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(doi: 10.2383/36424)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, dicembre 2011

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## Facebook Iran

# The Carnavalesque Politics of Online Social Networking

by Babak Rahimi

doi: 10.2383/36424

On February 14, 2011, Iran's capital city, Tehran, and other major Iranian cities saw a series of street demonstrations. The fury of the "Arab street" that had challenged and successfully overthrown an increasing number of North African regimes spilled over into urban Iran, where the opposition, known as the Green Movement, had regenerated into a new belligerent current against the Islamist establishment in power. In many ways, the 2011 uprising signaled a possible prolongation of an earlier episode of resistance in the form of public performances of mass rallies that had challenged the electoral victory of the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in the tenth presidential elections of 2009. While the security-military state apparatus embarked on repressive measures toward the protestors after the 2009 election, the silence of dissent that followed the suppression belied the dormant rage that flared up with the Egyptian crisis. In a post-Mubarak world, the Iranian opposition once again launched a public display of defiance that matched the call for change in other revolts in the region.

At the heart of the 2011 popular resistance lay the collective claim over the foundation of the Islamist state, the political theology of *velayat-e faqih* or the "guardianship of the jurist," which identifies clerics with the ultimate authority to rule during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, whose eventual return is believed to culminate in the establishment of divine justice on earth [Arjomand 2009, 21-22]. Slogans such as *Allah Akbar* and *Death to Dictator* explicitly targeted the legitimate rule of the Supreme Leader, whose spiritual authority is only overridden by the pronouncement

of an absolute deity and, accordingly, identified with the theocratic rule of worldly authority. The use of the concept of *istibdad* or tyranny underlines the opposition's challenge to the state's claim on legitimate rule in the name of Islam as a religion of justice. The February 2011 metamorphosis of the Green Movement characterizes, in a significant way, a profound shift in the paradigm of struggle in terms of becoming more conscious of its aims as a civil society movement and, more significantly, energized by other opposition movements in the region despite ongoing state repression.

Central among the Green Movement's communication forums has been and remains the internet, particularly online social networking sites, where the production of new forms of social interaction within communicative networks allows for the crystallization of new discourses and symbols of protests and the creation of a distinct virtual reality. As in the case of Arab uprisings, sites like Facebook represent emerging frames of reference for new kinds of activists who seek to redefine the everyday spaces and official cultures of sociability in the course of ongoing online activism, and, by extension, in connection with a broader spectrum of social and global forces. The virtual online March of Millions, organized on Facebook in solidarity with Iranian protesters days after the Egyptian uprising in January 2011, is a case in point. By clicking "I'm attending," political activists based in Iran and around the globe would not only show their support for the opposition movement, but also partake in an online event to enlarge the framework for thinking about street protests in digital terms. In this convergence of national and global processes, Facebook would characterize a contentious domain where images, repertoires, social bonds, stories and rituals around political dissent are invented (and re-invented) into new forms of activism. As state power seeks greater domination over society, emerging social networks continue to redefine activism by producing new ways of communication, transgressing the boundaries of political discourse and fashioning new meanings through digital interactive processes. As the case of post-election Iran shows, social networking sites like Facebook are more than mediums of communication; they are but social spaces of multiform styles, ideas and voices wherein a new episteme or new ways of thinking about self and reality are performed in creative ways.

In this study I want to focus on political activism within Facebook in the context of post-revolutionary Iran. I want to explore questions of how dissent is expressed and communicated on Facebook as an alternative space of interaction, whereby new bonds of sociability enable people to rethink themselves in what Guobin Yang calls the "creative use of contentious rituals, practices, and speech genres" [Yang 2009, 64-84] in ways that produce new forms of political communication while drawing upon traditions of local or national dissent on a broader level. By and large, I identify Facebook as a digital site of creative subversive pronouncements in what the

Russian cultural theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, described as the realm of carnivalesque or contested strategies through which space and time are inverted through parody and grotesque symbols, imageries and languages. Given the difficulty to quantify Facebook activities, I draw on an online ethnography to show how on Facebook submerged voices of dissent enact grotesque practices that break down existing political and social hierarchies, hence subverting received notions of reality and sociability. At the heart of Facebook activism is a carnivalesque strategy in the subversion of officialdom, shaping sites of transgression that are rooted in particularistic concerns to see reality other than what it is or appears. As a contested space, Facebook defaces power.

