Role of Social Networks on Political Activism: A Case Study of Facebook Usage during Iranian Presidential Election in 2009

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ABSTRACT

This research is based on political events before and after the Iranian presidential election in 12 June 2009, and the role of Facebook as a social networking website in this case. Facebook was utilized extensively by the Iranian people during the election and it was banned by the government just before the election. Facebook was mostly populated by reformists who were supporting opposition candidate, Mir Hussein Mousavi and the Green Movement. Many Iranians used Facebook during the protests after the election and their usage actually played a role in escalating the protests. Findings shows that the most important feature of Facebook was its sharing option that allowed individuals or citizen reporters to upload their material and share it, whether texts, photos or videos. This study examined Facebook's political function and effects as a new medium utilized by ordinary citizens in new political affairs. The research concluded that social networking can foster the democratic roots of each society as well as assisting people to overcome media censorship and filtration.

Key words: Cyber media, Social networking, Facebook, Politics, Citizen Reporters, Censorship

ÖZ

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Bu çalışma 12 Haziran 2009 yılında gerçekleştirilen İran Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimlerinin öncesinde ve sonrasında meydana gelen politik olayları temel alarak, bu olaylarda bir sosyal ağ sitesi olan Facebook'un rolünü incelemektedir. Facebook seçimler süresince İran halkı tarafından yaygın bir şekilde kullanılmış ve seçimlerin hemen öncesinde İran hükümeti tarafından yasaklanmıştır. Facebook'un çoğunlukla seçimlerde rakip aday olan Mir Hussein Mousavi ve Yeşil Devrim'i destekleyen reformistler tarafından kullanıldığı görülmektedir. Birçok İran vatandaşı seçimler sonrasında gerçekleştirilen gösteriler boyunca Facebook'u kullanmış ve bu durum gösterilerin artmasında önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Araştırma sonucunda elde edilen bulgular, Facebook'un bu süreçteki en önemli özelliğinin, bireylere ya da yurttaş muhabirlere metin, fotoğraf ve video gibi materyalleri paylaşma olanağı sağlaması olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, vatandaşlar tarafından yeni bir iletişim aracı olarak kullanılan Facebook'un politik işlevini incelemektedir. Araştırmada sosyal ağların her toplumun demokratik köklerinin gelişimine katkıda bulunabildiği kadar insanlara sansür ve filtreleme uygulamalarının üstesinden gelmekte yardım ettiği sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cyber medya, Sosyal Ağ, Facebook, Siyaset, Vatandaş Gazeteciler, Sansür

With very special gratitude to my wife **Mozhdeh**. Without her love and understanding, none of this would be possible.

With special thanks to my kind sister **Farideh**, whose support and encouragement always helped to keep me on course.

This thesis is dedicated to my father,

For his love and endless support,

He is a great source of motivation and inspiration for me, forever.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

This study is based on political events before and after the Iranian presidential election in 12 June 2009, with incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad running against three challengers, Mir Hussein Mousavi, Mehdi Karoubi and Mohsen Rezai.

Iran's official news agency (IRNA) [1] announced, one day after the election, Ahmadinejad as winner of the election with 63% of the votes and Mir Hussein Mousavi received 34% of the votes, Mohsen Rezai and Mehdi Karoubi stood on third and fourth place. The European Union and the United States and several western countries, like Germany and France, expressed concern over alleged irregularities during the election, and many analysts and journalists from inside and outside of Iran doubted the validity of the results. Many people also believed that the results were not valid, and that their votes were lost or that they were actually cheated.

Several large-scale protests and demonstrations took place where the people expressed their disagreement with the results, and many of them were crushed by the police with violence and brutality, resulting in the deaths of a large number of people.

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[1] Islamic Republic News Agency

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Programmed blocking of communications like Mobile phones and the Internet as well as social networks like Facebook before and after the election, was one of the reasons that made people suspicious about the validity of the election.

Meanwhile, the opposition inside Iran especially reformists don't have access to established media like TV or newspapers, as what they had was mostly banned by the authorities, and their access to the official media like state TV, radio and news agencies, was prohibitively restricted at that time.

In Iran, according to the constitution, all TV and radio channels are directly controlled by the supreme leader who is Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at the time and private TV or radios are forbidden. Also all newspapers and magazines must get a publication permit from the government and are controlled strictly.

Many Iranians are using digital receivers to watch satellite channels, which in terms of politics are mostly considered as opposition channels, but due to the jamming of signals across the cities with the use of appropriate high technology equipment utilized by the government, watching these channels have become almost impossible in some cases. Additionally, the police are responsible for confiscating satellite equipments from the people, and they do it occasionally.

Freedom of speech condition, Internet censorship and filtration as well as more information about Internet speed and connections in Iran, are discussed in the literature review chapter which certainly would be helpful in understanding the research context.

1.2 Research statement

Cyber media, particularly social networks have marked a new phase in communication and recent media history, in which the media space is not formed by official or unofficial state agencies. Instead, we are faced with ordinary people who, with their cell phones and computers connected to the Internet, have become very strong agencies, and are broadcasting themselves.

Social movements or social demands or any political activities are broadcasted by individuals, by uploading and sharing the information, whether established news agencies cover it or not.

Variety of factors could have played a role in bringing about this phenomenon, and scholars with different approaches describe dissimilar reasons for this outcome. While some of them call it 'the Facebook revolution', others disagree completely.

Clearly, there is need for further research and examination on social networking and its effects on people as well as societies. Politics is also involved in this process and is influenced by this new phenomenon. Innovative forms of political participation are initiated by social networks and some commentators are highlighting raised public awareness with the help of social networks, which connect more people together.

I share the assumption that social networks are utilized by people in countries where free flow of information is banned or controlled by the government.

In Iran and during the presidential election in 2009, social networking websites, especially Facebook, as their users testify, became one of the primary sources of

information for the people in home and aboard, although it was banned very quickly after the election. Most news about the candidates, their declarations, interviews, photos, and movies were uploaded and shared by Facebook members, and serious discussions as well as users declaration of agreement or disagreement with the candidates were also broadcast.

The fan pages of presidential candidates were joined by hundred thousands of Iranian Facebook members, for instance the fan page of Mir Hussein Mousavi was joined by 230 thousand members. After the election, Facebook's function changed and it became a main source of news about the protests as well as the main place to upload individual's news, photos and videos about the demonstrations.

Iranian authorities have always portrayed social networking websites as "American spywares" which is meant that these social network websites are planned to encourage uprising and insurrection among the Iranian people. For instance, to prove their claim, they refer to Hillary Clinton, (United State's Secretary of State) who requested to Twitter [a social networking website [2]] to postpone a planned maintenance shutdown as a way to allow Iranians to speak out and utilize Twitter social network, during the Iranian protests, in fact to postpone Twitter's administration team plan to revise the website because it may cause some problems for Iranian members to distribute the news.

> And I think keeping that line of communications open [Twitter] and enabling people [Iranian people] to share information, particularly at a time [after the election in 2009] when there was not many other sources of information, is an important expression of the right to speak out and to be able to organize. (Clinton, 2009).

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[2] www.twitter.com

1.3 Purpose of study

The main goal of this research was to understand the role and effects of Facebook as a social network on the Iranian presidential election in 2009 and the events that happened afterward.

Besides that it assessed the Facebook usage rate in Iranian society as a whole and I compared usage rates among different social strata.

Likewise, it examined the impact of Facebook's attributed features on new political affairs, its role and its effectiveness, especially in totalitarian regimes, regarding freedom of speech indicators and censorship.

Additionally, this research had an eye on a significant term in new media studies called citizen reporters, and their role in new social and political movements.

A glimpse on some of my research questions illuminate the thesis subject more:

1. What is the Facebook usage rate in a sample Iranian society?

2. What was the main role of Facebook usage in political events before and after the presidential election in 2009 in Iran? Could Facebook usage be effective in escalating the protests after the election?

3. Does Facebook usage help in increasing public awareness and freedom of speech in Iran?

4. Is there a relationship between Facebook usage and censorship in Iran?

5. Does Facebook usage support citizen reporters in the cyber space in Iran?

1.4 Significance of study

This study can shed light on our understanding of social networking phenomenon and its function in Iranian society, especially concerning political issues.

Likewise it illuminates a vital relation between organized censorship by governments, and individuals' utilization of social networks to overcome those limitations.

Similarly, this research studies the citizen reporter phenomenon's connection with social networking as well as its effectiveness in Iranian society, particularly during the presidential election in 2009.

Finally by answering these research questions, the emerging patterns may be helpful in the future, concerning the role of social networking in political affairs.

1.5 Scope of study

My case study is the Iranian presidential election in 2009 and its aftermath, and the sample city chosen for the research is Esfahan, the second major city in Iran.

I conducted two surveys. One survey was conducted on a random sample of Iranian citizens in Esfahan, and the other was conducted on a random sample of Iranian Facebook users.

1.6 Dilemmas and limitations

The most important factor which caused serious difficulty during my research was people's lack of trust on me as a researcher. So many people were not participating in the survey, even when it was online.

They were mostly afraid that this research is conducted by the government so they were not inclined to answer. Even when they trusted me as a researcher, they still worried about the results, whether the government could reach them and it may consequently cause some inconvenience for them. For instance in the online survey, some people exposed their suspicion that perhaps their IP address is recorded and that by answering these questions the government may recognize their Facebook membership a crime.

Second major limitation during the research process was non-cooperation of the responsible organization related to the thesis subject, like Ministry of Information. Two factors were influential in their hesitation: first the thesis topic deals with a suspect political issue, second the researcher is studying in a foreign university which makes the formal procedures more complicated.

The third factor which caused much loss of time during the research was the lack of accurate statistics required for my research, the lack of statistics about Internet usage rate as well as Facebook usage rate in Iranian society. (It's worth mentioning that regarding filtration in Iran, Facebook users inside the country are connecting to the website by VPNs or anti filter softwares, therefore their IP addresses are fake and even Facebook administration team also did not publish any statistics in this case).

The accurate statistic about Internet usage rate and Facebook usage rate in Iranian society, even if it exists and Iranian authorities have access to it, is not available to the public due to some alleged security reasons.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Globalization and media

The present world is changing rapidly and the Internet is one of the key factors of globalization. Revolution in Information Technologies (IT) has established a new type of virtual communication, a new world which is created in parallel to the real world through satellite, Internet and etc. According to Dr. Yahya Kamalipour[3](cited in Pournaji 2008) this world has two main characteristics:

> 1) Virtual reality culture**:** electronic media has extensive and increasing audience that offer collections to them in terms of symbolic content. In such conditions the virtual space is shaped and cultures are transferred through electronic mediators,

> 2) Time without time and space of currents**:** concepts of time and place find new meanings; time and place distances are practically removed and the possibility to transfer such information, data and capital and simultaneous relation among individuals in different places is created (p. 1).

In an article entitled "Globalization of Media: Key Issues and Dimensions" Mirza Jan (2009) points out that no media is global in inherent shape and what we call audience of the global media is a small and relative rich society with English language (p. 66). He stresses that all attitudes of globalization have become possible with help of the mass media whether at domestic level or international level (p. 66).

Also Jan (2009) argues that globalization creates important challenges for the media

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[3] professor of communications in Boudreaux University in America

and cultural policy that has been shaped based on traditions. Jan (2009) believes that what we recognize today as the global media are more introducers of American political and cultural values and western countries and the media that could correctly represent values and traditions of different countries haven't been developed adequately (p. 73).

Kamalipour (cited by Pournaji, 2008) also believes that media globalization is not a coincidence. Creating of media multinational companies and information giants is one of the reasons for media globalization, these big and giant companies become bigger every day and one of the main reasons of media globalization is their economic advantages (p. 2).

In addition, Soltanifar[4] (2008) emphasize that gaining of soft power in the modern global media age and the globalization age through modern information and communications technology is by far easier than gaining and maintaining of hard power [hard power, for instance refer to gaining and maintaining power through military] (p. 25).

Defining soft power in the global world, Soltanifar (2008) indicates that power is the ability to shape others' preferences. In other words, such soft power involves persuasion in contrast to the category of hard power based on coercion, compulsion or physical and military force (p. 26). Soltanifar (2008) considers soft power as scholarly discussions, and public values that are propagated with the aim of affecting public opinion and not political advertisements (p. 27). Soltanifar (2008) believes that the media in the globalization process is successful when it is compatible with

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[4] Professor of communications sciences at Tehran University

public opinion and moves with it (p. 28).

In this regard Soltanifar (2008) refers to Edward Said who believed that in the liberal view, development of mass media will not only increase control over humans' life but also enhance the ground for individuals' empowerment against the organizations and the government. Edward Said also believed that globalization process of the mass media creates a kind of awareness towards common human values (p. 29).

Soltanifar (2008) also refers to the French sociologist Edgar Morin, who believes colonization emerged in two shapes, direct and indirect or neo-colonization. After changing of direct colonization to indirect colonization, culture category is used as the tool of this colonization and from this time on whoever is born on the earth has a diverted mind and thought by such global media (p. 29).

In addition, Kamalpour (cited in Pournaji 2008) indicates that communications technology motivates us to talk about globalization. Emphasizing virtually disappearing of geographical boundaries, today every person in every place of the world can connect to the world network by a computer, and the main consequence of media globalization is the fact that it is not possible to keep people unaware in the present world, people who seek news and want to inform themselves could do this work wherever they are. (p. 3).

Here it is essential to talk about the difference of the title of 'globalization' and media and 'media globalization'. The former refers to a mutual relation between these two phenomena, indeed media and globalization, and the latter refers to a longitudinal relation and in harmonization with these two phenomena. In fact media

globalization means establishment of multinational media companies and information giants and has a close relation with economic advantages of media and their political power.

2.2 Globalization and the Internet

Globalization proceeds faster as a result of the improvement of modern technologies, especially in the field of telecommunication. The individuals who already have been neglected and considered as a stranger in their country, can become aware of the world even in the most isolated part, through extensive information networks, and can participate in many public centers and the civil society.

Globalization gives rise to productivity of information technology and creates a global market and a motivation for information technology acceptance. Globalization and information orientation cause individuals to feel a need for information, awareness and knowledge more than ever, and we can say that the human being is moving towards the information community in which all relations are formed based on information. With increased urbanization and the appearance of modern economic actors, information revolution creates a new social being in the form of emergence of information societies, participatory democracy and the spirit of globalism.

In studying the relations between information and globalization, I found that these two phenomena have a two-fold relation with each other. From one side, information has a special role and place in globalization, and on the other side globalization leads to increased access to information and perception of its importance.

In information arena globalization is considered as the facilitation of free flow of information beyond boundaries or without paying attention to boundaries.

Globalization leads to expanding, speeding, facilitating and encouraging of communications especially telecommunications like Internet.

According to Friedman (cited in Chepeuiak, 1999) this growth in technology has created information democracy, and this democracy enhances international harmonization capability (p. 8).

In this regard, Montazeri (2010), researcher of Javan Newspaper says:

> the reason that Internet has displayed a strong presence among the television networks, satellite and mobile phone network, refers to unique properties of this media that not only causes its preceding over other informatics tools but also causes it to be unrivalled. These properties have capability of simultaneous edition, being extra-geographical, being supranational, low expense of extensibility and its unlimited capacity (p. 10).

Internet indeed develops human thought, connects some people of the world (who have access to the Internet) to each other and brings them near, and most important of all, reduces the world's complications.

Manuel Castells (1995) says: "cultures are made up of communication processes. As Roland Barthes and Jean baudrillard taught us many years ago all shapes of communication are based on production and consumption of signs" (p. 418).

Emphasizing that there is no separation between the reality and symbolic display Castells (1995) indicates that in all societies human beings have lived in a symbolic environment and have acted through this environment. Thus historical property of the modern communication system that is organized around electronic integration of all methods of communication from written communication to multi-sense communication is not the inspiration of virtual reality; rather it is creating of real

metaphors (p. 419).

Castells refers to politics too and believes that it belongs to the same scope in which, the use of computer communications are expanding every day. He also looks at the history of the Internet in terms of political utilization and mentions Christian fundamentalist groups, American paramilitaries and Zapatista troops in Mexico who have been the pioneers of using such technology to propagate their political advertisements through E-mail (1995, p. 420).

Castells also points to an experience of political participation of people through the Internet which perhaps has been the first time in the world, and that is the electronic participation experience of citizens of Monica in California. They proposed their public viewpoints about general and urban issues with politicians in a program called Pen, for example, discussing homelessness in the presence of those homeless people. It was one of the best known results of this electronic participation of citizens at the beginning of the 1990's. Castells believes that these experiences and electronic participations could lead to the reinforcement of local democracies (1995, p. 422).

2.3 New media

In the previous decades a new manner of communication was created by the appearance of a triangle i.e. linking of computer, mass media and telecommunications that had both some characteristics of the mass media and lacked some of them. Of course it added some new properties to it. Such media like the World Wide Web were called new media.

In this regard, Denis McQuail (2005, p. 258) indicates that theories related to the mass media have permanently been reviewed based on the modern technologies and

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their application. Before this we observed a new kind of media which had developed and changed a wide spectrum of the possibilities related to social technologies for public communications. However, exact prediction of what will happen seems too soon and what is important is predicting of possibilities and testing of major social and cultural results that have already appeared.

In the following, McQuail stressed a fundamental supposition that the media is not just an applied technology to transfer certain symbolic concepts or it doesn't just relate the parties of a transaction; rather it is a perfect sample of a group of social relations and interactions with manifestations of modern technology (2005, p. 259).

McQuail emphasizes that the new media are in fact a distinct set of the communicative technology that have certain properties along becoming newer, digital equipments and vast availability for personal use as communications tool. Our attention is specially focused on a group of activities that are proposed under the title of the Internet (2005, p. 260).

