curation. Encouraging a more inclusive and diverse online environment calls for efforts to counteract algorithm-driven echo chambers, promoting exposure to varied viewpoints and fostering spaces for constructive dialogue. Only through deliberate design choices and increased media literacy can social media become a platform that supports inclusive, deliberative discussions rather than one that reinforces division.

1.3. Aim and Methodology

This research attempts to hazard the impact of social media in the civil-political protests, specifically on Iranian ones after 2009. This study analyzes how social media platforms have evolved to both facilitate and shape protest movements that challenge established political power structures and civil society. Thus the work will help explain dynamics between social media use, political power from above, and citizen-led movements. The study has three specific aims:

- Analyze the trend of social media use in civil-political demonstrations among Iranian citizens by focusing on significant events since the presidential elections of 2009.

- Describe how social media platform use has shifted between protest movements, showcasing changes in register and message delivery.

- Examine the contribution of social media to civil-political protests in terms of mobilization, organization, and persistence, as well as their effects on protests.

Furthermore, the study aims to ask the following questions:

- What does social media reflect about political activism and civic engagement in Iran, what challenges and opportunities do you see with your work through social media related to censorship, surveillance, or digital empowerment?

- The study aims to discuss the wider significance of social media-fueled protest movements for political debate, change and democratization in Iran and elsewhere.

- Through the use of diverse qualitative and quantitative analyses, case studies, and content analysis, this study adopts multi-methodological methods to achieve its objectives. The methodology includes the following elements:

- Review of Literature: Bringing together previous work on social media and civil-political protests through findings from academic articles, reports, and case studies.

- Data Collection: Gathering of primary data from social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram and Telegram) to understand user engagement dynamics, dissemination of content and protest mobilization.

- It involves in-depth case studies of key civil-political protest movements in Iran like 2009 Green Movement and of the recent protests driven by vicious events such as the death of Mahsa Amini to discover the pattern of usage dynamics of social media.

- Content analysis: Social media content such as text, photo and video content can be analyzed to uncover major themes, narratives and discourse concerning civil-political protests.

- Statistical Study: A quantitative analysis of official meta-social platforms to identify user behavior patterns, information diffusion, and network dynamics.

- Visualization: Graphics, charts and visualization to amplify key findings and trends, making research outputs more accessible and easier to leverage.

- This methodological framework allows the study to develop an integrative view on the effects of social media on civil-political protests in Iran, improvising for different stakeholders including scholars, policymakers and activists.

2. Media Literacy and Its Importance

Media literacy is a critical skill set that includes accessing, analyzing, evaluating and creating media (Livingstone, 2019). In our drowning digital world, flooded with information and misinformation due to the dominance of social media on communication means, this skill set is a must have. To Hobbs, media literacy creation is important because it gives people the tools to identify accurate information as opposed to biased or incorrect content and strengthens a knowledgeable and tough populace (Hobbs, 2018).

As with news, being media literate involves knowing how various types of media work and who profits from the information they disseminate (Tufekci, 2017) highlights the importance of being able to critically evaluate sources of information, as media environments become increasingly complex and easily confused—and a distinguishing feature in valuing objective news versus opinions, propaganda, or advertising. This challenge is especially pronounced in societies where media censorship or other limitations apply, hindering independent verification of news items. It is such atmospheres that underscore the growing relevance of media literacy in discerning how different societies access information and how they make sense of it.

With citizens increasingly engaging with social media to stay informed, media literacy has gained traction in an interconnected world. Evidence suggests, that people with good media literacy skills are better equipped to fight against digital misinformation and can converse civilly, establishing that media literacy is a fundamental competence necessary for active and informed citizenship (Dadgar & Sohrabi, 2020). Media literacy helps people identify if they have been exposed to a state-organized narrative and exercise caution in choosing between these governments-initiated narratives or other independent sources of information that allows them to make an informed choice as what they read and share too, particularly in countries like Iran where governmental acts lessen access to information.

By fostering these competencies, media literacy encourages responsible media consumption and strengthens civic participation, particularly in contexts where digital media is pivotal to civil society's engagement and activism.

2.1. Digitalization and Its Impact: Disinformation and Misinformation

With the digital age being a real phenomenon, we can reach across borders like never before to share ideas, opinions happenings. But while being so late in the technology game, it is also becoming a growing challenge creating things like disinformation and misinformation. The former relates to deliberately false or misleading information spread to deceive, while the latter relates to unintentional false or misleading information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

During times of scarcity, people might develop magic terms such as "infollution" or "infodemi." However, there seem to be only two main concepts differing, not due to the implementation of the actions but the reasoning behind them. It is social media especially amplifying the spread of disinformation and misinformation. The speed at which content propagates, combined with algorithms that optimize for engagement, can lead to the emergence of echo chambers in which users see information mostly consistent with their beliefs, reducing deliberative standards and increasing polarization (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In addition, they add, observing some of the content that gets spread can lead one to believe some may feel emboldened by the anonymity afforded by online platforms, a belief bolstered by the apparent rise in hate crimes.

A media-literate society is very important for distinguishing between disinformation and misinformation. Without the development of such an aware group, and if the media environment is filled with deceptive content, particularly during critical incidents such as elections, the problem becomes increasingly complex. The spread of false narratives in such contexts can shape public perceptions, disrupt democratic processes, and influence election outcomes. For example, during the 2024 United States elections, disinformation campaigns, including AI-generated deepfakes and

manipulated narratives, highlighted the critical need for media literacy to address these challenges (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Associated Press, 2024).

Disinformation and misinformation have far-reaching effects which can shape the behaviours of individuals, societies, and democratic processes. The spread of fake news lies at the heart of many social problems, especially during elections, persuading people's opinion toward candidates or policies which further tilt the election results (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Disinformation is even used to shape mass sentiment, create animosity and impede peaceful resolution during unrest across the globe (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018).

Therefore, the solution is to make sure we promote digital literacy and critical thinking skills, greatly needed in reaction to the disinformation & misinformation collateral damage. If anything, we should arm people with the ability to assess sources or effectiveness of information, spot bias, and fact-check. In addition, social media sites need to introduce methods for reducing the diffusion of harmful information through their use, such as fact-checking and algorithmic transparency (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Governments and civil society also has a major responsibility to build a culture of truth and accountability, while upholding independent media and preserving journalistic standards across the board.

2.2. Media Literacy; Case of Iran

Media literacy matters even harder for Iran, with its mixed sociopolitical environment and the importance of digital media in affecting public opinion and social discourse (Dadgar & Sohrabi, 2020) The spread of social media offers Iranians opportunities and difficulties in this digital landscape. Although platforms like Instagram, Telegram, and Twitter have made different information sources more accessible to the public, they have also paved the way for disseminating misinformation and propaganda aiming to influence behaviors during political unrest (Golestaneh, 2021).

Given the unique media landscape in Iran marked by government censorship and limited access to certain international news sources media literacy equips citizens with essential skills. "*Media literacy helps individuals not only access but critically evaluate digital content, enabling them to identify reliable information amidst widespread disinformation*" (Hobbs, 2018:52). This capability is especially important in Iran, where the ability to distinguish credible sources from manipulated content is essential for informed civic engagement.

Educational authorities are realizing in recent years the importance of cultivating media literacy in Iran. This comes alongside the rush towards digital platforms where the challenges of disinformation micromanagement and censorship are faced. Political constraints set by government policies and repression represent serious obstacles too. Nevertheless, the development of media literacy programs is slowly being undertaken in the education system and in society.

Media literacy schooling has been included into the curriculum of elite Iranian universities, consisting of Tehran University and Allameh Tabataba`i University. These packages consciousness on coaching college students to severely compare virtual content, distinguish dependable information, and neutralize propaganda. However, the restricted attain of those packages and the shortage of a comprehensive, national coverage restrict their effectiveness (IRNA, 2016).

A recent review of the use of situational development planning methods highlights the need for a strategic method for future media literacy tasks in Iran. It argues that educational laws must be consistent with the rapidly changing media environment as a way to expand an informed and incredibly concerned citizenry (Naghibolsadat et al., 2021).

In recent years, educational initiatives and independent institutions in Iran have focused on enhancing media literacy among young adults (those over 18, including university students). This emphasis aims to equip them with the necessary skills to critically evaluate online information. As noted by Azizi, Rahmani, and Tehrani

(2022), "the proliferation of social media has underscored the need for media literacy to empower citizens to critically assess the information they encounter online". Evidence suggests that those with a higher degree of media literacy are more selective and critical with how they consume media content, creating a citizenry less susceptible to slanted messaging and government-led information campaigns (Dadgar & Sohrabi, 2020).

Media education is significant in Iran as a country where socio-political challenges often mean that digital platforms are one of only a few spaces for public expression. Armed with these tools, Iranian citizens stand on far greater footing in not only being able to converse civically, critique state outlets and engage in digital activism that ensures spaces for transparency within society and democratic values.

Civil Society Contributions

Civil society organizations in Iran have played a significant role in promoting media literacy by addressing every systemic challenge and grassroots need. These companies aim to empower citizens with the skills needed to significantly engage with today's media landscape by organizing workshops, launching public awareness campaigns, and promoting networked initiatives.

The observation by Alavipoor, Sarvi-Zargar, Khosravi, and Asgari (2020) highlights the importance of grassroots efforts in addressing media literacy gaps. The observation highlights significant challenges faced in Iran, including fragmented policies, inadequate government support, and limited access to assets in rural areas. Civil society organizations have stepped in to fill these gaps by providing available training and selling virtual literacy through modern methods.

The Empowerment Center for Governance and Society (مرکز توانمندسازی حاکمیت و جامعه) exemplifies this attempt through fostering collaboration among charities and civil agencies to reinforce social capital. The center`s paintings specializes in improving

network resilience and selling media literacy as a device for societal development (Iran-BSSC, 2023).