### **A Political History of Internet and Information Technology in Post-Revolutionary Iran**

Historically speaking, the advancement of internet in Iran has been closely tied with the state promotion of modern communication technologies as a force of modernization. Since the mid-Nineteenth century, when electric telegraph as a worldwide communication cable was first introduced to Iran under the Qajars, the institutional practices in governance dictated the growth of information technologies in the expansion of the military and, by extension, in the process of state-building. While cinema and television emerged as new cultural sites for a growing consumerist society, radio and telephone provided new discursive wires for the effectiveness of governance, especially under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi who led the charge of rapid militarization of the state and of urbanization of society between the 1960s and 1970s. The state's agenda for economic reform was matched by social reforms that involved changes in ways of adopting modernity with the use of information technologies like television broadcast as consumptive goods. Of key importance was how the new technology would produce a distinct Iranian modernity informed by a political culture of sociability.

The 1979 revolution, however, brought into view the political underpinning of information technology in ways that led to increasing mobilization of opposition groups against the Pahlavi regime. By the 1970s, cassette tapes, cinema, and radio helped the circulation of revolutionary discourses, imageries, and affective bonds in strengthening a popular movement that weakened state control over the public sphere in what appeared to be a new information landscape [Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994]. The establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 marked a pivotal moment in Iranian history as the societal forces that brought down the *ancien régime* endeavored to create a new state that would be both modern and Islamic, an

alternative project of modernity that would necessitate the use of technology for the realization of competing visions of utopian polity. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) forced the newly institutionalized Islamist regime to realize the crucial role information technologies can play in fighting and winning wars. But it was in the post-war period when emerging technologies like satellite television, fax, and other computer-mediated forms of communication revolutionized the way people behaved, understood, and articulated their social reality in response to socioeconomic transformations in lieu of state policies ensconced in ideological politics.

In this social revolutionary process, internet first appeared as an alternative scientific and technological apparatus during the troubled economic period that followed the Iran-Iraq war. Contrary to expectations at the time, the Islamic Republic originally welcomed internet by allowing commercial and educational sectors to access it without interference. Whereas in China the technology was largely developed by the state in the form of an intra-governmental communications network, Iran's first experience with internet occurred within the university system. After the reformist victory in the 1997 presidential elections, the new technology emerged as a potentially political forum of communication. The democratic openness of the early reformist years was marked by a new momentum for expression of dissent, as the new reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, sought to accommodate the democratic aspirations of the middle class and the growing desire for greater youth interaction with the broader region and the world.

By the late 1990s few would contest the claim that cyberspace had transformed Iranian politics in innovative ways. As older mediums of dissent were increasingly choked off with the introduction of a new press law that restricted freedom of expression [Tarock 2001, 590], the new technology appeared as an alternative and "safe" place to express dissent in the tug-of-war between reformists and conservatives. Opposition figures like Ayatollah Husayn Ali Montazeri and journalists like Akbar Ganji would post anti-government articles, memoirs, and letters online; younger Iranians would find in cyberspace a new social space of interaction, breaking barriers of normative sociability endorsed by the official culture [Rahimi 2008, 45-46]. In many ways, increasing numbers of dissident writers chose cyberspace as an outlet for venting their discontent with the state. Meanwhile, the Iranian blogosphere grew in size correspondingly with advancements in computer technologies and a growing educated younger population, reaching a crescendo in the latter period of Khatami's presidency (2001-2005) [Hendelman-Baavur 2007]. While the expanding cell phone and computer market began to impact the socio-cultural life of the Iranian youth population, the mushrooming of internet cafés in the late 1990s indicated a social transformation in webs of communication. It was during this period when blogs present-

ed not only the most accessible, immediate, and personalized forum of contestation [Sreberny and Khiabany 2010], but also served as an “emergent genre” of cultural practice of dissident politics [Doostdar 2004].

For the most part, in the decade leading to the 2005 presidential elections, cyberspace emerged as an ingredient of a vibrant Iranian oppositional public sphere that has existed in Iran since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911 [Dabashi 2010, 135]. With the burst of new energy led by a youth constituency that overwhelmingly made its presence felt in electoral politics, the new platform led to unprecedented modes of interaction. The state’s attempt to limit cyberspace through various censorship measures in the early 2000s posed considerable difficulty for the expansion of dissident activities online. Yet internet presented a powerful alternative space for the opposition. First, it helped various groups, ranging from women’s rights organizations to reformist religious factions, to mobilize virtual civic spheres of contention that aimed to “defy authoritarian control over the ideas of civil society and symbols of justice” [Rahimi and Gheytanchi 2008, 47]. Second, it facilitated a public domain of critical discussion through which new political ideas were advanced and contested by diverse groups, including the supporters of the regime. The spirit of irreverence for the official culture of the state found its most sophisticated expression online, as writers and humorists like [Ebrahim Nabavi](#) would irritate the boundaries of permitted discourse in their personal websites and blogs.

