Title of Proposed Research

When Global and Local Meet Online: Iranian Feminist Digital Activism and Politics of Visibility

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Abstract

This project looks at the mediation of Iranian feminist activism and debates around gender issues on social media platforms as this is shaped by local and global power relations. Centring its analysis on the generation of narratives and images on Instagram and Twitter, the research interrogates the production and circulation of feminist discourses by Iranian feminists and women's rights campaigners. In studying media practices and strategies of self-mediation of activists through applying a digital ethnographic approach, the study investigates how local/global binary is constructed by rival feminist discourses at home and in the diaspora as a strategy of visibility and legitimacy. The research frames part of the activist's digital campaigns as forms of popular feminism, which centre on the mediation of individual woman empowerment and self-branding, as a way of understanding their connection with transnational, western and Eurocentric feminisms in combination with their characteristics as nationally-focused causes.

Research Rationale and Significance

Building on my PhD thesis, the proposed research examines articulations of feminist activism on Iranian social media in the context of the country's political structure which has afforded limited opportunities for women's movements. Long-standing suppression and oppression of women's rights activists which, intensified after the conservative takeover and the US comprehensive sanctions act of 2010 (CISADA), has rendered the women's movements invisible and pushed them underground, making digital media as alternative media and substitute public sphere for Iranian women.

In investigating digital media affordances for self-mediation of women's rights activists, the research shifts the discussion away from a focus on politically convenient effects of social media which has been fairly prevalent in the study of political activism in the Middle East, particularly after the 2009 Green movement in Iran and Arab Spring in the early 2010s (Richter, Antonakis & Harders, 2018). Furthermore, in the mainstream media studies literature the region is framed as a homogeneous entity that is universally influenced by the role of digital media. There has, however, been little scholarly interest in the contextualisation of the dynamics of social media in its interplay with politics. This research's significance lies in its focus on mediated activism of actors, as it is grounded in the political and cultural histories of the society in which they are embedded while taking into consideration the global-local nexus.

The main research question is: how do Iranian women's issues and demands are framed in the self-mediated content of feminist activists on social media, and with which discursive frameworks and media strategies do different issues are performed online? The subsidiary research question is: how are these narratives shaped and constrained on one hand, by affordances and mediation opportunity structure of digital media and on the other hand, by the political opportunity structure of the country, and the local and global power relations?

Conceptual Framework

In recent years, social media platforms have become a battleground for resistance and activism of Iranian women and many feminists are appropriating digital media as a movement media for mediation (Livingstone 2009; Couldry, 2008; Silverstone 2002) of gendered debates. In bringing Iranian women's activism and digital media platforms into dialogue, the research is inspired by the mediation opportunity structure (Cammaerts 2018; 2013; 2012). In the framework of the triad of interrelated opportunity structures; 'the media, discursive and networked opportunity structures, the research attempts to capture the dynamics and affordances of social media (Bucher & Helmond 2017; Boyd 2010) for women's contestation. Centring on questions of self-mediation (Chouliaraki 2010) of women's rights activists, the discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe 2014; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002) is employed to identify the feminist frameworks that circulated on the online platforms. To explore how different feminist discursive frameworks compete for legitimacy and visibility on digital platforms, the concept of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, et al. 2020, Banet-Weiser 2018, 2018B) is adopted. It is also argued that these discourses are in turn shaped by the political opportunity structure of the country (Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Meyer and Minkoff 2004) since even in the so-called deterritorialised media environment, national territories and their accompanying political and cultural histories form, inform or misinform different aspects of women's digital campaigns (Khiabany 2015).

Methodology

Applying a multi-sited mobile ethnographic approach (Postill & Pink 2012; Varis, 2016; Hine, 2008) the research seeks to engage with the complexity and multilayeredness of the field. The ethnographic research is built upon activists' stories through a set of semi-structured interviews with activists who are contributing to producing and sharing content regarding women's issues online. Organised observation of the study is mainly conducted on Twitter and Instagram, the most popular platforms in Iran. The study analyses the range of women's issues and demands communicated in textual and visual content shared on the mentioned platforms. It focuses 1) on public profiles of individual activists, 2) pages affiliated to activist groups and digital campaigns regarding particular women's issues and demands, which is limited to a one-year period (2020- 2021). These pages were chosen for their popularity, visibility and the rapidity of their reactions to gender-related events. In this step, social media analysis software is used to harvest and archive larger sets of data (Lomborg 2013; Giglietto, et al. 2012) .

I am a native speaker of Farsi, the primary language of Iranian digital space, and I am part of a series of established networks among women's rights activists. This combination of linguistic and contextual knowledge is crucial in enabling me to closely study and more profoundly apprehend the developments occurring in the digital media ecology.

Work Plan:

The main academic output will be first draft of a monograph and an article:

1st quarter

- Continue archiving and analysing online material;
- Read further in literature;
- Refine overall structure and argument.
- Draft Introduction and Chapter 1[Theorising Feminist Digital Activism: Implications for the Study of Social Media in the Middle East*]. [All chapter topics are provisional]*
- Complete archiving and analysing of online data;
- Complete bulk of the secondary reading.
- Draft Chapter 2 [Historical Oscillation of the Iranian Women's Movements: Between Visibility and Marginalisation]
- Draft Chapter 3 [Contemporary Debates and Developments in digital media Studies in Iran]
- Present at the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies.

2nd quarter

- Draft Chapter 4 [Gendered Discursive Struggles on Iranian Social Media: Competing Feminist Discourses]
- Revise Introduction and Chapter 1.
- Draft Chapter 5 [Popular Feminist Language of Iranian Digital Feminist Activism: When Global and Local Meet]
- Revise Chapter 2.
- Draft Conclusion.
- Revise Chapters 3 and 4.
- Draft and revise a Paper (For Feminist Media Studies preferably).
- Final revision.
- Submit for publication.
- Present at the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies.

Project bibliography

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