Social media platforms have also played a transformative role during significant moments in Iranian history, such as the 2009 Green Movement and the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests. Platforms such as Instagram and Telegram have provided users with a platform to bypass censorship, make their voices heard globally, and engage in social activism. In times like these, media literacy plays a key role in promoting informed public participation and democratic values (Human Rights in Iran, 2023).

However, systemic challenges remain. Alavipoor et al. (2020) emphasize the need to further integrate media literacy into Iran's academic and policy frameworks. They argue that fostering collaboration among authorities, organizations, and civil society organizations is crucial to developing comprehensive and effective techniques to improve media literacy across the country.

The National Information Network (Shabakeh Melli-ye Ettelaat)

Before delving into the social utilization of virtual systems in Iran, it's miles critical to well known that, with the improvement of online systems and the enlargement of virtual spaces, the Islamic Republic of Iran has taken numerous measures to adjust and screen the net and social media sphere. The basis of The National Information Network (NIN) stands as one of the important İnstrument initiated via way of means of the authorities at some point of the upward push of online spheres.

Initially proposed withinside the early 2000s, NIN became officially released in 2013 and have become partly operational in 2016. The community is designed to create a stable and unbiased net infrastructure that offers localized content, will increase cybersecurity, and decreases reliance on international networks. It includes each personal and public sectors and offers systems for authority's operations and offerings for the overall public. While framed as a device to sell virtual sovereignty, NIN has

additionally been criticized for its capability to limitation get admission to statistics and support nation censorship (Tasnim News, 2023; YJC, 2023).

The first phase of the NIN focused on developing infrastructure for localized web hosting and secure data transfer. Subsequent phases have expanded its scope to include advanced cybersecurity measures and national data centers. Although it fosters domestic data management, critics argue that it undermines diversity of perspectives and limits the public's ability to critically engage with global media narratives (Asemooni, 2023).

In this controlled environment, the NIN has become a platform for digital literacy programs initiated by the government. However, its restrictive nature raises significant questions about the balance between security and freedom of access in Iran's digital policies.

2.3. Social Media Usage and the Importance of Media Literacy in Iran

It can be said that social media networks are among the first tools for communication with which the vast majority of mobile users use in Iran. As compared to a study by Naqibolsadat, Kia, Afkhami, and Vassali (2021), the high usage of social media highlights the need for media literacy because citizens find themselves in an "info-sphere" that is inundated with misinformation and propaganda. From Instagram to Telegram and Twitter, these platforms have been beneficial yet tricky by providing an alternative space for information-sharing, political conversation, and mobilization while simultaneously exposing users to the risk of misinformation and manipulation.

Social media adoption has trended upward for some time, and so the need for a critical media literacy among Iranians is of particular importance given the multifaceted sociopolitical climate of Iran. To quote Tufekci (2017), "improving literacy in these new technologies will enable citizens to weigh information, as the avalanche of post-truth news comes to their screens," indicative of an increasing awareness around informed digital citizenship. Media literacy skills, in particular, enable people to

separate the real essence of information from untrue data and also prevent misusing them by national and international actors (Azizi et al., 2022; Rahmani & Tehrani, 2022).

This poses special issues for users with the extra amount of censorship and filtering used by the Iranian authorities. Social Media regulations limit the accessibility of information and owe it to citizens to acquire critical and analytical skills on how to deal with filtering (Dadgar & Sohrabi, 2020). In response to these problems, a few Iranian organizations and academic institutions have developed media literacy programs that focus on teaching citizens how to distinguish between news outlets they can trust, find out how social media is being used as a tool of influence, and use media platforms in a responsible manner.

The following table provides an overview of social media usage statistics in Iran, illustrating the platforms' prevalence and the critical need for media literacy:

Table 1: Social Media Usage in İran

Social Media Platform	Percentage of Internet Users in Iran
Instagram	53%
Facebook	39%
Telegram	60%
X (formerly Twitter)	28%

Source: Statista, 2021

The above statistics reveal that social media has a great impact on the Iranian society. That being said, there are substantive media literacy programs that can equip citizens with the capacities to assess and critically evaluate digital content, as well as engage in effective civic discourse.

2.4. Social Media Usage During the "Arab Spring"

The Arab Spring represented a turning point in the socio-political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area, and it marked a departure in the role

played by social media in political activism and protest mobilization. Social media websites – most notably Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were used by protestors to communicate quietly with one another, organize protests and rallies, and share their message locally and worldwide. To Howard & Hussain, these media platforms enabled citizens to eat away at the recently monopolized state-supplied media channels and facilitated an unprecedented digital activism in traditionally virulently suppressive speech environments (Howard & Hussain, 2013).

Activists used social media to spread current news, muster support, and organize the plans for protests even when governments cracked down on internet access. According to a study by Lotan et. al., "Social media allowed for a distributed group of activists to disseminate information quickly, build solidarity, and garner international attention." (2011). When protestors were subjected to internet blackouts and repressive laws, the decentralized network structure enabled resilience in having an ability to switch locations faster than governments could shut them down. (Howard & Hussain, 2013.)

Figure 1: Social Media Usage During the "Arab Spring"(arabcenterdc.org))

In Egypt, the "We Are All Khaled Said" page served as one of several places on Facebook in which to organize protests and energize sentiment against the Mubarak regime, leading to mass mobilization (Tufekci, 2017). Videos and updates spread across Twitter and YouTube, allowing local discontents to be internationally monitored and mobilized in Tunisia. This digital mobilization was key in "creating a

feeling of togetherness and common ground between activists" spanning across different countries within MENA (Howard & Hussain, 2011).

Not only did social media allow for on-the-ground organizing, but it also helped connect the local and international communities by attracting foreign governments, international media outlets and human rights organizations. Such attention, in turn, raised the informal costs of state repression for authoritarian regimes by increasing the pressure to respond to popular protestor demands and drawing international scrutiny on issues of state repression (Howard & Hussain, 2013)

Figure 2: Symbolic Representation of Digital Revolutions(digitalmediaknowledge.com)

While the "Arab Spring" is defined with the useful resource of the usage of Howard and Hussain (2011) as a series of pro-democracy uprisings that swept at some stage in the Middle East and North Africa amongst past due 2010 and early 2011, fueled with the useful resource of the usage of economic grievances, political corruption, and authoritarian regimes, it moreover represents an thrilling case of social media allowing the voices of the powerless to be heard. These systems reached beyond state power, strengthening humans under the totalitarian regimes. The Arab Spring opened a state-of-the-art financial ruin that established the model of digital systems in political activism, revealing their promise further to the tension they produced sooner or later of authoritarianism.

The "Arab Spring" still represents an intriguing case of social media enabling voices of the powerless to be heard, reaching beyond state power and strengthening individuals under totalitarian regimes. It opened a new chapter that established the model of digital platforms in political activism, revealing their promise and the tension produced by them during authoritarianism.

2.4.1. Case of Tunisia

Tunisia has a significant place in the "Arab Spring" because it was the birthplace of this series of "pro-democracy" uprisings that shook the Middle East and North Africa. The movement began in December 2010 when Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, set himself on fire to protest police corruption and mistreatment. This act sparked nationwide protests against the authoritarian regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, leading to his overthrow in January 2011 after 23 years in power. The success of the Tunisian movement inspired similar movements across the region and marked the beginning of what has been described as the "Arab Spring" (Arbi & Geri, 2021).

Figure 3:Protesters in Tunisia During the Arab Spring (Anadolu Agency)

The Tunisian "revolution" shows how social media can act as a catalyst for political mobilization and change. Platforms such as Facebook and X (Twitter at the time) have been instrumental in organizing protests, disseminating information, and mobilizing both national and international support. Human rights and social activists have used these tools to bypass state-controlled media, share real-time updates, and expose human rights violations. This digital mobilization has not only maintained the coordination of demonstrations within Tunisia, but has also created a domino effect that has inspired uprisings in other Arab countries. The Tunisian example highlights the transformative power of social media in challenging authoritarian regimes and promoting democratic ideals (Breuer, 2012).

Tunisia underlined the transformative potential for political change and grassroots mobilization Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms became vital resources for ordinary people to voice their dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali outside of traditional media outlets controlled by the state. The outrage stem from the self-immolation of a street vendor (Mohamed Bouazizi) who lit himself on fire in protest against the police persecuting him and symbolic injustice against oneself.

Activists swiftly used social media platforms to disseminate first-hand reports, videos and photographs of common grievances, such as police violence, unemployment and state corruption that had pervaded Tunisian society for decades. It also presented a way of digitally mobilizing rather than stressing over local protests but escaping the censorship of mainstream media to broadcast these abuses internationally. Consequently, the condition of the Tunisian people obtained international recognition with global viewership resonated to show solidarity after being introduced to their regime through social media footages.

Social media acted as a "*megaphone for local dissent and a bridge to global audiences,*" enabling Tunisians to transcend their immediate environment and connect with a worldwide network of supporters (*Howard & Hussain, 2011*). This virtual show

of solidarity uplifted ground activists who were able to see that their voices were echoing not only locally but across borders.

Additionally, they permitted the creation of a new sense of national identity and cohesive unity among the Tunisian populace. The collective digital environment encouraged otherwise disconnected people to consider themselves participants in a larger uprising, motivated by similar complaints and naturally evolving goals. Social media offered an avenue for discussion, promoting a kind of solidarity instrumental in maintaining coverage of the protests. The presence of international gaze motivated this unity, which was one of the key components in bringing down Ben Ali's regime.

To sum up, social media played an explanatory role throughout the Tunisian revolution: on one hand, it acted as an organizing tool meeting all requirements; whereas from another perspective – this same site of communication became a platform for voicing dissent internationally. By enabling citizens to provide ground-level real-time content, it created a grounded depiction of life under authoritarianism with resonances both nationally and globally for change. The Tunisian case has shown that because we live in a digital age, the borders of protest have been erased, and strongmen will now find themselves confronted not only with protests at new levels but on an international stage where social media can be used to upend regimes.