The expansion of both online and offline social networking in the course of the 2009 presidential elections was predicated on the preceding 2001 and 2005 presidential elections, together with local and parliamentary elections, which had been characterized by a burst of new energy led by a youth constituency that overwhelmingly made its presence felt in electoral politics [Gheissari and Nasr 2006, 128-158]. The constitutive feature that linked politics with internet was the demographic transformation across gender and class, characterized by a young generation with no memory of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 [Semati 2008, 7]. Despite the rise of the neoconservatives to power in 2005, Iranian electoral politics underscored a growing decentralization of political activism that relied less on political elites and more on grassroots campaigning, which included the mobilization of a large segment of the youth population and lower-income groups, especially in the provinces [Gheissari and Sanandaji 2009, 287-291].

To sum up, the decentralization began to crystallize in the 1999 student uprising and eventually reappeared as a new protest cycle in the aftermath of the 2009 elections made explicit in the protest discourse of electoral fraud with the reelection of Ahmadinejad. The 2009 campaign season provided an opening for the opposition to reassert itself, with hopes of a repeat of the 1997 reformist triumph with the over-

whelming support of the electorate population. The protests that shook the streets of Tehran and other major cities thus arrayed those forces that saw an opportunity to challenge the state and advance a new democratic openness to change the status quo. In a remarkable way, during the early stages of the protests, internet emerged as a site of contestation in auxiliary with other “traditional” forums of protest that took place largely in city spaces and, to a lesser extent, print media. Weeks after the election, as daily street protests led to nightly protests on house rooftops or underground city spaces like subways, cyberspace became more of a camouflage site for a subversive mobilization of dissent via activities that would quickly become manifest on social networking sites like Facebook.

### **The Rise of Facebook: A Post-Blogosphere Social Space**

In his seminal study on *The Rise of the Network Society*, Manuel Castells elaborates on the notion of network society to identify social practices that transcend the boundaries of the nation-state, underlining a truly global process that resembles a “new morphology” of interconnected societies with “pervasive expansion” [Castells 1996, 469]. Of key importance in this networked type of societal relationships is the flow of information and the ways it can undermine stable understandings of community and identity. Though the exact pervasiveness of such a social structure is open to debate [Van Dijk 1999], in postindustrial societies internet serves as the ultimate manifestation of network processes producing new relations that are making everyday life more decentralized and dispersive [Shirky 2008].

The everyday in this sense is absorbed into the network formation of interactive spaces of associations. Network associations, Harrison White described, are formed when there is “switching back and forth between at least two domains, everyday and ceremonial, with their continuing networks” [White 1995, 1035]. A network notion of identity is predicated on a person’s encounter with others in everyday life through shifting and switching interactive connections that form a collection of multiple identities. The idea of online “network” refers to social relations that are not linked to other offline networks, but shape identities in multiple virtual forums and accommodate intersections of various persons with changing perceptions of self and reality. As a public forum of intersections of various perceptions, discourses, and imageries, internet is the space where different identities can shift the pattern of connection and displace identity from a stable sense of everyday.

The popularity of Facebook in Iran grew rapidly in light of this creative dynamics of online social networking. The first users of computer networking in the

country began with email, chat-rooms (e.g. on Yahoo) and cell phone text messaging. However with the rise of new social networking sites around the world, the growing Iranian blogosphere slowly began to shift its attention to sites like Friendster and MySpace in the mid-2000s. While Google-owned Orkut became popular in Brazil and India, Persian weblogs (some of which were designed and operated in North America) provided the first social networking services in Iran. By 2006 Balatarin and Donbaleh became the first popular community websites where bloggers could contribute to online discussions, while others could advertise, do business, circulate information and guide others online in how to circumvent online censorship. The ability to get connected with people who share interests and ideas across ethnic, gender, political, and religious boundaries marked a sharp distinction from blogs, which mostly provided privatized spaces of expression where others could merely view, copy, and paste to other sites online. Facebook's meteoric rise in popularity began in February 2009, when the Iranian government unblocked the site months ahead of the 2009 presidential elections. While the site was known to many younger Iranians, it had never gained the popularity of other social networking sites, probably because of difficulties in accessing it.