In responding to the question of what is new matter about the new media, McQuail (2005, p. 260) says the most fundamental aspect of information and communications technology (ICT) may be digitalized reality. It is a process during which all texts (symbolic meanings in all forms of encryption and recording) can be converted in to binary numbers of zero and one and have the same process of production, distribution and storage. Convergence among all forms of the existing media in the fields of distribution and propagation, receiving and organizing are the potential results.

As we know, various forms of the mass media have already stood out and have kept their independent identity and even have prospered and developed. Mass media as a distinct factor of social life has become permanent. We can see the new media as an additional thing to whatever exists rather than a replacement for it.

McQuail believes that if we consider the main characteristics of the media, it seems that Internet has distinct differences. First the Internet is not involved in producing and distributing of a message alone, rather it works in the field of processing, exchange of ideas and saving of information. Secondly, the new media are as private as they are public, and have been modernized. Thirdly, activities in the Internet are not professional or are not organized like other mass media in legal and administrative aspects (2005, p. 261).

These are very important differences and bear on the fact that new media are primarily similar to the mass media because of the propagation extent, their availability and at least due to releasing from supervision.

McQuail (2005, p. 262) states differences of the new media and traditional media in five points and says he has put Internet, radio, film and television in one vessel and states five cases of publication limitations and productive models of audio-visual programs through this:

- Capability of multi-person discourse,
- Capability of simultaneously receiving, changing and repetitive broadcasting of cultural subjects,
- Communication is beyond the national level and from limited communications to modernity,

- Providing of global communication,

- Inserting of modern and post modern concepts in a network tool.

According to Rasmussen (cited by McQuail 2005, p. 263) the new media in contrast to television can have a direct role in personal life programs. In fact the new media briefly reinforce the individual's power in contrast to the destructive impacts of modernity. But in the ground of social change, capability of the new communications must be restudied as the agent of programmed social or economic changes.

McQuail (2005) mentions that we should at first glance differentiate among the mass media which could be used systematically for planned development through informatics and collective influence with no purposeful and open applications that are the characteristics of modern technology. (p. 264).

Based on an article in Etelaat Newspaper from Ramin Bahrampour (2010, p. 10) the new media were regarded as a tool for social change and movements which used the modern media extensively for communications and organization.

Bahrampour (2010, p. 11) refers to protests towards WTO[5] world conference in 1999 where protestors used modern media widely to communicate with people and to educate them.

2.4 New media and politics

Undoubtedly the dominant language and discourse of this age is changing, and postmodernity, globalization, and also structural change of the new media are the necessities of the era.

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[5] World Trade Organization

Huggins and Axford (2001) deal with this subject in their book *New media and politics* and ask questions such as "does the media build flow or is it affected by change processes?" and "are changes of technologies and media lead to political change?" (p. 13). According to them logic of the new media is to improve more democratic and heavier kinds of discourses of the civil society. In fact they believe that such media alter the public space and assimilate cultural experiences.

Huggins and Axford (2001) state differences between old and new media:

1. Systematic differences that refer to various organizational principles of old and new media (p. 14).

2. Technical and esthetic, immediacy and intractability, extensive scope of reflect ability and dominance of picture over text (p. 15).

And then Huggins and Axford mention some political characteristics of the new media (2001, p. 20):

1. extending of 24-hours news programs

2. simultaneity of voice, picture and text in political subjects

3. opinion poll with telephone

4. electronic city conferences

5. creating of concepts of electronic democracy, electronic government and on-line government

6. clear discourses among people and politicians

7. increasing of transactions speed and their becoming immediate

8. keeping aloof of the new media from the politicians and governmental organizations

Huggins and Axford (2001, p. 50) briefly stress that political communications are changing due to global processes of liberalization and exertion of no compulsion and developing of modern technologies, among these changes, we see the emergence of role-creators and political subjects in the mass media.

Huggins and Axford argue that two development processes of Neo-liberal paradigm and wave of new media technologies have accelerated the transition of national communications systems. They emphasize the importance of communicative media and democracy and their configuration to the democratic property of the society and also the importance of media democratization (2001, p. 52).

According to Huggins and Axford (2001) five factors give rise to the creation of the new role of media in democracy:

1. Commercialization: media should attract people's attention to gain profit and this means changing of political procedure to the intended form by people ,

2. Concentration: monopolization of the media ownership and its concentration in the hand of some media giants of the world cause to create new shapes of democracy (p. 98).

3. Globalization: traditional shapes of democracy are inevitably changed by traversing of national boundaries by the media (p. 99).

4. Exertion of no compulsion: perhaps media are changed to be in the service of public purposes from one side by reduction of government supervision on the media or reversely they may move at the opposite direction of public purposes (p. 100).

5. Reproduction: presence of the media in the society and culture is done more rapidly by the extending of reproduction channels. (p. 100).

What is obvious is that we cannot express one-sided and certain ideas about the impact of the Internet on democracy i.e. weakening or strengthening of it. Huggins and Axford (2001, p. 102) believe that Internet users are in minority in terms of number, however they are among the high groups of the society in terms of social group. Therefore, Internet is changing to a meeting place for equipped classes of political institute.

Stephen Coleman mentioned transformation in another concept and its relation with the new media. This concept has a key role in social networks too: active citizen which has no economical expenses for the government but carries moral responsibilities in the society (p. 168). This kind of citizen is more a response to the existing increasing concerns with regard to social disorderliness (cited in Huggins and Axford 2001, p. 170).

Stephen Coleman argues that since traditional media are a monological discourse they contact with the whole society as audience and their productions are not easily compatible with citizenship needs. Though many have stressed their potential role in the education of individuals for democratic citizenship since the invention of radio and television, the nature of such media and other factors such as ownership have no consistency with the citizenship spirit. Stephen Coleman emphasize that this inability in educating attribute citizens to the nature of the media and collusion of media producers with ruling structures and political ideologies (cited in Huggins & Axford, 2001, p. 172).

Of course it must be said that at the end of the twentieth century attempts were made to reinforce the role of the media in the fostering of citizenship voice. Among these

attempts we can refer to local radios, cable televisions and direct relationship with the people. It should be noted that all these issues involve accessibility and awareness of citizens from working with the new media.

New media promise a rich information society in which citizens have access to different resources. So it is a probable conclusion that participation in the political process has mainly increased. But on the other side we should recall that these media could weaken democracy by creating discrimination in distribution of knowledge and information, segmentation of discourse among various sections of policy making and decreasing of participation given to the interest in electronic democracy that was expanded in the world in the previous decade.

Ring and Hyrax (cited in Huggins and Axford 2001) review characteristics of the new media and state five cases:

1. Lack of limitation of exchanged information volume,

2. Increasing of the audience control on receiving and precision of the message,

3. Control of the audience about the point that which audience receives which messages,

4. They decentralize equal control of public communications,

5. They have capability of interaction (p. 295).

In view of Ring and Hyrax one of the reasons for strength of such media is combination of the existent three characteristics about the media, i.e. "transformation of data, public participation and interaction". Ring and Hyrax to the American viewpoint with regard to the impact of Internet that Americans believe it can provide a greater political voice for the common people (cited in Huggins and Axford 2001, p. 297).

Ring and Hyrax emphasize that today information and communications technology is at the center of any thought about electronic democracy and interactive nature of this technology establishes a potential for a rich type of politics (cited in Huggins and Axford, 2001, p. 315).

2.5 Interactive media

In recent years and by developing of the Internet, a new kind of media called interactive media have emerged. Hamid Abedi (2009, p. 1) has studied functions and characteristics of such media in an article entitled '*Interactive media and the twenty first century'*. Abedi explains this new phenomenon as follows: First he draws the structure of the old media like radio and television vertically in an axis from top to bottom, i.e. from the message sender by means of message transfer to its receiver. Hence Abedi believes that programs (messages) are prepared by a centralized situation (message sender) and reaches through communicative tools (radio and television) to the audience (message receiver). The message has a monologue and to some extent an un-democratic shape. But in the structure of the new media based on computer and Internet or interactive media, the broadcasting system is changed from vertical to horizontal state according to Abedi, so that each sender can act as the message receiver and each receiver as the message sender by coming out of the interactive state and be a pure displayer.

In fact numerous audiences are not considered in such media and numerous communicators are more focused. The published message in this state is changed from monological discourse to multilogical discourse or dialogue. Abedi (2009) says in this state whoever has something to say will be able to transfer his message to an extensive group of the audience (p. 2).

The second important characteristic of interactive media according to Abedi (2009) is their being virtual or non-physical (p. 2). Abedi believes that humans would be able to participate in an electronic procedure on behalf of real situations of life.

In sum, Abedi (2009, p. 3) states 11 characteristics for interactive media:

- very high speed in information transfer,

- security of data transfer by optic fibers than air waves,

- very low expense for communicators,

- the possibility of changing of each audience to a mobile studio of television broadcasting,

- the possibility of extensive selection and access to wide resources of information, amusements and services,

- the possibility to experience out of reach realities in virtual space that lie beyond time and place,

- decentralization of broadcasting of news and information from power centers and the possibility to establish equal situations for all people in the society,

- interaction among the cultures through mutual and direct relation among communicators,

- variation and flexibility in selection and manner of displaying of programs and even personal identity of individuals,

- the capability to record information,

- reinforcement of individualistic spirit.

2.6 Cyber space

Cyber space is a term that is heard much in the world of Internet, media and communications. Helen Sadeghi (2005) believes that cyber is a prefix to describe a

person, thing, idea and space that is related to the world of computer and communications (p. 1).

Cyber space in general and in terms of meaning is said to groups of internal communications of human beings through computer and electronic communications without paying attention to physical geography ((Misfadin, 2005, p. 1).

An on-line system is a sample of cyber space where users can make relations with each other through e-mail (Misfadin 2005 p. 1).

Sadeghi (2005) emphasizes that in contrast to the real space, physical displacements are not needed in cyber space and all actions are just done by the pressing of keys or mouse movements. This physical non-displacement persuades researchers to study some similarities of cyber space with unconscious states especially mental states that appear in dreams (p. 2).These researches were inspired by Chang Tzu, a researcher who studied similarities between cyber space and dreams. Helen Sadeghi (2005) describe that "one night Chang Tzu sees in his dream that he has become a butterfly, when he wakes up thinks to himself and says am I a man who dreams to be a butterfly or am I a butterfly that now dreams to be a man?" (p. 2).

Given the above example, Sadeghi (2005) argues that the working process of a computer user in cyber space is a kind of tantalization or disappearing inside of a different reality, i.e. a virtual reality that is beyond real rules and realities like a mental leader at the time of meditation who reaches to unity with his surrounding environment, like the computer user who becomes merged while working in the virtual and cyber space (p. 2).

Of course such merging does not happen every day for computer users, since most of the times we press the keyboard for the doing of a specified function and without indulging into the virtual world, but if we ask professional and regular advocates of computers, we will perceive that most of them recall moments when they have felt no obstacle and distance between themselves and their computer.

Sadeghi (2005) stresses that cyber space is a scope of mind that could extend and explain all shapes of logical life (p. 2). In fact we can experience various and different mental states such as imaginations, hallucination, day-dreaming, hypnotistic states and diverse levels of consciousness in the cyber space. It is under such conditions that cyber space according to Helen Sadeghi (2005) is the same as dream world, the world that appears when we are sleeping (p. 3).

Mahsa Yaghmaee (2010) argues that we cannot just consider cyber space as a big information main road, because our mental experience in the cyber space is totally different from our mental experience when day dream without any purpose and value. Indeed as sleeping at night from psychological view is necessary for health, emotional development and personality growth of an individual, this cyber space is in the service of human's psyche (p. 4).

Yaghmaee (2010) believes that cyber space could bring boundaries between conscious and subconscious realities closer and could tell new things about the meaning of reality (p. 5).

For instance chat is a graphical environment in which users can choose one or more masks among the existing graphical masks for their personal representation in order

to relate with others. Each of these masks illustrates a special situation or psychical state. Some of these dream-like states in the place could be found in other cyber space too.

Yaghmaee (2010) explains that it is necessary to consider some characteristics from a psychological viewpoint in order to perceive this visual experience more:

- Current rules of time, place and distance are not executed in dreams,

- The person who dreams can repeatedly transfer from one adventure to another,

- There is no sense of distance or place in dreams,

- Some daily knowledge is disappears in dreams (p. 5).

The above states occur in cyber space to a wider extent, and users can indulge in the virtual and cyberspace in contrast to time and place.

2.7 Cyber culture

Do social and relational spaces of Internet have culture? What are their characteristics? Do national, ethnic or political, cultural value systems rule over the cyberspace? These questions are more and more asked everyday by expanding of digital media.

With the increase in human's interaction with computers and networks, dealing with the relation and interaction of human and machine is no longer sufficient. Digital technologies and computers can facilitate developing of relational cultures in cyber space. These issues include forming of a new culture, representation and understanding of the cyber reality, identity, importance and power of social forms like virtual societies and cyberspace discourse in the common culture and other

grounds.

With cyberspace, new concepts gradually entered into social discussions like cyber-relations, cyber-democracy, cyber-protest, cyber-citizen, concepts which are related to the subject of my thesis and research.

Computerized relations among humans become more pervasive day by day. Computers are more and more linked to each other through local and global networks and also through wireless technology. Extensive relation increases the speed of transfer of picture, voice, film and information more than before. Computerized technologies provide the possibility of interaction of human-machine in a completely new and modern form and also possibility of human-human interaction in cyber space.

L.P Misfadin (2005) in an article called "*Cyber Space Culture*" argues that human with human interaction is the building block of culture. Misfadin (2005) refers to the cultural development model of Luria and Vygotski which implies paying attention to cultures of cyberspace in any study about computer-oriented human relations, since this requires relational and behavioral actions that humans do while interacting with their surrounding environment (p. 10).

Misfadin (2005) following Luria and Vygotski, argue that humans apply various psychological structures in order to make relations with themselves and the environment. Structures are classified in the form of signs that include time and non-time relational mechanisms (p. 11).

Structures are categorized in the form of tools which include a wide range of behavioral models and methods that the individual learns and adopts in order to offer effective performance within a culture or community. Generally, signs and tools enable individuals to analyze data and build meaning and interaction with objects, individuals and situations they encounter.

In the context of the Internet, humans don't just interact with digital tools, rather these tools enable humans to enter into a cyber space with a range of relational and cultural possibilities that is effective in their ability for interaction with different technologies.

Their group and individual cultural actions may be consistent with cyber cultures of cyberspace or not.

Some other researchers have argued that cultural-social aspects of computer-based interaction of humans in transferring of meaning and creating of an effective and efficient structure are more important than technical considerations of communication.

There are opposite characteristics in discussions and researches related to cyber culture and some researchers have referred to them too. Misfadin (2005) refers to the ideas of Fisher Wright and Buster who have compared personally idealistic and non-idealistic predictions in the discourse ruling over the Internet (p. 12).

Misfadin (2005) explains that some interpreters propose utopian viewpoints with regard to the so called information path while obviously defending instrumentalism.

These scholars predict that the ability to be released from Internet communications has a major impact on the emergence of new forms of democracy and collective understanding in the global village of cyber space (p. 14).

Misfadin (2005) also argues that some scholars have proposed non-utopian standpoints about cyberspace at a more extensive level. Capitalism and money-oriented culture are dominant in such standpoints and develop the existent hierarchy of unfairness and economic inequality (p. 14).

Likewise, from one side it reinforces western/American cultural values and technical skills. These discussions and those that have mutual and opposite subjects are related to cybercultures like the Internet as a collective control center versus the Internet as a new social culture, or the Internet as a cultural context versus, the Internet as a cultural artifact which is included in philosophical subjects of cyber culture.

2.8 Cyber citizen

"Citizen journalism (also known as "public"," participatory", democratic","guerrilla" or "street journalism") is the concept of members of the public playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (Citizen Journalism, 2011).

According to the report '*We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information'*, Authors Bowman and Willis say: "The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires" (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 9).

This report states:

> The venerable profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in

history where, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, by the audience it serves. Armed with easy-to-use Web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information. And it's doing just that on the Internet (p. 7).

In this regard Journalists network website emphasized that

Citizen journalism should not be confused with community journalism or civic journalism, which are practiced by professional journalists, or collaborative journalism, which is practiced by professional and non-professional journalists working together. Citizen journalism is a specific form of citizen media as well as user generated content (Citizen Journalism, 2011).

Mark Glaser (2006), a freelance journalist who frequently writes on new media issues, said

The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others. For example, you might write about a city council meeting on your blog or in an online forum. Or you could fact-check a newspaper article from the mainstream media and point out factual errors or bias on your blog. Or you might snap a digital photo of a newsworthy event happening in your town and post it online. Or you might videotape a similar event and post it on a site such as YouTube (p. 1).

Citizen journalism is a "bottom-up, phenomenon in which there is little or no editorial oversight or formal journalistic workflow dictating the decisions of a team. Instead, it is the result of many simultaneous, distributed conversations that either blossom or quickly atrophy in the Web's social network" (Bowman & Willis 2003, p. 9).

2.9 Protest in an information society

Modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as cell phones, email, and the World Wide Web are transforming the methods in which activists communicate and collaborate. Garrett (2006) mentions "the cell phone coordinated

protest against the World Bank with software built to circumvent state-sanctioned censorship, as an example in the social movement landscape" (p. 202). In this case McAdam et al. framework (cited by Garrett 2006) aimed to explicate social movements' emergence, growth, and results by describing three interrelated factors: "mobilizing structure, opportunity structures, and framing process" (p. 203).

According to McAdam et al. (cited by Garrett 2006) "mobilizing structure refers to the mechanisms that enable individuals to organize and engage in collective action including social structures and tactical repertoires" (p. 204).

McAdam et al. (cited by Garrett 2006) also described opportunity structure as "conditions in the environment that favor social movement activity which include factors such as the relative accessibility of the political system and the stable or fragmented alignments among elites". For instance, "civil rights mobilization efforts in the 1950s and 1960s were successful in part because of the differing attitudes between elites in north and those in the south toward the rights of the African Americans" (p. 204). Finally McAdam et al. (cited by Garrett 2006, p. 206) argued that "framing processes are strategic attempts to craft, disseminate, and contest the language and narratives used to describe a movement. The objective of this process is to justify activists' claims and motivate action using culturally shared beliefs and understandings".