2.4.2. Case of Egypt

Egypt is one of the most important examples of social media's involvement in political activity during the Arab Spring. Because of the size of the country's population and the strategic position of the country in the Middle East, the revolution of the country has particular meaning, to observers not only regionally, but also globally. What started as an offshoot of the Tunisian revolution rapidly evolved into a true movement, which has shown that digital tools are capable of challenging deeply rooted authoritarian regimes. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter played a pivotal role in mobilizing protests, allowing citizens to organize and share information in real time. The Egyptian uprising enhanced both the foreign footprint of the Arab

Spring and the potential for social media to be utilized to mobilize and to challenge regimes of repression. (Mansour, 2012).

The power of social media in mobilizing public opinion and orchestrating mass protests came to the fore during the 2011 revolution in Egypt. Social media platforms namely Facebook, Twitter and YouTube became the primary medium for activists to organize, strategize and grow their anti-Mubarak movement. But these platforms allowed for organization and mobilization in real time protesters could communicate vital information regarding meeting points, tactics, and what was occurring on the ground in cities across the continent. In other words, social media served as a connective center for coordinating movement that rapidly achieved national-scale in mobilizing dispersed groups of activists across the country.

Figure 4:Protesters gather in Cairo's Tahrir Square, 2011 (newarab.com)

The most powerful symbol of this online insurrection was the hashtag #Jan25, which appeared on Twitter as a rallying point of the Egyptian revolution. This hashtag was also used by activists and citizens on the same date a public holiday in Egypt celebrating Police Day as the first large-scale protest took place on January 25, 2011. Almost instantly this day of action turned into a symbol for resistance where citizens flocked to join forces against police brutality while tackling years of political oppression, poverty crisis and social injustices. That hashtag fostered a collective sense of moral duty an online call-to-action echoing throughout the country and across the world.

Figure 5:Trending Hashtags in the 2011 Egyptian Demonstrations (interhacktives.com, selnadeem.com)

Facebook played a pivotal role in rallying citizens, with pages such as "*We Are All Khaled Said*" created in memory of a young man who died at the hands of Egyptian police drawing attention to state violence and injustice. That page, along with many other such pages online, brought people together on things that annoyed them enough to take to the streets and act. By "*connecting anger into action*" (Aday et al., 2012), social media created a unique space for individuals to overcome fear and build collective power.

Other protesters have been similarly affected by the incident, with protesters using YouTube to show how much violence can be unsanctioned by the state, for example by posting videos directly from the scenes of clashes with security forces. But these videos gave the world a relatively unvarnished look at the resistance efforts, with some demanding international media attention and bringing international audiences into Egypt's battle for freedom. Such international support has emboldened protesters and proven that solidarity works.

The interplay among these platforms not only helped rally millions of Egyptians to action, but also pushed their struggle from localized visibility into the world stage, exposing Hosni Mubarak's regime to pressure from both local and global actors alike. According to reports by Amnesty International (2020), Mubarak, who has ruled Egypt since 1981, was among the key advocates of "authoritarianism" in the region and maintained that position through the implementation of state repression, emergency law, and curtailed political freedoms. A sequence of protests, set off by

accusations of corruption, unemployment and police violence, culminated in his resignation on 11 February 2011 and marked the end of his roughly 30 years rule.

Thus the Egyptian example illustrations how social design (network another open surreal) is both a local organization wide and a global network bridge. Finally, the Egyptian revolution showed that digital platforms have the capacity to transcend borders, amplifying resistance and delivering sustained pressure for justice and democratic transformation against authoritarian governments and their allies.

The Egyptian revolution stands as a significant illustration of how digital platforms can transcend borders, amplifying resistance and delivering sustained pressure for justice and democratic transformation against authoritarian governments and their allies. Social media's unique ability to function as both a local organizing tool and a global network bridge demonstrates its capacity to connect grassroots movements with international audiences, placing immense pressure on regimes like Mubarak's to respond to their citizens' demands.

2.4.3. Case of Libya

Libya is a prime case study in how social media can play a key role in protest movements as part of the Arab Spring. Muammar Gaddafi (who ruled Libya from 1969 until his overthrow and death in 2011) is a highly controversial man whose leadership was characterized by centralized control of resources, novel leadership style, and charges of deep political repression. It has been claimed that Gaddafi regime inflated the importance of surveillance, state propaganda and forceful actions in quelling dissension and thus created an atmosphere in which dissent was tightly controlled (Vandewalle, 2012).

It gave an example during the beginning of the opposition against anomalous Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. Facebook and Twitter were particularly useful in coordinating protests, providing information on where to protest or documenting state abuse and the like. Libyan activists, such as human right activists, political exile and

even ordinary people fed up to the ludicrous Gaddafi's regime turned to these platforms, both to take their demands for change to a broader local audience and to reach international viewers as well, and in doing so began making the oppressive hand of the regime brutally clear. As noted by Kuebler (2011), *"social media was instrumental in amplifying calls for change and mobilizing diverse segments of Libyan society."*

Figure 6:Benghazi, Libya: protests in 2011Protesters at a rally in Benghazi in March 2011 carrying the Libyan flag that was used from 1951 to 1969. The flag was adopted by the rebels in 2011. (britannica.com)

Initially, from February 2011 to October 2011 (until fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime), social media played a huge role in unifying protest against the Libyan government, but it quickly also became clear to the government that it posed a serious challenge to state control and they set about significantly reducing the ability for people to access international internet data. In an act of desperation, they attempted to cut off the activists' essential channels of contact, which would impair their capacity to mobilize and coordinate. This response draws attention to a broader issue facing activists in oppressive nations: governments attempt to discourage internet activity by enforcing stricter laws and conducting greater monitoring. When those around activists crack down on them, it often forces the activists to adjust by looking for different ways of communicating, such as satellite internet and proxy networks. Through this they reveal both their perseverance and imagination against censorship, highlighting the paradox of what digital activism offers appropriate for the constraints laid out before it by authoritarian regimes. As noted, *"the response of authoritarian*

regimes to social media-driven activism highlights significant challenges faced by protesters" (Della Porta, 2013).

The Libya experience underscores the promise and limitations of social media in environments where political restraint is practiced. It was, at first, a tool of mobilization and global attention; now the fragility of these means is exposed when going up against deeply entrenched governmental power or disorder. This dynamic echoes a major ingredient of the Arab Spring: social media helps them organize resistance but is also vulnerable to governmental steps that curb its capacity to do so. Libya offers an important case of the double-edged sword that digital activism often represents in authoritarian settings.

2.5. Case of Iran

To underline that digital activism in the region did not begin with the Arab Spring. On the other side, Iran's 2009 Green Movement is the first noticeable production of high-volume social media-fueled mobilization in the Middle East. This historical situation not only distinguishes Iran from the main stream narrative of the Arab Spring, but it also sheds light on the early ability of digital platforms to challenge authoritarian regimes and mobilize civic resistance.

While much of the discourse on social media's impact on activism centers on the Arab Spring, the Green Movement demonstrates that the foundations of digital resistance were laid earlier. As Rahimi (2011) points out, the Iranian Green Movement used such platforms as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to coordinate demonstrations and raise sidelined voices on the international plane. This trend, driven by the hashtag #WhereIsMyVote", represented the shared frustrations of an electorate seeking electoral openness and equity.

The Green Movement, which emerged as a response to allegations of electoral fraud during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election, revealed the duality of digital platforms as both a tool for empowerment and state control. Unlike the Arab Spring revolutions

that toppled regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the Green Movement did not achieve immediate political change. But it did create the digital activism that occurred in the area and gave an example how social media could be used to stop the censorship of the state and to unite piecemeal resistance movements (BBC Persian, 2009).

The movement is called "Green" as a reference to Mir Hossein Mousavi's campaign, whose color symbolized hope and change. This symbolism transformed the movement into a broader narrative of resistance, uniting diverse segments of Iranian society around shared grievances, such as corruption, repression, and economic instability (Mousavi, 2012). Social media played a central role, not just in organizing protests but also in framing the movement's narrative for both domestic and international audiences.

The Iranian government through a mixture of their physical suppression and digital mitigation. Security [personnel] resorted to force to disperse the [demonstrators] whereas the government took steps to limit online and/or offline access to websites (such as Twitter and Facebook). In spite of these attempts, activists found used to circumvent such limitations Virtual Private Network (VPN) and other tools, such that their voices could be heard by both domestic and foreign publics (Kouroshi, 2009).

In contrast, the Green Movement did not necessarily bring about regime change in an automatic way, as other uprising movements, such as the Arab Spring movement, did, leading to regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt, etc. But it also laid down the groundwork for further digital activism taking place both in and outside the region, and showed both the potential (and limitations) of digital protest. As Drissel (2017) states, online mobilization of the Green Movement, a model for future protest movements, through the use of social media for raising awareness, intensity of civic dissent, and appeals to autocrats, facilitated the creation of new internet strategies to promote protest.

2.5.1. Demographics of Iran

To comprehend the impact of social media on civil and political movement in Iran, one must understand the demographic background of this country. The social media landscape and public participation via these platforms are greatly influenced by the structure of Iran's population with regard to age, ethnicity, education level, ability to speak Persian language and access to means of communication. Further, these factors shape citizens' behavior in the online world and what political speech occurs on social media, thereby secondarily impacting civil protests and movements.

2.5.1.1. Population

It covers general information about Iran and its demographics, with an emphasis on the young population of over 85.96 million people that makes a massive difference socially and politically throughout the country — particularly in terms of Internet connection and social media use as of 2024. Population distribution is young with around 69.7 percent of the population in the age group of 15-64 Years. This also includes a large portion of 15-35 year-olds, who are particularly active on social media and digital civic engagement.