However, the decision by the state to make the site accessible to the larger public had a profound implication on the social and political life of the country. On the level of content control, the unblocking of Facebook signified a measure of selective social openness that would encourage younger people to vote in the upcoming elections. Since higher electoral participation can be a sign of state legitimacy, the authorities would relax control measures before elections in order to create a false sense of freedom for the populace. By unblocking Facebook and creating a fake sense of open and fair elections, the intelligence services gained the ability to monitor the activities of dissidents, who might have felt more comfortable to express their views on Facebook as a social networking forum instead of on a registered personal website that could be easily identified and targeted by authorities. By unblocking Facebook, the state would also flex its muscles by displaying how it could maintain the ability to grant (some) social freedom. Such selective political openness lends a measure of legitimacy to a regime that sees the bolstering of its authority through shared spaces of interaction like Facebook as a way to consolidate power.

On the societal level, Facebook made an unprecedented impact on new forms of social relations. Through shared profiles with personal information, including photos, the new users could interact with acquaintances, family, and friends through private or public communication links. Equally important was the search engine in Facebook that brought individuals closer together. As users located their childhood or high school friends, colleagues, and potential mates on Facebook, others went on



the social networking site to post articles, blogs, sites or news clips on the “Wall.” With the ability to choose privacy settings and who could see different parts of their profile, the site empowered a new way of interaction that expanded an inherently network oriented type of sociability. Facebook was both a self-generated private and a public domain, a distinct virtual space of digital networking that emerged not merely as a means for communicating, but also as a site for displaying oneself in the course of free-flowing data conjured up in stories, imageries, and personal narratives. The Facebook “Wall” provided a digital forum where interactively like-minded individuals of different gender and social backgrounds could intermingle and socialize. Socializing with “friends” on Facebook would also include similar offline ceremonial rituals like gift-giving in the form of giving and receiving clips or emotive statements and honoring or celebrating rites like marriage and birthdays from a distance, in some cases between people who only knew each other online. In a short span of time, social networking appeared to facilitate building new contacts and forms of mutual interest and social bonds.

Between February and (mid)-May 2009, Facebook rapidly expanded into a political forum. Unlike blogs and especially Twitter, which was less known in the pre-election season, Facebook users had the chance to instantaneously exchange ideas and openly discuss issues of political significance. Likewise, intense debates between the four presidential candidates on national television, which drew a large audience weeks before the elections, led to increased communication between Facebook members. In a significant development, political adversaries engaged in sporadic online debates on the social network. Links such as “People You May Know” would enable users to send messages, chat or at times “add as friend” people of opposite political views just to discuss or dispute topics of political relevance. Contacts were made (and unmade) as political campaigning underwent an intense period of expansion between mid-May and the day of elections, June 12. Pro-government and anti-government users would engage and encounter each other on Facebook’s personal or group sites, thus changing the political culture of campaigning in post-revolutionary Iran.

As early as January 2009, Mousavi’s supporters like Mohammad Sadeghi Esfahlani, a young graduate student based in Germany, had launched the first Facebook campaign initiative in the history of Iranian electoral politics. On a daily basis, the site would include Mousavi’s messages, statements, and views to be shared by his supporters and potential voters. Mousavi’s statements were mostly declarations about major policy issues, ranging from economy to foreign affairs. It would also include links to other official websites like Kalameh or Wikipedia pages in Persian related to the Mousavi campaign. On profile sites, the supporters of reformist candidates would send the speeches of their candidates, invite each other to communicate their

political views, and organize meetings via instant messaging (SMS), Twitter (recently a popular device among the young), YouTube, and blogs [Rahimi 2011]. Despite a brief blockage of the social networking site in late May, Facebook's popularity grew rapidly as leading reformist activists like Mohammad Reza Abtahi, Karim Arghand-Pour, and Said Shariati began to join the site and build support against the hardliner regime in power. *Do not vote for Ahmadinejad!* became one of the most popular slogans circulating on pro-Mousavi Facebook sites.