Garret (2006, p. 206) explained that

> Various terminology and stories used to describe protests against the WTO and the IMF[6] exemplify a contemporary framing process. For example, 'anti-globalization' is the label most often used by mainstream media, while activist publications often refer to the 'global justice,' anti-capitalist,' or 'fair trade' movement, each of which implies slightly different justification, strategies and objectives.

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[6] International Monetary Fund

In this framework 'mobilizing structure' contains three subcategories: "participation levels, contentious activity, and organizational issues" (Garrett 2006, p.206). Participation level depends on three mechanisms that potentially link technology and participation: "reduction of participation costs, promotion of collective identity, and creation of community" (Garrett 2006, p. 207). Actually,

> By reducing costs associated with publishing and accessing movement information, ICTs have the potential to alter the flow of political information, reduce the cost of conventional forms of participation, and create new low-cost forms of participation, ultimately contributing to an upsurge in participation (Leizerov 2000 cited by Garrett 2006, p. 207).

The second mechanism connecting technology and participation is the "promotion of collective identity"; Garrett (2006) explains it as "a perception among individuals that they are members of a larger community by virtue of the grievances they share" (p. 208). In fact, ICTs[7] can promote collective identity among people.

The third mechanism is facilitation of community creation by ICTs. Norris (cited by Garret 2006) argued "online community members report that their experiences with these groups significantly reinforce existing social networks, while simultaneously allowing them to connect with those who hold different views" (p. 209).

According to Garret (2006, p. 209) "numerous case studies suggest that new technologies are also facilitating the maintenance of geographically dispersed face-to-face networks".

The second subcategory which I mentioned before is 'contentious activity' which implies that "an oft-noted feature of ICTs is their ability to accelerate and

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[7] Information and Communication Technology

geographically extend the diffusion of social movement information and of protest" (Myers 1994 cited by Garret 2006, p. 211). For instance, broadcasting a protest in a place can amplify the subject salience across a broader area, potentially encouraging prospect actions somewhere else.

And finally the third subcategory is "organizational issues" in which "new ICTs facilitate collaboration between traditional social movement organization and they may more likely make other kinds of social movement configurations too" (Garret, 2006, p. 212). The framework concluded with third factor which is "opportunity structures" that are "attributes of social system that facilitate or constraint movement activity. They shape the environment in which activists operate and activists must take them into account when crafting actions" (Garrett 2006, p. 219).

2.10 Social Networks

Boyd, D. M., & Ellison (2007) define social network sites as

> web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (p. 1)

PC Magazine Encyclopedia of IT Terms defined social networking website as

> A Web site that provides a virtual community for people to share their daily activities with family and friends, or to share their interest in a particular topic, or to increase their circle of acquaintances. There are dating sites, friendship sites, sites with a business purpose and hybrids that offer a combination of these. Facebook is the leading personal site, and LinkedIn is the leading business site. Globally, hundreds of millions of people have joined one or more social sites (2011, p. 1).

2.11 Facebook

Facebook is a social networking service and website launched in February 2004, operated and privately owned by Facebook, Inc. In January 2011, Facebook had

more than 600 million active users. Users may create a personal profile, add other users as friends, and exchange messages, including automatic notifications when they update their profile. Facebook allows any users who declare themselves to be at least 13 years old to become registered users of the website. Facebook was founded by Mark Zuckerberg with his college roommates and fellow computer science students Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes.

2.12 The Impact of Facebook on political communication

Mike Westling (2007) in "Expanding the Public Sphere: the Impact of Facebook on Political Communication" reviewed Facebook features and its effects on politics. Presidential campaigns in the US in 2008 defined themselves as "conversation[s] with the American people…these campaigns will follow traditional communication strategies that include television ads, campaign rallies, direct mail, and press coverage" (Westling 2008, p. 837).

The only way politicians could efficiently achieve feedback from the people was to conduct an opinion poll, but "beginning with the Howard Dean campaign in 2004, political strategists realized that Internet could provide additional methods of gauging the public's interest and opinion as well as engaging of community members in the political process" (Westling 2008, p. 837).

Westling (2008) tried to define a good political communication in a community and referred to "Jurgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere. Habermas envisioned a place where community members could collectively form public opinion in an environment removed from the government or economy" (p. 837).

Westling (2007, p. 837) emphasized that

> A community that exemplifies good political communication requires participation of political actors, the media, and the public. Politicians should be able to get their message to community members both directly and through mediated sources. At the same time, the news media should be acting to bring information to the public, as well as providing a check on government by investigating and validating that information. Community members should take an active role in the media as well by questioning sources, responding to journalists, and passing along relevant stories to their peers…community members should have an opportunity to respond to their representatives at time and places outside the polling booth. Representatives should ideally then respond to that input.

Westling (2008) also acknowledged that "A community that facilitates good political communication will allow citizens to organize, plan events, and form groups in order to give their opinions more weight. The community will provide the soil for grassroots organizing to grow a movement from an idea" (p. 838).

Regardless of Facebook history that I explained before, it has some features which facilitate political communication. Westling (2008) argued that "Facebook may be a better means of achieving a true public sphere than anything that has come before it, online or otherwise …there is no other online community that connects members of real-world communities (geographical, ideological, or otherwise) in such an effective way" (p. 839).

Likewise "politicians can use Facebook to communicate with community members who are willing to listen, but they cannot actively impose their messages on anyone. At the same time, community members have the means to express their opinions to political actors and organize to create their own voice if they feel no candidate yet represents their stance" (p. 839).

In fact, Facebook functions to enhance real-world communities, real-world political issues, and real-world news stories. The huge majority of information on Facebook comes from some other location. What Facebook does is to connect members of a community together and supply a means to share information through a single network. The potency of Facebook lies in its capacity to let members to connect and organize.

Two important Facebook features which are effective in political communication are the following. The first is group function. Westling (2008) indicates that "Members can create their own themed groups on any topic and invite other members to join. In groups, members can post to message boards; add pictures, and post news and links" (p. 840). The second is the ability to 'share' a news story, video, or web page with others. "Along with the link and a short summary, members can include comments. Other members can then comment on the 'share' and give their own opinions or provide supplemental sources of information" (p. 841).

Westling (2008) mentioned two other enabling features of Facebook like the ability to send direct messages to the campaigns or candidates, and, secondly "the greatest benefit that Facebook has provided to candidates thus far is the means to mobilize and organize thousands of supports" (p. 844). There are quite a few ways that users can utilize Facebook's features to organize political events. In other words Westling (2008) says "Facebook's features make it an excellent tool for informing, mobilizing, and organizing political supporters" (p. 845).

And finally, Westling (2008) concluded that social networking and Facebook have increased political participation among young generations (p. 847).

2.13 Facebook for protest

"Facebook for protest? The value of social software for political activism in the anti-FARC rallies" is an article by Neumayer & Raffl (2008) in which they review the role of social networks like Facebook in political affairs.

The Facebook group called 'A million voices against FARC' and the rallies that took place in 165 cities across the globe covered the Colombian news in January and February 2008. "No more! No more kidnapping! No more lies! No more murder! No more FARC" "was the message that passed the national boundaries of Columbia and spread globally via the social networking website of Facebook" (Neumayer & Raffl 2008, p. 1).

"Several newspapers around the world announced that 500,000 to 2,000,000 people responded the Facebook-group appeal on February 4, 2008 by attending rallies in different parts of the world" (Brodzinsky 2008 cited by Neumayer & Raffl 2008, p.1).

The Anti-FARC rallies that were organized via Facebook and carried out in many cities all across the world serve as one example for global political activism. The protest underlines the theoretical concepts of information and communication technologies in general and cyber-protest in particular: "[1] the foundation for community building, [2] the interrelation of the real and the virtual space, [3] digital division and social inequalities, [4] the influence of globalization on local communities and their contribution to the global sphere" (Neumayer & Raffl 2008, p.1). Exploring these four concepts in relation to the anti-FARC rallies allows the assessment of potentials as well as limits of networked political protest by using

social software.

Fuchs (cited by Neumayer & Raffl 2008, p. 2) argued that

> Internet is not only a big marketplace but also a space of political interaction. Blogs, wikis and social networking sites provide a technological basis for grassroots action to coordinate and for participants to communicate … the Internet can support the organization of topic-oriented pressure groups, protest organizations and ideological movements outside the mainstream since civil society has the opportunity to engage in political participation without the guidance of institutions or organizations.

Fuchs (cited by Neumayer & Raffl 2008, p. 2) described "cyber-protest as an emerging field of social movement research that reflects the role of alternative online media, online protests, and online protest communication in society, and global access to information via Internet is its main advantage". Turkle (cited by Neumayer & Raffl 2008) argues that "virtual identities are rather anonymous. Age, class, race and gender might become obsolete; hence the Internet offers equal chances for online participation" (p. 3).

Howard Rheingold (cited by Neumayer & Raffl 2008) immediately announced the anti-FARC rallies on his website as from Facebook to the street of Colombia and explained this incident "as one example of so-called 'smartMobs'. This concept describes the combination of different technological, economic, and social components' which results in an infrastructure that makes certain kinds of human actions possible which has never been possible before" (p. 3).

Rheingold (cited by Neumayer & Raffl 2008) believes that "the hierarchical, decentralized and likewise open architecture of Internet provides the necessary precondition for virtual communities and hence for participation, new social

movements and emergence of cyber protest" (p. 3).

Rheingold (cited by Neumayer & Raffl 2008) although argues that "social software has real potential for enabling democratic forms of decision-making and beneficial instances of collective action" (p. 3).

Likewise Fuchs (cited by Neumayer & Raffl 2008) argued that "protesters on the Internet produce shared meanings that constitute collective identities and practices" (p. 4).

Della Porta in this argument, clarified a weakness of social protest via Internet and said " [e]very new form of communication both heighten ties between those who already know one another and raises the walls of exclusion for those lacking access to the new medium of communication" (cited by Neumayer & Raffl 2008, p.5).

Neumayer & Raffl (2008) concluded that

> Social software has the potential to enhance political activism from a local to a worldwide scale as exemplified in the anti-FARC rallies, although the usage of social software applications still has to be considered as a privilege. In countries with huge social inequalities social software is still used and formed by elite, additionally it is created within and emerged from a western US-American context and its inherent cultural, social, economic and political structures (p. 7).

2.14 Ukrainian Orange Revolution

Another article named "The role of digital networked technologies in the Ukrainian orange revolution" by Josha Goldstein (2007) was written in the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

McFaul (cited by Golstein 2007, p. 4) observed that "the orange revolution may have been the first in history to be organized largely online".

Goldstein (2007) elaborates that

> Ukraine's digital revolutionary stage drew on several emerging tools. These tools had a broad range of uses, from coordination of activists via SMS to development of an independent, online media to web site discussion boards for activists to share best practices and make detailed reports of election fraud (p. 4).

Goldstein (2007, p. 4) described a new phase "cyberutopianism", in this regard, and argued that what must be avoided is "the notion that digital technology will necessarily lead to a more inclusive political future. Revolutions are complex, historically contingent processes".

Jay Rosen, a prominent supporter of citizen journalism mentioned a new phenomena called 'citizen journalist' and described it as below:

> …the people formerly known as the audience [who] were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another- and who today are not in a situation like that at all. … The people formerly known as the audience are simply the public made realer less fictional, more able, less predictable (cited by Goldstein 2007, p. 6).

Goldtsein illuminated that "any narrative of citizen journalism in Ukraine must have begun four years before the Orange Revolution in September 2000, with the high profile murder of the Internet base opposition journalist Georgiy Gongadz. This event was central to putting the nation on a track towards political change" (Goldstein J. , 2007, p. 7).

"Estimates vary as to how many Ukrainians had access to Internet in the latter half of 2004. However, estimates generally range between two and four percent of the

population of 48 million" (Goldstein J. , 2007, p. 9).

One of the most fascinating questions about the Orange Revolution is how Internet became such an influential tool when such a small percentage of the Ukrainian population was online. To what extent had the information environment been enabled by the Internet that was pervasive enough to convince hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to sleep outside in tent cities through nights with subzero temperatures in order to protest against fraudulent election results?. Goldstein argued that

> We can approach this question through the lens of the classic Two-Step Flow Theory developed by sociologists Katz and Lazardsfeld (1995), which delineate a 'two step' information path. The first step is the direct path between mass media and the general public, while the second path is among elite opinion makers who strongly influence opinions of the general public. This theory helps delineate how a relatively small group of activists and citizen journalists helped create a distinct information environment that challenged the narrative presented by state sanctioned media (Goldstein J. , 2007, p. 9).

Andriy Ignatov (cited by Goldstein 2007, p. 10) argued that "in order to cover a larger audience, we had to attract our target audience from people who were usually better networked than the rest. We strive to reach investigative journalists, human rights lawyers, entrepreneurs, and students".

Stephen Bandra from the Institute for Politics, Democracy and Internet at George Washington University in an empirical study on political participation during the Orange Revolution, clarified the online political citizen as "a person who not only actively seeks out news and information sources on the Internet but also is proactive in a variety of ways ranging from forwarding political emails to participating in online chat conversation", and in the same study also developed the notion of political influentials as "persons who take part in a list of even more proactive,

locally based activities such as making political donations and organizing events"
(cited by Goldstein 2007, p. 10).

Bandra argued that "compared to the United States, a larger percentage of Internet
users in Ukraine helped to disseminate online political news and information,
contributing to the two-step of information, even if a smaller percentage of users
were activists and organizers themselves" (cited by Goldstein 2007, p. 10).

Goldstein (2007, p. 19) concluded that "while a wide range of factors shaped events
and outcomes of the Orange Revolution, the Internet and mobile phones proved to be
effective tools for pro-democracy activists", and continues that

> First, the Internet allowed for the creation of a space for dissenting opinions
> of 'citizen journalists' in an otherwise self-censored media environment.
> Second, pro-democracy activists used the convergence of mobile phones and
> Internet to coordinate a wide range of activities including election monitoring
> and large-scale protest.

2.15 Kenya election and digital networks

Joshua Goldstein (2008) in another case study illustrated "the role of digitally
networked technologies in Kenya's 2007- 2008 post election crisis".

Goldstein (2008) argued that "mobile phones and the Internet were catalysts to both
predatory behavior such as ethnic-based mob violence and civic behavior such as
citizen journalism and human rights campaigns" (p. 2).

Goldstein (2008) concluded that "while digital tools can help promote transparency
and keep perpetrators from facing impunity, they can also increase the ease of
promoting hate speech and ethnic divisions" (p. 2).

This paper described the pathways that Kenyans used new technologies to organize action: "SMS campaigns to promote violence, blogs to challenge mainstream media narratives, and online campaigns to promote awareness of human rights violations" (Goldstein 2008, p. 3).

Goldstein (2008, p. 3) acknowledged that

> Mobile phones and the Internet haven't simply been around long enough in Africa. However, incidents like the crisis in Kenya provide a flash of insight into emerging power of these tools. Additionally, theorists such as Yochai Benkler provide useful language to help us begin to understand the place of these tools in society. Benkler's notion of the networked public sphere described two ways that digital technologies enable different kinds of communication than their analog antecedents. Benkler writes, "The first element is the shift from a hub-and-spoke architecture with unidirectional links to the end points in the mass media, to distributed architecture with multidirectional connections among all nodes in the networked information environment. The second is the practical elimination of communication costs as a barrier to speaking across associational boundaries.

Likewise, Goldstein (2008, p. 4) emphasized that "digital technologies are tools that, in addition to allowing communication in the traditional one-to-one fashion, also allow us to become our own broadcasters and reach large numbers of people in unprecedented ways at trivial costs".

At the end, Goldstein (2008) clarified that "throughout sub-Suharan Africa, where artificial borders and legacies of ethnic strife have yet to solidify many countries into nations, the narrative is more complicated", indeed, this research showed that "in the Kenyan context, whether aspiring to promote an ethnic-based hate crime or a global human rights campaign, the Internet and mobile phones have lowered the barriers against participation and increased opportunities for many-to-many communication" (p. 9).

2.16 Burma revolution

In September 2007, the world observed another uprising by the people of Burma against the military regime that has rule the country since 1962. Mridul Chawdhury (2008) published an article named "The role of Internet in Burma's saffron revolution" and examined this case.

Concerning the strongly controlled media atmosphere in Burma, it is normally difficult to get access to information about the situation, particularly during times of citizen unrest, but this protest, however, was different.

"When the government cracked down on the demonstrators, killing monks, civilians, and even journalists, the world watched in horror as the Internet gave people outside Burma a peek into what was actually happening inside the country", Chawdhury said (2008, p. 4).

Chawdhury (2008) emphasized that "in this case it is an example of a situation where Internet-driven protests have not been lead to political change, which is worth understanding in its own right" but

> significance of Internet on the Burmese pro-democracy movement is also worth analyzing from several perspectives including, [1] the effect of the new mass media model in fostering the democratic behavior of citizens, [2] the role of the Internet in transnational mobilization, [3] the impact of the Internet in authoritarian regimes and their response to citizen unrest (p. 4).

The important point mentioned by Chawdhury (2008) is that "level of information control within authoritarian countries seems to have important ramifications on the efficacy of Internet-based political activism" (p. 4).

The uprising in Burma is ultimately a model of a protest where digital network technologies played a significant role, but also where the protest not succeeded to lead to key political change.

The new mass media model during the Saffron Revolution was initiated by citizen journalists, Internet café users inside Burma, pro-democracy bloggers across the globe, and online newspapers based abroad. Although it was very dangerous for them, concerning the laws which condemn them to prison, the protesters decided to "anonymously upload images and videos from local Internet cafes, email them to friends and relatives outside Burma or pass them physically across the border to individuals in Thailand, to be uploaded to the Internet" (Chowdhury, 2008, p. 5).