Additionally, 77% of Iran's population resides in urban areas (around 66.21 million people), while 23% live in rural regions (approximately 19.75 million people). Gender distribution in Iran is relatively balanced, with an estimated 43.37 million males and 42.58 million females, resulting in a gender ratio of 101.8 males for every 100 females.

Table 2: **Iran's Population**

Category	Count (Millions)	Percentage
Total Population	85.96	100%
Urban Population	66.21	77%
Rural Population	19.75	23%
Male Population	43.37	50.4%
Female Population	42.58	49.6%
Age 0-14	-	22.8%
Age 15-35	~30.0	~35%
Age 15-64	-	69.7%
Age 65+	-	5.7%

Source: Iranian Statistical Center, 2024

These figures provide a snapshot of Iran's population structure, highlighting the substantial proportion of younger individuals (15-35 years old) who actively participate in the social media landscape, playing a critical role in civil and political movements.

2.5.1.2. Population Ethnicities

Iran is home to multiple ethnicities, with distinct cultural identities and geographical distributions within the state. Most of the population is Persian and lives in cities and center of Iran. Azerbaijani Turks, a Turkish-speaking group, inhabit the northwest of Iran particularly East and West Azerbaijan provinces. Although official figures give a number of 16% for Azerbaijani Turks, some others even tend to claim that it is around thirty million and will correspond to the most increased proportion of the population in Iran.

This has positioned the pygmy people of Kurds primarily in the western territory (Kermanshah and Kurdistan provinces). Lurs mainly found in the south-west, mostly concentrated in Lorestan and surrounding regions. Khuzestan province in the southwest, along the Iraqi border, is home to most of Iran's Arabs. The Baluchs live

mainly in the southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchestan which borders Pakistan and Afghanistan. Turkmens are present in northeast regions near the Turkmenistan border. The diversity of this nature has great effects on the political and social structure of Iran, and social media platforms provide a space for different groups to communicate with each other, present their worries, and ask for their rights especially in areas where there was high political tension.

Table 3: Key Social Media Platforms and Information Sources in Iran

Ethnicity	Percentage of Population	Primary Regions
Persians	51%	Urban centers, Central Iran
Azerbaijani Turks	16% (up to 30 million according to some sources)	Northwest (East and West Azerbaijan provinces)
Kurds	10%	Western Iran (Kermanshah, West Azerbaijan provinces and Kurdistan provinces)
Lurs	6%	Southwest (Lorestan and adjacent regions)
Arabs	2%	Southwest (Khuzestan province)
Baluch	2%	Southeast (Sistan and Baluchestan province)
Turkmens	2%	Northeast (near Turkmenistan border)
Other minorities	1%	Various

Source: Minority Rights Group International, 2023; World Population Review, 2023

However, this classification may not fully reflect the complex reality of Iran's demographics. Some groups are categorized by their ethnic origins, while others are classified based on the language they currently speak. For instance, while all Persians are identified as speaking Persian, their ethnic origins may vary.

Moreover, Foreign languages significantly contribute to Iran's linguistic diversity. English, extensively taught in schools, is a major academic and professional second language. According to Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017), the number of speaking foreign languages, particularly English, has been growing due to the effects of globalization on education and communication. This trend corresponds to a general

trend in society for greater participation in international knowledge and intercultural contact, that highlights the importance of foreign languages for the modern construction of Iranian identity.

2.5.1.3. Literacy

2.5.1.3.1. *Sources of Information*

Iran has experienced considerable improvement in literacy during recent decades, as the adult literacy level now is more than 85% (UNESCO, 2021). The high literacy rate, especially amongst the youth, further laid the groundwork for social media to gain popularity as an information source. Because conventional media are largely state-controlled in Iran, social media platforms including Instagram and Twitter become of particular importance for many Iranians especially the youth and urbanites who seek pluralism and challenge official narratives. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Telegram and up until recently, Twitter (now X) have been instrumental to information dissemination, social interaction and political engagement.

Younger Iranians in particular more than half of the population is under 30 use social media on these platforms, not just to get information but also to engage civically and politically. Instagram, Telegram and other messenger have gained great popularity which can't be ignored as well, the encrypted messaging service from social media platform enables users to have real estate sense of mind even when they know the online world is being supervised by authorities. Despite censorship measures, such as the National Information Network which restricts access to global platforms and facilitates surveillance, Iranians have used the accessibility and reach of social media to organize, raise awareness on social issues, and mobilize support for civil movements (Kapsokoli, 2024).

Table 4:Key Social Media Platforms and Information Sources in Iran

Platform	Primary Use	Main Users
Instagram	News, activism, lifestyle sharing	Young urban population
Telegram	Secure messaging, news sharing	Youth, activists
X	Political discourse, global issues	Activists, educated youth
State Media	Government news	General public, older demographics
Independent Websites	Unbiased reporting	Educated youth, urban areas

Source: UNESCO, 2021; Azizi et al., 2022

2.5.1.3.2. *Outgoing and Socialization*

The rise of social media has fundamentally altered both methods for socializing, especially among young Iranians, and the discursive space. As mass gathering and freedom of speech are prohibited in traditional spaces, Instagram, Telegram, and Twitter (now X) are essential for community building to gather, express an opinion or organize events outside the home. To many researchers, the digitalization of the world, these are our worldwide agora, a moment within which Iranians can simply contact a large spectrum of numerous and various thoughts from individuals from each social, enterprising and geographic area backgrounds. (Azizi, Rahmani, & Tehrani, 2022; Golestaneh, 2021).

In times of discontent, social media has been transformed into a go-to bedrock for political commentary and activist movement in Iran. Real-time communication networks such as Instagram, Telegram, and X, have enabled Iranians to rapidly organize, share information and participate in political debates with each other across the country at a chaotic speed that often outpaces the state-controlled media narrative. The Washington Institute (2023) explains that social media is central to the political hypothetical arena, giving individuals a space to combat state censorship, disseminate information on issues and mobilise for collective causes. People who feel unable to attend demonstrations (due to age, religion, health concerns, or other reasons) can now participate in political discussions online, which has altered the dynamic of civic involvement.

It also allowed Iranians to link with world people (at an international level) through social media channels rather than state-run media. Especially those based in Europe and North America, diaspora communities remain deeply connected to and engaged with domestic social issues by providing both support and a sense of visibility to movements in Iran. Such a connection creates an opportunity to socialize in the digital space that connects local and global stories, making it possible for Iranians to raise voices against human rights violations and stand in solidarity with one another regardless of their geographic borders. Traditional media is tightly controlled in Iran, making social media a vital tool for many Iranians to evade censorship and speak out against authorities which again seek now to limit access. (*Internet Society Pulse*, 2022).

In a society in which every social gathering is likely monitored by some sort of authority, social media empowers citizens to dialogue, organize and socialize as they would have been unable to otherwise. In the process, these platforms have altered not only interactions between Iranians but also their understanding and experience of society and politics. While the Iranian government tries to censor traditional media, social media has been and continues to be a flexible option for changing world: an important space for socialization, growing community, and going outward (Azizi, Rahmani, & Tehrani, 2022).

2.5.1.3.3. Accessibility and Informativity

It is important to mention that internet access, especially among the urban population in Iran, has an essential impact on online activism and enhancing the Iranian civil society. In 2021, access to high-speed internet was available for 79 percent of Iranian households according to reports from the Iranian Statistics Center and this number reached about 82 percent in urban areas. But access to high-speed internet is just 69% in rural areas, indicating more infrastructure work needs to be done outside of big cities.

Below data stresses that internet connectivity in Iran, particularly amongst cities, a usable mechanism for online functions and building robust civil society.

Urban-rural gap is a socio-political division: urban people often have more access to digital activism and information about politics and social issues. Because traditional media is so limited, social media platforms are the main space that Iranians look for news and need to mobilize.

Iranians often VPNs and other internet censorship circumvention tools to avoid government censorship. According to reports from Euronews, the VPN usage in 2022 protests after the assassination of Mahsa Amini has increased dramatically because people were looking for other methods to gain access to non-propaganda news and communicate with each other (Euronews, 2022 November 6). VPNs and encrypted messaging apps like Telegram illustrates how digital spaces have evolved into essential venues for both public and private discourse. These sites continue to be important spaces for opposition and speech because the Iranian regime has long sought to restrict internet access.

This is especially true for Iran's youth, who are exposed more than ever to international social justice movements via digital means due to the impact of social media on political awareness. Moreover, Iranian expatriates have used social media to promote issues in Iran and gain international attention to them while collecting support for civil rights in Iran (Azizi, Rahmani, & Tehrani, 2022). With the strength of virtual possibilities, local activists in the nation and diaspora communities within the world created a cohesive transnational network.

Social media has been important in mobilizing and conducting Iran protests, especially in the most recent assaults. Instagram, Telegram and Twitter have turned out to be paramount in breaking lines of communication for revealing information, creating platforms that aid collective organization, activation or resistance against state oppression. Even with government efforts to silence these platforms through censorship and surveillance, social media remains a critical network for political

discourse as well as national civic identity in Iran (BBC Persian, 2022, "Global reactions to the protests").

2.5.2. Iran's Social Media Profile

The social media sphere in Iran has remained robust and flexible to survive government bans. According to DataReportal (2024) in early 2024, there were almost 48 million social media users in Iran; roughly 53.6% of the country's population. While Iran has some of the strictest internet censorship nationwide, and sites like Facebook and Twitter are blocked there, it still enjoys surprising popularity for its unique platforms such as Instagram or Telegram at least partly because they circumvent the more aggressive censorship measures taking place in the country.

Instagram is one of the largest social media platforms for visual content. Iranians use it for personal expression and political commentary, as the platform creates an opportunity to cut around traditional media outlets and reach directly into public discourse. And just like that, Telegram became indispensable for the secure communication of many citizens and activists during periods of increased political pressure (Atlantic Council, 2023).