It was, however, on the level of political mobilization that Facebook emerged as a popular online site for electoral campaigning. While the supporters of Ahmadinejad mostly relied on a vast offline social networking apparatus made up of volunteer units, known as *basij*, and members of the security-intelligence corps, pro-reform supporters focused on informal ties, everyday public spaces like parks and social sites like Facebook to organize campaign rallies. When on June 7 the interior ministry rejected a request to hold a major political rally outside of Tehran in the Azadi stadium, the country's national sports complex with the capacity to hold 100,000 people, the Mousavi camp rapidly organized another rally at a smaller sports complex in the heart of the capital city. When the rally was finally approved by the government the following morning, the Facebook announcement of the new gathering place was rapidly disseminated through text messaging, email and, to a considerably lesser extent, Twitter. In the afternoon, Mousavi supporters not only filled up the stadium but also the surrounding streets and avenues [Rahimi 2008, 158-160]. Facebook had become a major political forum in the campaign.

In the wake of street protests after the election results were announced, anti-government supporters turned to Facebook for a display of contentious activities. As young voters had become accustomed to online activism in the pre-election season, the post-election period changed the modes of political action in an innovative way. On Facebook and other internet sites, the new social movement found a unique place for the formation of emotional ties where activists could imagine themselves as a community, sharing symbols and ideals, and coordinating action on the street level to be recorded, documented, circulated, and re-played to bolster solidarity for the movement in the face of state repression. The online broadcasting of offline events such as police brutality provided a new mechanism for greater transparency that, in contrast, the state media would systematically ignore. While instant text messaging circulated by cell phones allowed more immediate communication, Facebook served as a collective site to post gruesome images of street clashes.

The footage of the death of Neda Agha-Soltan captured by cell phone camera and shortly after posted on Facebook, and later on Balatarin and YouTube, aroused an emotional reaction that brought the uprising in the country closer to the world

at large. With over 270,000 hits on Facebook the day after the footage was posted online, Neda's death became the symbol of the movement. As the video-clip circulated on YouTube, the image memorialized a powerful narrative in the name of Neda (meaning "voice" in Farsi), a calling for freedom from oppression [see Assmann and Assmann 2010, 225-242]. While the regime counterattacked with other stories and information, some of which were fabricated, in order to undermine the narrative of Neda's death, the opposition launched an expansive campaign of visual representations of the protest movement, confronting the offline (and at times online) official political culture of the state by creating a critical and yet satirical world of images, narratives, stories and symbols. In many ways, Facebook became a new battleground for the shaping of (not just national, but global) public opinion and the formation of a new kind of politics: a digital carnival of contestation.

### **The Carnavalesque Facebook**

The digital discourse of a Facebook type identifies one among many other dialogical forms of spontaneous everyday speech. Bakhtin identified such social communication as a two-sided exchange within social dialogue, as discursive "voices" that undergo a process of negotiation and conflict in the creation of various publics [Bakhtin 1981; Bakhtin 1984a]. Like the novel, Facebook also embodies a social dialogue that reflects the spontaneous living utterances that undermine the formality of language and enable a distinct speech that would be inherently open, making disagreement or differences in the views expressed a precondition for understanding and interaction. In a significant way, the anatomical indeterminacy of Facebook is largely marked by the co-presence of discursive activities that can be characterized in terms of asymmetrical exchanges, creating a distinct communicative realm of composite yet irreducible experiences for the participants, interactively sharing a "wild public" or contested spaces where hierarchies are questioned through various performances, including grotesque language and symbolic inversions [Young 1987]. The rowdy aspect of talk is magnified by heteroglossia as an intensely intersubjective dialogical process that shapes the background of a diversity of speech acts [Bakhtin 1981]. Such diversity is marked by various expressions of linguistic styles, hybrid speeches, dialects and invented words that shape Facebook into an informal and unofficial realm of social discourse.

In many ways, the carnivalesque experience of Facebook signifies the encounter of something disjointed, a temporary loss of self in the normative sense, going along with the ability that invigorates a performance of interactive ecstasy. In his study of