Chawdhury (2008) indicated that "during the Saffron Revolution, the major source of information was content such as amateur videos taken by ordinary citizens, therefore governments shut down the Internet completely and temporarily suspended most cell- phone services" (p. 6).

Chawdhury (2008) emphasized that "much of the cyber activism surrounding democracy in Burma has originated outside the country with links to locally-based activists" (p. 9).

Chawdhury (2008) also quotes from Ethan Zuckerman, co-founder of Global Voices and a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, who argues that "Cyber activism inside a country can work if there is not high degree of fear. In Burma people are generally terrified writing against the government due to the numerous cases of arrest and torture" (p. 9).

About the impact of the Internet in authoritarian regimes there are a range of views. According to Chawdhury (2008) "optimists believe that growth of Internet will foster more democratic behavior among citizens and even weaken dictatorial regimes, while skeptics argue that there is more hype than real change" (p. 12). It acknowledge that, although there is a optimistic relation between measures of democracy and Internet distribution in most countries, but still there is no convincing proof about existence of any causal relation between the two.

Likewise, Chawdhury (2008) referred to Boas who claimed that "despite the fact that Internet has an important role in communication and information flows, autocratic governments retain control over use and access to the Internet. Proliferation of Internet does not necessarily create a significant challenge for power base of authoritarian regimes" (p. 12).

Getting personal Internet connection in Burma depends on government's approval which "certifies that applicant is not politically dangerous; therefore due to prohibitive cost and bureaucratic hassle of getting individual subscriptions, average Burmese citizens usually have access to Internet from limited number of Internet café, which are heavily controlled" (Chawdhury 2008, p. 12).

Also "due to ONI[8] reports the pattern of Internet filtering in Burma indicates that the government's primary motivations for blocking content are political rather than moral or cultural" (Chawdhury 2008, p. 12).

Another interesting point, derived from a comparison between Burmese' uprisings in

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[8] OpenNet Initiative

1988 and 2007, "it is worth highlighting the significantly lower number of deaths in 2007. It is plausible that the military felt it was under greater scrutiny because of Internet and was therefore more restrained in its use of force" (Chawdhury 2008, p. 14).

Chawdhury (2008) concluded that "Internet, camera phones, and other digital networked technologies played a critical role in Burmese protests and in transmission of news about those events to the outside world, although failed in political change" (p. 14).

Chawdhury (2008) argued that " the military government in Burma learned that state control of ISPs[9] and telephone services gave them the ability to completely block access to the Internet, and prevent unwanted news from leaving the country" (p. 14), this is an efficient policy for dictators who want to control free speech. Also, "in a tightly controlled media environment, citizen journalism is even more important than in countries with free press. Citizen Journalists are able to report on government actions and provide a measure of accountability that would not otherwise occur" (p. 14).

Chawdhury (2008) acknowledges that "even the most authoritarian regimes are sensitive to international public opinion. There were far fewer deaths in 2007 than in 1988. It is possible that Internet saved lives of many protesters… the presence of Internet in a dictatorial regime may save lives" (p.14).

At the end, Chawdhury (2008) emphasized that " a unique aspect of Burmese

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[9] Internet Service Provider

transnational mobilization is that individual bloggers and digital activists worked together with permanent advocacy organizations … combination of online and offline groups acting together is likely to have a more significant and sustained impact than purely online movements, which may have a more limited attention span" (p. 15).

2.17 Egypt and Facebook

El Ezzi et al (2008) discussed cyber activism in Egypt through Facebook. This article revolves around two questions: "[1] how far has the Facebook group influenced the agenda setting of Egyptian newspaper? … [2] How much emphasis was given in Newspapers coverage to the two protests planned by the Facebook groups?" (p. 3).

A Facebook group named 'A collective protest for Egyptians' decided to disseminate messages to the people not to go to work on two specific days (April 6 and May 4). "In less than a week from the creation of the Facebook group, 40,000 members joined the group and there were 6000 wall posts" (El Ezzi et al., 2008, p. 5). These Facebook group members acted as opinion leaders influencing the Egyptian public. But, in both protests, "the group did not really succeed in convincing the public not to work on those two days, but some demonstrations did take place in some cities in Egypt" (El Ezzi et al. 2008, p. 6).

In these protests, bloggers and Facebook users as opinion leaders started to spread the rumors in Egyptian public, and rumors became talk of the town.

Regarding the second question posed by the article, one needs to know two important facts about Egypt: "[1] in Egypt, out of 80 million people, only around 5 million of them have access to the Internet due to many factors including illiteracy and poverty

rates, [2] the Egyptian press hardly practices full freedom of speech due to government restrictions" (El Ezzi et al. 2008, p. 7).

About social networks and web communities, El Ezzi et al. (2008) argued that

> Internet gives the chance for 'like-minded' people to form communities despite their location, or geographical position on the physical global map … the web community is characterized by anonymity. The whole group is virtual, people might not see or know each other, but just the initials, nickname, or photo. This gives the web community more freedom and flexibility; because people tend to talk more freely when their identity is covered … these web communities have strength and public power. They are interactive, moreover, group members are all interested and are going on together on the same stream, and eventually they work to achieve something together (Gauntlett cited by El Ezzi et al. 2008, p. 9)

Likewise, El Ezzi et al (2008) referred to some scholars' arguments about Facebook who believe that Facebook

> will not change the way people talk but it will add more people into discussion, while others believe that Facebook is an effective tool of communication because it will enable them to keep in touch with what concerns the public in a particular community and all over the world ... Furthermore, Facebook offers new ways for interacting with news like New York Times do daily by publishing news quiz on Faceook(p. 10).

El Ezzi et al (2008) concluded that "even though the Egyptian press does not really practice full freedom of speech due to government restrictions, the Facebook group's admin and members have been able to function as opinion leaders and play a role in making the public think about the two intended protests" (p. 24). They also claimed that "even though there exists a low penetration rate of Internet in Egypt, the messages about the protests spread fast. This leads us to the conclusion that Internet and its famous tool, Facebook, have been successful in allowing voices of a silenced public to be heard" (p. 25).

CHAPTER 3

FIELD OF STUDY

3.1 Internet usage rate in Iran

Regarding my research topic, it's significant to know about Internet usage rate in Iran as well as the number of Facebook users and filtration systems.

There is inconsistency between institutions about Internet usage rate in Iran; some announce it 43% in 2010 based on statistics published by the reference site www.Internetworldstatus.com (2011) , which shows 13,180% user growth between 2000 and 2010, although some other institutions declare it 11%.

Middle East Internet Users
September 2009

Country	Number of Users (000 omitted)
Iran	32.2
Saudi Arabia	7.7
Israel	5.3
Syria	3.6
U.A.E.	2.9
Jordan	1.5
Kuwait	1.0
Lebanon	0.9
Oman	0.5
Qatar	0.4
Bahrain	0.4
Yemen	0.4
Palestine	0.4
Iraq	0.3

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm
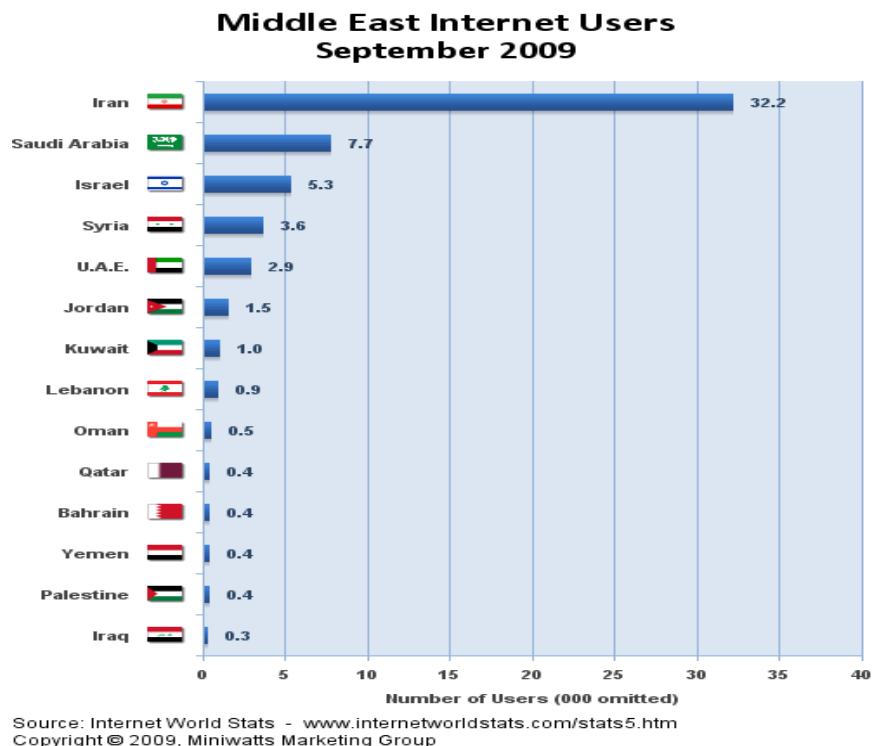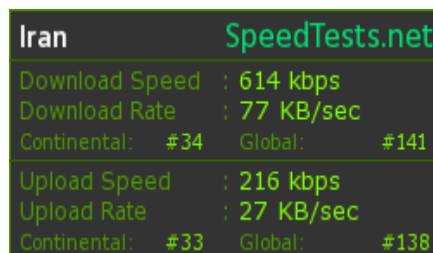Copyright © 2009, Miniwatts Marketing Group

Figure 1. Middle East Internet users statistics

What we can see in this website is

- IR - 76,923,300 population ('10) - Country size: 1,648,195 sq km

- Capital City: Tehran - population 8,429,807 ('10)

- 33,200,000 users as of June/10, 43.2% usage, per IWS.

- 465,100 Broadband Internet connections as of June/10, per ITU

In these statistics, there is an interesting point which makes the contradictions more clear. The amount of Broadband Internet connection is less than 2%, and it shows that other users are connecting to the net through dial-up connections. These statistics are based on Intelligent Work Station (IWS) model not International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and that's why they show a high growth percentage in Internet users. In Iran, Ministry of Communication announces the Internet percentage 34.8% based on a different definition of Internet users as "all people who are above 6 years old, not whole population who use the Internet once a month" (Eghtesad 2010, p. 2).

Likewise, based on another report by Iranian Statistics Center, Internet usage percentage in Iran is 11/1% which is based on sample population questionnaires (Eghtesad, 2010, p. 2). About Internet speed in Iran, 'SpeedTests' (2011) the reference site about Internet speed in the world published theses statistics

Figure 2. Internet speed average in Iran

Therefore, Iran is ranked 141 among 185 world countries regarding download speed and 138 regarding upload speed. We should remember that during the uprising after the 2009 election in Iran, Internet filtration increased and Internet speed was reduced to 10% of its capability. It wasn't disconnected at all but almost didn't work.

3.2 Facebook users in Iran

The number of Facebook users in Iran, or Iranian users (inside and outside Iran) is not available, indeed there is no clear statistics in this regard.

Since Iranian presidential election in 2009, Facebook website has been filtered in Iran, therefore Iranian users inside of the country have to connect to it through anti filter software or VPNs[10], so their IP[11] addresses are not valid and true, consequently it is not possible to count them based on their IP addresses (the method which is used to survey the nationalities in this website).

Likewise, Iranian users outside Iran are connecting through the country of their residency's IP addresses and they may indicate their nationality or country of residency different from Iran, so again it is not possible to count them.

But there can be some assumptions like regarding the number of broadband connections in Iran and the impossibility of connecting to Facebook through dial up connections and pass the filtrations, we can say the number of Facebook users can be two or three times more than the available broadband connections, i.e. two or three different family members of this population, which will approximately be 1 million users inside Iran.

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[10] Virtual Private Network
[11] Internet Protocol [address]

3.3 Freedom of speech in Iran

Before talking about Internet filtering in Iran, it's meaningful to talk about freedom of speech in the country. Let me note some statistics in this regard.

Freedom of speech is the freedom to speak freely without limitations. The term freedom of expression is sometimes used to show not only freedom of verbal speech but any act of seeking, receiving and imparting information or ideas, regardless of the medium used. This concept as an article is included in the universal declaration of human rights adopted by the United Nations and Iran is one of the signatories.

In Iran, unfortunately, before and after the Islamic revolution in 1979, freedom of speech was under limitations. Although lifting those restrictions has been one of the main goals of the revolution, it did not happen.

Recently and during the team of the Iranian former president 'Mohammad Khatami' (1997 – 2005), censorship became more relaxed and some alternative media could take a breath but after him and during the time of the current president, 'Mahmoud Ahmadinejad' (2009) this condition became worse and media are under more pressure than ever, even though he declares Iran as the most free country in the World.

RWB[12] ranked Iran as the 175th country in the world, regarding freedom of speech indicators, in a report entitled '2011 world press freedom index'. Just 3 countries are after Iran: Turkmenistan, North Korea, and Eritrea. "Iran holds its position at the bottom of the Index. The crackdown on journalists and citizens which occurred just

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[12] Reporters Without Borders

after the disputed re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009 only strengthened in 2010" (Iran Human rights Profile, 2011).

Freedom House organization in another report 'freedom of the press 2010' ranked Iran as the 187th country in the world, before countries like Belarus, Cuba, Uzbekistan, Libya and North Korea (Freedom of the Press, 2011).

3.4 Internet filtration in Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran implemented a very functional technological filtering structure, which is between the most functional one in the world. A central system for Internet filtration has been utilized that increased the filtering conducted at the Internet service provider (ISP) level. Iran produced domestic technology for blocking of offensive websites, due to lack of reliance on western filtration technologies.

Expression of views in the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on some regulations, and freedom of speech limited over a wide range of subjects like religion, social harmony morality, and politics.

In contrast to the well-developed state controls over print media, radio and TV, the Internet initiated a quite unregulated medium for communication in Iran, and allowed opposition and independent media voices to be heard. Internet has also provided a stage for Iranian to distribute opinions in opposition to the regime, like pro-secular and reformist political viewpoints.

The rising attractiveness of the Internet has led to increasing government scrutiny. "Dissenting voices online, including human rights activists, bloggers and online media outlets, have become the target of government regulatory action and are

subject to arrest, imprisonment and torture" (Internet filtration in Iran, 2009).

In October 2006, Ministry of Communication and Information Technology in Iran published an order that seemed to be intended for household access to broadband Internet, "forbidding ISPs from providing Internet connectivity to households and public Internet access points at speeds greater than 128 kilobytes per second. This policy restricts the ability of Internet users to download multimedia content" (Internet filtration in Iran, 2009).

Figure 3, 4 and 5 show Iran's Internet censorship condition based on OpenNet Initiative Website which is a reference site for filtering statistics (Internet filtration in Iran, 2009).

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

FILTERING	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political					●
Social					●
Conflict/Security				●	
Internet tools					●

OTHER FACTORS	Not Applicable	Low	Medium	High
Transparency			●	
Consistency				●

KEY INDICATORS

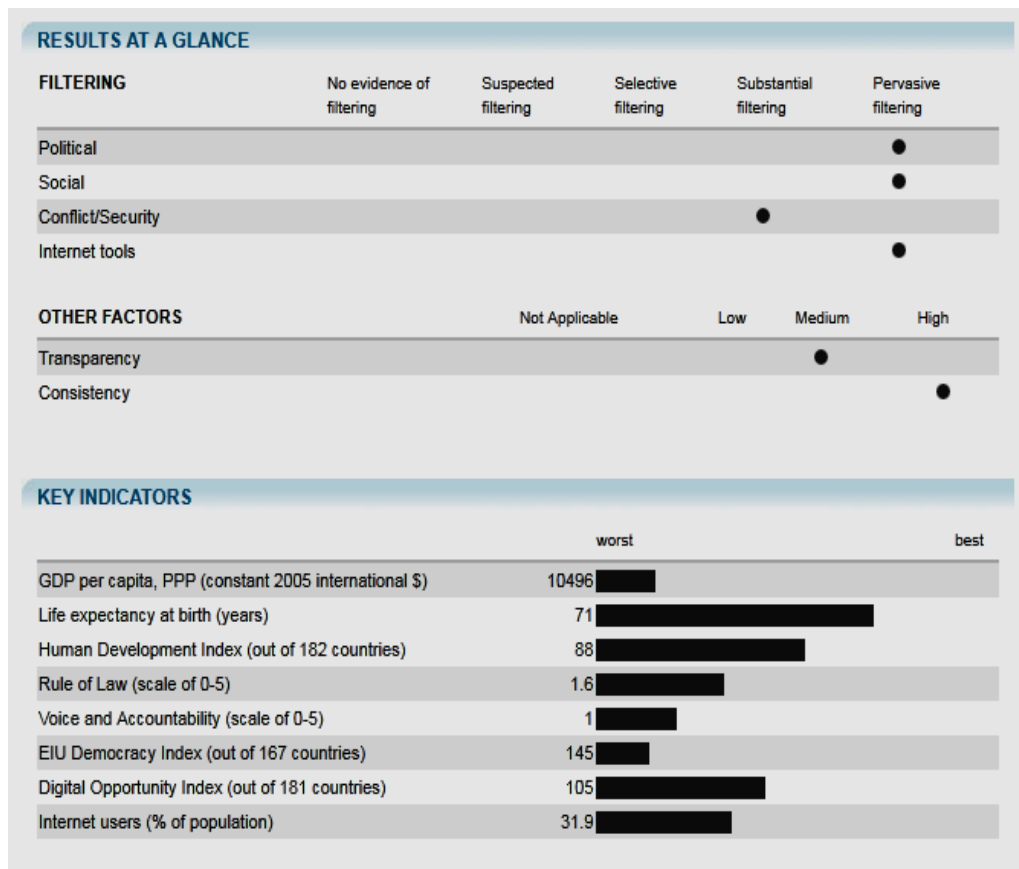|	worst	best
GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2005 international $)	10496	
Life expectancy at birth (years)	71	
Human Development Index (out of 182 countries)	88	
Rule of Law (scale of 0-5)	1.6	
Voice and Accountability (scale of 0-5)	1	
EIU Democracy Index (out of 167 countries)	145	
Digital Opportunity Index (out of 181 countries)	105	
Internet users (% of population)	31.9	