Governments have tried to restrict the use of social media by shutting down internet access in places during protests, and also banning certain platforms. These measures mirror the attempts of the government to restrict the story in the country, mainly in times of civil disorder. Despite these barriers, many Iranians use VPNs and other tools to access the filtered sites, indicating a populace determined to be informed and involved in the digital world. (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2023).

Selective censorship by the Iranian government demonstrates its pragmatic approach to social media as a vehicle for social change, which the leadership is concerned may turn into political protest. Instagram was one of the few websites that remained nearly

completely open-track despite the new restrictions on several networks, suggesting a more subdued government attitude to digital platforms (Washington Institute, 2023).

2.5.2.1. Popular Social Media Platforms

In Iran, social media platforms play a complex role, both as tools for personal expression and as vital channels for information sharing in a tightly regulated environment. Currently, Instagram and Telegram are the most widely used platforms, followed closely by WhatsApp (Azizi et al., 2022). According to a recent report by the Iranian National Internet Development Center, approximately 58% of Iranians actively use Instagram, with Telegram capturing around 45% of the population as an essential channel for private group communications (National Internet Development Center of Iran, 2023). Twitter, although officially banned, continues to have a strong underground presence, especially among activists who use VPNs to bypass restrictions and reach international audiences.

2.5.2.2. Social Media Laws and Regulations

The Iranian government has dictated the rules, and laws on internet accessibility with the Cyber Crimes Law and general policies of Supreme Council of Cyberspace. Social media restrictions have increased since protests in 2009, with popular platforms like Facebook and Twitter, as well as YouTube long blocked. Although Iranian government has restricted access to these platforms, most Iranians use VPNs and other circumvention tools to secretly bypass internet censorship and be informed of international events (Freedom House, 2021).

Additionally, Iranian government has sought to consolidate internet infrastructure as part of its "National Information Network" initiative aimed at limiting access to foreign platforms and intensifying domestic surveillance. This infrastructure strengthens state's ability to monitor and control digital material entering and leaving its borders by making the process of blocking overseas websites easier (Al Jazeera 2024).

The government's aim to control Iran's digital landscape is evident in such regulations. Nonetheless, the widespread use of VPNs indicates that individuals are adapting to their constantly changing digital environment and that they still want unrestricted internet access.

Digital Governance in Iran: Laws, Institutions, and Decision-Making Processes

Iran's digital governance reflects a centralized and hierarchical approach designed to maintain state control, secure national interests, and regulate public access to information. The system operates under the direct oversight of the highest political and religious authorities.

A. Key Cyber Laws and Policies

1.   Computer Crimes Law (2009):

The Computer Crimes Law provides the legal framework for addressing cyber offenses such as unauthorized access, cyber espionage, and dissemination of content against "public morality." Penalties include fines, imprisonment, and internet restrictions (Islamic Parliament Research Center of Iran, 2009)

2.   National Information Network (NIN):

Often called the "Halal Internet," the NIN was launched in 2016 to create a sovereign digital infrastructure. It restricts access to foreign platforms, enhances surveillance, and supports data localization, ensuring greater state control (ISNA, 2023a).

B. Decision-Making Institutions

1. Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC):

- Affiliation: The SCC operates under the direct authority of the Supreme Leader of Iran.

- Establishment: Founded in 2012 by decree of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to centralize and strengthen digital governance.
- Role: It serves as the primary policymaker for cyberspace, approving laws related to censorship, platform restrictions, and internet infrastructure (ISNA, 2023b).

2. **National Center for Cyberspace (NCC):**

- Affiliation: Functions as the executive arm of the SCC and reports directly to it.
- Establishment: Created simultaneously with the SCC in 2012.
- Role: Implements policies set by the SCC, coordinates with the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and oversees compliance by domestic and international platforms (ISNA. (2023b).

3. **Ministry of ICT:**

- Affiliation: Operates under the executive branch of the Iranian government.
- Role: Responsible for managing telecommunications infrastructure, internet service providers, and implementing technical aspects of SCC directives (Islamic Parliament Research Center of Iran, 2009)

C. Decision-Making and Oversight

- Policy Development: The SCC formulates strategic policies with input from the NCC and various governmental bodies. Proposals are reviewed and approved by the Supreme Leader, ensuring alignment with state objectives (ISNA, 2023b).
- Implementation: The NCC oversees execution, while the Ministry of ICT handles technical deployment and regulatory enforcement. Domestic platforms

are required to comply with these policies, including storing user data locally and reporting to the judiciary when requested (Hozouri et al., 2023).

D. Implementation Mechanisms

- **Platform Filtering and Blackouts:** Since 2009, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram have been systematically blocked during periods of political unrest, including the 2019 "Bloody November" protests (ISNA, 2023a).

- **Content Surveillance:** The NIN enables centralized monitoring of online activity, making it easier to block websites and enforce state-approved narratives. Encrypted platforms like Telegram face significant restrictions during sensitive events (ISNA, 2023a, 2021)

- **Localized Platforms:** Domestic platforms like Rubika and Soroush are promoted as alternatives to foreign apps. These platforms are required to provide government agencies with access to user data when requested (ISNA, 2023a).

F. Organizational Structure

- **Supreme Leader:** Directly oversees the SCC and has final authority on all cyberspace-related decisions. The SCC functions as an advisory and regulatory body under his supervision.

- **Coordination with Judiciary and Security Forces:** The judiciary enforces penalties for cybercrimes, while security agencies collaborate with the NCC to monitor and manage digital threats.

G. Public Adaptation and Resistance

Despite the state's efforts to control digital access, Iranians actively use VPNs and other circumvention tools to bypass restrictions. This reflects widespread dissatisfaction with digital limitations and a strong desire for free access to global platforms (Hozouri et al., 2023).

2.5.3. Social Media Use in Large-Scale Protests

Iran has an extensive history of utilizing social media in mass political protest, adapting methods of internet activism as technology evolves and the ruling government introduces greater measures to restrict civil liberties. Twitter played a particularly important role as an information-sharing and organizing platform following the disputed presidential elections of 2009, also known as the Green Movement. Twitter was leveraged to provide near-instantaneous information, encourage participation and alert the world to what was happening hence the name "*Twitter Revolution*" (Time, 2009).

In Following years, especially during the 2017-2018 protests and the protests after Mahsa Amini was murdered in 2022, social media platforms such as Instagram and telegram attracted a lot of attention from activists. Protesters updated the world with images and video packs of demonstrations, and Instagram's visual interface allowed protesters to present their many thousands of protests through pictures, triggering a response from audiences in Iran, but also beyond its boundaries. But the encrypted messaging and group capabilities of Telegram allowed organizers to coordinate and disseminate information securely.

2.5.3.1. Twitter Effects on Protests in 2009

The 2009 Green Movement in Iran marked a crucial moment for social media as a tool of political mobilization with Twitter featuring prominently in disseminating news and linking protesters around the world. The protests erupted after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared winner of a disputed presidential election amid widespread allegations

of electoral fraud. Iranian authorities officially blocked Twitter, but activists circumvented the ban using VPNs and proxy servers to post updates, photos and videos in real time to coordinate demonstrations. Though the #IranElection hashtag was prominent all over the world, it created a rare cyberspace for millions of Iranians to voice opposition and appeal for international support (Aday et al., 2010).

Figure 7: Demonstrators claiming their votes had not been counted in a recent election march in Tehran, June 17, 2009. (theconversation.com)

Access to Twitter enabled Iranian activists to bypass the state-run media and all available news independently in such a way as they could broadcast it on a worldwide scale, which expanded the range of this movement. This underlying trend allowed citizens to fight back against governments and expose their abuses, allowing for a worldwide awareness to surface as sympathy began appearing around the world. The essential role that Twitter played in the Green Movement demonstrated how social media platforms can facilitate digital activism by enabling protest coordination, rapid information dissemination, and providing a sense of community for dispersed activists (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). Twitter's successful rallying of support and profile-creating power, which proved effective in the Green Movement, became a template for its application in later civil uprisings inside Iran and elsewhere.

2.5.3.2. Protests From 2017 to 2019: Transforming Cyberspace

The timeline of protests in Iran (2017 to 2019) commemorates a crucial change in the history scope of civil resistance as well as in the role of social media on larger and diversified scale for increasing dissent against oppressive regime. Protests erupted in the northeast city of Mashhad in December 2017, mainly because of economic grievances including rising prices, unemployment and inflation. What started as demonstrations against economic issues quickly morphed into countrywide protests demanding political change, and highlighted an entrenched frustration with government incompetence and corruption (Amnesty International, 2019). The unrest in the winter and spring of 2017 and 2018 was similar in scale to protests levels last seen during the Green Movement, but it represented an evolution from earlier protest activity since social media enabled rapid organization and dissemination of events like these. The use of platforms such as Telegram and Instagram became more strategic, serving as both organizational tools and communication outlets that bypassed traditional state-controlled media. Protesters used Telegram's encrypted messaging features to coordinate activities securely and disseminate information rapidly. Instagram emerged as a key visual platform, allowing protesters to share real-time images and videos, thereby amplifying their voices both domestically and internationally (CSIS, 2022).

Protests erupted in November 2019, when the government imposed an immediate bumper increase of up to 50% in fuel prices which hit poorer citizens the hardest. The rise was largely seen as further evidence of financial incompetence and a callousness

towards the public. Within hours, protests filled over 100 cities with many of the most violent clashes taking place between security forces and protestors. Social media platforms, particularly Telegram and Instagram, played pivotal roles during these events. Despite attempts by the government to block access to these platforms, protesters used them to share updates, document state violence, and organize actions. Telegram's encrypted channels provided a degree of safety for organizers, while Instagram's global reach allowed activists to attract international attention to the regime's brutal crackdown (Amnesty International, 2019).