Rabelais, Bakhtin identified such disjointed interactivity as the carnivalesque, or that space and time in which power relations are inverted, enabling alternative, subordinated voices, behaviors, and interactions deemed as misrule to emerge and transform the everyday into an event of subversion [Bakhtin 1984b]. Likewise, Henri Lefebvre described the disjointness as the “subjunctive” or “as if” realm of a perceived universe that takes place in diverse forms of human action. The jubilant, wildly humorous and at times combative exchanges that take place on Facebook identify social spaces of subjunctive that are marked by a spirit of sociability which enable each user to achieve an out-of-place experience of the everyday and in essence posit the social networking site as a shared place of in-between reality. Such synergistic energies produce playful moments, reinterpreting the world as if it were or should be so – a world of possibilities, permitting diverse forms of interactions like the exchange of random trivia, pictures, links, and confessions, hence making it a “weird blend of personal communication and public media” [Meikle 2010, 13]. In doing so, it allows for diverse forms of informal and formal communicative interactions, from messaging to “poking,” so creating a convergence of subjective perceptions and interactive sociability. Such social process entails diverse modes of rationalities that foster new discursive expressions, largely in tension with the officialdom. As Alberto Melucci has shown, new social movements tend to focus on subaltern discourses that underscore an active attempt to reconfigure the social norm “by means of changes in language, sexual customs, affective relationships, dress and eating habits” [Melucci 1988, 249]. Political activism on Facebook also opens up the possibility for the emergence of alternative stylistic and narrative spaces marked as unofficial discourses that allow individuals of diverse backgrounds to negotiate positions of identity and power.

Accordingly, the Iranian politics of Facebook carries several carnivalesque components. First and foremost, there is the dialogic force of symbolism, in particular the color green, used on all pro-Mousavi sites as festive statements in opposition to Islamist officialdom culture. They serve as dialogical expressions with the aim to subvert the somber, melancholic official color of the Islamic Republic, namely, black. This point is critical since in the attempt to reconfigure everyday life with strict social norms under the Islamist regime, built around its founding myth of the narrative of loss and mourning for sacred martyrs, represented by the color black, the symbolic display of green creates a shared sense of oppositional culture that revolves around the desire for change, renewal, and ultimately freedom from the status quo. A study of Facebook profiles of Green Wave activists shows how green characterizes more than a statement, but the plurality of intense emotional states that renders joyful their commitment to change and signals an opening up into an alternative world. “Green is more than politics, but a new life,” as a post on Mousavi’s site describes. In the

color green, the dissent community, in a sense, is reborn into virtual free-flowing visions of symbols with deep emotional significance. The association of the color green with the Persian New Year and the Household of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*), whom Mousavi claims descent from, carries the combined symbolism of celestial empowerment in the allegiance to the Prophet and his family along with the element of fertility, seasonal pregnancy and renewal through time, a key carnivalesque theme that de-privileges constancy, stability, and permanence, the ideals which are most cherished by the state. Such emotional force expressed, consumed, and exchanged on various Facebook sites provides a vital counterweight to the abstract version of truth endorsed by the regime, which recognizes symbols of emotional kind as ones that transcend the situation of individuals, dogmatically endorsing a single voice or a “semantic dictatorship of a monologic, unified style and a unified tone” [Bakhtin 1984a, 204]. The dialogic encounter of symbols of rebirth like the color green brings to light a poetic expression of politics that is relentlessly wild, emotionally charged, and discursively incomplete.

Second, the carnival of funny images, satirical discourses, grotesque descriptions and jokes presents a subversive, humorous culture, marked by a crescendo of activities that undermines the official culture of normative behavior, mostly evident in the face-to-face public life of everyday persons. The Facebook factor here involves what Daniel Miller has called the “death of distance,” or the process of diminishing the ordinary spaces between people [Miller 2011, 193]. Such death is marked by the way less-distant social relations allow individuals to escape the ordinary and give expression or imagine new ways of being that are deemed inappropriate in normal time. As a dispersed space of nodes and networks, comical images or stories about government policies, officials and, particularly, leaders create a mode of consciousness that inherently views power relations in their stable everyday spaces as disjoint and upside-down. With Facebook pages that depict Ahmadinejad or other state officials in images or video montages of animals or grotesque characters, the online experience of Facebook users becomes one of festive humor, a mockery of staging state power that stubbornly tries to keep its distance from its audience in everyday public life. Meanwhile, the most effective subversive element lies in the constant (unsanctioned) interactions that dissolve the stability of daily spaces of sociability and produce new aesthetics of expression and communication.