Figure 3. The Internet filtering condition in Iran

Figure 4, Level of Filtering regarding political content: (Content that expresses views in opposition to those of the current government, or is related to human rights, freedom of expression, minority rights, and religious movements).
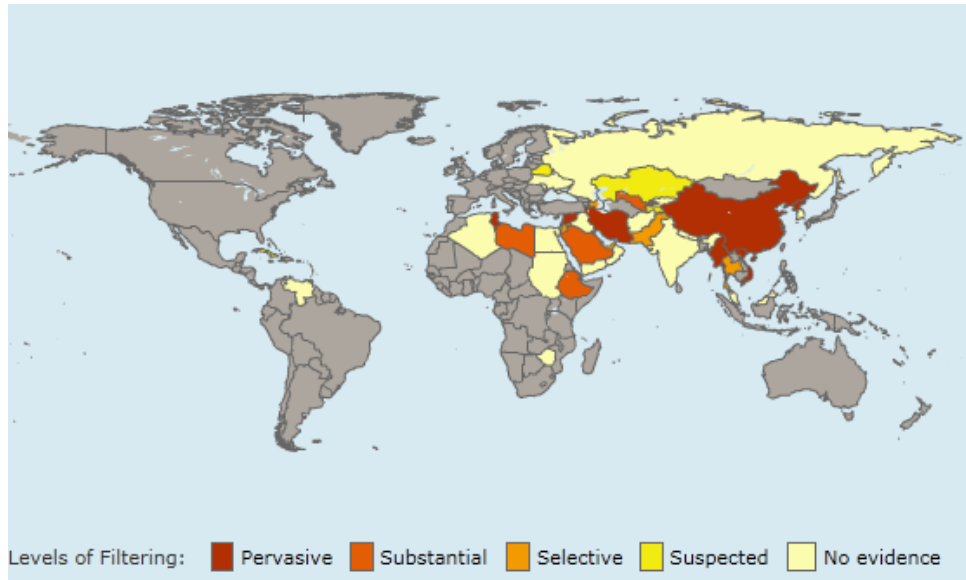

Figure 4. Level of Filtering regarding political content in the world

Figure 5, level of filtering regarding social content: (Content related to sexuality, gambling, illegal drugs and alcohol & other topics that may be socially sensitive or perceived as offensive).
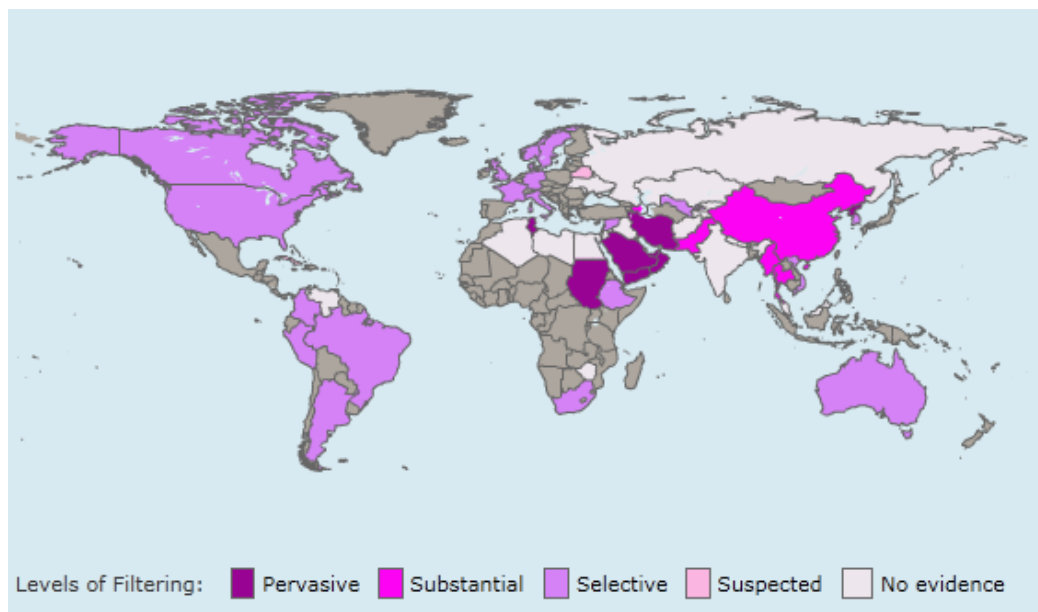

Figure 5. level of filtering regarding social content in the world

OpenNet Initiative (2009) concluded that

> Iran continues to strengthen the legal, administrative and technical aspects of its Internet filtering systems. The Internet censorship system in Iran is one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated in the world. Advances in domestic technical capacity have contributed to implementation of a centralized filtering strategy and a reduced reliance on Western technologies. Despite the deeply held commitment to regulation of Internet content, authorities continue to be challenged in their attempts to control online speech. Political filtering related to the 2009 presidential campaign, including the blocking of Facebook and several opposition parties' Web sites brought renewed attention to the role of filtering in Iran.

Chapter 4

METHODOLOGY

This research was concerned generally with the role communication technologies like the Internet and social networks, especially Facebook, played in the recent political affairs and formed on the case of Iranian presidential election in 2009.

It investigated the interrelation or mutual effects of social networks (Facebook) and political issues and discussed new forms of cyber democracy, cyber protest and cyber citizenship.

Additionally, the research had an eye on an important term in new media studies called citizen reporters and their role in new social and political movements.

4.1 Research motivation and background

Before and after the Iranian presidential election in 2009, social networks started to play an important role in political campaigns and functioned as an alternative media in a context where the mainstream media were controlled by the government and were under its censorship.

During the election (June 2009), a new social movement, called Green Movement, was initiated in which the pro-reformist candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi chose the green color as the movement's symbol. This Green campaign started to use cyber space to support its candidate and different groups and websites started to work

online.

They organized some rallies through the use of social networks, for example, announcing the time and dates in the Facebook groups, and people started to share and broadcast these news and announcements. The people responded broadly to these calls for rallies. Soon, the social networks became the main source of news for the pro-Green Movement and also acted as tools for organizing the political rallies and meetings. They also played a strong role as an interactive media for sharing individuals' video and audio files and comments. Almost a week before the election, social networks were filtered by the authorities but when the reformist candidates complained, the filters were lifted.

One day after the election, the results which came out from the polls were not what the pro-Green movement expected, and as a result the former president Mahmmod Ahmadinejad was elected. This caused a lot of anger among the people who believed that a big fraud had been perpetrated. The almost free atmosphere before the election suddenly changed by the use of police brutality, and rallies against the election results by pro- Green Movement were banned by the government using police forces.

In these demonstrations and protests, hundreds of people were killed and thousands were injured and imprisoned, and again social networks like Facebook played a critical role in arranging and managing the protests although they were filtered immediately after the election.

Now, after two years have passed from election time, Facebook is still the main source of news for pro-reformist people and continued its role as the preferred

communication channel for them.

There is no doubt that cyber media and social networks are playing a significant role in new political affairs, and also citizen reporters are opening a new phase in the new media age, as we can see in recent political events in Arab countries like Egypt and Tunisia. Therefore studying the role and effect of social networks like Facebook, especially in countries with totalitarian regimes and strong filtration is the main goal of this study.

4.2 Research questions

From these general aims, a number of specific research questions and issues emerged and were further refined in the course of developing the research design. The main questions are listed below:

1. What is the main role of Facebook in political events before and after the presidential election in 2009 in Iran? Did social networks like Facebook the main contributor to increasing the support for reformists, or escalating the protest against the regime? If yes, what are the main attributes that make it function like that?

2. Who are the main Facebook members and how and why are they influenced? Regarding the Internet usage percentage in Iranian society, who are the typical Facebook users? Are families influenced by their Facebook members in the household? Can we anticipate the Facebook usage rate in Iranian society despite filtration?

3. Can we say that social networks like Facebook (as a medium and a social network) help bring the silenced people and votes to the surface and make the public sphere more active, with regard to political issues and grievances?

Does a social network mediator like Facebook help in arranging and managing political events? Does a social network like Facebook, by its specific features help in increasing public awareness about political demands, democracy and human rights issues in a totalitarian regime which censors the media? Does social networking advocate freedom of speech and pro-democracy movements?

4. What is Facebook's relationship with censorship and filtration in repressed countries? Are Facebook users able to overcome the censorship borders in these countries or not? Can Facebook act as an alternative source of news? Has Facebook extended the political news access for the public? Are Facebook news feeds reliable for Facebook users and audiences or not?

5. Has Facebook supported citizen reporters in the cyber-space in Iran? How is Facebook utilized by its users in this regard?

4.3 Theories

Regarding my research topic and questions I considered and selected some communication theories for use in my research design and analysis. These theories are directly or indirectly related to the research topic and are significant in this regard.

The first theory that I considered is the "Two step flow theory of communication" which suggest that information flow from mass media to opinion leaders and from them to a larger population. This theory was formulated by sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld et al. in 1944 (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944, p. 144).

Dissimilar with hypodermic needle model, in which mass media influence directly,

the two-step flow model emphasizes intervening individuals (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1957).

As I looked forward to clarify a social network's members and the way this media is connected to the society, this theory helps us to understand how media can connect people together. The person who is called opinion leader in this theory can affects other people, such that if social networking if it has any influence, this influence can be extended to other people who are not social network members. Even in a small family a young member of the family, who is connected to the network can play this role for other members who are not connected to the network. In this way cyber social network will be linked with traditional forms to reach other people by dialogues. So in the case of Facebook, not only its members but other persons who are connected to them are also affected, again if there is any effect.

Lazarsfeld and Katz believe that media information is feeding the masses through opinion leadership. The people, who have most access to media, and have a more knowledgeable perception of media, explicate and disseminate material to other people (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1957).

Concerning the two-step flow model, the phrase "personal influence" explains "the process intervening between the media's direct message and the audience's reaction to that message" (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1957, p. 9). Opinion leaders are likely to be similar to those they affect on, regarding character, concentrations, demographic, or social economical aspects. Opinion leaders are likely to affect other people to transform their manner and actions. The two-step theory improved the capability to assess how media contents control audience manners and explicates why some media

do not modify audiences' outlooks. This theory supplies a foundation for the multi-step flow theory of mass communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1957).

The opinion leader is the mediator who is a dynamic media user and who transfer the meaning of media contents for lower-end media users. Naturally the opinion leader is highly esteemed by people who acknowledge his or her beliefs. Opinion leadership has a tendency to be subject specific that is, a individual who is an opinion leader in one field may be a follower in another field (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1957).
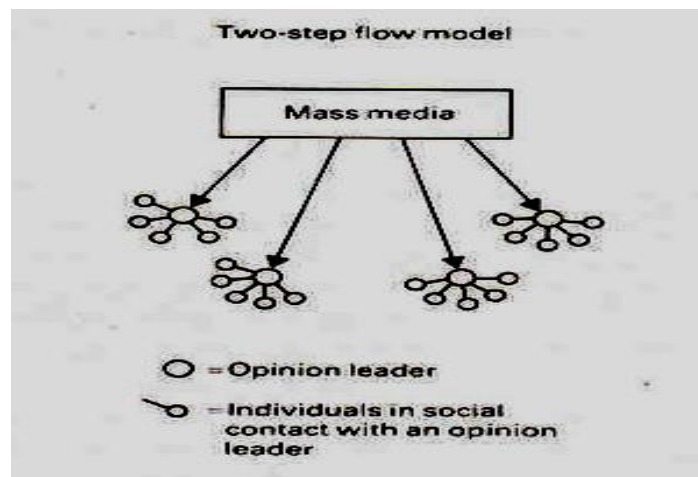

Figure 6. Two step flow of information theory's conceptual model

The second important theory which I am using in my research is 'Agenda Setting' which, according to McCombs and Shaw means, the construction of public thoughts and forming of pubic opinions in terms of importance of the specific issues. This theory illustrates the important power of the media – the capability to convince us which subjects are central. McCombs and Shaw examined the Presidential Campaigns in 1968, 1972 and 1976, in the research done in 1988, and concentrated on two factors: awareness and information. Examining the agenda-setting role of the media, they tried to evaluate the link between what voters in one group declared as key issues and the real content of the media throughout the campaign. McCombs and

Shaw derived out that the media applied major control on what voters regarded as to be the key subjects of the campaign (cited by Asadi, 2008, p. 11).

Asadi (2008) described two basic issues that motivate most studies on the agenda-setting:

1. The media do not present reality; they manipulate, filter and form it,
2. Media focus on some issues directs the public to consider those issues as more significant than other issues (p. 11).

One of the most central factors in the idea of an agenda-setting role of media is the time frame. Also, different media have different agenda-setting potentiality. Agenda-setting theory seems fairly suitable to assist us understand the effective role of the media (for instance on political communication systems) and in fact in the construction of public awareness of leading issues (Asadi, 2008, p. 11).

Meanwhile I should mention that in the case of a social network like Facebook, normally an agenda is formed and created by the members themselves, except in some cases where a group or organization like has subscribed in the Facebook and are uploading their Facebook webpage in favor of their orders, for example a news agency who run the military, like some news agencies in Iran which are managed by the revolutionary Guard [a branch of the military in Iran].

As Bernard Cohen states: "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (cited by Asadi 2006, p . 11).
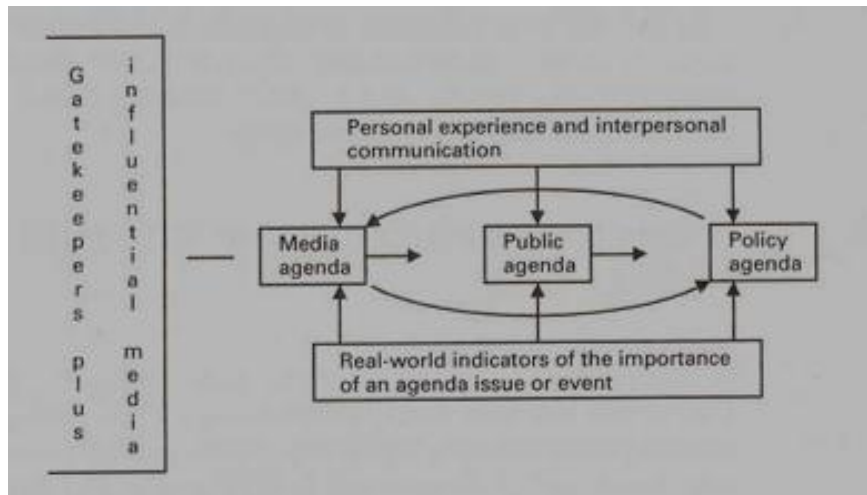
Figure 7. Agenda setting theory's conceptual model

The third theory which is useful in my research is network theory and analysis. The inspiration of social networks and the concept of sociometry and sociograms came into view over 50 years ago. Barnes (1954) is recognized with coining the concept of social networks (Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 55).

Network analysis is the study of how the social formation of connections around a person, group, or organization influences beliefs or manners. Causal pressures are natural in social structure (Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 56).

Network analysis is techniques for identifying and determining the level of the pressures. The network approach implies that reality should be mainly understood and explored from the viewpoint of the properties of relations between and within units instead of the properties of these units themselves. It is a relational approach (Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 57). "In social and communication studies these units are social units: individuals, groups/ organizations and societies" (Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 57).

Indeed a communication network is "interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned communication flows and this theory studies the interpersonal linkages created by the sharing of information in the interpersonal communication structure" (Rohaninejad, 2010, p. 1).
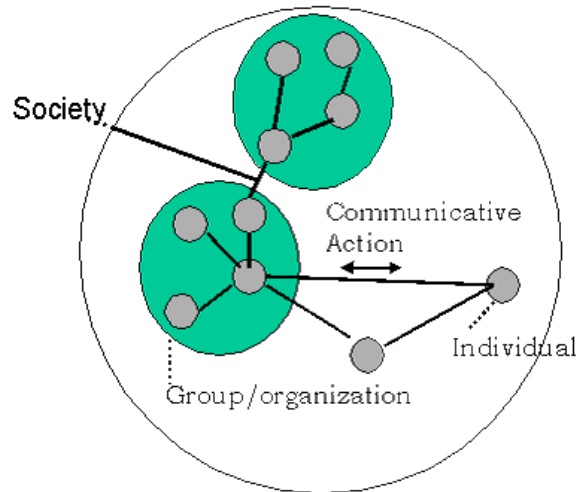

Figure 8. Conceptual Model of a network society

This theory helps us to simulate a cyber society with its online social units, and to study the relationship between the units themselves, and how they influence each other, whether they have any effects on each other, and in the case of an election, whether they are capable of affecting on people's beliefs.

Probably when we can understand the relations between the units and their mutual effects in a cyber space, it can help us to understand their relations outside cyber space more comprehensively. Meanwhile cyber activism does not represent the reality of political activism in Iran as a whole.

4.4 Research design

Social networking is a new phenomenon in modern world and Facebook is one of the most widely used social networking media.

Facebook as a new medium of communication with its unique communicative features and indeed with its member's usage of it, initiated a creative and interactive way of communication for human beings, therefore people and consequently societies are transforming by this new pattern. Politics is not an exception.

I conducted a research to study such likely effects in a case study which is the Iranian presidential election in 2009, using different research methods to reach a better understanding of the subject.

I chose quantitative research approach and used survey method. In sum, the reasons to choose survey method were: 1) Surveys are useful in describing the characteristics of a large population, 2) It can be administered from remote locations, for example through Email or like what I did through a website, 3) Many questions can be asked about a given topic, and finally, 4) Sample survey means that similar data can be collected from groups then interpreted comparatively. Additionally, to look at the research topic from different perspectives as well as answering some research questions, I conducted interviews in a focus group.