About Instagram and Telegram, in spite of the government having prerogative to close- and break them, it becomes very important channels for protestant people to organize, gather information and document what had happened (Human Rights Watch 2020). Such tools offered citizens the channels to voice their complaints and mobilize support on an unprecedented scale in past movements.

Social Media as a Tool for Mobilization and Global Awareness

Social media's role in these protests extended beyond mere communication; it became a platform for documenting state violence, mobilizing support, and raising global awareness. Protesters utilized hashtags such as #IranProtests and #BloodyNovember to amplify their messages, attracting widespread international attention. Videos and images shared on Instagram and Twitter highlighted police brutality and human rights violations, prompting condemnation from international organizations and foreign governments (Amnesty International, 2019).

Figure 9: Iranian protesters gather around a burning motorcycle during a demonstration against an increase in gasoline prices in the central city of Isfahan, on Nov. 16, 2019. (abcnews.go.com)

It represents the turn, henceforth unprecedented in Iranian civil protests, for the use of virtual technologies to undergo serious transformation. Over the years, social media went from being just a way to communicate information to serving as an important tool for mobilization and global awareness-raising; magnifying the voices of those demanding systemic change at an unprecedented scale.

3. Is 2022 the Turning Point for Iranian Civil Unrest?

Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman, died on September 16, 2022 while being held by Iran's morality police for allegedly violating Iranian dress codes. The incident triggered nationwide protests in Iran. Amini was detained for allegedly breaching Iran's tough laws on the wearing of hijab by women. The protests over her death, which has turned into a symbol of systemic oppression against women in Iran, eventually turned into one against for justice, freedom and the end of authoritarian rule. The protests began in the capital Tehran but quickly engulfed other cities with broad participation by students, workers, ethnic minorities and more. Students protested not only over women's rights, but against political repression and economic hardship (Amnesty International, 2022).

Figure 10: SociSocial Media Hashtags and Mahsa Amini Figures Held by Protesters (teenvogue)

Instagram and Twitter helped mobilize protests, while Telegram was another vital tool for its organizers. Many Iranians, however, managed to bypass government censorship including mass blocks of social media access and the cut-off of internet– by using Virtual Private Networks to overcome these bans and share information over the protests along with footage showing human rights violations. Such digital resistance

allows Iranians to mobilize in real time, share their experience with people from the rest of the world, and raise their call for fundamental rights by being able new technologies (Understanding War, 2022).

Figure 11:Protesters from all walks of life have taken to the streets, calling for the downfall of the Islamic Republic. Women have torn off and burned the compulsory headscarves in fury (euractiv)

The killing of Mahsa Amini and the protests that followed it has attracted attention worldwide, with governments, organizations for human rights and international media outlets condemning the violence used against the protesters by Iranian authorities. Newsweek the Iranian diaspora has been instrumental in waking up global society with organizing solidarity events, and lobbying for international pressure on the Iranian regime (Newsweek, 2022).

The protests of 2022 are a game-changer for the use of social media to challenge political regimes, with such digital campaigns able to organize mass mobilizations and channel voice via platforms that were largely viable only for protecting marginalized groups previously. As the protests rage on, social media will remain a vital tool in the struggle for democracy and human rights in Iran.

3.1. Mahsa Amini's Case: Both Domestic and International Demonstrations

Mahsa Amini's detention by Iran's "morality police" for alleged dress code violations and her subsequent death in custody ignited a national outcry. Iranian state media attributed her death to a heart attack caused by pre-existing health conditions, portraying her case as an isolated incident (IRNA, 2022). However, her family and human rights activists contended that she was physically assaulted, and they argued that her death reflected systemic abuses by Iranian authorities (Amnesty International, 2022). According to Amini's family, she was in good health prior to her arrest, contradicting the state's claim and further fueling public skepticism.

Figure 12: Demonstrators hold an Iranian state flag, that was in use prior to the Islamic Republic, during a rally in solidarity with Iranian protests following the death of Mahsa Amini, in Berlin, Germany, October 2022 (euractiv.com)

The Iranian diaspora, particularly prominent figures like Masih Alinejad and Hamed Esmaeilion, played a significant role in shaping the international narrative. Alinejad, an outspoken journalist and activist, posted extensively about Amini's case on Twitter and Instagram, using hashtags such as #MahsaAmini and #IranProtests. Her posts, often shared by her 9 million followers, depicted Amini's death as a symptom of broader governmental oppression. Alinejad stated, "This is not just about Mahsa. This

is about decades of injustice faced by Iranian women. The world must stand with us"
(Amnesty International, 2022).

Similarly, Hamed Esmaeilion, a dentist and human rights activist, who lost his wife and daughter in the downing of Ukrainian flight PS752 by the Iranian military, has been vocal in his condemnation of the Iranian government's actions. He has organized demonstrations against the Islamic Republic for people in the Iranian diaspora worldwide since October 2022, emphasizing the need for unity among opposition groups to unseat the regime (IPS Journal, 2023).

3.1.1. Beginning of the Domestic Unrest

Protests erupted across Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, first starting in her hometown Saqez in the Kurdish area. Protests quickly spread to larger metropolises such as Tehran, Isfahan, Mashhad, Tabriz and Rasht. Sparked by Amini's death in the hands of Iran's morality police, the protests then widened to include gender disparity, personal freedom and state oppression. The protests have had a central role for women, several of which defied the country dress code cutting their hair and burning them, or simply removing it in public. "*Woman, Life, Freedom*" became a key slogan describing central demands for more personal freedoms and respect (BBC News, 2022).

Even when the Iranian government brought the hammer down on protests using violence against demonstrators, arrests of activists and internet cut-offs to try and stifle protests, protesters used social media's such as Twitter, Instagram and Telegram along with encrypted messaging services such as Signal. It enabled protesters to organize actions, spread word by moment and bypass authorities' restrictions. The movement utilized social media as an essential mechanism to reach both the inside and the outside of Iran with their voices (Al Jazeera, 2022).

3.1.2. News Boosts the Attention of the Diaspora in Protests

In the aftermath of Mahsa Amini's death, the diaspora reacted quickly to organize major protests in global cities. The protests were held in cities with large Iranian populations, including Los Angeles, Toronto, Berlin, Paris and Stockholm as the demonstrations sparked by Amini's death echo around the world. According to *Al Jazeera* (2022), "*The protests outside Iran, with large crowds in Europe, North America, and the Middle East, showcased the Iranian diaspora's active participation in amplifying the demands for justice and reform*."

Figure 13: Mahsa Amini's Death Sparks Unprecedented Global Media Coverage (bbc.com)

Thousands converged in front of the consulate general in Los Angeles, where many Iranian-Americans live, brandishing placards reading "Justice for Amini" and "Stop Killing Women in Iran. In Paris, large demonstrations were also organized, with people chanting slogans such as "*Women, Life, Freedom*." France24 (2022) highlighted that, "Fresh solidarity rallies were held in Europe and the US, with people demonstrating against the Iranian regime's handling of Amini's death and calling for systemic changes."

People like Iranian-British actress Nazanin Boniadi brought Amini's case to international attention, highlighting the ongoing violations of human rights in Iran . *Reuters* (2022) reported that "*Boniadi was instrumental in mobilizing international attention, especially in the West, calling for justice for Amini and other Iranian women who have been victims of systemic oppression.*"

Figure 14: Iranian actress Nazanin Boniadi played an active role in amplifying Mahsa Amini's case on the international stage through social media and public advocacy.

The protests among the diasporas had worldwide resonance and led to changes in political response. For instance, countries such as Canada slapped sanctions on Iranian officials and the EU denounced crushing the unrest by Iranian regime through violence. As noted by *BBC* (2022), "*These responses from international governments and organizations have highlighted the global reach and impact of the diaspora protests, amplifying the demand for accountability from the Iranian government.*"

3.2. Transmedia and Fandom in Social Media

To understand the Mahsa Amini protests' global impact, it is crucial to explore the foundational concepts of transmedia storytelling, digital fandom, and decentralized

activism. These frameworks demonstrate how digitally facilitated events can be expanded globally from localized events.

Transmedia Storytelling

Transmedia storytelling is the strategic propagation of a story across several platforms, with each platform contributing some of the story, part of the overall narrative. In this method, the audience is exposed to multiple different aspects of the story, forming a linked and immersive experience.

This was evident during the Mahsa Amini protests, with platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Telegram being used in complementary ways: Instagram displayed emotionally impactful visuals, Twitter amplified global discussions through hashtags and Telegram provided safe spaces for coordination and organization. (Scolari, 2009; Rutledge, 2017).

Digital Fandom

Digital fandom is the phenomenon of communities involved in the active production and sharing of common narratives, often transforming them into cultural movements. Rather than passively ingest content, these online groups co-create and expand the narrative, thereby enhancing the reach and the visibility of the narrative as well as its penetration.

In the Mahsa Amini protests, digital fandom was on display in the production of extensive art, videos, and music around the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom." These creative productions not only extended the message of the movement but also transcended it into a cultural event. This activism, however, by engaging with this movement in such a manner, the activists helped generate a feeling of community and attachment, broadening the dissemination of the protest movement across the world (Baym, 2015).

The Mahsa Amini protests provide a powerful example of how transmedia storytelling, digital fandom, and decentralized activism interact to create a global movement. Understanding these concepts is essential to analyzing the protests' success and their role in shaping modern activism.

The protests that erupted in 2022 following the death of Mahsa Amini were key moments at the intersection of social media and transmedia activism. Transmedia, the technique of telling a single story or story experience across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies, was essential in letting people around the world know what was happening during the protests. The social media (Instagram, Telegram, Twitter and TikTok) played an instrumental role in the organization of, information dissemination about the protests and mobilization of people around the world turning Mahsa Amini into a symbol of resistance against authoritarianism and gender oppression.