In a significant way, therefore, the satirical discourse underlines the plurality of utterances, many of which profane and grotesque, or multi-voicedness of Facebook communication in ways that undermine the monological discourse of authorial type endorsed by the state and various official institutions such as media or bureaucracy. The use of grotesque language in describing the state or its ideology emphasizes the

inherently destabilizing nature of diverse expressions of impassioned contestations that constitute Facebook as an alternative space for expressing dissent. Such tension reflects a domain of language styles and diverse speech genres, a heteroglot public space of interaction saturated with linguistic expressions of discontent against the status quo and the existing power relations. The political impact of the Facebook offline also lies in the complex ways in which such online unofficial language submerge everyday discourses of interaction. As jokes, political statements or video clips of anti-government activists circulate and immerse offline everyday discourses, hence changing the boundaries of public, the lines between “physical” and “virtual” collapse, making Facebook an unofficial public sphere of contestation.

The conversion of time and space offers a third paradigm for the political potential of Facebook. In spontaneous “real time” services, the user is allowed to reconfigure his or her everyday situation in mundane time into a virtual temporality, wherein not only time is suspended but also the individual can playfully rethink the here-and-now into a unique configuration of alternativeness. Identity dissolves as ordinary time is interrupted in a cyberspace of momentary festivity, transgressing what is collectively perceived as the social order of time. In the case of Iranian users, cyber-activists immerse themselves in alternative times of momentary interactivity with others on Facebook, which open up new epistemic social lives of distinct political significance. The social network provides, in a sense, a new framework for thinking about time and the everyday, about how to imagine possible worlds in overcoming or reshaping offline everyday life. In one profile, for instance, a dissident user identifies her personal time on Facebook as a moment of non-everydayness that enables a moment out of the ordinary life to think, to critically question how life is lived under the Islamic Republic and how it may differ in an alternative world imagined on Facebook or other virtual spaces. This extraordinary sense of alternativeness is the key to understanding the relationship between temporality and thought and its political implications as a carnivalesque experience.

To stress, as I have, the anti-establishment nature of Facebook is not necessarily to ignore the presence of state power and how it can play a role in controlling online activity. In many ways, intelligence cyber units, known as the “Iranian Cyber Army,” are continuously monitoring Facebook and other social networks not merely for the surveillance of opposition activities, but also to learn the language and symbols of the dissidents, in order to effectively adapt and interrupt political communication of the dissident groups. However, the oppositional innovations in genres and discourses of digital contentions largely respond to the gaps, failures, and inefficiencies of state power. The “Facebook effect” in Iran’s post-revolutionary politics is therefore precisely in the ability to follow through with changes in modes of contention that

enact a creative force magnifying the shortcomings and the temporal constitution of state hegemony, its failures to maintain perpetual control over everyday life. And it is precisely in the everyday that Facebook as a distinct digital communicative domain shapes an alternative way of doing politics and, above all, being in the world.

At the micro-level, through Facebook the everyday becomes an event of extraordinary significance through which numerous mini-counterpublics are formulated in contention with the official public sphere and its stable conceptions of identity and politics. At the macro-level, Iranian Facebook activism is ultimately about re-defining Iranian modernity on a transnational context. Thus the Green Movement activists' various application of subversive practices on Facebook profile and group sites, including the circulation of grotesque imageries and vulgar accounts about the Islamic Republic, are rooted in concerns about rethinking Iranian politics in both the native and global terms of democratic modernity. Yet, at large, the significance of the Iranian dissident politics on Facebook lies in the multiplication of speech genres and subversive voices that make the status quo a parody of history and, more importantly, open up an "as if" space of informal interactivity or what Ray Oldenburg has called "third places," wherein new imagined realities can impact the content of everyday life with long-term implications [Oldenburg 1991]. The carnivalesque in Facebook bears on the relationship between what is the given time and an imagined time, what is immediate and what is possible, thus making online politics an ever more contentious activity of a densely creative type.

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## Facebook Iran

### The Carnavalesque Politics of Online Social Networking

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Abstract: This study explores different modes of political communication and interaction in new social networking sites, particularly Facebook. With a focus on postelection Iran, it uses Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque as a way to understand the emergence of a new dissident politics of cyber-activism. For the oppositional Iranian Green Movement, Facebook has provided a communication forum where discourses and symbols of protest allow for the production of new forms of social dialogue within communicative spaces and achieve a distinct virtual reality geared to subversion of state officialdom. In this light, the author concludes, Facebook in Iran represents an emerging frame of reference for a new kind of activism that seeks to redefine both the everyday spaces and the official cultures of sociability, and, by extension, to connect with a broader spectrum of social and global forces unsettling received forms of public speech.

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*Keywords: Carnavalesque, Iran, political activism, social network, virtual space.*

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