I am not claiming to do just a quantitative research or qualitative research at all but like a two separated research with two different styles, I tried to conclude based on both research results.

I should mention that my core focus and concentration was on effects of social networking and I am inspired by the theories that I mentioned above (p. 75 to 80), so these theories formed the foundation of my research design.

Before going through the research design I explain very briefly about the history of social impact of the mass media which "was evident as far back as the 1920s, when many critics blamed that motion pictures had a negative influence on children" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010, p. 678).

> in 1960, Joseph Klapper summarized what was then known about the social impact of mass communication. In contrast to many researchers, Klapper downplayed the potential harmful effects of the media. He concluded that the media most often reinforced an individual's existing attitudes and predispositions. Klapper's viewpoint, which became known as the minimal effects position, was influential in the development of a theory of media effects The early 1970s saw extensive research on the social effects of the mass media.

Several studies of the media effect on pro-social manners have started in the scholarly literature recently. Researchers who examine the effects of media have exerted techniques: "content analysis, laboratory experiments, surveys, field experiments, observations, and panels" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010, p. 681).

In the first part of quantitative section I used the survey and my goal was to study the impact of social networking on politic, or in other words, considering question number 3 in my research questions; to analyze the relation of social networking and people awareness about political events. Therefore I arranged a group of Facebook users (twenty members, ten men and ten women) while another group called control group with the same arrangement, were not Facebook members. In a specific period of time, which some political events were going on (February and March 2010 in Iran when some protest rallies were arranged by the opposition and managed by Facebook groups mostly), I studied their alertness about the ongoing event and compared the results. All respondents were asked by the phone, and all Facebook members were supposed to check their Facebook daily.

In second part of the quantitative section, I used the survey approach based on questionnaires and I followed two main goals in this regard: first, I tried to assess the Facebook usage rate in the case study and second I tried to find out the Facebook usage rate in different social structures.

This section looked forward to answering question number 2 in my research questions, in fact helped me in my evaluation of Facebook usage rate in Iranian urban society. So, I determined the main Facebook audiences in the society, which regarding 'agenda setting' and 'two steps flow of information' theories may follow the proposed agendas on the medium (Facebook) and by social networking spread it within the society. This assessment was vital in the final conclusion concerning the political impacts of social networking and anticipation of its effectiveness.

The survey was conducted in an urban area which is Esfahan in my research, the second major city in Iran. A number of factors were considered in forms of categories like age, class, religious beliefs and education. Respondents were selected from specific sample areas across the city and were not necessarily Facebook users, which means that they were selected randomly. Meanwhile rural people (people who are not living in the big cities) were excluded from this categorization because they don't have potential access to the Internet due to technical problems or financial problems. Data analysis was based on SPSS Software results.

A similar survey was conducted on a group of Facebook users. This survey was electronic and online, and the targets were selected randomly and not based on any categorization.

The main goal of this section was answering questions number 1, 3 and 4. Facebook users who were connecting to this network for more than two years and registered in Facebook before the Iranian presidential election in 2009 were eligible to answer the questions.

Regarding some security reasons this online questionnaire designed using Google Documents Software and was spread within Facebook. All respondents were asked to spread it without any hesitation and limitations; therefore it followed the same pattern as other news, links or any other digital content passed in the cyber social network of Facebook.

It's necessary to mention that an assessment of the whole network in this case was almost impossible, so I had to enter to the network from a random point; therefore it may raise this question that these results are concluded from a sample group and are not generalisable to the whole population. I confirm this reasonable point in advance although it's a similar issue for all case studies, but to alleviate this problem I used a pragmatic approach and I tried to evaluate the Facebook political dispersion of Iranian Facebook users, like counting the political pages and political figures' fan pages as well as Facebook user's political groups. Subsequently I compared the results with the previous phase of survey and explored the similarities and differences. It made the research assessments more reliable and trustable. Meanwhile the final results were analyzed by SPSS Software.

4.5 Social Impact of the Internet

According to Wimmer & Dominck

> mass media research follows a typical pattern when a new medium develops. Phase 1 concerns an interest in the medium itself: the technology used

functions, access, and cost. Phase 2 deals with the users of the medium: who they are, why they use it, what other media it displaces. Phase 3 pertains to the social, psychological, and physical effects of the medium, particularly any harmful effects. Finally, Phase 4 involves research about how the medium can be improved (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010, p. 730).

Research examining the Internet proposed by Wimmer & Dominck has normally pursued this model and the methods proposed by them are: surveys, content analysis, and the occasional experiment (2010, p. 730). In this regard I used a qualitative audience research method, and I focused on phase 2 mentioned above.

4.6 Audience research method

 Audience research is a useful method to study about audiences and the forms of motivations and obstacles that the audiences face in adopting new manners (or ceasing an existing one). Additionally, "information often is obtained about the audience's preferred channels or formats of communication, respected or credible sources of information, and other issues" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010, p. 750).

Audience research can help in evaluating the impact of a media or its content. This research may consist of examining of the target audience regarding "awareness of the message, the exposure to or use of the products, or the intention to change behavior" (2010, p. 1).

Audience research methods can be used for any issues related with audiences: radios and TVs, as well as print media, artistic activities, and recently the Internet.

4.7 Qualitative research audience overview

Qualitative research can help understand an audience segment of interest. Techniques for gathering information vary greatly and range from in-depth individual interviews or focus groups (my preferred technique in this part) to, observational studies, and

ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation (Audience Research Basics, 2010). Often, the study participants are not drawn randomly from a known population group, but are recruited by using telephone directories, databases maintained by various organizations, geographic proximity to the research site, key informants, snowball sampling (persons recommended by others as participants), and even "samples of convenience" (whoever is available at the time and place of the study) (Audience Research Basics, 2010).

Such research often collects participants' verbatim responses or researchers' observations. Participant responses are analyzed to identify common themes or ideas expressed across different individuals and/or groups. These analyses may use more or less rigorous methods, such as multiple reviewers, structured review protocols, and analytic software (Audience Research Basics, 2010).

4.8 Benefits of qualitative research

To analyze some qualitative concepts in my research I decided to use an audience research method by conducting it on a focus group. The advantage of qualitative research is the chance to develop an expressive well understanding of individuals' attitudes, concerns, motivations, behaviors, and preferences.

Qualitative audience research allows one to (Audience Research Basics, 2010):

- Discover a subject or thought with audiences,

- Understanding of what and how audiences feel about a subject,

- Realize the language audiences use to talk about a subject,

- Observe the acceptance of a issue within the context of peoples,

- Find out reasons that motivate behavior.

4.9 **Focus Group**

A focus group is a group of people who are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards a concept, idea, product, etc. "Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members" (Amini, 2009, p. 28).

In the social sciences, focus groups let interviewers to discover audiences in a more normal setting than a one-to-one interview. Focus groups have a high noticeable reliability since the idea is easy to understand.

Also, "they are low in cost, one can get results relatively rapidly, and they can raise the sample size of a report by talking with numerous people at once" (Amini, 2009, p. 29).

I arranged a traditional focus group from a group of Facebook users who were in touch via Facebook constantly but not necessarily politically engaged. Meanwhile, all Facebook users who participated in this research had opened their account before the presidential election in June 2009.

Chapter 5

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

When I started my research process I needed some reliable statistics about Internet and Facebook usage rate in Iranian society. As I mentioned in the literature review chapter, due to some restrictions exerted by the government, access to these statistics are forbidden for normal citizens, although some web sites and institutes published some reports about them. These reports are not normally trustable in terms of accuracy and are elaborated based on government's favor or order.

The second problem in this regard is filtration, which makes it more difficult to get accurate statistics. In Iran more than 10 million websites are filtered according to the official reports and one of the most famous one is Facebook (Sharif, 2009, p. 1).

Facebook was accessible by the public before the Iranian presidential election in 2009 but was filtered just after the election. Sharif (2009) announced the reason as the utilization of Facebook by the protesters during the demonstrations (p. 1).

Nowadays, inside Iran, Facebook members have to connect to the network through anti-filter software or VPNs, which are illegal, and yet most people use it. Because of this roundabout way of connecting to the Website, it is not possible to accurately count the Facebook members inside Iran and, consequently, to get a true and accurate estimate of Facebook usage rate in the society. It is worth pointing out that, by using

anti- filter software or VPNs, users are connecting to a host or server outside Iran, and, therefore, they connect by a fake IP address to the websites, so depending on which country they connect from, they will be counted in that country's statistics even though they are inside Iran.

Let me refer to some official reports about Internet usage rate in Iran briefly, and then go through the first phase of my research.

According to the Ministry of Information report about the Internet use in 2011, 34% of Iranian population are Internet users, and the country has a high growth in expanding Internet access in the region (Sharif, 2009, p. 1), but some other institutes inside Iran have different views and provide different statistics. For example a Research Center inside the Parliament announces it around 11%, which is 50% less than the world average (Sharif, 2009, p. 1).

In this official report published by the Ministry of Information, Internet connections with 64kbit/s speed are considered as a Internet connection (Sharif, 2009, p. 1), but it needs to be pointed out that in the world average, Internet connections with less than 256kbit/s speed are considered as low speed connections (Definitions of World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators, 2011).

This report announced that around 7 million people in Iran were connecting to the Internet through dial-up connections in 2008 (Sharif, 2009, p. 2). With this low speed, it is almost impossible to connect to the Facebook website by anti-filters or VPNs, and 1.5 million users (5.73%) are connecting by ADSL connections (Sharif, 2009, p. 2) which may pass the filtration, but it still is not clear if all of them are

home connections or whether organizational and governmental usages are included as well.

I, therefore, had to conduct my own research to assess the Facebook usage rate in Iranian society, as this information was necessary for my overall research. I arranged a random survey in my sample city, Esfahan and I asked 100 people in the city center square whether they are Facebook members or not.

Results are shown in Figure 1, and indicate a Facebook usage rate of 10% in the sample. I divided the questioned people into four categories based on their age, and it shows that most usage is seen in the group who are 18-30 years old (24%); followed by 30-40 years old (12%); and 40-50 years old with 4%.

People younger than 18 years old were not considered in the survey, because according to the law, they are not allowed to vote in the presidential election so they cannot be counted in my research.

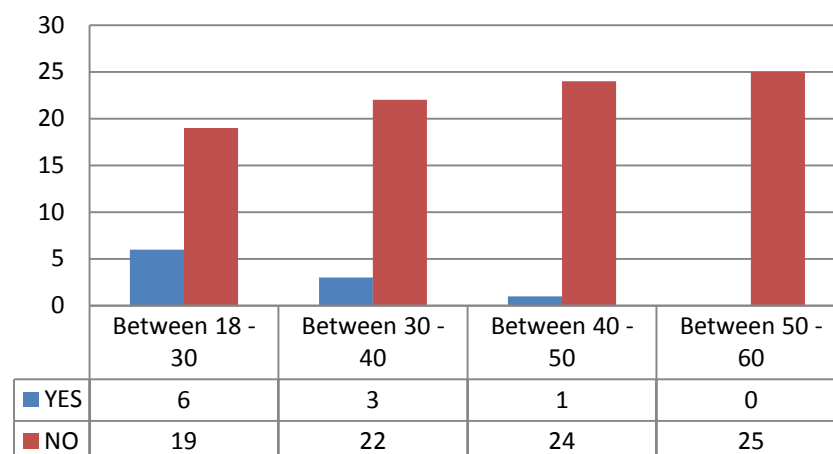|	Between 18 - 30	Between 30 - 40	Between 40 - 50	Between 50 - 60
YES	6	3	1	0
NO	19	22	24	25

Figure 9. Facebook usage rate in the sample group

In the second phase, I tried to estimate the Facebook usage rate in different traditional social networks, so I divided the society into 5 categories to assess the usage rate in each of them, and therefore to get a better understanding about Facebook usage in the society.

- Bazaar and free occupations

- Academic area

- Religious schools and masques

- Labor and workplaces

- Government jobs (people who works for the state directly or indirectly)

This division is based on overall traditional and historical segments of the Iranian society by a cultural perspective, even though there are some contradictions and convergences between them like some people in labor sphere or academic sphere are employed by the government.

These social groups mostly follow the same political preferences, so their support (agreement or disagreement) in political issues is decisive.

I prepared the questionnaire and selected a sample for each category and finally I asked 50 people in each category whether they are a Facebook user or not. First of all, in the Bazaar of Esfahan, I randomly selected 50 people of different ages and 9 of them (18%) were Facebook members (Figure 10).

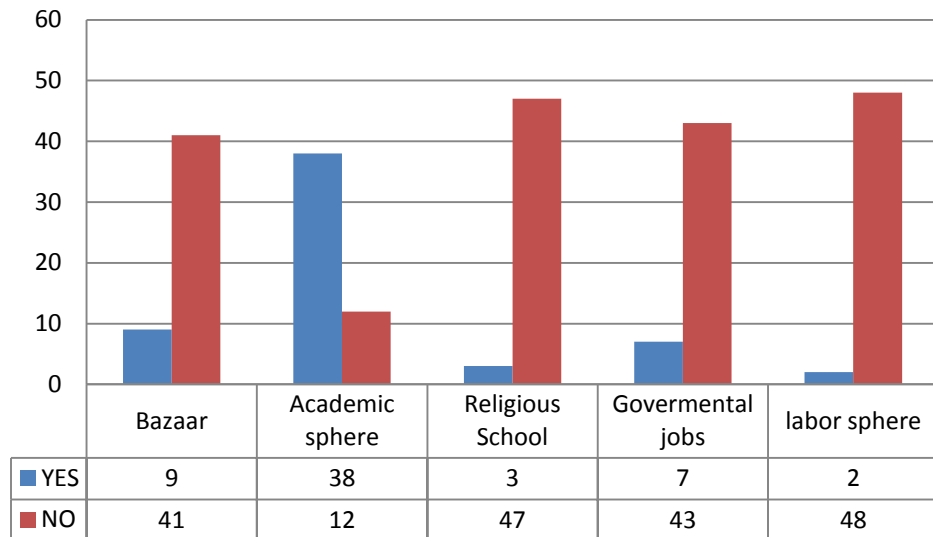|	Bazaar	Academic sphere	Religious School	Govermental jobs	labor sphere
YES	9	38	3	7	2
NO	41	12	47	43	48

Figure 10. Facebook usage rate in different traditional social networks

I used the same approach in other social networks, and in religious schools or mosque networks, Facebook usage rate was only 6%, and among people who had government jobs – directly or indirectly- it was 14%.

In the sphere of labor, it was less than others, 4% which had a significant reason mentioned by some of them: economic problems and the price of Internet access or lack of public access to the Internet, which is already solved in other social networks by default, for instance in universities or religious schools, internet access is free of charge.

But the most Facebook usage rate belongs to the academic sphere where 72% of the students and staff use it. It shows that Facebook is subscribed by people who are related to the academia more than any other segment of the society. Therefore, if, as a social network it has any influence, the main target of that is the academic sphere.

Another remarkable and key result was explored about religious schools, where they

mostly have the same Internet access like universities, but they don't have the same Facebook usage rate. Some of them claimed in the interviews that they obey the Islamic rules and they consider Facebook membership as a disorder, so they don't like to use it. Some others claimed that being a Facebook member is forbidden by law, so they are afraid of problems that this may cause for them.

Therefore, I can conclude that Facebook cannot reach a broad and expandable group of religious students and as a medium, if, it has any influence, it has its lowest effectiveness on this traditional social network. I should mention that in the Islamic Republic of Iran, religious schools are the main important source of support for the government; therefore influencing them by alternative media can play an important role in political change.

I repeated the same survey in an on-line form inside Facebook to fortify the results. 370 Facebook members were asked about their age, job, and education.

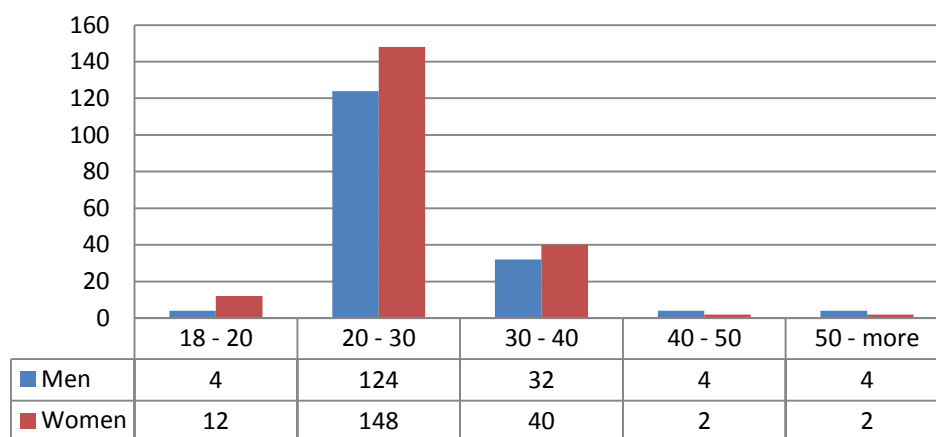|	18 - 20	20 - 30	30 - 40	40 - 50	50 - more
■ Men	4	124	32	4	4
■ Women	12	148	40	2	2

Figure 11 . Facebook members' average age in the sample group

This figure shows that 73.8% of male Facebook members and 71.1% of women are between 20 – 30 years old, and 19% of men and 19.2% of women are between 30 – 40 years old.