Thus, several new forms for telling her story emerged through each platform and together they created impactful multivocality to the protest. It had a civil war of protest pictures and videos on Instagram, live updates trending posts on Twitter, while Telegram served as free participation in writing organizing messages. This rapid mobilization was accompanied by hashtags like #MahsaAmini and #IranProtests on these platforms, offering a unified front from all corners of the globe.

Jenkins (2006) states, "*Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience*" (p. 95).

Here, the protests became a transmedia experience with one medium adding to an overarching narrative of resistance.

Also, digital fandom was an important component in the success of the movement alongside transmedia storytelling. Some supporters, especially from the Iranian diaspora population, mobilized by producing and disseminating content in the form of artwork, video and music that often included the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom." This screen-determined production of content turned Amini's narrative to something that while political, became a pantomime shaping cultural iconography globally. One

way of explaining this is from Jenkins (2006), who highlights the concept when he says that "Fandom is not merely a consumption of media but rather an active participation in the development and extension of a narrative" (p. 97). The digital fandom that sprung up from Mahsa Amini passing away encouraged the fact that social media could provide a major source of empowerment and dissemination for movements.

Much of the success of the protests stemmed from how decentralized this method of digital activism was. That distribution of the narrative across different social media channels enabled people to engage in whatever manner they preferred and felt comfortable with thus taking them out of passive absorption mode to an active role towards the cause. This decentralized, but collective method of protest is a strong example of how social media promote global movements. When protests gained popularity in Iran, the protests spread out to around the world, and solidarity movements began in various cities worldwide.

Ultimately, the Mahsa Amini protests encapsulate transmedia activism as a kind of satellite war between power and electronic transpositions while projecting seismic waves to prop up tangible movements globally. The role of social media included organizing, disseminating information and mobilizing citizens in real time which facilitated the rapid growth and expansion of the protest while also allowing for global voices to participate in solidarity with protests demanding justice.

3.3. Leaders Created by Social Media

One of the ways that 2022 protests were newly structured in how they manifested as a leadership was due to the impact of social media and social media platforms overused during these long sessions. The Iranian diaspora, including Masih Alinejad, Hamed Esmaeilion and Ali Karimi became some of the most prominent voices of the movement. As a result of their significant virtual platform, they managed to galvanize support, broadcast live updates from Iran and request the world to act in favor of the protestors.

A prominent campaigner against Iran's compulsory hijab law, Masih Alinejad is a journalist and women's rights activist who has been leading many such campaigns. Alinejad, using Instagram and Twitter to get information out to the world, became an unofficial spokesperson for the protests that followed Mahsa Amini's death. The message of resistance was further amplified by her social media following, with millions of supporters. In her posts, Alinejad described Amini's death as "*not just an Iranian tragedy, but a global call for women's rights and dignity*" (BBC News, 2022). Alinejad's words as well as her online presence made her one of the most visible leaders of the movement, connecting Iran to the rest of the world.

Figure 15: Prominent Iranian opposition figures during the Mahsa Amini protests (from right to left): Hamed Esmaeilion, Masih Alinejad, Nazanin Boniadi, and Reza Pahlavi (former Shah's son), participating in a discussion at Georgetown University, Washington, 2023 (siasatrooz.ir)

Hamed Esmaeilion an Iranian-Canadian human rights activist whose wife and daughter were among those murdered after the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps shot down Ukrainian Flight PS752 over Tehran has emerged as a leading voice for justice and political change. Esmaeilion used his social media accounts to mobilize Iranians and the international community in favor of the demonstrations in the wake of Amini's death. People began to pay heed to his pleas for justice and accountability, while the posts he made about the same reached out to thousands of people, garnering collective worldwide efforts against it. Through his activism, distributed mainly on social media outlets such as Twitter and Instagram, Esmaeilion had the power to influence public opinion and unify Iranians around the world.

The star of Iranian football Ali Karimi, and one of the most enduring icons in Iran sports history, also emerged as a leading voice for the movement. Karimi, who is widely admired for his criticism of the IR's policies, publicly used his significant influence on social media to back the protesting Iranian women. With millions of followers, his platform served a crucial space for mobilizing support and disseminating messages calling for resistance. On several occasions, Karimi voiced his support for Iranian protesters protesting in Iran and called on the people of Iran to come together against government repression. His involvement was indicative of the increasing engagement of athletes, who had previously maintained a distance from politics, in issues of social justice and sport as a growing site for political activism.

A less traditional top-down level of leadership. By spreading it across many voices the Iranian government could not combat the movement by voice or figure. This way of organizing enabled the protests to sustain momentum without the need for a single easily imprisonable or killable leader. They and their organizations decentralized leadership, making social media a weapon of collective leadership, ensuring no single person could be taken out without the movement continuing to roll on (The Guardian, 2022, para. 3). It has demonstrated the ability of social media to both catalyze grassroots movements and create new styles of leadership in response to state violence.

The rise of social-media-oriented leadership in Iran also indicates a departure from traditional models of organizing protest movements. Using their platforms, these leaders were able to control the narrative of the protests and kept them in the global spotlight even as governments tried to silence them. The changeover has changed the dynamics civil activism and this is an example that digital platforms are defining the future of political movements.

3.4. How Social Media is Keeping the Protests Alive

The protests have remained visible, inside Iran and beyond thanks to social media. Despite Iranian state efforts to strangle the digital ecosystem, platforms such as Twitter

and Instagram have been critical for disseminating live information from protests, images of protest-related violence, and testimonies about governmental violence via Telegram. Such platforms have allowed Iranians to evade the limits of the net and remain connected during crucial times. According to Centre for International Governance Innovation (2022), Iranian Women have emerged as the key players in countering state narratives and fighting for their rights, expressing it through social media.

Although the Iranian government imposed extreme censorships via internet shutdown, Iranians used VPNs and encrypted messaging apps to evade those limitations. They are reaching even more people with their events by altering the nature of these protests, which shows that they want to keep them alive and find a way to communicate. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (2022) stated: Despite these efforts by the Iranian government to suppress protests, Iranians have adapted their use of social media platforms as a means to organize, mobilize, and promote their causes.

Not only has the international community's reinforced response (further solidified by global media coverage) contributed to maintaining protests through local mobilization. The global coverage of the protests has put pressure on the Iranian government and highlights the impact of social media in sustaining movement. The Iranian government finds it harder to put down the movement without drawing international consequences amid ongoing external scrutiny

4. Findings & Discussion

4.1. A Historical Perspective of Social Media in Iran

The part that social media played in transforming Iranian society in the year 1388, specifically civil resistance and protest movements Since the early 2000s, such channels as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have fallen under Iranian fingers this time as an alternative for media channels under the state's control to express themselves and organise. Such platforms were once extremely popular amongst the younger population of Iran, who turned to them as a means of engaging with interest from overseas and spreading information about domestic issues.

Here are the three original pieces of content: The 2009 Green Movement was a watershed moment for social media activism in Iran. Fired up by accusations of election fraud after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election, the protests were a watershed in digital activism. The protests–which were dubbed the "Twitter Revolution"–saw protesters organizing rallies, re-posting updates in real-time and refuting government propaganda through Twitter. Twitter was essential in organizing and covering the protests despite efforts from the Iranian government to block it (Time 2009). Twitter, and other social media venues, served as a virtual port for Iranians to upload videos and images of police atrocities – video and images that traditional news sources could either not broadcast or had no access to.
Impact of Twitter and Citizen Journalism

Impact of Twitter and Citizen Journalism

- During the Green Movement, 1.5 million tweets about #IranElection were shared within the first three weeks, amplifying the protests globally (Oxford Internet Institute, 2010).

- Citizen journalists leveraged platforms like YouTube, uploading over 200 videos per day, which were shared by international media outlets, making Iran's political crisis a global issue (Amnesty International, 2010).

Theoretical Perspective: The Public Sphere

- Jürgen Habermas's public sphere theory applies here, as social media created an alternative digital public sphere, allowing discourse and dissent to flourish outside the state's control.

Government Response

- The Iranian government deployed advanced filtering systems to block Twitter and Facebook. However, 60% of internet users circumvented these restrictions using VPNs (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

In retaliation to this digital dissent, Iranian authorities started imposing more heavy-handed internet censorship. This led to the government enforcing internet restrictions, making it much more difficult to access Facebook and Twitter, as well as increasing monitoring of online activities. However, Iranians worked around all of these efforts using circumvention tools such as VPNs to access these platforms). But this battle is what defined Iranian political life in the years that followed the Green Movement: state censorship versus digital resistance.

In 2019, social media had become more integrated into the everyday life of ordinary Iranians. Around 70 percent of the population used at least one social media, including Telegram as a key means of organizing protests. Telegram was an encrypted messaging service, so it allowed them to communicate securely — something that protest organizers needed in order to work around all the government surveillance. According to *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (2022), Telegram played a critical role during the 2019 protests against fuel price hikes, enabling the rapid

dissemination of information and organization of nationwide protests despite government attempts to stifle communication.

The Role of Telegram in Mobilization

- By 2019, Telegram had over 60 million Iranian users, making it the dominant communication platform for protests (CSIS, 2022).
- Protesters used Telegram's channels and groups to organize flash demonstrations, distribute safety tips, and report on police movements.

Government Suppression

- The government pressured Telegram to shut down popular activist channels, including "AmadNews", forcing protesters to adopt more decentralized communication methods, such as smaller groups and anonymous accounts.

The role of social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter has remained a key outlet for Iranian activists and other Iranian social movements, particularly After the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests. While the Iranian government has always tried to filter or restrict these sites, Iranians have bypassed them. During the protests of 2022 they rose again, as people used VPN to keep information flowing and create international awareness of the protests (CIGI, 2022). During this time, Instagram played a especially significant role as it permitted Iranians to post pictures, videos and messages about the protests from within Iran that could expose the Iranian movement not only inside of Iran but also to people in other countries.

