

Virtual social networks and environmental activism

(A study of Iranian environmental activism)

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Introduction

New media have created new challenges for the Middle East countries. One aspect of the new media which is important; both in experimental and theoretical point of view; is its linkage with social activism. The emergence of the new media in most countries has increased the possibility of social activism formation. The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the formation and organization of virtual environmental groups and transition of their activities to real world. The effect of membership in a virtual social network (especially Facebook) on the formation of environmental social activism is the point of departure in this paper.

State of the Internet in Iran

According to National Internet Development Management Center of Iran, the country's Internet penetration rate in 2013 was 49.13 percent. The numbers of Subscribers were 21,198,945 and Internet users were 36,918,795. Iran had 75,149,669 populations at the mentioned year. According to the number of internet users per 100 people, Iran ranking was 125 in 2013. In recent years, members of virtual social networks sites such as Facebook have been rising in Iran in recent years. Since Facebook has been blocked in Iran and users use anti-proxies for signing in, there are no reliable statistics about its members. But evidence show facebook members are steadily decreasing because Viber has attracted many fans and is becoming a rival for facebook.

Literature review

There have been various theories about the role of mass media in creating and strengthening the public sphere among contemporary thinkers. In this regard, Habermas's (1989) theory of public sphere which emphasizes the role of the mass media, such as magazines and newspapers in the spread of public debate and communicative action in bourgeois public sphere is especially well-known (Friedland, Lewis A. and et.al.2006). But theorizing about the role of the media was changed with the advent of new media. The most basic question was that as regards to unique characteristics as well as differences of the new media with traditional one, (Brown, 2011) how and to what extent they play a role in the public sphere and social activism. In other words, can social media promote civic engagement and collective action? In this regard, there are two

main approaches: Those who believe in the positive role of new media, especially social networking, in reinforcing and supporting of social activism. Using the term 'networked social movement', Castells argues about movements that try to achieve their goals relying on Facebook. This networked social movement was based on cultural values (justice); was a loose and semi-spontaneous coalition relying on internet technologies (Facebook); and was a locally based movement aiming globally (Castells, 2001). Castells shows how the new media has been utilized for mobilizing people to support some social and political goals. (Castells, 2001: 138). Scholars tend to view the internet's role in social movements as two-fold: the internet can facilitate traditional offline activism, enhancing a movement's existing repertoire by adding email campaigns, online petitions and even virtual sit-ins to activists' existing toolbox (Castells, 2001; Juris, 2005; Harlow, 2012), or it actually can create new forms of activism and resistance (Cardoso and Pereira Neto, 2004; Rolfe, 2005; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2009; Harlow, 2012).

Obar and his colleague in a survey of 169 representatives from 53 national advocacy/activist groups operating in the United States showed that all groups are using a variety of social media technologies to communicate with citizens almost every day. Qualitative results of their study suggest that groups believe that social media can facilitate civic engagement and collective action by strengthening outreach efforts, enabling engaging feedback loops, increasing speed of communication and by being cost-effective.(Obar, J.A.; Zube, P.; Lampe, C. ,2012) The internet is a cheap, quick way of international communication that simplifies mobilization (Schwarz,2013).

The second group is those who are skeptical of the role of new media. They believe that virtual behavior does not necessarily lead to actual behavior. They express their concern with the word slacktivism. According to this critique, the Internet merely provides another tool for the already active; it does not help mobilize previously passive citizens (Christensen, 2011). Christensen attempts to summarize the viewpoints of those who are skeptical of the role of the new media as follows: 1. Internet activities are not effective; and, 2. Internet activists do not engage in other activities (Christensen, 2011).

Method

Using qualitative approach techniques such as participant observation in environmental NGOs and semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 30 environmental activists, data for this study were collected.

Findings

Most of people who sending any environmental materials through Facebook are young and have an academic degree /The number of virtual activists is much more than actual activist./ Environmental activist groups have stated that without Facebook the number of their members and the scope of activities were slaked./ The main function of cyberspace is transmission of news and information than social mobilization /Some members of environmental groups living in remote areas of the country. They have been joined to these groups through Facebook. /Each interviewee has participated at least in two environmental protests in 2013. They stated that they have been informed of the rally through Facebook.

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