Less than 2% in both sexes are older than 40 years old and almost 6% in both sexes are younger than 20 years old.
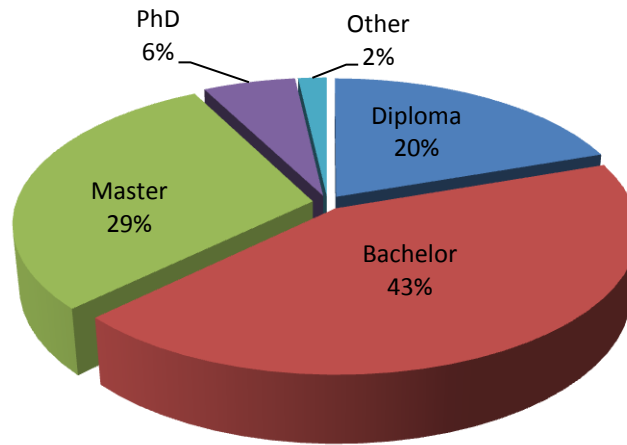

Figure 12 . The sample group's level of education in the online survey

This figure shows that 78% of Facebook users in the sample group have academic education and studied at universities. In fact this point acknowledges a high degree of educated people in the sample group.

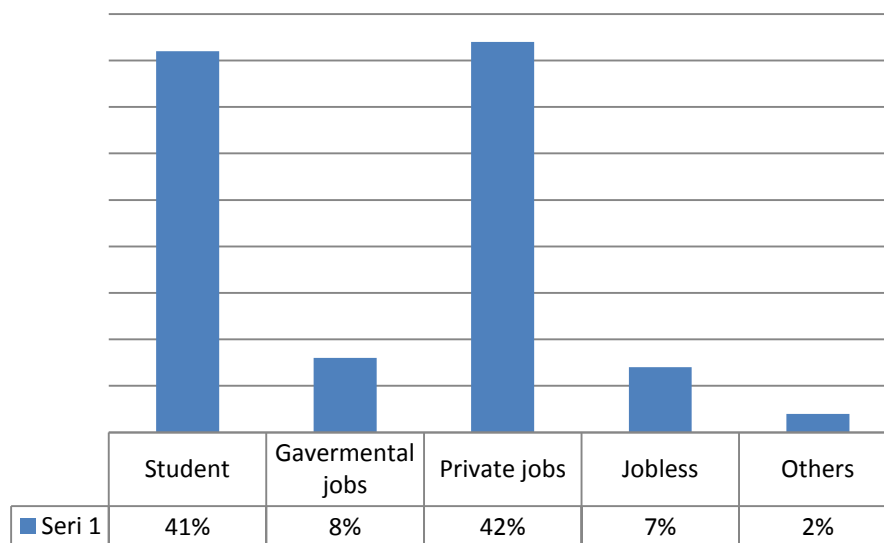|	Student	Gavermental jobs	Private jobs	Jobless	Others
Seri 1	41%	8%	42%	7%	2%

Figure 13 . Employment status of Facebook members in the case study

Likewise regarding job condition of Facebook members in the sample, statistics indicate that 41% are students and 42% are working individually or in private jobs. Only 8% of Facebook members are working in governmental organizations, and 7% are jobless as well.

In the next phase and concerning my research questions, I used an experimental method to assess people's awareness about ongoing political issues, indeed to find out the relationship between social networking or indeed Facebook membership and awareness about a political event which in this regard, I chose a public demonstration in 14 February 2011 called by Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karobi, opposition leaders. 20 Facebook users and 20 none-Facebook users randomly selected and were called and asked whether they were aware of the protest or not.
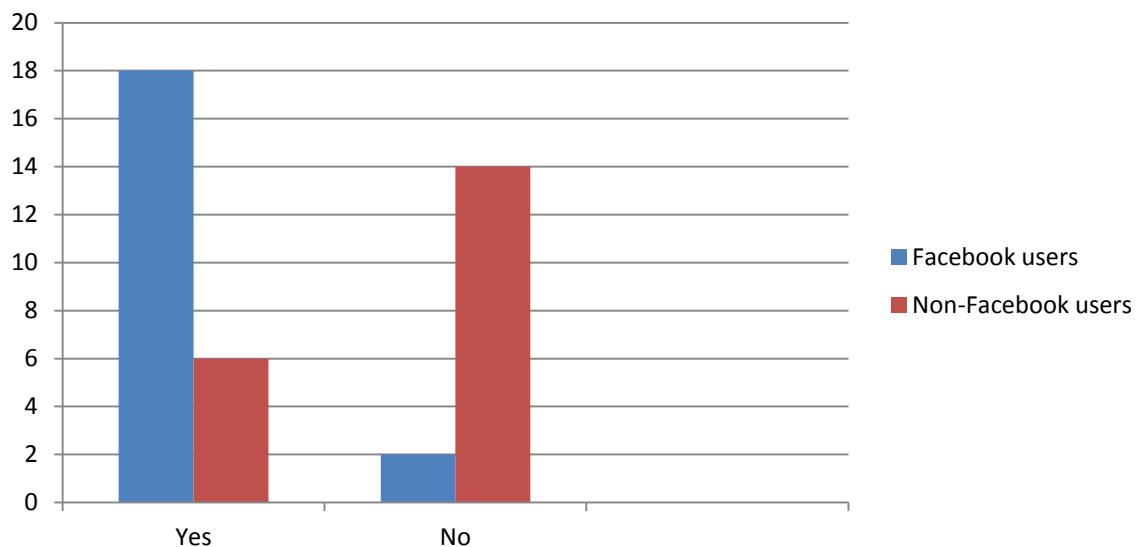

Figure 14. Facebook users' and Non-Facebook users' awareness about a political event

90% of Facebook users were aware of the protest regardless of whether they participate or not, while 30% of none-Facebook users were aware of the event and 70% did not heard about it.

The next essential parts of my research was an assessment of Iranian political dispersion map in the Facebook; therefore I searched the political groups or fan groups by their Farsi name in Facebook and calculated memberships one by one. The results are not precise but almost true, as there may be some groups which are missed in the final calculation. I searched the political figures inside Iran whose fan groups declare their political beliefs, and all of them were selected based on the current political situation. Iranian Political figures outside Iran are not considered in the survey, because either they are not playing an important role or they are supporting the political figures inside Iran.
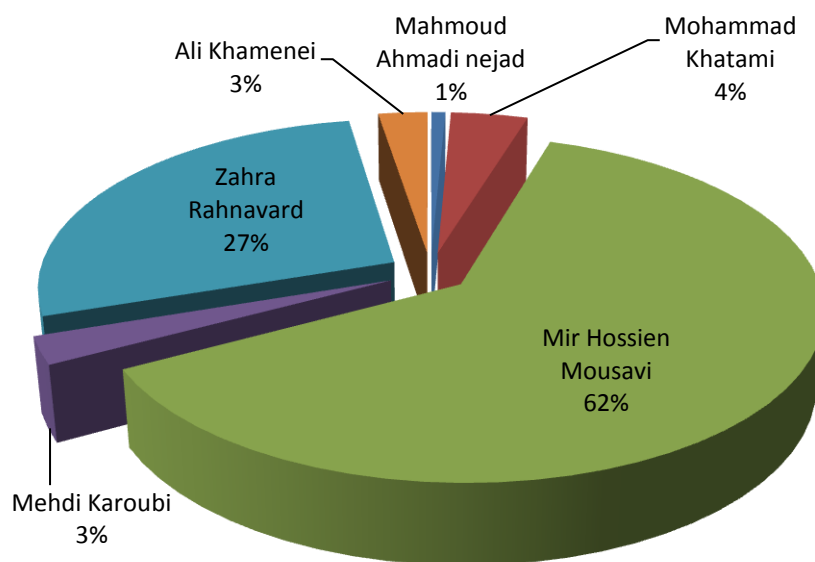

Figure 15. Iranian political dispersion in Facebook fan pages

The figure above shows that Mir Hussein Mousavi, presidential candidate in 2009 who the Green Movement was initiated by his campaign has 62% support and his wife Zahra Rahnavard has 27%, together they have 89% support, and have occupied much of the fan pages in the entire Facebook.

Mehdi Karoubi another presidential candidate occupies 3% of the Facebook Iranian political support sphere and Mohammad Khatami, former president of Islamic republic of Iran has 4%.

What connects these three figures together is reformism, as they are considered as "reformist" in Iranian political terms. Consequently 96% of Facebook Iranian political support sphere belongs to reformist tendencies or to people who supported reformist political tendencies at this time.

By contrast, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad - who won the presidential election - and Ali Khamenei (supreme leader), both from the conservative political tendency, who are running the country at this time, occupy 4% of the Iranian Facebook political support sphere together.
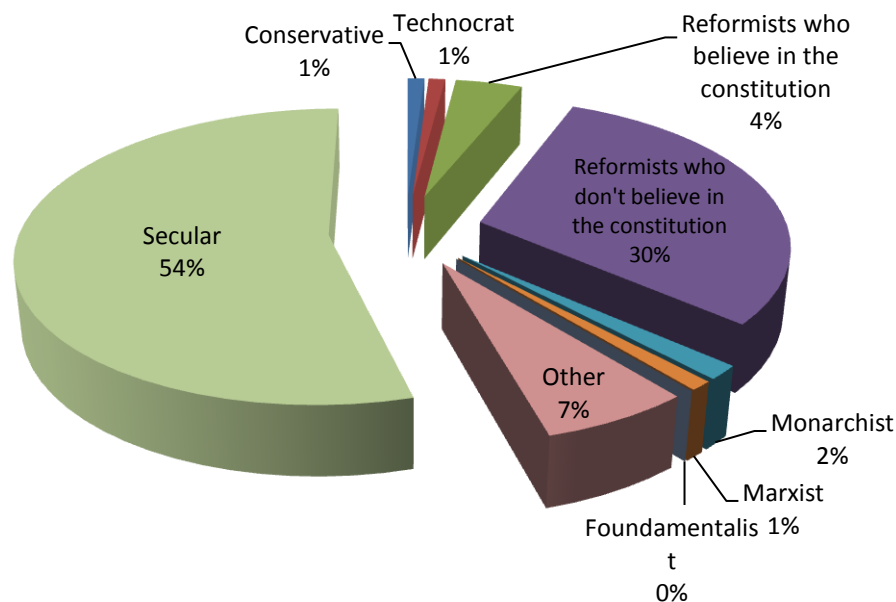

Figure 16. Political tendencies dispersion in the sample group

In the next phase of the survey, Facebook members were asked about their political beliefs, this survey was conducted like the previous one, and its goal was to

illuminate the political dispersion of Iranian Facebook users. 370 Facebook members were asked to declare their political tendencies among some proposed choices based on the current political division in Iran. To distinguish some reformists who believe in the foundation of the Islamic Republic from the others, belief or lack of belief in the constitution is the key factor. Therefore some people who demand changes inside the regime are divided from the people who want that the reforms start with the constitution first, even though they may believe in the Islamic revolution's goals formulated in 1979. This division was determined with the help of Prof. Dr. Esmaili from Social Science Department of University of Esfahan (Esmaili, 2011).

54% of the sample group are looking for a secular country, and 30% are reformists who don't believe in the constitution, while 1% are conservative, 1% technocrat and 4% are reformists who believe in the constitution. The only problem with these results is that they are not generalisable to all Iranian Facebook users, and consequently, cannot be considered as representing the opinion of entire Iranian Facebook users.

Concerning the weakness of assessing all Iranian Facebook users' political beliefs, the results are still meaningful as they match with pervious results about Iranian political dispersion in Facebook fan pages. Similarities like: 93% of people who are supporting Mir Hussein Mousavi, Mehdi Karubi and his wife are the same with the secular and reformist amounts.

Reformists who believe in the constitution normally follow Mohammad Khatami, the former Iranian President (1997 – 2005), and their percentage is exactly the same with Mohammad Khatami's fans in the previous survey, both of them are 4%.

Concerning the figures 9, 10 and 13, they show that mostly young people, whose ages fall between 18-30, and who are Facebook members, don't believe in the current system and demand basic changes as well as most academic sphere members, 72% of whom are Facebook members.

Regarding the presidential election in 2009, and the social movement initiated by Mir Hussein Mousavi called the "Green Movement", 79% of the people declared that whatever their current political tendency is, they strongly support the Green Movement and its goals as a social movement for change in the future of Iran (Figure 17).

This implies that in 2009, Facebook was mostly used by the Green Movement supporters rather than any other political groups. It's worth mentioning that although Mir Hussein Mousavi never claimed secularism in his political views, most secular people support him because they believe he can assist the society in a peaceful movement to the secular era, as mentioned by the focus group.
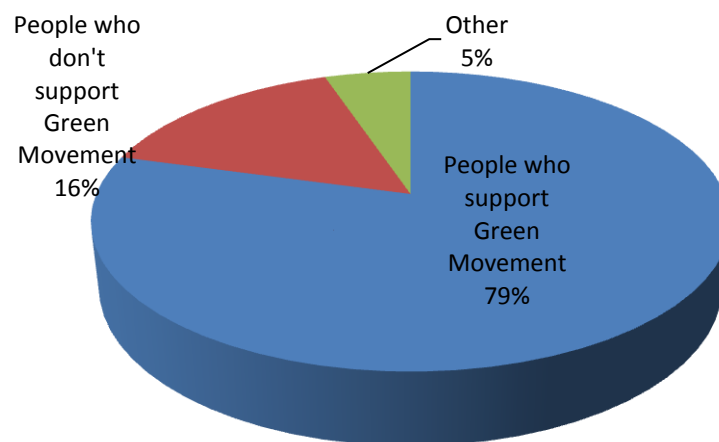

Figure 17. Green Movement supporters in the sample group

In the next step, some general questions were asked about the research subject. For example 87% of the people who answered the questionnaire believed that after subscribing to Facebook they felt like they had a medium to represent their feelings and ideas. Only 13% didn't have such feelings.

Likewise 81% of the people who answered the questionnaire indicated that after subscribing to Facebook, they felt like they have improved their knowledge about general political issues, democracy, human rights, etc. 14% mentioned that it didn't affect their knowledge about these issues while 5% believed in its negative effects.

It is also worth mentioning that, in this case study, 87% of Facebook members declared that after subscribing to Facebook, they became more aware of the news.

In my case study, regarding the freedom of speech condition in Iran, 94% of people have acknowledged that Facebook is helping people to access the filtered news sources as well as overcoming the borders of censorship by spreading the censored materials in cyberspace by individuals. The function of Facebook in relation to freedom of speech in Iran is acknowledged by the focus group members in their discussions as well.

Meanwhile, in the survey, 72% of Facebook members have stated that they trusted the contents of Facebook shared by their friends, in terms of reliability and honesty, while 15% don't care about the reliability and 20% do not trust in Facebook shared contents. While the Focus group concluded that there are also some trustful sources in Facebook which are uploaded not by individuals but by the other groups or organizations which, in the case of Iranian presidential election, were official news

agencies, as well.

Regarding research questions, it was necessary to have an assessment of people's preferred news sources, therefore all Facebook members were asked to state it in the survey in two specific times, current day and the time of election in 2009.

Comparison between these two times enabled me to get more exact results, also clarifying whether during the time of the election an exception happened or not, also classifying, which source of news are still used by the people in Iran. The Facebook members were allowed to select their main source of news based on their preference, so they could choose more than one option.

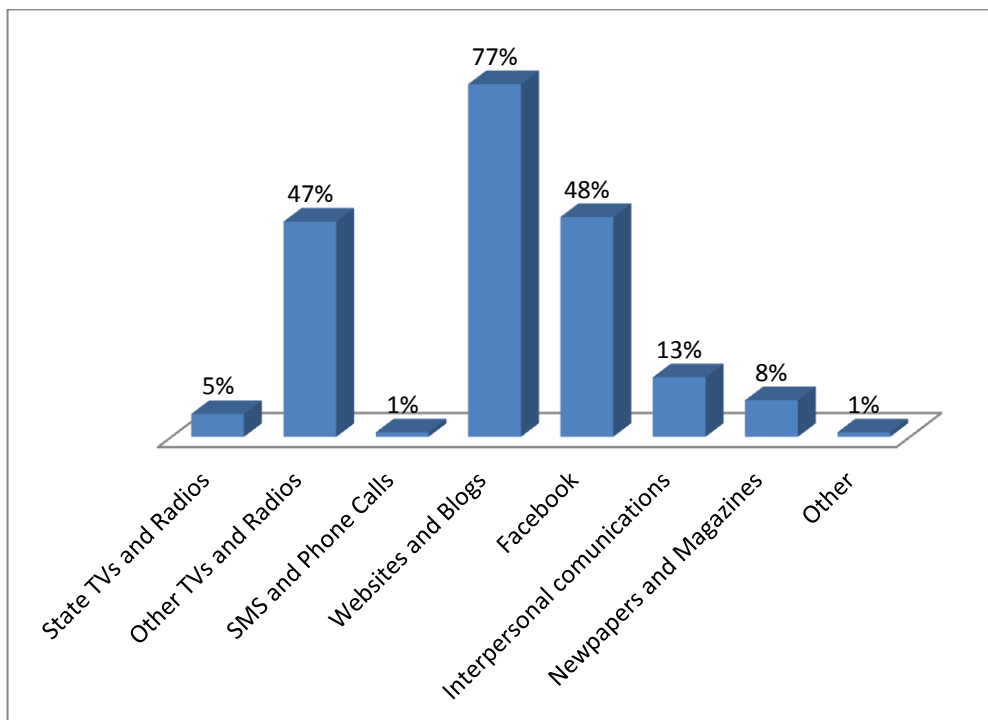The results are shown in the figures number 18 and 19:

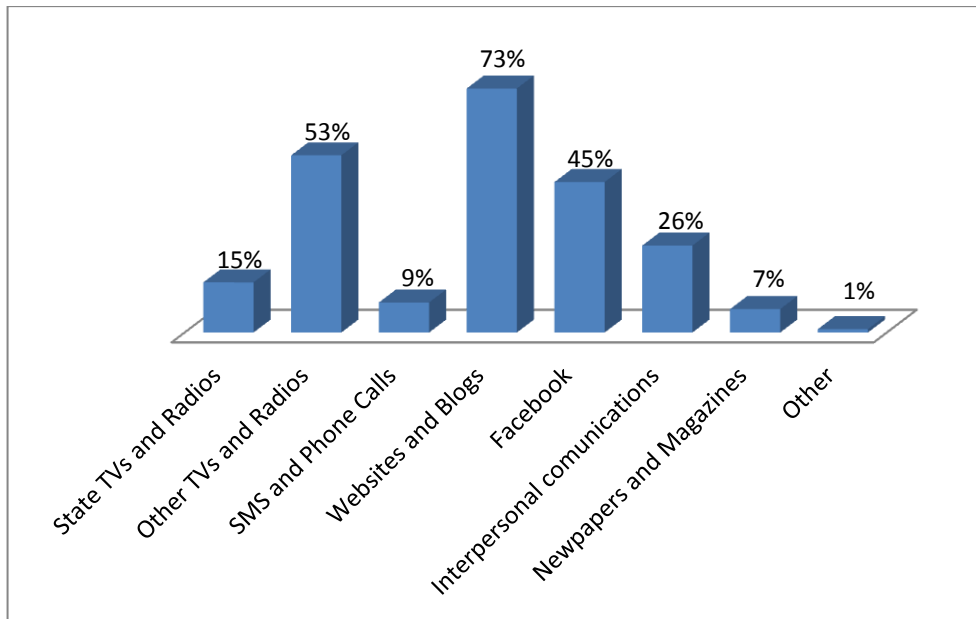Figure 18. People's preferred news sources in September 2011

Figure 19. People's preferred news sources in the time of election in 2009

Respondents mentioned websites and blogs as their main source of news in both times and next to it, in second place, Facebook and other TVs and radios are standing, almost parallel, although Facebook shows a tiny growth in 2011. Second place of Facebook in both times emphasizes its role as a source of news for its members, although Facebook is not the main source of news for even its members.

