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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Impact of New Media on the Formation of Social Non-Movements in the Last Decade in Iran

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

The contemporary globalized landscape, characterized by the rapid convergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and social networking infrastructures, has fundamentally restructured the ontologies of communication and political agency. This digital metamorphosis has facilitated a paradigm shift from centralized, institutionalized power structures toward a decentralized, networked paradigm, often conceptualized as the "death of distance." Within this milieu, the emergence of "social non-movements"-collective actions performed by non-collective, spontaneous, and leaderless actors-represents a significant departure from classical social movement theories. While traditional movements were anchored in formal organizations and rigid ideologies, contemporary "non-movements" operate through the "micro-physics of power," utilizing the rhizomatic, horizontal, and ubiquitous affordances of new media to manifest dissent within the interstices of daily life.

In the Iranian context, the proliferation of digital platforms and the ubiquity of mobile connectivity have created a unique socio-technical environment. This study addresses a critical research gap in understanding

how the specific affordances of new media-such as speed, continuity, autonomy, and interactivity-interact with shifting socio-cultural norms to catalyze and scale social non-movements. The research problem is situated at the intersection of digital media's dualistic nature: its capacity to serve as a tool for social mobilization and national cohesion versus its potential to exacerbate social despair, propagate disinformation, and facilitate the erosion of traditional cultural identities.

Method:

To explore these complexities, this research employs a qualitative, descriptive-developmental design grounded in the Grounded Theory (GT) methodology. The inductive approach was necessitated by the lack of sufficient theoretical frameworks to explain the specific trajectory of recent social unrest in Iran. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of seven high-level experts, including academics in sociology and political science, as well as strategic practitioners in media management and security operations. Analytical rigor was maintained through a systematic three-stage coding process (open, axial, and selective coding), achieving theoretical saturation through the analysis of 217 coded textual segments.

Findings:

The empirical analysis culminated in the formulation of a comprehensive paradigmatic model that conceptualizes the lifecycle and structural drivers of social non-movements through four systemic dimensions:

Causal Determinants: The primary triggers are identified as the exponential increase in internet penetration and the technological ubiquity of mobile devices. These factors act as the foundational catalysts, providing the essential technological infrastructure required for digital agency and the synchronization of dispersed actors.

Contextual Dimensions: The socio-cultural landscape is defined by the radical transformation of communication technologies and a profound shift in lifestyle paradigms. Key contextual factors include the erosion of traditional familial cohesion, the widening generational gap, and a fundamental transition from traditional/religious values toward more secularized, digitalized identities. This shift provides the fertile socio-cultural substrate necessary for non-movements to manifest.

Intervening Conditions: These act as critical mediators that modulate the intensity, scale, and sustainability of social non-movements. The model identifies "perceived psychological and physical security" through digital anonymity as a facilitator of participation. Conversely, negative intervening factors such as "modern digital addictions," "personality passivity," and the "erosion of indigenous micro-cultures" act as complex mediators that can influence the longevity and depth of collective social engagement.

Strategic Outcomes and Implications: The interaction of the aforementioned dimensions produces significant socio-political consequences. The model identifies multi-directional networked interactions and highly efficient resource mobilization as primary outcomes. Most notably, the research highlights the "global scaling" of local grievances—a phenomenon termed "tele-democracy." Through the viral and borderless affordances of new media, localized, spontaneous dissent is elevated to international political discourses, effectively bypassing traditional state-controlled media and challenging centralized mechanisms of social control and governance.

- Multi-directional Networked Interaction: The transition from linear broadcasting to complex, multi-way engagement.
- Resource Mobilization and Coordination: The ability to organize mass participation with minimal institutional costs.
- Global Scaling and Tele-democracy: The capacity for local, spontaneous grievances to transcend geographical boundaries and gain international visibility, effectively bypassing local governance constraints.

Conclusions:

This study posits that social non-movements in Iran are not merely digital echoes of physical unrest but are hybrid, socio-technical phenomena. They leverage the "rhizomatic" nature of the internet to bypass hierarchical leadership, making them both highly adaptive and structurally difficult to suppress. By operating through "networks of outrage and hope," these movements utilize the affordances of new media to reconstruct social identity and political demand in real time. The findings suggest that the transition from vertical, institutionalized agency to horizontal, networked agency necessitates a radical rethinking of both political science and media studies, particularly concerning the boundaries of governance, social cohesion, and cultural identity in increasingly digitized and volatile societies.

The findings confirm that the relationship between new media and social non-movements is not merely instrumental but ontological. New media do not merely facilitate communication; they reconstruct the very nature of social agency. By enabling rhizomatic, non-hierarchical, and horizontal connectivity, digital platforms have provided a mechanism for a "politics of presence" that operates outside the control of centralized authorities.

The study demonstrates that in Iran, the "non-movement" phenomenon is a direct byproduct of the tension between globalized technological affordances and local socio-political structures. While these movements often lack long-term strategic planning or formal leadership, their ability to utilize the viral nature of digital content and the low-cost mobilization of resources makes them a formidable challenge to traditional governance. Ultimately, the research posits that the rise of digital non-movements signifies a fundamental shift in the micro-physics of power, moving from top-down control to a landscape of decentralized, networked, and highly volatile social engagement.

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Data available on request from the authors.
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