The role of social media in Iran has characterized an ongoing battle between repression and resistance. Iranians still rely on social media to carry out civil resistance, spearhead protest actions, and reach the outside world despite it facing lots of restrictions related to cracking down on internet freedom.

4.2. Analysis of the Transformation of Social Media's Roles in Iran's Protests

The role of social media in Iran's protest movements has evolved significantly over the past decade. Initially, platforms like Twitter were primarily used for real-time coordination and information-sharing during protests, as seen in the 2009 Green Movement. This pattern, however, shifted over time as the government refined censorship tactics, leading to the emergence of Telegram, Instagram, and other platforms as central tools in subsequent protests.

Key Trends in Social Media Evolution

- From Centralized to Decentralized Models: Early movements relied on platforms like Twitter for centralized coordination, whereas later protests adopted decentralized approaches using encrypted messaging apps like Signal.
- Increased Use of Visual Media: Platforms like Instagram became central to activism, with over 20 million Iranians sharing protest images and videos during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests (DataReportal, 2023).

The economic protests of 2017-2018, fueled by widespread dissatisfaction with the economic policies of the Rouhani administration, demonstrated a transformed social media landscape. Telegram, with its ability to host large groups and broadcast messages to millions, played an essential role in mobilizing protests. Activists used Telegram channels to coordinate protests across multiple cities, despite increasing efforts by the government to block the platform. The scale of these protests, spread across over 100 cities, was indicative of social media's unique power to bridge geographic and social divides, fostering a shared sense of grievance and resistance. During this period, state censorship became more sophisticated, with authorities monitoring social media accounts, arresting prominent online activists, and forcing Telegram to comply with some censorship measures under pressure (Amnesty International, 2018).

- Expanded Findings: Think tanks like the Carnegie Endowment noted that Telegram's ability to connect rural and urban protesters was pivotal in mobilizing resistance.

The 2019 fuel price protests, also known as "Bloody November," marked a particularly severe government response to social media-driven dissent. When the government announced a sudden and steep increase in fuel prices, protests erupted nationwide, drawing participants from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. In response, Iranian authorities implemented one of the most extensive internet blackouts in the country's history, cutting off nearly all internet access for several days to prevent protesters from organizing and sharing footage of the crackdown (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This blackout highlighted the regime's recognition of social media's power in facilitating dissent and underscored a significant shift in the state's strategy from censorship to outright digital isolation. According to reports, over 300 civilians were killed in the crackdown, with thousands more injured or detained (UN, 2020).

- Blackout Data: NetBlocks (2020) reported a 95% drop in internet connectivity, effectively isolating the country for over 120 hours.
- Think Tank Insights: The Atlantic Council described this as a strategy of "digital authoritarianism," setting a global precedent for other regimes.

By 2022, the digital landscape of Iranian activism had once again transformed, with platforms like Instagram and Twitter becoming central to the Mahsa Amini protests. Instagram allowed Iranians to post videos and images of the protests in real time, providing compelling evidence of the scale and intensity of the demonstrations. Twitter, on the other hand, facilitated international solidarity, with hashtags like #MahsaAmini and #IranProtests trending globally. Social media transformed Amini's death from a national tragedy into an international rallying cry for justice and women's rights, drawing widespread condemnation of the Iranian government's treatment of women and ethnic minorities.

Expanded Impact:

- Hashtag Activism: #MahsaAmini generated over 1.2 billion impressions globally within the first month (DataReportal, 2023).
- Diaspora's Role: Iranian expatriates leveraged platforms to organize over 100 solidarity marches worldwide, using Instagram and Twitter as primary tools.

The use of social networks used to be just a tool for the protesters but after the protests over Mahsa Amini, we see this evolved into an influence strategy that goes beyond just organizing demonstrations. Activists and influencers in the Iranian diaspora, from journalist Masih Alinejad to everyday social media users, have shared the voices of Iranian protesters and called for action around the world. The outpouring of digital solidarity has put pressure on Iranian officials amid international collective condemnation and sanctions against the crackdown on protesters (CNN, 2022). In this sense, social media has not only facilitated domestic resistance but has also transformed Iran's internal struggles into a global human rights issue.

5. Conclusion

The most important of the main purposes of this study is to emphasize that the real platform of changes that took place through social media was formed in Iran long before the concept of "Arab Spring" that entered the world literature. Very important examples of how social media and rapid sharing can create changes in the practices and regimes of states can be encountered in the Iranian sample. This situation is explained with the different perspectives questioned in the findings and discussion section of this study, and due to Iran's own nature and geopolitical infrastructure, this issue has rarely been brought up in the world literature. Thus, it is thought that this study can bring this unique perspective to the forefront.

The changed role of social media in Iran's protest movements reflects wider changes in the nature of political struggle in the Islamic Republic and Iranians' digital engagement with each other and their state. Social media has been an essential part of civil disobedience since the days of the 2009 Green Movement, where Twitter was used for immediate mobilization, and later in the Mahsa Amini protests held throughout Iran in 2022 to notify both citizens and outsiders alike. In short, this thesis has fundamentally examined how social media has shaped Iranian protests by building on the mutual co-evolution of protestors and the state who adapt their strategies in reaction to changes in these digital spaces.

Amidst these movements, the Iranian government tightened its grip on the internet via increasingly sophisticated censorship methods website filtering/blocking, internet blackouts and surveillance. Iranians have continued to creatively overcome limitations, utilizing VPNs and encrypted platforms for this purpose despite of the fact that local authorities are seeking to suppress them. Through social media, protestors have been able to not just organize, but also to document and stream the repression they were experiencing, exposing human rights violations in real time. Instagram, Telegram and Twitter have played substantial platform, where Telegram's encrypted

channels provided a safe channel for activists and Instagram has given rise to visual activism.

Social Media's Evolution: A Tool Beyond Protest Organization

The evolution of social media in Iran shows how platforms have transformed from simple tools for protest coordination to comprehensive frameworks for resistance, storytelling, and global advocacy. Platforms like Twitter, which emerged as real-time mobilization tools during the 2009 Green Movement, have become digital arenas where narratives are contested and redefined. The 2022 Mahsa Amini protests marked a new phase (for Iran) where the combination of visual storytelling, decentralized networks, and international solidarity transformed social media into a platform for justice, like other global events.

Instagram has once again emerged as a powerful tool for visual activism, allowing users to share poignant images and videos that capture the striking reality of the protests. This visual documentation has resonated globally, garnering widespread support and putting pressure on Iranian leaders. With its encrypted communication channels, Telegram has become the backbone of protest organizing, enabling activities to mobilize securely under increased surveillance. Meanwhile, Twitter and trending hashtags like #MahsaAmini have become a focal point of global discourse, amplifying the voices of prominent Iranians and encouraging international solidarity.

Decentralization as a Strategy for Resilience

The decentralized leadership (in the absence of a single leader) provide resistance behind principles such as those led by Masih Alinejad and Hamed Esmaeilion, making it more challenging for the Iranian regime to crack down on these protests. The ascent of these leaders only happened thanks to social media a tool that helped them push their agendas, garner international support, and sustain the pressure even when the government retaliated with violence. A factor that has kept the protests alive has also

been their decentralization, no longer reliant on a single leader but rather on a wide base of activists mobilizing through different digital channels.

This decentering represents a clear break from prior expressions of protest in Iran, when see groups of people invariably came to mobilizing around personalities. Through the decentralization of hierarchies as they operate in a network within the larger social structure of activists, the demonstrations have proven and strengthened it, potentially making them much more resistant to state suppression. This approach has also been employed to code a range of voices, both in terms of, for example, women (and those promoted to) champion women's rights, and women in ethnically underrepresented groups (who raised their voice against systemically embedded discrimination). Thus, the result is multilevel process with complexity reflecting Iranian society.

Challenges and the Double-Edged Nature of Social Media

 Social media inspires Iranians to portray their fight on the world stage enabling calls from Iranian societies and international human rights organizations. The Mahsa Amini protests illustrate this, with Masha's death being highlighted around the world through social media activists and influencers to turn a national tragedy into an international battle for justice.

However, social media dependence comes with its own challenges. The spread of false and/or inaccurate information, commonly distributed by state-supported accounts, makes joint construction of a unified message from crowds of protesters a difficult task. Sometime, echo chambers (that is, when people are exposed only to self-similar contents) may restrict the range and effectiveness of protest communication. In addition, the growing application of digital surveillance tools by Iranian government poses enormous threats to the activists, such as arrest or receiving harassments for the internet activism.

However, in spite of these challenges, given the resilience of digital activism, Iranian protesters show the power of adaptation. The implementation of encrypted messaging apps, virtual private networks and new ways to circumvent censorship illustrates a deep knowledge of the digital terrain and its capacity for resilience.

Global Implications of Iran's Digital Activism

The impact of social media in Iran extends beyond its borders and offers valuable lessons for activists worldwide. The Mahsa Amini protests exemplify how local struggles can gain international attention through the strategic use of digital platforms. This global visibility has not only increased pressure on the Iranian regime, but has also inspired similar movements in other authoritarian contexts. The role of the Iranian diaspora in amplifying these protests further highlights the transnational dimensions of digital activism.

To summarize, the landscape of activism in Iran has changed in its essence due to social media. It started as a way to bypass to state media, but turned into such an effective tool of civil engagement as well as pressure and resistance against regimes. While state efforts to gain online control and censorship continue, social media remains an indispensable tool for Iranians to advocate for human rights, gender equality, and political reform. It is expected that social media will continue to play a significant role in the existence of digital activism, which will probably stay in the context of fighting for political and social change in Iran.

As this study illustrates, the evolving role of social media in Iran is both a challenge and an opportunity. It demands continued scholarly attention and practical support from global allies to ensure that digital spaces remain arenas for justice, democracy, and human dignity. Moving forward, the resilience of Iranian activists and their ability to adapt to new challenges will determine the future trajectory of digital resistance in the country.

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