Sms and phone calls and interpersonal communications show a significant difference in a comparison which is understandable concerning the election atmosphere.

After I specified the place of Facebook as source of news, as well as its usage rate and main members, there was a gap between Facebook members and the rest of the society. While this gap still exists and only people who access to the Internet, if they can pass the filtration, have the chance to be Facebook members, some evidence implies that its influence is not limited to its members and cover a more expanded social area. Regarding the 'two step flow of information' theory mentioned in the

methodology chapter, I tried to prove this assumption and posed a question in the survey and asked whether Facebook members were transferring the information or feelings that they were impressed with in Facebook to their family or close friends who are not a Facebook members. The answer was that, as expected, 94% of the questioned members answered YES; they transferred their impressions and information to the others. Therefore if we assume Facebook members to be opinion leaders, as in the 'two step flow of information' theory, Facebook members function like relay point to non-Facebook members and consequently, I can conclude that Facebook members influence more people in the society compared to its usage rates. I think, it is possible to say that, a Facebook member with a family is enough to influence the whole family.

Concerning question number 5 in my research questions about citizen reporters phenomenon, 24% confirmed that they used their mobile phones or cameras to shoot something which they found important or interesting in terms of social or political significance and uploaded and shared the material on their Facebook webpage, either to criticize or announce it to other friends.

28% have indicated that they have never been in a situation that needed to be covered but if they would be, they most probably would try to record and share it on their Facebook webpage. These statistics show a great growth in the citizen reporter phenomenon enabled by the advances in communication technologies.

In repressive regimes which face censorship and where most media are controlled by the authorities, Facebook is a vital apparatus which helps individuals to connect themselves as citizen reporters to the society without dealing with the formal

circumstances of traditional media. It is significant to mention some other statistics which confirm this assumption as well, like 87% of Facebook members in my case study indicated that after subscribing to Facebook they felt like they could express themselves, confirming the feelings characteristic of the citizen reporter phenomenon.

I decided to look at an event which is directly related to the citizen reporter phenomenon and indeed is one of its best examples: Neda AghaSultan, a young woman who became one of the most famous figures of the protests after the election in 2009, after she was killed by direct shot.

Her death has been shot from different angles by individuals' cameras and uploaded on social networks like YouTube and disseminated rapidly within other social networks like Facebook and Twitter, before any news agency could show it (Neda Aghasoltan's death video, 2010). In the survey, 37% confirmed that they have watched this video on Facebook for the first time, and 19% indicated other websites as a first source.
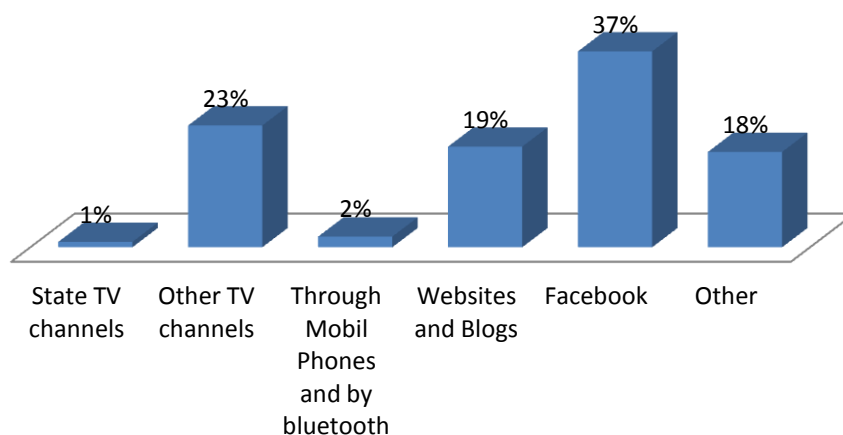
Figure 20. Neda AghaSultan's death video, an example of citizen reporters' videos

The number of people who watched this scene in Facebook shows the ability of citizen reporters in spreading media content. This movie is a sample of hundred thousands of movies which are uploaded by individuals, which, nowadays while I am writing this thesis, is obviously the main source of support for covering the oppositions in Arabic countries. However, concerning discussions in the focus group, many believed that these media contents mostly have a unique attribute which is "objectivity", which in this case means media contents are not elaborated or edited by media specialists in order to imply a particular media agenda determined by news agencies or any other organizations. People who upload these contents do not have such an agenda beyond a shared feeling of opposition, although they may individually believe in a particular political tendency. They typically are interested in illuminating an event, although there are some exceptions.

Focus group discussions pointed out that the only difficulty with citizen reporter phenomenon and its functionality in repressed countries is government's control over the Internet, which enables them to ban the public's access to the Internet easily and therefore cut the connection between them and the network. Focus group believes that these solutions are temporary and are not efficient enough to prevent the public from accessing the material. People can initiate their own organized networks, like what people did in Iran, and transferred the media contents by using Bluetooth wireless technology in public crowded places like Metro stations during the demonstrations after the election in 2009.

Regarding my 1st research question, about Facebook role in political events before and after the presidential election in 2009, 85% of the questioned group confirmed that Facebook can be a useful and practical apparatus in arranging new social and

political protests, especially in totalitarian regimes in which formal ways of protest are banned by the government.

In this regard and in the case study, 86% of Facebook members have stated that Facebook played a significant role in escalating the protests after the election, while 14% did not believe in such a proposal. The questioned group was asked to clarify how Facebook could have an effect on escalating the protests, and they have indicated some terms in this regard (see figure 21).

Organizing (arranging) the protests with 61%, as well as encouraging people with 71%, got the highest levels in the figure, although 21% considered Facebook as a creator of these events which doesn't mean that Facebook administration team created the events. Here they are referring to some people who were mostly living outside Iran and by any reasons or intentions were calling for some protest by creating events in Facebook and were announcing it to the people, indeed a protest which did not exist, so some people were following these events without confirming the event with the others, and therefore were causing lots of confusions among demonstrators.
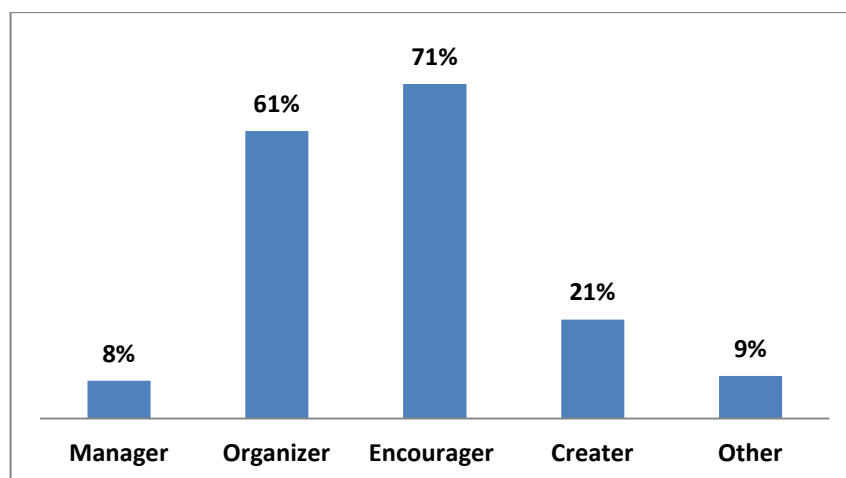

Figure 21 . Facebook's role in the protests after the election in 2009

Focus group also discussed Facebook's role in the protests and emphasized that Facebook was only an apparatus in the opposition's hands and was led by the people, therefore Facebook as a medium of communication didn't have any specific role itself although by its unique features, like its sharing option, enabled the organization of the protests.

Likewise the focus group highlighted that Facebook, by covering the protests through the individual's photos or movies uploaded and shared to the network, was encouraging the people for the continuation of protests, although some others have different and counter ideas. They believed that Facebook also was playing a role in depressing the protests after the election by spreading fear and panic among the people. They have indicated that photos and videos disseminated in the network of police violence and brutality slowed down the process of people joining the protests. They reached this conclusion by a simple comparison between demonstrations arranged during the first days after the election in which an enormous number of people were participating, while after one week, and in later protests, numbers of people were dropped suddenly and obviously. Therefore the focus group stressed that while Facebook may help by enabling the arranging and encouraging of people, it may function as an apparatus that plays into the regime's hands to spread fear and panic among people.

Concerning the role of Facebook before the presidential election in 2009 in Iran, 70% of the respondents believed that Facebook had a significant role in activating the political campaigns and 57% declared that discussions about the election in Facebook convinced them to participate in the election.

Likewise, 60% of the respondents have indicated that Facebook enabled silenced votes to be more active and make the elections more dynamic and energetic, although 16% disagreed with this proposal and 24% had a different idea.

The focus group put emphasis on the virtual communities that emerged in Facebook in support or disagreement with candidates during the election, and pointed them out as influential motivators.

Likewise the focus group mentioned Facebook as a cyberspace that helped opposition groups to keep themselves unified and motivated, although they mentioned that this function was helpful during the specific time of election. They acknowledged that Facebook members have the same plural political tendencies as we can find in the society.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS

Social networking is playing a significant role in our world today. Almost 1 billion of the world's population are social network members. Just Facebook has 800,000,000 million active users across the world now (Statistics, 2011). Indeed human beings are participating in huge communities woven together by new forms of relations and communications.

The influences of these social networks are obviously notable, especially regarding new political changes across the world, from Arab countries to the USA. People in Tunisia utilized social networks to disseminate a video about a worker who burned himself in the city square to protest about his being unemployed. This video circulated rapidly in the society, by people's utilization of social networks and finally resulted in an unexpected political change within that country, whose impact extended to other countries as well.

Iranian people are one of the pioneer Internet users in the world who used Internet for political purposes, and Iran has the third-largest number of bloggers in the world after the United States and China. Iranian cyber politics during the presidential election in 2009 also played an important role. In my research I focused on Facebook, and as a first step, I assessed its usage rate in my sample case, Esfahan, as there is no official statistics in this regard.

Facebook usage rate in my sample was 10%, but if we take into account problems in gaining access to the Internet and filtration in Iran, this is still a high degree of Facebook usage rate. Although it is not generalizable to the whole country, among the urban areas across the country, mostly big cities, it is still a large number.

The results show that the young generation, between 18-30 years old, are the main Facebook users, which is similar with the online survey's results in which 73.8% of male and 71.1% of women Facebook users are between 20-30 years old, therefore a very young generation of Iranian people are the main social networks users.

Based on social structural divisions considered in the research, academia with 72% has the highest Facebook usage rate in the research (in the online survey 41% declared their current condition as a student as well), followed by Bazaar with 18%, therefore it seems that Facebook as a medium has its most circulation of information within these two social contexts.

It is worth mentioning that in the case study, 78% of Facebook users have a high level of education which is remarkable.

The very small number of Facebook users in religious schools who are the main supporters of the regime, implies that Facebook cannot share its uploaded contents efficiently with this group; in fact social networking cannot work as an alternative medium for them.

Based on the results, numbers of men and women Facebook users are comparable and, in fact women are using it slightly more, therefore the research did not

recognize any gender inequality or bias in this case.

Political dispersion of Facebook users in the sample group implies that 84% are secular and reformists who don't believe in the constitution, and demand a fundamental change in the regime.

In addition, the numbers of Facebook users who support Mir Hussein Mousavi and his wife (89%) together with the number of Facebook users who support the Green Movement (79%) show a meaningful relation with previous results. Therefore it is concluded that either during the presidential election in 2009 or now, Facebook is heavily used by the opposition (secular or reformists) who are between 20-30 years old, mostly students or related to the academia who support Green movement's goals.

My research shows that lack of freedom of speech and censorship led people to utilize alternative media to express themselves. Facebook seems to have enabled normal citizens in this regard, and so assisted its users to overcome the limitations, placed on the media by the authorities.

Likewise in the survey, 86% indicated that Facebook utilization during the election in 2009 played a significant role in activating political campaigns before the election as well as escalating the protests after the election. The respondents mentioned serious political discussions and shared material (texts, photos, video, etc) by the users, also protest announcements and news, as the main effective factors in this case.

It is also significant that 57% of the respondents declared that by following the political discussion in their Facebook, especially by their friends, they were convinced to participate in the election in 2009, and so confirmed that Facebook usage helped in enabling silenced votes to become more active. We can conclude that social networking can be effective in increasing political participation.

The experimental survey also indicated that people who are Facebook members are more aware and informed about political activities than people who don't use the Facebook. Similarly, the sample group defined Facebook as an encourager and organizer, whether before the election and in political campaigns or in the protests afterward. They mostly acknowledged that Facebook can be a useful and practical tool in the hands of the opposition to arrange a protest where and when formal ways to protest and announcements are banned.

Likewise, results indicate that one of the most effective features of Facebook was its capability to upload and share information, which in fact helped the individual citizen reporters to disseminate their material without dealing with formal news agencies. This capability assisted people to be more aware of the events and provided alternative perspectives to the events, especially in regimes where people face strict censorship or news elaboration.

In addition, some respondents thought that this feature of Facebook can play another role, in that by sharing some material, for example, police brutality shown in a video, it can depress the protests by spreading fear, and consequently slowed down the process of people joining the protests.

Regarding censorship, my research indicates that Facebook can be used in a way that could assist access censored information for its users. 94% of people in the survey acknowledged this point and indicted that after subscribing to Facebook they became more aware of news in general. They also emphasized that after subscribing to Facebook their general knowledge about political issues, democracy, human rights and the like, improved. Therefore I can say that Facebook is maintaining a channel for freedom of speech and the only way to ban this channel is to filter it or by disconnecting people from the Internet. The second choice seems impossible for even most brutal regimes, and the first choice, filtration, doesn't function properly for authorities as we could see in my case study.

Facebook users mentioned Facebook as their second preferred source of news, which besides non-government TVs and radios, acknowledges Facebook's role in news circulation. The results show similarities between June 2009 and Sept 2011.

The large difference between Facebook as a preferred source of news (48%) compared to the state TVs, radio, Newspaper and magazines (13%) shows its important role as an alternative source of news in the sample group context.

Facebook members in the case study declared that they transferred their impressions of Facebook contents to their close family or friends who are not Facebook members, which supports the assumption that Facebook materials have broader effect than what Facebook membership rate would indicate.

Consequently, social networks like Facebook can alter the traditional process of broadcasting and open a new phase in news dissemination. Social networking also

initiated a new way of political participation in which individuals are connected and become more aware and active regarding issues which are going on around them. In this new social formation, people who are not professional journalists could start acting as citizen reporters.

Thus, when millions of people can act as citizen reporters with access to a medium like Facebook, a social network which enables them to broadcast by themselves, political issues, social biases and inequalities will be more exposed and visible.

Social networking makes the people more connected, their voices can be heard more than before, and therefore makes them more unified in terms of their goals, whatever their goals maybe. In this case, Facebook has served as such a medium and catalyst, and has assisted this process.

Facebook, as a social networking website, despite all its security problems is still an apparatus which is very difficult to be controlled by the government, and this is a key point in our understanding of its role.

It is also worth mentioning that Facebook is a corporation with its own goals, and the attributes discussed above depend on the peoples' utilization, and that Facebook administrative team may not necessarily designed it for these purposes.

I conclude that my research results acknowledge the role of social networking in improving democratic conditions   of a society like Iran as well as people's empowerment in politics, whether in agreement or disagreement with their government.

Social networking can help people to have a keen eye on politics as well as on politicians, and if we recall the role attributed to the media in democracies as a watchdog, nowadays, with the assistance of social networks, this role has been extended to normal citizens as well as media experts.

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APPENDIX

Form No.1

Assessment form of Facebook usage rate in Esfahan

NO: Sex: Age:

Are you a Facebook user?   Yes ☐   No ☐

If yes, how often do you check your Facebook page?

Form No.2

Assessment form of Facebook usage rate in different social strata

NO:	**Sex:**	**Age:**	**Category:**

Are you a Facebook member?

If yes, how often do you check your Facebook page?

Form No.3

The Experimental survey's form

Date: 13 February 2011   **Sex:** Male   Female   **Age:**

Form NO:

Are you a Facebook Member?   **YES** ☐   **NO** ☐

Are you aware about political activities which are organized in recent days?

YES ☐   **NO** ☐

If yes, please explain it

…………………………………………………………………………………………